

You shall open your hand to your brother, to the poor, to the needy, in your land." (15:11)

There are four levels of *tzedakah*. First is one who is "*your brother*." One's family takes precedence in charity. Second is "*your poor*." The poor citizens of one's city are to be cared for before one accepts responsibility for the poor of another city. The third degree is "*your needy*." He who is most needy is to be helped first. Last is "*in your land*," the poor of *Eretz Yisrael*.

The laws regarding charitable donations are unambiguous. One does not contribute according to his heart's sentiments. *Torah* provides a prescribed manner and order for giving. The needy person or organization should meet the standards and criteria set forth by the *Torah*. All too often we make decisions regarding our charitable donations based solely upon our affinity with an organization or individual. If the *Torah's* standard for charity is met, we no longer have license to render a decision based upon religious affiliation or personal prejudice.

Rav Shalom M'Belz, z.l., suggests a novel interpretation of this *pasuk*. When one's hand is open, the fingers are not all the same size. Once one's hand is closed as in a fist, however, all of the fingers seem equal in size. The *Torah* demands "*Open up your hand*." Notice that there are various "sizes" or situations which call for different approaches to *tzedakah*. Not all of the poor are the same. One's decision should not be based upon a "closed" hand, in which all the fingers seems to be the same. We are adjured to proffer our contributions each according to its own unique degree of importance. As Hashem bestows upon us the ability to contribute, so, too, does He issue us the framework for distribution of our *tzedakah*.