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The Depth Behind Tzedakah

In the blessing of the *Sim Shalom*, after we ask for *ahavas chessed* (loving kindness), we ask for *tzedakah* (charity).

The simple understanding of *tzedakah* is that it is a *mitzvah* for one to give of his money to the poor. But there is far more depth to the matter of *tzedakah*.

Of Avraham Avinu, it is written that because he believed in Hashem, he merited "*tzedakah*" from Hashem. This "*tzedakah*" which Avraham Avinu merited shows us what the depth of *tzedakah* is, for it is obviously not referring to the transferal of any money to Avraham Avinu. The outer layer of *tzedakah* is to give away money to a person in need, but the essence of *tzedakah* goes far deeper than the act of giving away money.

The Gemara says that "*tzedakah* is great, for it brings the redemption closer; for it is written, "*Zion will be redeemed with charity.*"^[1] The simple understanding of this is that there is much *tzedakah* and *chessed* in our times, and this is bringing closer the redemption, and it will eventually redeem Jerusalem, where we will see the redemption. But there is more depth to it this matter.

Tzedakah: Giving Away The Self

What is the "I" of a person? What is a person's essence?

The innermost aspect of oneself is the *neshamah*, and atop that is the physical body. The outermost layer of a person is his acquisitions that he has acquired on this world. But what is a person's "I"? Where is the "I" of a person located?

There is no one answer to this question, because there are many levels to this answer. It depends upon how one is experiencing his own existence.

Tzedakah is essentially about giving away one's "I". When one gives money to another, he is giving away his acquisitions, but not necessarily his "I". Yet, this is only the superficial aspect of *tzedakah*. The inner point contained in *tzedakah* is to give away *yourself*, to another. Just like money is part of the person until he gives it away - and this is called *tzedakah* when he gives it - so can a person give his own "I" to another [when he gives *tzedakah*].

Tzedakah: Hashem's Money

Simply speaking, a person has a *mitzvah* to give his money to one who is in need. Logically speaking, we would say that it is Reuven's money until he decides to give it away to Shimon. But the Sages tell us the exact opposite. Really it is Shimon's money that happens to be in the Reuven's possession, for Hashem has given this money to Reuven so that he can be the messenger who will give it to Shimon.

The Gemara says that the reason why Hashem made poor people is so that they can merit us to have *mitzvos* when we give to them. Contrary to what we would think, it is the *collectors* are doing us the favor – it is not *we* who are doing them the favor. When we give *tzedakah*, we have the opportunity to give away that which is not really ours, because Hashem has only given us this money so that we can give it to others, and we are but His messengers to support His children.

Tzedakah: "I Am But A Tool of Hashem"

There is yet even greater depth to how should view *tzedakah*.

Tzedakah reveals the entire essence of man's purpose on this world of everything. Reuven is giving Shimon that which is really supposed to go to Shimon – thus, the *mitzvah* of *tzedakah* serves as a revelation of the concept that we do not exist for ourselves.^[2] This defines our entire purpose on this world. *Tzedakah* reveals that my money is not my own, for I do not exist for myself. It is entirely Hashem's *shefa* (Heavenly sustenance) coming to the world, and I am but a mere tool to contain His *shefa*. (This is explained in sefer *Nefesh HaChaim*).

This helps us understand not only how to approach the *mitzvah* of *tzedakah*, but how we can view our our entire stay on this world as temporary; the truth that we are not here for ourselves. The concept of *tzedakah* reveals how all of man's actions are nothing but a path that reveals Hashem, that man is a tool to bring down Hashem's light onto the world.

Giving Away The Self: Nullifying My Existence To Hashem

The most external layer of a person is his possessions, and this is definitely not a part of the "I". The physical body is also not a part of our "I" (as Rav Chaim Vital explains). What, then, is our "I"?

Generally speaking, our spiritual essence, our *neshamah* (soul), is our "I". But there are three parts to the Jew's soul: the *nefesh*, *ruach*, and *neshamah*. The "*nefesh*" is called "*nefesh b'gufa*", the minimal spiritual energy that keeps the body going. This is not where our "I" is, though. The Vilna Gaon says that the essence of man is located in the "*ruach*", which is also known as *bechirah* (free will).

When one chooses evil, his "I" has chosen evil, and when one chooses good, his "I" has chosen good. When a person feels that "I" am in charge of things, this really stems from a deeply rooted *gaavah* (conceit), When man thinks he is in control and that things are entirely up to him, this is entirely stemming from ego, and from the viewpoint of the ego, man has the free will to choose between good or evil.

The Sages state that "everything is in the hands of Heaven except for fear of Heaven". The only thing we are in charge of on this world is to have *yiras shomayim* (fear of Heaven). A person is given the choice to follow the way of the Torah or, *chas v'shalom*, the opposite.

The "I" in a person makes him think that he is his own existence. He is aware that is he who chooses, and that everything depends on his decisions, and therefore he often doesn't see Hashem in the picture. He attributes all strength to himself, as in the verse, "*The strength and might of my hands.*" The "I" makes a person think that he doesn't need Hashem to get by in life.

This is the danger that we are faced on this world. In the future there will be no more *bechirah*, for it

is written of the future that it will be “*days in which I have no desire*”, but now we are currently in a time of *bechirah*, and therefore we are experiencing our “I” mainly through our *bechirah* (or *ruach*).

In the future, where we will be in World To Come, the “I” of a person will look different. The “I” will graduate from the level of *ruach* to the level of *neshamah*. It will be a situation of complete *bittul* (nullification) to Hashem.

The Opportunity Of Tzedakah

Tzedakah is what enables a person to touch upon the level of *bittul* (nullifying the self) and to overcome the ego. It is not just about giving away your money to others. It is because our “I” is but a tool of Hashem, for we do not exist for ourselves.

Hashem has chosen to reveal Himself on this world through the selfless acts of man, which causes man to nullify his ego and give away his existence for Hashem. *Tzedakah* is therefore touching upon the great spiritual light of the future, where all of our existence will be nullified to Hashem, where man will totally realize that he did not exist for himself and that he was nothing but a tool to reveal Hashem.

We cannot merit this level fully in our times, but we can merit a resemblance of it. A person can get a glimpse of *Olam HaBa* on this world, when he realizes he is entirely a tool to reveal Hashem. This level will be fully realized in the future when we are actually in *Olam HaBa*, but even in our current times we can merit a glimpse of this level and attain it partially.

Our main *avodah* of this world is, “A stubborn person is successful”, as the Vilna Gaon says. One must indeed feel very strongly the famous words of Rabbi Eliezer ben Dordaya: “The matter is not dependent on me.”^[3] We are here on this world to mainly use our *bechirah*, to stubbornly pursue the right choices and to try as hard as we can. However, this inevitably causes us to feel that our “I” is in charge of our decisions, but that is our *avodah* of the current reality we are in, where our “I” is not yet perfected.

Only in the future where our “I” become perfected and we will have no more ego, and we will realize then that we are nothing except a tool to reveal Hashem. But even though we are not yet in the future, we can still touch upon it, when we have the deep understanding towards *tzedakah*.

Thus, the depth of *tzedakah* is to feel like you are giving up your *self*, as you give to the other in need. The outer act of *tzedakah* is to give away money, but this is a merely giving away a branch of the “I”, not the “I” itself. The inner essence of *tzedakah* is that when I give away money, I am giving up my very “I.”

It is written, “*My son, give your heart to me.*” Hashem wants to give ourselves away to Him – that is the entire essence of what He wants from us. *Tzedakah* enables us to can give all that we have of ourselves, for Hashem.

Tzedakah and The Redemption

This is the depth of *tzedakah* which is said about Avraham Avinu. Avraham Avinu merited to have “*tzedakah*” from Hashem because he reached the level of selflessness, out of his total *emunah* and devotion to Hashem.

Chazal say that *tzedakah* will bring the redemption. There is also a statement of Chazal (at the end of *Tractate Makkos*) that one will merit the redemption only if he has *emunah*. These two statements of Chazal bear a direct connection. The depth behind *tzedakah* stems from the depth behind having

emunah, and *emunah* is essentially about nullifying the "I", to give away one's existence for Hashem. And when one has that power to give up his self to Hashem, he is touching upon the level we will be on at the redemption. Thus, *emunah* and *tzedakah* are the two related concepts connected with the redemption.

To illustrate, Reuven can give away all of his possessions to Shimon if he is loyal to Shimeon, loves him, and trusts him completely. So too, we can give away our "I" entirely to Hashem, whom we have *emunah* in.

"*In Your hand, I place my spirit.*" When a person gives away his "I" to Hashem, he then gains a new "I" in place, which will feel like a resemblance of *Olam HaBa* on this world. It is a new "I" because the person realizes that he gave away his "I" to Hashem completely. When one has *emunah* in Hashem, it means that he gives away his whole existence for him.

This is the meaning of the statement of the Sages, "Mashiach ben David will not come until all of the *peratios* (coins) are used up from the wallet." Simply this Gemara means that the redemption will not come until all money has been given to *tzedakah*, but the word "*peratios*" can also mean "private aspects" - when all people give away their private existence away to Hashem, the redemption will come, where we will all be nullified to Hashem.

The redemption of the masses didn't happen yet, but each person can merit his own private redemption in his soul, through *tzedakah*. How? Through giving away his "I". Chazal say that one should choose to give away his *bechirah* to Hashem. This enables a person to serve Hashem entirely through *bittul*, for he has nullified himself entirely to Hashem.

In Conclusion

כי באור פניך נתת לנו וכו' וצדקה - In the blessing of *Sim Shalom*, the concept of *tzedakah* is mentioned in connection with the concept of the "*ohr panim*" (the radiance) of Hashem, because *tzedakah* is about giving away oneself to Hashem, and this enables a person to totally feel Hashem's existence, for it removes the barriers created by the ego. The person who gives away himself for Hashem - through being aware of the deep perspective towards *tzedakah* - he is the one who merits to dwell in the "*ohr panim*" of Hashem.

Man is either using his "I" on this world to choose to do the *mitzvos* and to make the right decisions, or he is choosing evil. But when one merits to go above his "I", though exercising more and more *bittul* to Hashem, he has less and less traces of the "I". With the less of an "I" he has, the more he enters what is called "the light of the redemption".

The more a person realizes that he is nothing but a tool of Hashem, he is closer and closer to meriting the private redemption of the soul. When each person in *Klal Yisrael* merits it, this will be the general redemption that will come to all of the world, because both the private redemption and the general redemption are about having no existence of our own, for we are nullified to Hashem.

May it be revealed the time where "*A new light shall shine forth on Zion,*" when the complete light of Hashem upon His creation.

[2] See the introduction to *sefer Nefesh HaChaim*: “Man was not created for himself, only in order to help others.”

[3] Avodah Zarah 17a

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