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A Purposeful Life: *Tzedakah* and the Philanthropy of the Rothschilds”

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Tzedakah is the Hebrew word for charity. The root of the word, “tzeh-dek,” means righteousness or justice. This suggests a close link between the giving of money or effort and the righting of wrongs. For religious Jews, *tzedakah* is the requirement of righteous giving and just behavior. For secular humanist Jews *tzedakah* is a moral requirement for oneself and one’s community, both local and global.

I feel fortunate in the opportunities life has afforded me and I feel that I should give to those who aren’t as well cared for. I have enough money to live, but sometimes I wonder what I would do if I were in a position of great wealth? More money would mean a greater ability to give to others. But would my ideas about how I lead my life be different?

To help me get an idea of what the answer might be, I researched the path chosen by the famous Rothschild family of Europe. In the late 18th century, Mayer Rothschild of Frankfurt, Germany, was a man of modest means who founded what would become the wealthiest and most influential banking dynasty in the early decades of the 19th century—and which survives to this day (in diluted form). The members of Rothschild family had the ability to do great good in the world - but did they? Did they give to the best of their ability? What did they do with the possibilities that were available to them?

Like a lot of European Jews, the Rothschilds came to banking by way of laws put into place by Europe’s Christian rulers. In the middle ages, the Roman Catholic Church banned Christians from banking, as it was considered a form of usury. Usury was defined as the practice of lending money at interest, which is now an accepted business practice throughout most of the world. The word usury now is reserved for the practice of lending at an excessive rate of interest. Europe’s Christian rulers also banned Jews from owning land and learning most trades, like blacksmithing and carpentry. As a result, many Jews went into money trades such as banking, commerce and money changing, which was the business of exchanging currency, especially of different countries.

By the 16th century, the Reformation redefined the concept of usury and again made it acceptable for Christians to work in the money professions, but Jews stayed in the field and remained prominent in the profession from the sixteenth century into the 18th and 19th centuries when the Rothschild family rose to prominence in the world of banking and finance.

Mayer Rothschild, born in 1744, was the founder of the family fortune. He started out in the quarter of Frankfurt where Jewish people were required to live, called the ghetto, as an agent and banker who also dealt in rare coins. He occasionally sold coins to William IX, the son of the Landgrave, or local ruler who grew wealthy by providing Hessian mercenaries to England’s King George III for use in the American Revolution. When William became Landgrave in 1785, he inherited the largest private fortune in Europe. Mayer began changing gold for William in 1789 and built up his business as a gold broker as the amount of business he did for his wealthiest client steadily expanded.

Mayer Rothschild also made money during the Napoleonic wars by selling contraband goods, or goods forbidden by law to be imported or exported in Europe and by smuggling gold to the British general Lord Wellington. Mayer had five sons, four of whom moved to other parts of Europe to establish branches abroad. (There were also five daughters.) I'll return to the sons and their stories shortly. The successive generations of Rothschilds stayed in finance and built a reputation as one of the most influential families ever in Jewish philanthropy.

Mayer's sons gave mostly to Jewish causes, probably because in those days Jews couldn't rely on admission into other hospitals, schools and other institutions. The Rothschilds felt it incumbent on them to help Jews less fortunate than themselves. Rather than glorify the family name, the purpose of Mayer's sons' giving was to make life better for as many Jews as possible by funding social programs and changing a legal system that discriminated against them.

Sons Amschel, Salomon, Nathan, Karl, and James, and their children funded and founded hospitals, schools, immigration societies, soup kitchens, financed Jewish colonies in Palestine in the 1880s and generally provided money to impoverished Jews.

Their influence on the Jewish Diaspora was widespread largely because of the brothers' dispersion across Europe. Through the brothers, the Rothschild family had offices in London, Paris, Vienna, Frankfurt and Naples.

Amschel, the eldest, stayed in Frankfurt, while Salomon, who lived from 1774 to 1888 mostly in Austria, gave generously to Silesia (now part of modern-day Poland), where a coal and ironworks facility that he owned was located. The head of the region praised Salomon's programs as a model of social responsibility.

His brother James and wife, Betty, lived in France founded a hospital for Jews with incurable diseases and an orphanage for Jewish children in Paris. Betty also bequeathed a large sum of money to be used to help poor workers pay rent.

Nathan Rothschild, who lived from 1777 to 1836, mostly in England, and Karl Rothschild, who lived from 1788 to 1855, mostly in Italy, used their power and influence among rulers to increase the rights and freedoms of Jews in those countries. When Karl went to Italy to financially prop up a new king, he made sure that the all-powerful Catholic Church's attitude toward Jews was at least cordial before he would lend money to their king. In England, Nathan refused to work with German interests operating there if the interests' home cities or towns wouldn't give Jews basic rights.

In the second half of the 19th century, family patriarch Mayer Rothschild's grandchildren and great-grandchildren retained their strong ties to Judaism but they also started to branch out to charities that helped non-Jews.

In Paris – Gustave and Alphonse, who lived from about 1830 to 1910, along with Edmond, their niece's husband – donated money to Parisian students' higher education and improved the living conditions of the working class by funding the construction of inexpensive housing.

In Vienna, Albert and Nathaniel, who lived from about 1840 to 1915, founded institutes for the blind and deaf-mute and a neurological clinic that was also a hospital, a botanical garden and an orphanage.

In the postwar era and into the current day, the Rothschilds' philanthropy has broadened, especially into the arts, even though Jewish charities still receive a significant amount of their largess. With each new generation, their giving grows more and more secular.

The Rothschild philanthropic foundations that survive today operate in the U.S., Europe and Israel. Some are general, funding philanthropic activities of all kinds and some are specific. One headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland, funds research in the field of ophthalmology, and another in the same city develops vocational training for young people. Two in Israel fund philanthropic activities in the Jewish state with an emphasis on education and medicine. Three in Paris focus on medicine, university physics and chemistry laboratories and the social welfare of children.

Much of the sort of giving that the Rothschild foundations do now would probably be considered "non-Jewish" giving. But what makes giving "Jewish"? Does an organization have to help just Jews? Be run by Jews? Have the word "Jewish" in the name?

My belief is that as long as the money or actions given by a Jew goes toward bettering the world, then those contributions can be considered Jewish giving. I feel that *tzedakah*, which is such a large part of Judaism and Jewish culture, allows that charitable giving be directed by reasons of need and not solely by the religion of the recipients.

On this point I am far from alone. The trend among American Jews is that with each new generation, its pattern of philanthropy becomes more secular and giving to strictly Jewish causes decreases. Today's younger Jews also give less to Israel. Overall, Jews give less to specifically religious charities than other Americans. Many Jews today, like myself, see secularized giving as a Jewish expression of our ethical values. Furthermore, unlike in the Rothschilds' day, our world is increasingly globalized: 24-hour cable news and international economic interdependence really does make the world a smaller place, and that means hardship in one part of the world, be it Sri Lanka or New Orleans, really does have an immediate impact on the rest of the world. Because of this, globalized and secularized giving makes sense, both from a Jewish and contemporary perspective. This expansion beyond Jewish causes brings *tzedakah* closer to another Jewish value: *tikkun olam*, or repairing the world.

But what about strictly Jewish causes? Should Jews give to Jewish causes, or ignore them for the sake of the rest of the world? Yes, Jews should use some of their time or money to help other Jews, because we are all part of a community and we should look out for other each other. However, this does not mean that you should give only to Jewish causes. The goal of *tzedakah* should be to improve people's lives, and this includes easing the suffering of those who need it the most—but not to the exclusion of fellow Jews. I would suggest giving ten to thirty percent of the total you donate to Jewish causes, because if Jews don't give to Jewish causes, who will? When you are contributing to Jewish causes, try to give to Jewish causes that really help, like by helping Jews in places like Ethiopia or by giving money to help preserve Jewish cultural or religious artifacts or fighting against antisemitism.

The Rothschilds had to deal with anti-Semitism. Their name was synonymous with big business, and they were cited as examples of Jews who were trying to take over the world by infiltrating controlling governments with their power and influence. Early on, the Rothschild's tried to lessen antisemitism, but later on they did not do much about it.

The Rothschilds' philanthropy extended beyond Jewish charities to help all kinds of people in need. Over several generations the many descendants branched out with their giving preferences. Reviewing the story of their philanthropy, I feel that charity to one's own group is a good thing but extending the reach of one's giving is even better. That is what the Rothschilds did, and I would do the same, though I think it would be better to be more personally involved, actually pitching in with the work, rather than merely funding programs.

Still, what a lot of good that Rothschild money has done. Much of it went to people living at a time when there were no publicly funded social programs. Consider the French workers who could get assistance with their rent when they were between jobs, thanks to Betty's 6 million francs. Think of the orphans who had a roof over their heads at night because of Albert's orphanage. To all those people, the Rothschilds' *tzedakah* made a difference in their lives, and that is what counts.

Is all charity equal from a Jewish perspective? I feel that all charity is not equal, that some charities are better than others. I believe charities that tangibly improve peoples' lives are better than charities that don't affect peoples' lives in an everyday way. In some cases, it's a matter of resource allocation. For example, if there is already an effective housing aid and food program in place, then longer-term projects, like education and job-training programs would serve the community better than duplicating basic aid programs.

When you give to charity, how do you know if your money is doing what you want it to do? You should try to find out as much as you can about the organization so that you can have faith in its judgment to try to make the most informed decision that you can.

My school, the Elysian Charter School of Hoboken, started a fund to help the victims of the December 2004 tsunami, and I was among the kids chosen to research different organizations to which we could donate the money. Lynne Shapiro, Nathaniel Lewit's mom, who works at my school and who is a member of The City Congregation and who is here today, told us about a job she had at an organization that used a large amount of the money donated to them for administrative costs. Her recommendation was that the organizations we chose should devote 90 percent or more of their donations to actually help for the victims.

We can look to Maimonides, the 12th-century Jewish philosopher, for some guidance on *tzedakah*. He believed that the priorities for charitable giving were, in order: family and friends first, then people who live in your neighborhood, then people who live in your city, and so on. In addition, he believed that you should give charity to non-Jews, if only for the sake of fairness and that you cannot give nothing. Maimonides built some skepticism and discernment into his system of charity. He said, for example, that if you see a man hungry, feed him at once, but if you see a man without clothing, make sure that his need is real and not feigned before giving clothes to him.

My personal interpretation of Maimonides's system of charity is this: The best way to help a person is to provide assistance so he can learn to earn a living on his own and allow a finite amount of assistance to move on and help another person. This works best in the most serious of cases when coupled with basic-needs programs. A person learning to provide for himself won't get very far if he has no food or a roof over his head or is sick. Contrary to Maimonides's framework, I feel that one should give according to need, including globally, and not focus first on the needy close by, although you do have a commitment to your community.

When you give, you should give to the best of your ability, as little or as much as that might be. If you are trying to concentrate your money on one place, a place that needs everything, start with short-term food and housing programs. Next, support education and job training. Fund or establish programs that help the government and economy. Once the majority of the population is able to fend for themselves with things like stable jobs, a responsible government and a decent public education system, I feel that people can now give to whatever they want.

Tzedakah, I believe, is part of a purposeful life. Be not only for yourself, but for yourself and others. When you are offered the chance to help, seize it, because one day you might need help. If you have more than you need to survive, share your wealth to make others' lives better. If you become wealthy and keep the money to yourself, what is the point of having it? Money cannot buy happiness, but it can be used to make others' lives safer, more comfortable, more hopeful, and more dignified, which leads to greater happiness and the greater good of all.