



## Religious Giving Takes Spiritual Discernment

### *Tzedakah*

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September 2015

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**“Philanthropy has become big business, often depersonalized, stripped of spiritual content and meaning.” - Julie Salamon**

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At Lake Institute on Faith & Giving, we are interested in giving across religious traditions. While each tradition has its distinctives, there is a shared sense of philanthropy that is foundational across religions. In no tradition is this truer than Judaism.

In Judaism, *tzedakah* is most often translated as justice or righteousness and describes charitable giving seeking to meet the immediate and systematic needs of the poor and vulnerable. It is a *mitvah*, or commandment, required of all Jews. Yet, if *tzedakah* is a basic requirement for Jews, how and why we give always remains a more complicated question. Rabbis and philosophers have spent centuries debating just such a question, none more so than a 12th century medieval Spanish rabbi, Maimonides. His Ladder of Charity continues to serve as a place to plumb the depth of our giving motives from giving begrudgingly with a frown to giving gratefully and forming a relationship between giver and recipient. (Maimonides’ Ladder is a great resource for small groups to engage questions of religious giving. [Here is an example lesson](#); For a reflection on Maimonides’ Ladder in contemporary times, see Salamon, Rambam’s Ladder.)

“And the work of  
*tzedakah* shall bring  
peace.”  
Isaiah 32:17

We are meant to reflect upon the means of giving within our religious traditions. For Jews currently in the midst of the High Holy Days, this is an opportune time for such reflection. The Hebrew month of Elul that has just ended is always a time for personal reflection, asking forgiveness, and making amends. As I write, Jews are celebrating Rosh Hashanah, the New Year, and are gathering across the world to reflect upon the past and consider how to make meaningful changes for the future. In just over a week as we approach Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, many Jews will fast, foregoing meals and giving *tzedakah* to agencies such as Mazon, the leading Jewish organization working to end hunger.

While the High Holy Days are a significant time for *tzedakah*, this religious giving is more than just an individual or communal obligation, rather it is a spiritual practice – one with the potential to refine the human heart and transform us as individuals and our shared human community.



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Other religious traditions have similar times where practices of fasting, giving, and spiritual reflection are heightened. Christians have Lent. Muslims have Ramadan.

Large percentages of people's giving may happen during these seasons, but perhaps it is as much the transformation of the gift-givers as the amount of the gifts given where we should focus. Are religious leaders serving as guides for those taking time to reflect on their spiritual lives during these seasons? Do we consider practices such as forgiveness and fasting as significant aspects of philanthropy? To create a culture of generosity in our religious communities, we must not be afraid to nurture individual spirituality and communal transformation - for intentional religious giving requires spiritual discernment.



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