

I read a story the other day of a rabbi who was walking to lunch with a minister friend. I know this sounds like that joke: a rabbi and minister walked into the bar... But trust me this one is not a joke.

The two of them passed a woman on the street who was begging. The rabbi described the woman as 'sitting on a stoop; thin, gaunt, wearing sunglasses on a cloudy day, smoking a cigarette.' The woman asked, 'Hey, can either of you guys spare ten cents for a cup of coffee?' The rabbi at first wondered where anyone could get a cup of coffee for just ten cents in the Starbucks driven world of three dollar lattes. But he put his hand in his pocket to find some change.

Not finding any, he gave her the lowest bill he had, a five and walked on. As the woman shouted her thanks to him, his Christian friend said, 'That was very kind.'

The rabbi went on to question whether his giving to the woman was kindness or something else entirely. The minister assumed that everybody gives charity out of kindness. But that is really not the Jewish intention of tzedakah, or charity. If it were, then giving tzedakah would be something we each decided every time we were called upon to give money. It would leave us with the question: Are we feeling kind and generous today, looking out for the plight of others or are we feeling like taking care only of ourselves?

We know that tzedakah is more than just kindness because we are commanded to do it. In fact in the 12th century, Rambam, Moshe ben Maimon gave us the eight rungs on the ladder of tzedakah.

In Rambam's Mishneh Torah, [in the volume on Laws of Gifts to the Poor 10:7, also in Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah, 249: 6-13] we find eight degrees of tzedakah, each one higher than the next.

8. The highest degree is assisting the poor by providing them with a gift or a loan, accepting them into a business partnership or helping them find a job. In fact this level of giving directly reflects a verse in this week's Torah portion [Vayikra, Leviticus 25:35], 'You shall strengthen him, be he a stranger or a settler, he shall live with you', in other words, strengthen people so that they do not become poor.

7. The next level is where neither the giver nor the recipient know each other.

6. Next is when the giver knows the recipient but the recipient does not know the giver.

5. The next level is just the opposite, where the recipient does know the giver but the giver does not know the recipient.

4. Next is giving before being asked.

3. Then giving after being asked.

2. Almost at the bottom is giving less than we can afford but giving it happily.

1. And last is giving unhappily.

In our Torah portion this week, Behar, we read one chapter [25] on helping the poor in order to insure that economic inequality does not become institutionalized.

These laws are not about kindness but about taking care of those who are needy. It is an important and basic tenet of our religion; so much so that we include unhappily giving tzedakah as one of the ways to complete this mitzvah.

The word tzedakah comes from the Hebrew word, tzadak meaning to be just, righteous. That makes giving an act of justice, of righteousness not at all an act of kindness. It may also be kind but that is not the motivation, not the intention behind our giving.

We do not know if the woman who was begging in our story was Jewish but we do know that she had an intrinsic understanding of Jewish law.

When the rabbi and his Christian friend were leaving the restaurant, they passed this woman again. She was still on the same stoop, wearing sunglasses and smoking a cigarette. 'Hey', she said again, 'can you spare ten cents for a cup of coffee?' The friend protested, 'He just gave you five dollars.' The woman responded 'I know he did. I remember. But you haven't given me anything today.'

The women knew that given was a requirement, not just an act of kindness.

Shabbat Shalom.