

SADAQA AND TZEDAKAH- Giving to Others

PURPOSE

The goal of this session is for participants to develop a basic understanding of the role of sadaqa and tzedakah in our faith as well as in our personal lives

PARTICIPANT OBJECTIVES

To begin to learn and to ask questions. Both the Jewish and Muslim traditions place a strong emphasis on helping those less fortunate. This concept is based on the idea that our own good fortune is given to us from God and we, therefore, are obligated to share with those who do not have. This can take the form of either giving money or giving time. These two avenues of contributing to the community are shared by both religions, allowing Muslims and Jews to work together to create a more just society.

PROCESS

Since facilitating personal encounters is very difficult, this lesson includes more explicit instructions on how to run the session than subsequent lessons will have. Have copies available for all of the women to read during the meeting and to then engage in dialogue.

FOR GROUP PARTICIPATION AND DISCUSSION

Qur'anic and Biblical Texts on "Charity"

Qur'an 2:177

It is not righteousness that you turn your faces toward East or West; but it is righteousness to believe in God, and the Last Day, and the angels, and revelation, and (God's) messengers; to spend of your substance out of love for Him for your relatives, for orphans, for the needy, for the wayfarer, for those who seek assistance, and for the freeing of human beings from bondage; to be steadfast in prayer and practice regular charity; to fulfill the contracts that you have made; and to be firm and patient in distress, in adversity, and throughout all times of peril. Such are the people of truth, the God-fearing.¹

Qur'an 2:274

Those who spend their wealth in charity by night and day, secretly and openly, they will have their reward from their Lord. They shall have nothing to fear or to regret.

Qur'an 76:8-9

(The righteous) feed the poor, the orphan and the captive for the love of God, saying: 'We feed you for the sake of God alone; we seek from you neither reward nor thanks.

¹ As indicated in the introduction, all Qur'anic quotes are from Ahmed Ali, *Al-Qur'an: A Contemporary Translation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

Discussion:

1. According to the passages from the Qur'an, what type of person gives to the poor and why should one give? What does this say about the importance of charity in the Muslim tradition?
2. In the first verse, giving to charity is listed among many other acts of righteousness. How does charity relate to these other practices of faith? Is it equal to them in importance? How is it the same as the other ones and how is it different? Can it be seen as an overarching category into which the others fall?
3. According to the texts, should one give to charity for the sake of the individual in need or for God? Do you agree with this reason to give? How might this change how a Muslim gives to charity?

Deuteronomy 15:4-11

There shall be no needy among you – since the Eternal your God will bless you in the land that the Eternal your God is giving you as a hereditary portion.... If, however, there is a needy person among you, one of your kin in any of your settlements in the land that the Eternal your God is giving you, do not harden you heart and shut your hand against your needy kin. Rather, you must open your hand and lend whatever is sufficient to meet the need...Give readily and have no regrets when you do so, for in return the Eternal your God will bless you in all your efforts and in all your undertakings. For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land, which is why I command you: open your hand to the poor and needy kin in your land.

Exodus 23:10-11

Six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; but in the seventh you shall let it rest and lie fallow. Let the needy among your people eat of it, and what they leave let the wild beasts eat. You shall do the same with your vineyards and your olive groves.

The first Biblical verse declares that “there shall be no needy among you,” but then goes on to describe what to do “if there is a needy person among you” and says that “there will never cease to be needy ones in your land.” How can you resolve this apparent contradiction? Consider the following commentary (which is based on classical Jewish commentaries) as one possible solution to the contradiction.

“There shall be no needy among you.” Should Israel be faithful to the law of God, there will be no poor to borrow among them, and the law concerning the cancellation of debts will find no application.

“There will never cease to be needy ones in your land.” Though they were promised that if they kept God’s commandments there would be no needy among them, it is here taken for granted that not for all time will all people lead such an ideal life. Poverty must, therefore, be regarded as an existing evil at some place or at some period. (Fisch, Rabbi Dr. S. The Soncino Chumash. Ed. Rev. Dr. A Cohen. Soncino Press)

Sadaqa/Zakat and Tzedakah

Zakat

Derived from the Arabic root word Z-K-W, the word zakat literally means purification, increase and growth. The Qur'an promises to multiply the wealth of those who spend for Allah's sake seven times over. The meaning reflects the Islamic philosophy that one purifies and increases his or her wealth by donating a portion of it to the needy through zakat or sadaqa.

Two terms are used. Sadaqa is a broad term conveying "sincere giving." Within sadaqa is the concept of zakat. Zakat does not mean charity. Zakat is not voluntary, unlike charity, but is an obligation upon every Muslim who has earned a minimum level of wealth. The third pillar of Islam, zakat is the duty to give 2.5% of one's accumulated wealth and assets – not just one's income – to those in need.

Just as the performance of the salat (prayer) is both an individual and a communal obligation, so payment of the zakat instills a sense of communal identity and responsibility. As all Muslims share equally in their obligation to worship God, so they are all duty bound to attend to the social welfare of the community by redressing economic inequalities through payment of an alms tax or poor tithe.²

Tzedakah and Charity

The Hebrew word tzedakah contains the same root letters as tzedek, "righteousness," and is most accurately translated as "righteous giving." It is commonly translated, inaccurately, as "charity." The Jewish concept of tzedakah is obligatory giving. It is about contributing to the common good and helping fellow human beings.

Tzedakah is a social obligation incumbent upon everyone. If we were to depend on everyone to have giving hearts, we would first have to work to change attitudes and feelings, and then hope that those feelings would lead to sufficient giving. Judaism is very practical and very clear about our ethical obligations in this realm, as though saying: "Give 10% of your net income to those in need. It would be nice if you did it joyfully. But do it."

Biblical ethics are permeated with laws assuring protections of the poor. The obligation to alleviate poverty required both individual Tzedakah and a communal governmental response. By early Talmudic times, at least four communal funds (plus communal schools for boys) were required in every sizeable community. These included a daily food distribution program, a clothing fund, a burial fund, and a communal money fund. By the Middle Ages, these had grown into a veritable bureaucracy of communal social welfare institutions. Tzedakah in Jewish history functioned as a system of taxation, not a voluntary philanthropic enterprise.³

DIALOGUE

² Esposito, *Islam: The Straight Path*.

³ Albert Vorspan and David Saperstein, *Jewish Dimensions of Social Justice: Tough Moral Choices of Our Time* (New York: UAHC Press, 1998), 85.

According to these passages, what are the differences between tzedakah, zakat, and charity? How do the implications of these terms affect how you give to others?

Do you think it is better to give out of emotion or obligation? Why? How do tzedakah and sadaqa go beyond giving money?

How can/do you incorporate these different aspects of giving into your life?

Charity versus Good Deeds

The Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H.) said: “Every Muslim has to give in charity.” The people then asked: “(But what) if someone has nothing to give, what should he do?” The Prophet replied: “He should work with his hands and benefit himself and also give in charity (from what he earns).” The people further asked: “If he cannot find even that?” He replied: “He should help the needy who appeal for help.” Then the people asked: “If he cannot do (even) that?” The Prophet said finally: “Then he should perform good deeds and keep away from evil deeds, and that will be regarded as charitable deeds.” Sahih Al-Bukhari, Volume 2, Hadith 524.⁴

The Prophet said, “Charity is obligatory everyday on every joint of a human being. If one helps a person in matters concerning his riding animal by helping him to ride it or by lifting his luggage on to it, all this will be regarded charity. A good word, and every step one takes to offer the compulsory Congregational prayer, is regarded as charity; and guiding somebody on the road is regarded as charity.” Abu Huraira, Volume 4, Book 52, Hadith 4:141

The rabbis distinguished between tzedakah and gemilut hasadim [acts of loving kindness]. “In three respects loving kindness exceeds charity. Charity represents giving of alms; loving-kindness is both alms and personal service. Charity is meant for the poor, loving kindness is for the rich as well as for the poor; charity aims to help the living; loving kindness is shown to both the living and the dead.” Benevolence in the fullest sense of the term comprised feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, tending the sick, burying the dead, comforting the mourner, ransoming the captive, educating the orphan, and providing a dowry for the needy bride. While the practice of charity fills the world with love, its true value depends upon the loving spirit which prompts it.⁵

DIALOGUE

What does Prophet Muhammad’s (P.B.U.H.) opinion of non-financial means of fulfilling charity suggest about a hierarchy of how one contributes to charity? Do you think there should be a hierarchy?

How can performing good deeds and staying away from evil be understood as charitable work? What does this say about the effects of our actions? What are some examples of when a good

⁴ Hadith are oral traditions relating to the words and deeds of Prophet Muhammad. Hadith collections are regarded as important tools for determining the Sunnah, or Muslim way of life, by all traditional schools of jurisprudence.

⁵ Samuel Cohen, *Judaism, A Way of Life*, (New York: UAHC Press, 1962).

deed is charitable?

In the Jewish tradition, what is the difference between charity and acts of loving-kindness? Is one better than the other or do they complement one another? How so?

Based on the previous discussion, how are the Jewish and Muslims conceptions of charity versus good deeds similar? How do they differ?