What may a pauper do with his matanot la'evyonim?

As a rule, mitzvot of chesed bind the benefactor, not the recipient. We honor our parents by offering them food, but they choose whether to eat. We unload a burdened animal, but the owner decides what to do next.29 We arrange jobs for the indigent, but this does not generate a special responsibility for them to rise on time in the morning and go to work.

One possible exception, though, is the mitzvah of matanot la'evyonim, giving money to the needy on Purim. According to Rabbi Meir, this mitzvah incorporates an unusual rule: The recipient is obligated to spend his gift for a Purim feast and nothing else. Rabbi Meir’s point is cited in a discussion regarding proper use of a rented animal:

According to Rabbi Meir, a recipient may spend matanot la'evyonim only for a Purim feast. We do not follow Rabbi Meir’s position in practice,30 but how do we explain Rabbi Meir’s dictum?

What sort of chesed can so encumber its beneficiary?

The authors of the Tosafot were also struck by the unusual character of this chesed:31

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29 Talmud Bavli, Bava Metzia 32a.

30 See Tur, Orach Chaim 694 and Beit Yosef there, and Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 694:2. See also Shvut Yaakov 1:77.
You might challenge [these limitations on use of matanot la'evyonim] based on Arachin 6b, "One may divert tzedakah money for any purpose, even after the funds have come to the collector. Even if the donor said, ‘This candelabra should be for the synagogue,’ one may divert it for another mitzvah.” Perhaps our law of not diverting funds, and of keeping a city's collection in that city, is unique to Purim.

Neither the Talmud nor Tosafot explains Rabbi Meir's rationale, though. Why should we treat Purim differently?32

Giving a meal gladdens the donor

Perhaps the respective foci of chesed and matanot la'evyonim are different. The purpose of chesed is to benefit the recipient, and our goals are determined by the recipient's needs and desires.33 On the other hand, the goal of matanot la'evyonim is also to generate joy for the donor.

The Rambam testifies to this, in describing the importance of matanot la'evyonim:

It would be better for a person to increase his gifts to the needy than for him to increase his feast or the portions he sends to his friends, for there is no greater, more splendid joy than to gladden the heart of the needy, orphans, widows and foreigners, for one who gladdens the heart of the forlorn resembles the Shechinah, per Yeshayah 57:15, "To resuscitate the spirit of the lowly and to resuscitate the heart of the depressed."

Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Megilah v'Chanukah 2:17

The Rambam here describes the benefactor's "splendid joy" in providing the cost of a person's meal. Admittedly, one could challenge this understanding and read these words as describing a disembodied, universal joy, or perhaps Divine nachat ruach generated by this generosity, but the Rambam's words in describing Yom Tov feasts betray his true intent:

Men eat meat and drink wine, for joy exists only in meat and joy exists only in wine. Also, when he eats and drinks he must feed the foreigner, the orphan and the widow, along with all of the other forlorn paupers. One who locks the doors of his yard

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31 Tosafot Megilah 78b Magevet; and see, too, Talmud Yerushalmi Megilah 1:4
32 From an unabashedly homiletic perspective, one could note that the story of Purim revolves around cases of thwarted intent. From Vashti's defiance, to Bigtan and Teresh's plot, to Haman's donation and decree, to the gallows intended for Mordechai, to Haman's advice to Achashverosh regarding appropriate honors and rewards, every action perpetrated in Megilat Esther leads to an opposite reaction, and the only intent which is fulfilled is the intent of our Creator and Protector. As a lesson of the megilah, then, the pauper must recognize that matanot la'evyonim are presented to him with Divine intent, and are not to be diverted.
33 See Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Matnot Aniyyim 7.
and eats and drinks with his children and wife, and who does not give food and drink to the needy and those of bitter spirit, does not experience joy of a mitzvah but joy of his belly.

Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Yom Tov 6:18

The joy experienced when providing a celebratory meal for others is categorically different from the joy generated by eating meat and wine with one's family; giving food to others alters the benefactor's own experience, introducing a unique brand of joy, the joy of a mitzvah. So, too, the "splendid joy" praised by the Rambam for Purim is the joy of the donor who has underwritten a Purim feast for a needy individual.

This is the joy which a donor is meant to experience, and wishes to experience, with matanot la'evyonim. We generally assume that a donor is comfortable with other uses of his donations, but regarding matanot la'evyonim the Gemara asserts, "He gave it for Purim; he did not intend it for any other use." Therefore, the recipient is bound to spend his gift for the feast of Purim and for no other benefit, however worthy.

On Purim, the donor's joy is the mitzvah

Taking this one step further, the Aruch haShulchan sees the donor's joy as inherent in the structure of the Purim mitzvot themselves, such that the benefactor does not fulfill the mitzvot of Purim unless he rejoices in his beneficence.

The Aruch haShulchan alludes to this in discussing Rabbi Meir's perspective on matanot la'evyonim:

Even though one may divert tzedakah in certain situations, here they enacted that it should not be diverted at all. The collectors should purchase meat with all of these funds, have the indigent eat as much as they wish, and let whatever remains fall to tzedakah.

Aruch haShulchan Orach Chaim 694:5

This requirement of satisfying donor intent is built into the actual rabbinic enactment of matanot la'evyonim, and is not simply an added frill. The Aruch haShulchan makes the connection to joy still more explicit regarding another mitzvah of Purim, though:

It is unclear whether one fulfills mishloach manot by sending portions to a distant friend before Purim, such that they arrive on Purim. Some say one does fulfill his obligation, but to me it seems that he does not fulfill his obligation. We require that portions be sent on Purim itself. Further, the

34 Talmud Bavli, Arachin 6b.
35 Talmud Bavli, Bava Metzia 78b, cited above in footnote 2.
essence of sending portions is to generate joy, and what joy does he experience now, if he sent the portions beforehand?

Aruch haShulchan Orach Chaim 695:17

According to the Aruch haShulchan, the mitzvah of sending mishloach manot is designed specifically to generate joy for the sender, as he applied a sender-centric philosophy to matanot la'evyonim. This is why the recipient must spend his donation in a certain way; the mitzvot of Purim are about creating joy for the benefactor.36

Why do we care about the donor's joy?

One question remains, though: Why did our ancestors create Purim mitzvot which emphasize gladdening a donor? Some37 note that Purim's social mitzvot respond to Haman's condemnation of the Jews as "scattered and lacking unity", but couldn't the architects of the holiday have met that need with recipient-centered philanthropy? Perhaps we may suggest a second benefit of these joyous mitzvah institutions.

We are taught38 that Achashverosh created his feast to celebrate the apparent death of Jewish hopes for our return to Israel. Calculating that seventy years of Jewish exile had elapsed without any Divine redemption, the Persian king concluded that Daniel's prophesied redemption had failed, and we were doomed to be absorbed into his empire. The events of Purim hardly changed that gloomy forecast; despite our miraculous survival, we were still servants of Achashverosh, lacking permission to build the second Beit haMikdash and to escape our interregnum.

To combat this narrative, the Jews of the time39 enacted a celebration which would catalyze redemption. The prophets of the end of the First Temple period had repeatedly warned that selfishness and greed would lead to exile, and Yeshayah had promised that generosity would be the key to our return, saying,40 "Zion will be redeemed with justice, and her returnees with tzedakah." Thus, our ancestors celebrated Purim with deeds of generosity - and they emphasized the joy of the donor in order to promote this generosity among their neighbors and children. Performing righteousness is insufficient; we must also promote it, so that it will spread.

This explanation has an evident lesson for our own day: To end our exile, we need to do more than adopt the prescription of our prophets; we must implement our mission in a manner that is attractive for our neighbors and children. Mitzvot must not be accompanied by a sigh; rather, we are charged with finding a way to bring joy and satisfaction to observance. When we come to practice and publicize a Judaism which is not only goal-oriented but also contagiously Purimesque and joy-oriented, then we, too, will see the end of a Diaspora, and the return of the Beit haMikdash.

36 For a related approach to the mitzvot of matanot la'evyonim and mishloach manot and the roles of donor and recipient, see Az Nidbiru 6:80.
37 Manot haLevi, cited by Chatam Sofer, Orach Chaim 196, among others.
38 Talmud Bavli, Megilah 11b.
39 Esther 9:18-19 indicates that these mitzvot were practiced spontaneously by the Jews before they were enshrined in law in 9:20-23.
40 Yeshayah 1:27.