Maimonides Text Study: The Highest Degree of Tzedakah

Group Instructions:

1) Assign a recorder/reporter. Be sure it is someone who did not report at the retreat.
2) Have each person answer: When you give of your time or money, what nonprofits or causes do you especially support?
3) Read the Eight Levels of Tzedakah and the text below aloud to one another.
4) Answer these questions: What problem is Maimonides trying to address? What is his theory of change? What impact does he want to achieve? How does he define primarily Jewish giving?
5) Discuss this question: What does primarily Jewish giving mean to you? What could it mean for Roots & Branches?

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.