Jewish Texts about Giving

Maimonides Levels of Tzedakah

Maimonides Eight Levels of Tzedakah (lowest to highest)

1. The lowest degree of tzedakah is the person who gives grudgingly only after being asked.
2. The person who gives wholeheartedly, but less than he or she should.
3. The person who gives what he or she should give, but only after being asked.
4. The person who gives what is needed before being asked.
5. The person who gives without knowing to whom he or she gives, although the person accepting the charity knows who the donor is.
6. The person who gives anonymously, knowing where the money is going.
7. The person who gives anonymously, and doesn’t know where the money is going.
8. The person who helps the one in need become self-sufficient by giving him or her a job or the means to get one.

Leviticus 25:35
There are eight degrees of charity, one higher than the other. The highest degree, exceeded by none, is that of the person who assists a poor Jew by providing him with a gift or a loan or by accepting him into a business partnership or by helping him find employment—in a word, by putting him where he can dispense with other people’s aid. With reference to such aid, it is said, “You shall strengthen him, be he a stranger or a settler, he shall live with you”, which means strengthen him in such manner that his falling into want is prevented. And if your brother becomes poor and his means fail him with you, then you shall strengthen him, be he a stranger or a settler, he shall live with you.

Maimonides, Mishneh Torah
Rashi’s commentary on this verse (paraphrasing the midrash in Torat Kohanim, Behar, 5:1) focuses on the clause “you shall strengthen him”: Do not let him slip down until he falls completely, for then it will be difficult to raise him; rather strengthen him as he begins to fall. To what is this comparable? To a burden upon an ass: while it is still on the ass, one person can hold it and set it in place; if it falls to the earth, even five people cannot set it back.
Order of Priority for Giving Tzedakah

The poor of one’s city take precedence over the poor of another city. The needy of Israel receive priority over the poor of the Diaspora. Obligations to local resident poor precede those owed to transient poor who have just come into the city. One’s impoverished family members come before another por person. Parents have priority over children (who can support themselves). One's self comes before anyone else (all things being equal).
Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh De’ah, 251:3

Order of Priority for Communal Funds

Pidyon sh’vuyim (redeeming of captives) takes precedence over providing food and clothing for the poor. There is no greater mitzvah than pidyon sh’vuyim, for the captive is in the category of the starving, the thirsting, and the naked, indeed, in danger of losing his own life. One who remains indifferent to his redemption transgresses [the Biblical commandments] “Do not harden your heart... Do not stand by the blood of your brother” and “Love your neighbor as yourself.” There is no more inclusive mitzvah than pidyon sh’vuyim.
Maimonides, Gifts to the Needy, 8:10

1. Redeeming captives
2. Medical care for the sick among the poor
3. Building and maintaining synagogues and Jewish educational institutions
4. Food, clothing, housing for the poor
5. Dowries and other necessities for indigent brides and grooms
6. Whatever is necessary to sustain a poor person’s dignity
Tikkun Olam

[According to Rabbi Isaac Luria, 16th century Kabbalist known as "the Ari"...] At the beginning of time, G-d’s presence filled the universe. When G-d decided to bring the world into being, to make room for creation, He contracted Himself by drawing in His breath, forming a dark mass. Then G-d said, Let there be light (Gen. 1:3) and ten holy vessels came forth, each filled with primordial light. G-d sent forth the ten vessels like a fleet of ships, each carrying its cargo of light. But the vessels - too fragile to contain such powerful Divine light - broke open, scattering the holy sparks everywhere. Had these vessels arrived intact, the world would have been perfect. Instead, G-d created people to seek out and gather the hidden sparks, wherever we can find them. Once this task is completed, the broken vessels will be restored and the world will be repaired.


Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*

In the face of the economic misery of immigrants, when saving human lives was a crying emergency, concentration on material aid was an act of supreme wisdom. However, our situation today is a spiritual emergency crying for moral and intellectual relief. . . . We are ingenious in fundraising, which is good; we are shipwrecked in raising our children, which is tragic. I wish we would give priority to teaching and inspiring our children to live as Jews.

Abraham Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs

![Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs diagram](image-url)