

**Beth Chayim Chadashim
Los Angeles**

**Bracha Yael's Bat Mitzvah
May 4, 2001**

I did not participate in my Bat Mitzvah at the conventional age of twelve or thirteen, for a good reason, I wasn't yet Jewish. My path to Judaism, though, started soon thereafter at the age of sixteen, when in a mystical moment, inspired by my first reading of the shema, I decided I wanted to become a Jew. I quickly found myself a spiritual teacher, who would become a lifelong friend, Rabbi Chaim Dov, then known as Ben, Beliak. After listening to my fantastical story of my decision to become a Jew, he handed me a book on Judaism, asked me to read it before our next meeting, and shoved me out his office door, thinking I'm sure, he would never see me again. But, at the appointed time the following week, I was there; and not just there, but with questions in tow from that week's reading. And thus began my journey as a Jew, each week Rabbi Beliak rewarding me with a new book and an invitation to return the following week to discuss it.

During these visits, he would also share with me what he considered key Jewish beliefs. Giving tzedakah—often translated as charity but literally means justice or righteousness—was one of the first ones he taught me.

In my research for this drash, I discovered that Rabbi Beliak was in good company in citing the importance of this Jewish value, since the talmudic rabbis believe "tzedakah is equal to all the other commandments combined!" (Bava Bathra 9b). Why this commandment above all others? I believe that maybe it is to give us incentive to do something that goes against our inherent sense of self-preservation. It is hard to know when enough is enough to meet not only our immediate needs but also for that proverbial rainy day. And even if we have enough for now and in the future, we might feel justified in thinking "I earned my money, so you go out and earn yours." Or, even if we are willing to help say, a homeless person who asks for change on the street, sometimes, we might want to judge who is worthy of our charity and who is not. For example, on occasion I catch myself being more generous with a poor woman than a man, because I'm more sympathetic towards her plight than his misfortune.

Despite any trepidation we may have towards the poor and what to do about it, the Torah, as shown by the verse I chanted tonight—Do not harvest the corners of your field, leave them for the poor and the stranger—has none. First, because it does not say "if there are poor" but rather says "for the poor" there is an assumption that there will always be poor people and thus will need to be cared for. Second, the Torah does not pass judgment on what made them impoverished and by implication neither should we. Third and finally, the designated owners of the corners of the field are the poor, it is their rightful possession and not ours.

I was an unwitting participant in what some of us would consider an extreme example of this biblical precept. One night when I was a twenty-year-old college student renting a room from a hasidic family, I was awakened by the opening of my bedroom door followed by whispers between my frum landlady and another woman. In the dim light that streamed

in from the hallway I could see a woman about my age with dirty matted hair and layers of mismatched clothing. Between her disheveled appearance and her body odor I took her to be a homeless person. As she quickly undressed and slipped under the covers of a spare twin bed, I laid motionless in my bed. I felt uncomfortable with my visitor and worried that she might harm me or steal something from me while I slept. I was angry that my landlady would let anyone into my room without my permission, especially a homeless person! The young woman was gone by the time I awoke the next day and even though I wasn't any worse for the wear I seethed in silence at the breakfast table that morning. Over time, though, I came to appreciate this hasidic woman's incredible generosity towards this poor stranger. But, despite this admiration, when I ask myself now would I extend such an invitation, I still struggle with what my answer might be.

Judaism, though, only commands that we give tzedekah, it is up to us to decide the nature of it. Many of you have chosen to give generously of yourselves, not only with your money but also your time. Those of you who have given service to Project Chicken Soup, Project Caring, and/or Turning Point; and/or those of you who have participated in the AIDS Rides and Walks or Breast Cancer Walks provide just a few examples of extraordinary acts of tzedekah.

In his book *God is a Verb*, Rabbi David A. Cooper argues that simple acts of tzedekah can also be just as powerful in breaking down "the boundaries that define the self as separate from others." He suggests to "Take one dollar and fold it a few times. Put a paper clip on it and keep it handy in your pocket or purse. The next time you see a stranger who is asking for charity, no matter what he or she looks like, give away this dollar. Try to have a dollar in your pocket each day to give away." To this, I would add that for those times when you don't have money with you to instead warmly smile at the person and apologize that you couldn't give today. I've found this to be an incredibly humanizing experience for both the other person and me.

Of course, I wouldn't want to miss this opportunity to make a plug for our own Tzedekah Council. They suggest we contribute daily to our distinctive purple pushke cans and when full return them to BCC so that the funds can be distributed to various charities.

Finally, it is always nice to share your simcha with others and one traditional way to do this is to make a charitable contribution in honor of a wedding, a bat/bar mitzvah, or other joyous occasion. As with our wedding, Davi and I have contributed to Mazon, a Jewish agency dedicated to feeding the poor, to help us celebrate tonight's simcha.

It is only fitting that the primary lesson of my Bat Mitzvah was also one that I learned as a teenager from my friend and mentor, Rabbi Beliak; that is, through tzedekah we acknowledge not only the holiness of another but also our own.

Shabbat Shalom