**Rashi and the Highest level of Charity**

Another approach to the question of what is the highest level of charity is that of Rashi, the great commentator (one should know for the exam why he is so famous – check out the short essay from the Britannica that deals with the commentaries he wrote – there will be questions from this section .

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Rashi>

you can also watch a nice animated video of Rashi here (don’t worry no questions from this source but it is cute!).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=As4sPXFDcqM>

If you recall from the last two classes according to Maimonides there were two distinct ideals in helping the poor:

1. rehabilitating the person who is slipping downwards towards poverty (and this rehabilitation should be accomplished without giving actual charity);
2. that of *anonymous* giving to the person who needs monetary support in order to survive.

However, if one looks at the Talmudic passage in Sukka 49b and the comments of Rashi on it a different kind of ideal emerges. The Talmud states:

And Rabbi Elazar said: The reward for charity is paid from Heaven *in accordance with the kindness and generosity (i.e. Hessed) included therein* as it is stated: “Sow to yourselves according to charity and reap according to kindness.

So, what exactly does it mean that charity with *hessed* is the test for the level of reward one receives? How does one combine kindness with the act of financial support? – this is explained by the famous commentator Rashi. He writes the following:

“Only according to the hessed in it” — The giving is the charity (*tzedakah*) and the effort [of giving] is the hessed. For instance, delivering it to the other's house, or making an effort to ensure that it will be worth more to the recipient, such as giving baked bread; or clothes to wear; or money when produce is readily available so the latter will not waste the money; *that is, a person* *applies their heart and mind to the benefit of the poor person*.

In other words, the best way to give charity is by extending physical effort, thought, consideration in how one gives that charity to the needy person. Rashi makes his point clearly both at the beginning of his comment “The giving is the charity (*tzedakah*) and the effort [of giving] is the hessed”, at the conclusion “a person applies their heart and mind to the benefit of the poor person” and by the examples he chooses:

1. delivering the charity to the other's house;
2. making an effort to ensure that it will be worth more to the recipient, such as giving baked bread; or clothes to wear;
3. or giving money but at a time when produce is readily available, and the price will be low

Let us note that in all these examples there is no explicit mention of anonymous giving. Of course all of them can to be accomplished incognito, however Rashi does not even bother to hint at the importance of giving in secret. It would seem that according to Rashi Rabbi Elazar ideal of combining charity and hessed in actually unrelated to the giving in secret.

There is a fascinating story found in another part of the Talmud, this one in Ketubot 67b (that Rashi comments on) that I believe strengthens this argument –for Rashi the ideal of charity+hessed is unrelated to anonymous giving. I will first bring the Talmudic story and then focus in on Rashi’s comments.

The tale goes like this:

Mar 'Ukba had a poor man in his neighbourhood into whose door-socket he used to throw four *zuz* every day.

Once [the poor man] thought: 'I will go and see who does me this kindness'.

On that day [it happened] that Mar 'Ukba was late at the house of study and his wife was coming home with him. As soon as [the poor man] saw them moving the door he went out after them, but they fled from him and ran into a furnace from which the fire had just been swept [i.e. they run into the furnace in order to preserve the anonymity of the donor, Mar Ukba].

Mar 'Ukba's feet were burning and his wife said to him: Raise your feet and put them on mine.

As he was upset (as the miracle occurred for her and not for him, as if to say that she was more righteous than he was!), she said to him, 'I am usually at home and my benefit [that I grant the poor] (i.e. the charity I give) is immediate'.

So here we have a perfect tale that seemingly discusses our exact question – what is the idea kind of charity? Mar Ukba seems to follow Maimonides ideal of anonymity which itself has clear Talmudic sources,[[1]](#footnote-1) his wife however acts differently – she is clearly not giving anonymously as the poor come to her door to request assistance. He is upset because he thinks he has performed charity admirably by giving anonymously and does not think that his wife did any better than him. In contrast she clearly believes that her charity was preferable to that of her husbands – because the benefit she gives is immediate. Let us now consult Rashi on this tale and see what he adds to it.

Rashi takes the wife’s response ('I am usually at home and my benefit [that I grant] is immediate') and interprets both parts of her response. The first part “I am usually at home” – he add: “and the poor  know where to find me, therefore my merit is great is great”. To the second part “the benefit I grant is immediate” he adds: “my benefit [that I grant the poor] is ready [for their use], as I supply them with bread, meat, and salt but you give money to the poor and *they* have to make the effort to buy a meal”.

From these words of Rashi I hear a clear echo of what Rashi himself wrote on the previous Talmudic source Sukka 49b. She makes the effort to gives something ready for use and thus “applies her heart and mind to the benefit of the poor person” whereas her husband gives money but leaves the *effort* for the poor person. The wife says in a sense is saying: “the charity I give is a combination of charity and hessed as I give something that the poor can use immediately. Your charity, my husband, however, is lacking (despite giving anonymously) in this element of kindness and consideration and is therefore less worthy than mine”.

In short, we have seen today a new perspective which I have titled “Rashi and the highest level of charity”. Based upon Rashi’s comments on two Talmudic the passages (sukka and ketubot) it would seem that in addition and possibly even before “anonymous giving” there exists the ideal of combining charity and kindness. This means applying one’s heart and mind to the benefit of the poor person, and includes some kind of effort, either physical or mental, which is beyond merely writing a check to the poor.

Summary Questions:

What does Rashi’s attempt to accomplish in commentary to the Bible?

Why is Rashi’s commentary to the Talmud so important?

With regard to the originality of the project which of Rashi’s commentaries (Bible +Talmud) is more innovative?

When where did Rashi live?

How did Rashi explain the words of R. Elazar that charity is rewarded in accordance with hessed included therein?

Why is giving money at a time when produce is readily available an example of charity and hessed?

How did we try to prove that Rashi understands the principle of charity+hessed as being the ultimate ideal of charity even if it is not anonymous?

Why was Mar Ukba upset?

Why was Mar Ukba wife’s charity preferable to that of Mar Ukba?

Why is being at home make Mar Ukba’s wife charity special according to Rashi?

Why did the couple run into the furnace?

What does the story of Mar Ukba and his wife seeming teach us about the highest level of charity?

1. Bava Batra 9b: R. Eleazar said: *A man who gives charity in secret is greater than Moses our Teacher*, for of Moses it is written, For I was afraid because of the anger aid the wrath, and of one who gives charity [secretly] it is written, A gift in secret subdues anger.

   Bava Batra 10b: What kind of charity is that which delivers a man from an unnatural death? *When a man gives without knowing to whom he gives and the beggar receives without knowing from whom he receives*. 'He gives without knowing to whom he gives': this excludes the practice of Mar 'Ukba.  'The beggar receives without knowing from whom he receives': this excludes the practice of R. Abba. *How is a man then to do? — He should put his money into the charity box*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)