

Tzedakah
“Jobs, Jobs, Jobs”
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In her recent article in *The Watchman's Rattle*, subtitled ‘Thinking our way out of extinction,’ Rebecca Costa delivers a fascinating account of how civilizations die. Their problems become too complex. Societies reach what she calls a cognitive threshold. They simply can’t chart a path from the present to the future.

The example she gives is the Mayans. For a period of 350,000 years, between 2,600 BCE and 900 CE, they developed an extraordinary civilization, spreading over what is today Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Belize, with an estimated population of 15 million people.

Then suddenly, for reasons we still don’t fully understand, the entire system collapsed. Sometime between the middle of the eighth and ninth century, the majority of the Mayan people simply disappeared. There have been many theories as to why it happened but no matter what has been speculated, they became extinct. There was cognitive overload, and systems broke down.

It can happen to any civilization. It may, she says, be happening to ours. The first sign of breakdown is gridlock. Instead of dealing with what everyone can see are major problems, people continue as usual and simply pass their problems on to the next generation. The second sign is a retreat into irrationality.

However, as I have often suggested, our people have something to share. We have a treasure chest of teaching that instructs and informs the world. We too, have faced great challenges. We faced two centuries of crisis under Roman rule and we overcame the destruction of the Second Temple when we were expecting a major cataclysm.

What is remarkable is that we did not focus obsessively on sacrifices like the Mayans. Instead, we focused on finding substitutes for sacrifice. Our Mahzor, in one of the most climatic moments of our entire liturgy says, “Amidst so much that it is out of our control, there is still something we can do.” *Teshuva*, *Tephillah* and *Tzedakah* make a difference and they can change our course. *Teshuva* and *Tephillah* work on the individual, *Tzedakah* on the civilization. So for today we will focus on *Tzedakah*.

Listen to these stories. Behind them lies an extraordinary insight into the nature of Jewish ethics.

Story 1. Rabbi Abba used to bind money in his scarf, sling it on his back, and place it at the disposal of the poor. [Ketubot 67b]

Story 2. Mar Ukba had a poor man in his neighborhood. Every day Mar Ukba used to throw four coins into this man’s door socket. One day the poor man thought, “I will go and see who does me this kindness.” That day Mar Ukba and his wife stayed late at the house of study and as they were coming home, they placed the coins inside the door socket. As soon as the poor man saw

them moving the door [to leave the coins] he ran out after them, but they fled from him and hid. Why did they do this? Because it was taught: “One should throw himself into a fiery furnace rather than publicly put his neighbor to shame.” [Ketubot 67b]

Both of these stories are about tzedakah and not just the act of giving but the manner in which this mitzvah is done and the care with which the obligation is executed. “If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward them. Rather, be open-handed and freely lend them whatever they need . . . Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart ... There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be open-handed toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land.” [Deut. 15: 7-8, 10-11]

Tzedakah does not mean “charity,” it means social justice. (Maimonides, Laws of Gifts to the Poor, 7:10).

Poverty humiliates. It robs people of dignity. It makes them dependent on others thus depriving them of the independence which the Torah sees as essential to self-respect.

Maimonides challenges us – he says Tzedakah is not just for the wealthy, it is for the health of the society. He says that it is not only for the affluent to do but for everyone to do. “So,” he says, “Here is a ladder.” Please look at the card in your seat. It is the ladder of tzedakah that Rambam constructed to help us reach higher and higher in our lives. I need not read them all however, I do need to ask you to first step on ... then step up.

First Level – Those who give to those in need, but do so unwillingly.

Second Level – Those who give cheerfully to those in need, but less than they should.

Third Level – Those who give to those in need but only when asked.

Fourth Level – Those who give to those in need without waiting to be asked.

Fifth Level – Those who give to those in need without knowing the recipient.

Sixth Level – Those who give anonymously to those in need.

Seventh Level – Those who give anonymously to those in need without knowing the recipient.

Eighth Level – Those who help others to help themselves.

Rambam is not only offering us a socio-psychological paradigm, he is offering us a concrete method for living. Rambam was the one who said Jobs, Jobs, Jobs, first and he wasn't talking about Steve. (How could I not make a reference to him this week?)

The famous ruling of Maimonides says that “The highest degree of charity, exceeded by none, is when a person assists another person by providing him with a gift or a loan or by accepting him into a business partnership or by helping him find employment – in a word, by putting him in a situation where he can dispense with other people's aid.” (Laws of Gifts to the Poor 10: 7)

This further serves to show that tzedakah does not mean charity. It means giving people the means to live a dignified life, and any form of employment is more dignified, within our value system, than dependence.

Our country is suffering from a jobs crisis and we have lost our sense of self-respect. The economics of this country have caused a gridlock and irrational behavior. We have lost our way.

Muhammad Yunus offered us an example for our time, and for which he was awarded the Nobel Prize: “the idea of micro-loans enabling poor people to start small businesses.” It is a very powerful idea.

Judaism refused to romanticize poverty or anaesthetize its pain. Faith is not what Karl Marx called “the opium of the people.” The rabbis refused to see poverty as a blessed state, an affliction to be born with acceptance and grace. “We support the indigent of the non-Jews with the indigent of the Jews ...because of the ways of peace.” (TB Gittin 61)

In recent weeks (9/29/11,) David Brooks wrote an article in the *New York Times* entitled “*The Limits of Empathy*”:

“We are surrounded by people trying to make the world a better place... Empathy makes you more aware of other people’s suffering, but it’s not clear if it actually motivates you to take moral action or prevents you from taking immoral action...”

In one experiment in the 1970s, researchers planted a dime in a phone booth. Eighty-seven percent of the people who found the dime offered to help a nearby person who dropped some papers compared with only four percent who didn’t find a dime. Empathy doesn’t produce anything like this kind of effect.

Moreover, empathy often leads people astray. It leads us to react to shocking incidents, like a hurricane, but not longstanding conditions, like global hunger or preventable diseases.

Nobody is against empathy. Nonetheless, it’s insufficient. These days empathy has become a shortcut.

Empathy is a sideshow.”

While I am not sure empathy is a sideshow, I certainly believe it is insufficient. If you want to make the world a better place, then you must do something.

Mahatma Gandhi once said, “The difference between what we do and what we are capable of doing would suffice to solve most of the world’s problems.”

Just Tuesday of this past week, I received solicitations from: The National Museum of American Jewish History, Israel Free Loan Society, HIAS, Hazon, Associated Services for the Blind and Visually Impaired, Mazon, ZOA, Ben Gurion University, and Shalva. Those are just the Jewish organizations. There is no shortage of worthy causes. So we must pick.

The Perelman family has instructed our community so well. In just this year alone, they made an enormous gift to the University of Pennsylvania Medical School. However, it did not happen until the Perelmans provided for Jewish education which began with a gift to the Jewish community in the naming of our local Solomon Schechter School.

Today, I say to you what I say almost every week to our Bar or Bat Mitzvah students as they make their way to the final stages of preparation for their big day. I say to them, “Tzedakah. Make a commitment now to give a percentage to tzedakah. Our tradition says 10%. Decide now that if you receive \$500 that you will give \$50.” Then I look at the parents and I say, “Now it is your turn. After our meeting is over, I want you to sit together and talk about priorities and values and make a determination about where that money is going to go.”

I was sitting next to my father on Rosh Hashanah, just as I had done for decades when living at home, and I could hear him davening. Many of the words of the prayer book I learned while sitting next to him and listening to him offer his prayers. So this felt familiar and comfortable. This time as I listened to his voice, it struck me that he was telling me something. Without talking directly to me, he was communicating a message. He was telling me, if you listen carefully, these words mean something. As the service turned from Minha to Ma’ariv, the evening service, I began to listen even more intently to the words he was saying. By the time we had reached the conclusion of the service I was filled with emotion and I was intent on every syllable. Then came the concluding Psalm, Psalm 27 and my father became very quiet so I leaned over a little further and this is what I caught. *Ki avi v’imi azavuni, v’adonai ya’asfani* – my mother and father have left me and I too will be gathered. My father was saying, “Just as my parents have passed, so too one day I will be gone.” Then it dawned on me that there were so many conversations I want to have with him. So many questions I still have to ask.

The very last line of Neilah, the final comment before the gates close, is a plea to God: *Avinu Malkeinu chaninu v’aneinu ki ein banu maa’sim eseh imanu tzedakah v’chesed, v’hoshieinu*. Our parent, our Sovereign, have mercy on us, answer us for our deeds are insufficient; deal with us charitably and lovingly, redeem us. Deal with us charitably.

As we now begin Yizkor, I ask you to take the words you will say seriously, *Hineni nodeiv l’tzadakah b’ad hazkarat nishmato*, “In loving testimony to my dear departed friends and family, I pledge tzedakah to perpetuate the ideals important to them.”