**The Levels of Charity in Maimonides *Mishneh Torah***

The next few classes will be focused upon the ideal ways one should give charity as found in Maimonides (in comparison with other sources). This short treatise found in the last chapter of the laws of charity (in his code *Mishneh Torah*), was highly influential throughout the generations within the Jewish tradition and one can even find a reverberation of it in modern times as well, in this book.

<https://www.amazon.com/Rambams-Ladder-Meditation-Generosity-Necessary/dp/0761128093?SubscriptionId=0EP44N4Z8Y93MBZ1ZC82&tag=dianerehm-20&linkCode=sp1&camp=2025&creative=165953&creativeASIN=0761128093>

I should mention that Maimonides did not create this list, these various levels of charity, purely out of his own thinking or philosophizing, but rather he gathered material from dispersed Talmudic sources which he then synthesized and organized in a very original fashion. His “levels” of charity are therefore both traditional and innovative.

Today’s task is straightforward – to read the short Maimonidean treatise (made up of 8 laws) and to understand its structure and the basic ideals that emerge from the different levels of giving. In the subsequent classes we will build upon this foundation, so please spend the time and study this material.

Please read the material and then I will elaborate upon it. There will be questions from the Maimonidean material, even if not elaborated upon in my comments so pay particular attention to the passages in bold.

Maimonides (Rambam), *Mishneh Torah*, Gifts to the Poor, Chapter 10 (laws 7-14)

**Law 7**

**There are eight levels of *tzedakah***, each one higher than the other. The highest level, higher than all the rest, is to fortify a fellow Jew and give him a gift, a loan, form with him a partnership, or find work for him, **until he is strong enough so that he does not need to ask others [for sustenance]**. Of this it is said, ([**Lev. 25:35**](https://www.sefaria.org.il/Leviticus.25.35)) *[If your kinsman, being in straits, comes under your authority,] and you shall strengthen him, whether a stranger or a resident, he shall live with you”.* That is as if to say, "***Hold* him up," so that he will not fall and be in need**.

**Law 8**

One level lower than this is one who gives *tzedakah* to the poor and does not know to whom he gives, and the poor person does not know from whom he receives. **This is the fulfillment of God’s command purely for its own sake [i.e. without any worldly benefit].** An example of this would be the “Chamber of Secrets” in the Holy Temple, for there the righteous would give clandestinely [and leave], and the poor, of good background, would sustain themselves from it unbeknownst to others. **Similar to this is one who gives to the *kupah* of *tzedakah* [organized charity fund],** **but one should not contribute to the *kupah* of *tzedakah* unless one is certain that the one who administrating it is trustworthy and wise and behaves competently**, as was Rabbi Chanania ben Teradion.

**Law 9**

One level lower is one who gives *tzedakah* knows to whom he gives but the poor person does not know from whom he has received. Such did the great sages who secretly throw money into the doorways of the poor**. A method such as this one is a good way when the administrators of the [organized] *tzedakah* do not behave competently**.

**Law 10**

One level lower is when the poor person knows from whom he takes but the giver does not know to whom he gives. Such was the way of the sages who would tie coins to their garments and would throw the bundle over their shoulder **so the poor could come up [behind them] and take [from it] without being embarrassed.**

**Law 11**

One level lower is to give to him with one's own hand before the poor person can ask.

**Law 12**

One level lower is one gives only after he has been asked.

**Law 13**

One level lower is to give him less than one should but with kindness.

**Law 14**

One level lower is to give to him sullenly (“in sadness”).

As can be seen from the above 8 levels (and 8 laws in *Mishneh Torah*) there are three broad categories of giving. The central category is that of anonymous giving *of various levels,* known as *matan be-seter* (i.e. giving in secret) in Hebrew. This category, includes levels 2-4, found in laws 8-10. The highest level is full anonymity from both sides giver and recipient; then there is when the poor person does not know who his benefactor is, even the benefactor knows to whom he is giving; and finally there is when poor person does know but the benefactor does not know to whom he is giving.

Reading between the lines of Maimonides treatment of these three levels (and I bolded the relevant lines in laws 8+10) it would seem that two factors played a role in his understanding of the religious value in such giving. The obvious one is preserving the dignity of the recipient. One should do the utmost so that the poor person not feel additional pain and embarrassment in receiving support from his fellow man. We shall see how this goal plays a role as well in the third category. The second element that emerges from Maimonides is the religious ideal of doing the good deed, the mitzvah, without any worldly benefit, the concept of “for its own sake (*leshma*)”. In the scenario where the benefactor does a good deed without *anyone* knowing about it he cannot expect any kind of real “return”. The poor person has no idea who gave the gift and the donor himself has no idea who received his gift. He cannot even boast about his good deed to his palls since there is no way he can prove to them that he did anything worthwhile, the deed is truly in secret….

Let us now take a look at the third category which contains four different levels of giving (levels 5-8 and laws 11-14). As you can see each is very short, one line or less. One has there: giving before being asked; giving after being asked; giving less than what is proper but with kindness, and finally giving (even the proper amount) but with sadness!

In this less than ideal category there is never anonymity, however, there are still different ways one can lessen the pain and the embarrassment of the poor recipient. Giving before being asked is the best, because of the embarrassment involved in asking for assistance. Giving full support after being asked is second. Third is showing kindness after being asked so he puts the pauper at ease, easing his shame, even if not giving full support. And finally, the worst level is a person who causes the pauper additional anguish by giving with a sour face, even if he gives full support! This category demonstrates nicely the importance of taking into consideration not only the financial straits of the pauper but his/her emotional state as well.

It is however the first category and highest level (law 7) that is the most intriguing and interesting. Maimonides opens his treatment of the levels of charity with this statement “The highest level, higher than all the rest, is to fortify a fellow Jew and give him a gift, a loan, form with him a partnership, or find work for him, until he is strong enough so that he does not need to ask others [for sustenance].” Maimonides seems to be saying here that the highest level of charity is not necessarily giving material support, in the giving of money, but rather in helping to rehabilitate the poor person, *even without parting with any of one’s own earnings*. In offering a loan, partnership in some business venture, or finding a job one has the opportunity of removing the poor person from the vicious cycle of poverty – that is the greatest kind of charity! I hope to discuss this passage more at length later in the semester and its revolutionary approach, but for today I would just like to emphasize a theme which we have seen earlier – the importance of such charity for the emotional well-being of the poor person.

Offering a loan or partnership one is not only helping to rehabilitate the pauper but one is doing so in a way that preserves his dignity. The primary feeling of embarrassment stems from the receiving of a free gift which is not meant to be repaid, *matnat hinam* in Hebrew. In addition to this basic feeling of shame there is also the shame that comes from asking for help from one’s fellow man. By initiating a business venture, or even offering a loan, one demonstrates that one has confidence that the person will be able to dig himself/herself out of the bad situation that they are in. In short, for Maimonides partnership/loan/a job has qualities that simple charity does not and therefore is the best possible option, even better than complete anonymity.

As a final note (for today) I need to address one example mentioned by Maimonides in his list of assistance that can lead to rehabilitation. At first glance one of the suggestions does not make sense nor does it fit the pattern I described above. The four examples he brings are “give him a gift, a loan, form with him a partnership, or find work for him”. One can easily understand three of these four types (loan, partnership, work) but what is “gift” doing here? Isn’t a gift the simple charity that only brings shame and embarrassment to the pauper?! The commentators on Maimonides recognized this difficulty and suggested a resolution that seems correct to me. The gift mentioned in law 7 is not charity but rather it is a gift between friends (think wedding gifts or in Christian countries Christmas gifts). These are gifts between equals that assumes an element of reciprocity, of some return. This is **not** a free gift from a wealthy person to a poor one, that does not include any expectation of a return. In fact, this “gift” is much closer to a loan rather than to “charity”. Such a gift between friends or even acquaintances preserves the dignity of the recipient *exactly because of the implicit expectation*, even if never expressed explicitly, *that at some point in time the recipient will return the favor to his friend*!

Summary Questions:

1. At what level is someone who contributes to an organized charity fund (*kuppa*)?
2. What condition does Maimonides add before contributing to an organized charity fund (*kuppa*)?
3. What kind of charity should one give according to Maimonides in the case that the administrator of the charity fund is not reliable?
4. Where and what was the “chamber of secrets”?
5. What is the importance of the “chamber of secrets” for Maimonides in his laws of charity?
6. What defines levels 2-4 of the ideal charity according to Maimonides?
7. What are the two reasons that Maimonides prefers anonymous giving?
8. What is the highest level of charity for Maimonides?
9. What is preferred giving less than what is proper but with kindness, or giving the proper amount but with sadness?
10. Why is giving before being asked preferable to after being asked?
11. How did we explain the basic feeling of shame and embarrassment that the pauper feels?
12. Why is “gift” a problematic example of charity for level 1?
13. How did we explain the example of “gift” in level 1 of charity?
14. Why is level 1 so important to Maimonides?
15. What common thread can be found in all three categories of the 8 levels of charity?
16. How is a gift similar to a loan?