



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Re'eh 5771

By Lisa Exler
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We are pleased to welcome guest writer, Lisa Exler, senior program officer at American Jewish World Service.

It happens to me on a daily basis: I return home from work, check my mailbox and am almost inevitably confronted by solicitations from organizations representing worthy causes, asking me to donate money to fight hunger, prevent disease, protect against violence or educate children. Even though my family allocates 10 percent of our income to *tzedakah*, “cold” solicitations of this sort, from organizations not in our *tzedakah* plan, usually end up in the trash. I mentally run through a short list of excuses—I donate to other organizations like this one; I can’t give to everything; my small donation isn’t going to solve the problem—and discard the envelopes, often without even opening them, but I feel a pang of guilt when they hit the recycling bin.

From the perspective of Jewish law, based on a verse in *Parshat Re'eh*, this guilt is not unwarranted. The 16th-century legal code, the Shulchan Aruch, includes among the laws of *tzedakah* the commandment not to avert one’s eyes and withhold *tzedakah* when confronted with the opportunity to give. The Shulchan Aruch quotes Deuteronomy 15:7 as its proof-text: “Do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kinsman.”¹

This commandment is generally considered to apply to situations in which a person—either the recipient or the communal *tzedakah* collector—makes the ask. However, when asked whether this law applies to requests for *tzedakah* received in the mail, the 20th-century rabbinic authority Moshe Stern responded that if the request is known to be truthful, one is obligated to send money. In the words of Rabbi Stern: “What does it matter to me whether I know the suffering of the poor person face to face or whether I know the suffering of a poor person through writing?”² In other words, I should respond to the envelope as I would if the people represented by it were themselves standing before me requesting my assistance. Knowledge of the need, rather than direct interaction with it, necessitates a response.

This may explain my guilt: at some level I am aware that throwing away these solicitations amounts to a failure to respond to need. Yet the fact that the question about mail solicitations had to be asked indicates that psychologically, we feel different about ignoring someone who stands before us asking for help than we do about ignoring an indirect, impersonal, faceless request for money.

The difference between our responses to mail solicitations and personal pleas is only one example of the enormous role that psychology and emotion play in our *tzedakah* practices. Rather than making rational calculations about

¹ Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 247:1.

² Responsa of Be'er Moshe, 4:92*. Rabbi Stern was specifically dealing with solicitations on behalf of poor Jews that were signed and verified by leading rabbinic authorities in the community. Nevertheless, his reasoning that responding to need should not depend on face-to-face interaction can be applied to contemporary solicitations, regardless of the source.

where our *tzedakah* might have the most impact, we often choose to give or not based on factors like media attention to the cause, personal experience with the issue, or photographs and images presented in the solicitation.

Journalist Nicholas Kristof, in his column entitled “Save the Darfur Puppy,” cites research that indicates that people are more likely to give and to give more generously when they believe that they are helping a single individual rather than helping masses of people who are suffering: “The human conscience just isn’t pricked by mass suffering, while an individual child (or puppy) in distress causes our hearts to flutter.”³

The lack of response to mass suffering—or a “hardening” of our hearts to issues that feel too impersonal or too vast to fix—is particularly common when responding to global poverty and systemic violations of human rights. We are easily overwhelmed by problems like chronic hunger, prolonged conflict and the poverty of millions, and we therefore offer rationalizations for not donating to these causes: the problems will never be solved; we’re too far away; other people can help.

A closer look at *Parshat Re’eh* suggests a solution to this problem. The verse cited above, which constitutes our obligation to give when asked, contains two halves—“Do not harden your heart and [do not] shut your hand.” The subsequent verse commands: “Rather you must open your hand,”⁴ but does not provide a parallel emotional directive to soften our hearts. I believe that this is the Torah’s way of telling us that our hearts are naturally open and that we are—at our core—compassionate people who want to alleviate suffering and respond to need. We must simply open our hands in order to release the protective shield we’ve erected against the world’s immense and painful problems.

Giving then—opening those envelopes, imagining real people standing before us and saying yes to *tzedakah*, rather than no—is a self-perpetuating solution. The more we open our hands, the softer our hearts become, returning to their natural state of empathy and compassion.



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³ Kristof, Nicholas. “Save the Darfur Puppy.” *The New York Times*, 10 May 2007.

⁴ Deuteronomy 15:8.

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