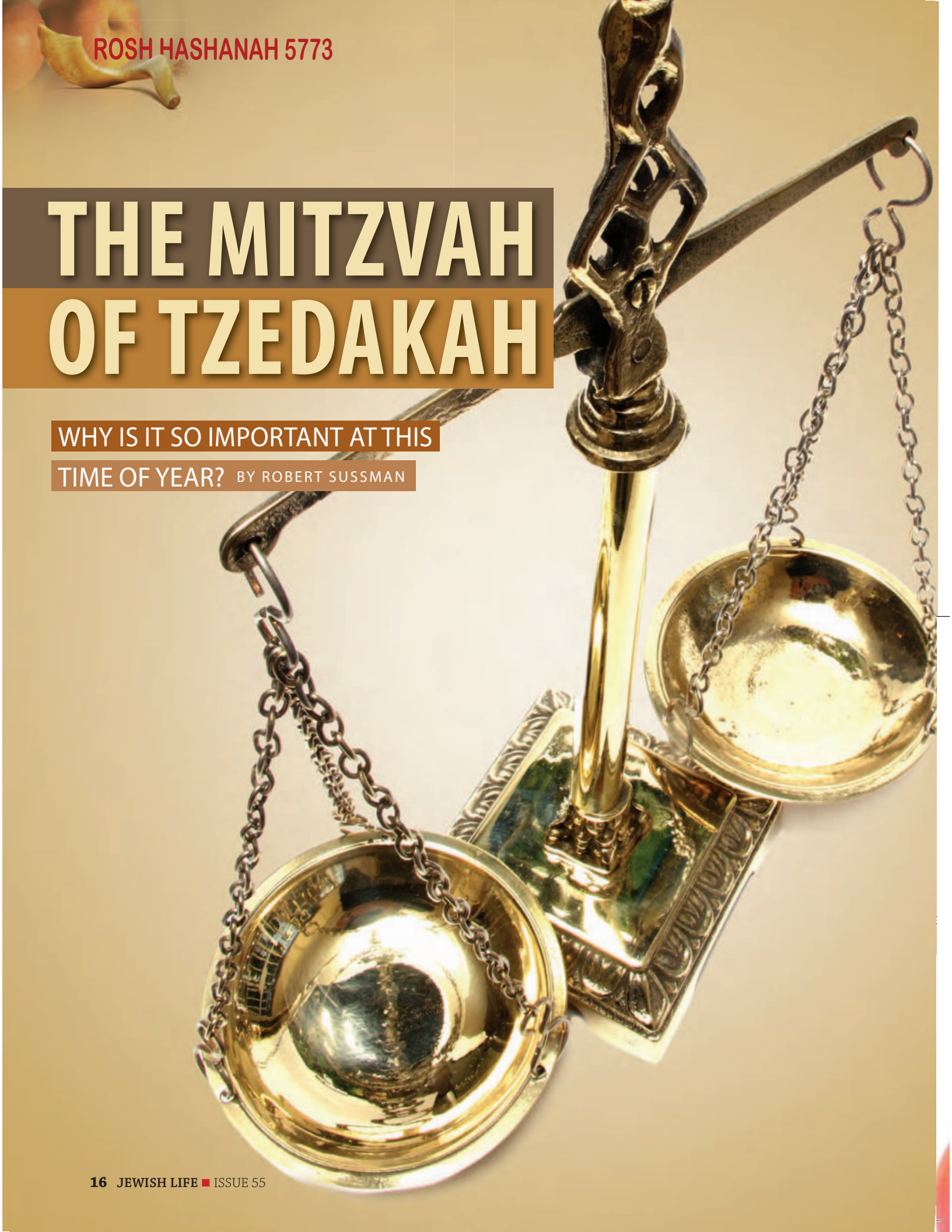




ROSH HASHANAH 5773

THE MITZVAH OF TZEDAKAH

WHY IS IT SO IMPORTANT AT THIS

TIME OF YEAR? BY ROBERT SUSSMAN

IN THE ROSH HASHANAH DAVENING, WE SAY, "Teshuvah (repentance), tefillah (prayer), and tzedakah remove the evil of the decree."¹ Beginning with selichos (special penitential prayers said prior to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and certain other occasions) and building up throughout the Aseres Y'mei Teshuva (the Ten Days of Repentance), we increase our tefillah and place a significant emphasis on teshuvah. It is a time to connect with Hashem, to call out to Him because He is close², to return to Him and repent for the mistakes that we have made. But why is tzedakah the one mitzvah that is singled out from all of the positive mitzvahs commanded in the Torah to be included alongside teshuvah and tefillah?

The mitzvah of tzedakah is derived from the verse³: "If there is a needy man among you, one of your brothers... you shall not harden your heart, nor shut your hand from your needy brother, but you shall **surely open** your hand to him, and shall

surely lend him sufficiently for his need for that which he lacks." Our Sages⁴ explain the redundant language ("surely open") to mean that we must perform this mitzvah over and over again – even a hundred times with the same person!

The mitzvah of tzedakah is to give to a poor person⁵ what he is lacking. If a person

we should pacify him with our words.⁷ Based on this, the Sefer HaChinnuch⁸ (The Book of Mitzvah Education) learns that included in the mitzvah of tzedakah is anything⁹ that benefits our fellow – whether it be money, or food, or another need, or even kind and comforting words – and he notes that a person's reward for this

“THE RAMBAM SAYS THAT IF A POOR PERSON ASKS FROM US AND WE DON'T HAVE ANYTHING TO GIVE HIM, THEN WE SHOULD PACIFY HIM WITH OUR WORDS.”

does not have clothing, we must clothe him; if he does not have utensils, we must acquire them for him; if a man does not have a wife (or a woman a husband), we must arrange for a marriage.⁶ The Rambam says that if a poor person asks from us and we don't have anything to give him, then

mitzvah will be very great. Moreover, he notes that this mitzvah must be performed happily and with a good heart.

The Rambam explains that even if it was the way of a person to ride on a horse and have a servant running before him, and that man became poor, we must buy for >

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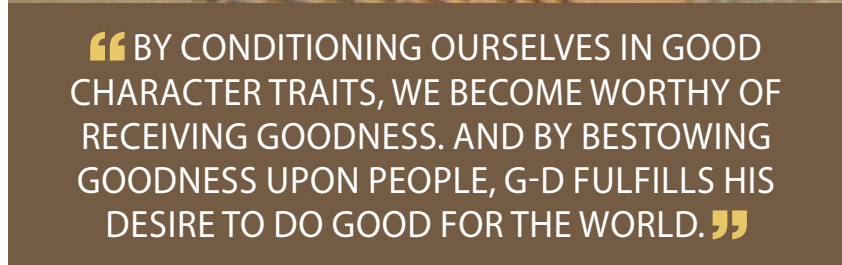
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Tzedakah – is commonly mistranslated as charity – but it really means righteousness or justice. Tzedakah is about doing justice with those who are lacking, ie, a “distributive justice”. Our possessions come from Hashem.¹¹ But more than that – our possessions are really Hashem’s possessions, as it’s taught in Pirkei Avos (The Ethics of Our Fathers): “Give to Him from His own, for you and your possessions are His.”¹²

The Rambam states that we are obligated to be careful with the mitzvah of tzedakah more than any other positive

Although we cannot know why G-d commanded us in a particular mitzvah, the Chinnuch tries to give a “tam” – a flavour – for each mitzvah. Regarding the mitzvah of tzedakah, he states²⁵ that G-d wants us to be educated and accustomed in the qualities of chesed (kindness) and rachamim (mercy), because these are praiseworthy qualities. By conditioning ourselves in good character traits, we become worthy of receiving goodness. And by bestowing goodness upon people, G-d fulfills his desire to do good for the world. If not for this reason, G-d could surely supply to a poor person enough for his needs without us, but G-d instead makes us His representatives, so that it should be a merit for us.²⁶ In other words, when we do good to others, we merit good for ourselves.

So why is giving tzedakah so especially >

ROSH HASHANAH 5773

important at this time of year? Based on the above, we can now answer: (1) it is the only mitzvah about which it is said that it is equal to all of the other mitzvot in the Torah; (2) a person must be careful with the mitzvah of tzedakah more than any other positive mitzvah; (3) Israel will only be redeemed through tzedakah; and (4) by being merciful to others (ie, giving tzedakah), we merit²⁷ that Hashem will be merciful to us. Finally, it is written²⁸: "Tzedakah saves from death," and this is the time of year when it is decided "who shall live and who shall die"²⁹. May we merit that Hashem be merciful with us and that we each be inscribed in the book of life for a good, healthy, prosperous, and sweet new year! **IL**



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- 1 From the tefilla Unesaneh Tokef recited on Rosh HaShanah.
- 2 See Rosh HaShanah 18a, explaining that the verse in Isaiah 55:6 which states, "Seek Hashem when He can be found; call upon Him when He is near," refers to the Aseres Y'mei Teshuva (the 10 days of repentance).
- 3 Devarim 15:8. And from the verses: **And if your brother becomes poor, and his means falter near you; then you shall strengthen him – a ger or a toshav (ben noach) – so that he can live with you. (Vayikra 25:35); Do not take from him interest and increase; and you shall fear your G-d – and let your brother live with you. (Vayikra 25:36).**
- 4 See Rashi on Devarim 15:8.
- 5 To be precise, the mitzvah of tzedakah is between Jew and Jew. If a person in need who is asking us is a non-Jew, then we have a d'rabbanan (Rabbinic) obligation to give something to that person. This is the mitzvah of Darchei Shalom (lit. walking in the ways of peace). We also have a Torah obligation to walk in the ways of Hashem (i.e., to emulate Him) and just as Hashem gives to non-Jews and provides for their needs, so too must we do so (i.e., have rachmanos (mercy) on them).
- 6 Matanos Aniym 7:3
- 7 Id. 10:5
- 8 \$479
- 9 Cf. Succah 49b, which states that the mitzvah of tzedakah is only fulfilled with money.
- 10 Matanos Aniym 7:3. However, although we are commanded to supply what someone is lacking; we are not commanded to enrich him. Based upon this, the Chinnuch asks, "What is our obligation in the case of someone who has money, but who is miserly even with himself and his own needs? We do not look after such a person who afflicts himself with poverty."
- 11 See Tehillim 24:1: "Hashem's is the earth and everything in it."
- 12 Pirkei Avos 3:8.
- 13 Matanos Aniym 10:1
- 14 Bereishis 18:19
- 15 Matanos Aniym 10:1
- 16 Bava Basra 9a. Rav Assi actually based this on a pasuk in Nechemiah 10:33 (As it says, 'Also we made ordinances': it is not written, 'an ordinance', but 'ordinances') – which referred to contributing money for bedek habayis (the upkeep of the Beis HaMikdash), Tosafos comments that it would apply all the more so to tzedakah.]
- 17 Matanos Aniym 10:1
- 18 Citing Isaiah 54:14. Consider, for example, the story of Rus and the kindness shown to her by Boaz.
- 19 Citing Isaiah 1:27.
- 20 Matanos Aniym 10:2
- 21 Devarim 14:1
- 22 Matanos Aniym 10:2
- 23 Id.
- 24 Id.
- 25 \$66 (The Chinnuch notes regarding the mitzvah of tzedakah, \$479, that its tam is the same as the much related mitzvah of lending to the poor, which is found in \$66.)
- 26 Another reason: G-d wants to support a poor man through other men due to the greatness of his sin, in order that he will be rebuked with pain in two ways: (1) with receiving shame from someone his same age, and (2) with the diminishment of his food.
- 27 Middah K'neged middah.
- 28 Mishlei 10:2. See also Bava Basra 10a.
- 29 From the tefilla Unesaneh Tokef recited on Rosh HaShanah.

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