

MAIMONIDES' LADDER OF TZEDAKAH

“Who is Kind to the Poor Lends to the Lord.”

Proverbs 19:17

When we help those in need, we are actually helping God do His work, for we are caring for His people. This is how important the Mitzvah of Tzedakah is. Maimonides thought a great deal about this Mitzvah and how it could be best carried out. He was very concerned that we help others in a way that would not embarrass them or give us a chance to show off. The Rambam outlined the Eight Degrees of Charity. These are eight ways to give Tzedakah, like eight rungs on a ladder, from top to bottom, from the best way to the least generous way. When we give charity, we should do our best to give in the best way.

But, however we give, we must be sure to support all the causes that deserve our attention. Jewish Education in our own country and throughout the world needs your support. Here in the United States there are many Jewish poor people; we should consider it our personal responsibility to care for them. How can we enjoy all that we have when we know that another is in need? We should climb the ladder of Maimonides and “lend to the Lord.”

THE EIGHT DEGREES

First Degree: “Help a person Help Himself”

Prevent poverty by giving someone a gift or a loan or finding work for him so that he will not need to appeal for help. This is the top rung of Tzedakah's golden ladder.

Second Degree: “The Giver and Receiver Unknown to Each Other”

One who gives charity to the poor without knowing to whom he gives and without the poor knowing from whom they take. This is how it was done in the Lishkat Hashaim (Chamber of Charity) in the Temple of Jerusalem.

Third Degree: “Receiver Known, Given Unknown”

One who knows to whom he gives, without the poor knowing from whom they receive. For example, in olden days, our ancestors brought gifts into poor people’s homes and left without being seen.

Fourth Degree: “Giver Does Not Know Receiver”

The poor man knows from whom he takes but the giver does not know the receiver. For example, there were men who tied money in the corners of the cloaks they wore, so that the poor might take it without being seen.

Fifth Degree: “Gives Before He is Asked”

The man who gives before he has been asked, but who puts it into the poor man’s hand, embarrassing him.

Sixth Degree: “Gives After He is Asked”

The man who gives cheerfully, and as much as he can, but only after being asked.

Seventh Degree: “Gives Less Than He Should, But Cheerfully”

The man who gives less than he ought to, but with a smile.

Eighth Degree: “Gives Unwillingly”

Lowest on the ladder is the man who gives only because he is forced to do so.

This is the gift of the hand but not of the heart.

Moses Maimonides