



TZEDAKAH'S ROLE IN REMOVING THE EVIL DECREE

One of the most poignant moments of the Yamim Noraim liturgy is the recitation of *Unesaneh Tokef*. Even the most hardened spiritual Jews succumb to the emotional depiction of confronting the reality of Yom Hadin — The Day of Judgement. In describing G-d's judgement of the world, the piyut evokes a solemn confrontation with mortality — *mi yichyeh umi yamus* (who will live and who will die?), conjuring all sorts of memories and images relating to our lives and our loved ones. The structure, substance and musical tone

is nearly fatalistic as we embrace the reality of the moment. The tension that builds up as we recite this piyut is finally released with the declaration “*uteshuva utefilah utzedakah maavirin es roah hagezeirah*” — repentance, prayer and charity remove the evil decree. This refrain, whose source is from the Talmud Yerushalmi (*Taanis* 2:1), provides a roadmap for us to influence the outcome of the pending judgement of Yom Hadin. Despite the seemingly passive nature of our disposition in the context of G-d's providence over the world, indeed there is something we can do to

impact the outcome of this day.

Reflecting upon these three elements, teshuva emerges as an understandable response to judgement as it has the capacity to alter the character and the deeds of the individual being judged. Prayer, as a direct appeal to the Divine, also has an expected impact upon the outcome of our judgment as well. The element of the triad that seems to be distinct from the others is tzedakah. Charity, while extraordinarily noble and certainly a hallmark of our people's legacy of compassion, seems unusually specific

for this very universal context. The piyut seems to avoid presenting a broader mandate for chessed in general, in deference to the very specific act of tzedakah. In what manner does this mitzvah become so central to the Divine judgement of our future?

Rav Soloveitchik, (*Harerei Kedem* Vol. I p. 76) suggests that the Torah's disruption of the Mishkan's construction in Sefer Shemos with the narrative of the *cheit haeigel* — the sin of the golden calf, and its resolving forgiveness, is intended to draw attention to the role of communal contributions, as foundational to the paradigm of forgiveness. Somehow, the experience of the Jewish people sacrificing of their own resources for the larger communal need, provides the foundation for G-d's ultimate forgiveness.

What is the source of charity's powerful influence upon our ultimate judgement as individuals and as a people?

I once learned, that perhaps it is the very nature of tzedakah's impact that shifts the entire calculus of our judgment. Tzedakah establishes a connection of dependency between two people. It entails, at the highest level, one Jew taking responsibility for the fate and well-being of another. Beyond an altruistic gesture, tzedakah is the medium through which we expand the circle of impact, and by extension, relevance of our lives. Tzedakah means that whatever occurs to us as individuals will have a profound effect upon those we support as well. It establishes an existential link between the fate of ourselves and that of others. In this regard, G-d's judgement upon us becomes an evaluation of more than the quantitative and qualitative value

of our own deeds. It entails a broader scope of accounting for the many connections and networks of support that we have developed and if those individuals or institutions as well are deserving of a questionable fate. Tzedakah can reverse or temper the "gezeirah" because it brings into G-d's accounting, the broader merits of those we support.

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When we live life for ourselves, we are left with the consequences of our own actions. When we live life for others, then our fate becomes forever linked with the compelling needs of those beyond our own world.

The Yamim Noraim inspire significant devotion to personal reflection and growth. The process of teshuva is one that demands deep introspection, profound honesty, and extraordinary resolve. Perhaps, through the medium of tzedakah, we can ensure that this focus does not remain in the realm of the personal. Rather, it moves us to recognize our capacity to make a difference in the lives of others — to look around the shul, or our community, and recognize the myriad of ways that we can become "essential" to the world of others and to edify our community through respect, unity, and support. Yom Tov is an exciting and vibrant time for many people. For others, the expansion of focus on children and family, serves to painfully accentuate everything that is missing in their lives. For those who are blessed to be praying for continued nachas and success, perhaps one of the most effective methods, is to extend ourselves to those for whom these days are excruciatingly challenging, to embrace them with compassion, love, and support and to show, that our lives matter, because they matter to others.



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