

Why Jews Give: Two Hebrew Phrases Help Explain Why Jewish Giving Is So High



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By Jim Friedman

Two women pass a beggar on the street. Both women have the exact same income and expenses. The first weeps at the suffering of the beggar and gives him \$5 out of the goodness of her heart. The second notices but rushes past. Later in the day, however, she feels compelled because of her religious beliefs and returns to give the beggar \$100. **Who is the better person?**

Why are Jews so generous?

Many people who are not familiar with the Jewish community are often surprised at the large annual gifts that Jewish Federations and other Jewish non-profit organizations receive year in and year out. Are Jews more generous than other people? Have Jewish organizations cooked up some kind of secret fundraising sauce?

I have been privileged to work with the Jewish Federation of Cincinnati for twelve years and identify as a Reform Jew. I hope the following observations will shed some light on the nature of Jewish philanthropy.

What does it mean to be Jewish? Well, that's like saying, "Describe an orchid," or asking, "What does wine taste like?" There is immense variety among Jews, and trying to make generalizations can be misleading. Nevertheless, the following comments that describe more traditional types of Jewish giving are the basis for Jewish giving and are the motivations even for many who are not as religious in their day-to-day practice of Judaism. These age-old traditions and beliefs permeate today and help explain why Jewish giving is disproportionately high.

The Jewish "obligation"

Tzedakah is a Hebrew word that often gets mistranslated as "charity." But it's much more like a righteous obligation than a charitable gift. Most of us pay our taxes every year more because it's the right thing to do as a U.S. citizen. It's not considered discretionary. We might complain a little, but we do it. *Tzedakah* is like that. Give away 10 percent or more to help the Jewish people and you are doing your duty. It's not something you think about, and it doesn't even matter if you feel like doing it. Just do it! The concept may sound harsh to those on the outside. But it's all part of the Jewish endeavor to act in concert with God, lead a good life, act justly, and care for those in need.

Repair the world

A very old man is planting a fruit tree. A passer-by wonders why he would bother to plant a tree that won't bear fruit until decades after he is dead. The old man responds, "As my father planted before me, so do I plant for my children." This story from the Talmud models *tikkun olam*, a Hebrew phrase that means loosely, "repair the world." The traditional Jewish belief is that we have an obligation to leave this world better than we found it. What we give is not so much for our own enjoyment, but to sustain and improve the world for the current as well as the next generation. It is really not a choice, but rather a requirement, to make our entire community a better place for everyone.

This is different from faith-based giving. This is peoplehood giving. Jewish history is rooted in persecution through the ages, and time and again Jews have found themselves unwelcome in the countries where they've lived. So there is an element of, "If we don't take care of each other, who will?"

Now, back to the story in the beginning. **Who is the better person:** the one who gave \$5 out of emotional impulse or the one who gave \$100 out of obligation? If you chose the first person, here's a follow-up question: Would your answer be different if you were the beggar?

Jim Friedman is Director of Planned Giving and Endowments for the Jewish Federation of Cincinnati. This article was originally published in the January 2015 issue of Planned Giving Tomorrow; a PDF is [available here](#).

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