

Class 9 Rambam's Ladder part 2

Last week we introduced Maimonides (i.e. Rambam) famous 8 levels or degrees of performing charity as found in his Mishneh Torah. In today's class I would like to further discuss his highest level – that of rehabilitating the poor person. You will recall he wrote the following:

There are eight levels of *tzedakah*, each one higher than the other. The highest level, higher than all the rest, is to fortify a fellow Jew who has become impoverished and give him a gift, a loan, form with him a partnership, or find work for him, **until he is strong enough so that he does not need to ask others [for sustenance]. Of this it is said, (Lev. 25:35) *[If your brother grows poor and his hand falls] and you shall fortify him, whether a stranger or a resident, he shall live with you*". That is as if to say, "**Hold him up,**" so that he will not fall and be in need.**

We summarized his approach this way: "Offering a loan or partnership one is not only helping to rehabilitate the pauper but one is doing so in a way that preserves his dignity. The primary feeling of embarrassment stems from the receiving of a free gift which is not meant to be repaid, *matnat hinam* in Hebrew".

This understanding is the standard understanding of the passage and u can read a modern-day application from Julie Salamon's book *Rambam's Ladder* attached to the end of this class (and yes there will be questions from the reading). However, in today's class I would like to take a "second-look" at Rambam's formulation and suggest another way to understand them.

In studying poverty and charity scholars distinguish between two basic types of poverty (and I am utilizing formulations taken from Mark Cohen's book *Poverty and Charity in the Jewish community of Medieval Egypt*, 34-35, 48), One is "**structural poverty**" which pertains to those who live in **permanent destitution**, a "structural" state of deprivation in which, for one reason or another, such as ill health, physical disability, widowhood, or old age, **they cannot find work or other dependable means of sustenance**. Such people must get over their shame of accepting the support of others in order to survive. Most beggars fall into this category. The other type encompasses those for whom poverty or need arises under specific, intermittent circumstances, the result of what the Annalists call a "conjuncture." Poverty in these cases results from a particular convergence of circumstances that suddenly changes

their economic situation for the worse (think of a factory being destroyed in a fire, of workers suddenly laid off, inventory lost etc.). **Sudden impoverishment, however temporary it might be, is also a source of shame. The “shamefaced poor”, as they are called in medieval and early modern European texts, resist turning to others for help, let alone resorting to the embarrassment of the public dole or of beggary.**

With this background information it is quite fascinating to read what Maimonides has to say about *lending money* to the poor and why it is even a greater mitzvah than *giving charity*. He writes in his *Sefer ha-misvot*, “Book of Commandments” at Positive commandment number 197:

The 197th commandment, to lend to the poor . . . This is a greater and a weightier obligation than that of charity; because the recipient [of charity] who has already “uncovered his face” in order to beg from people *does not suffer as acute stress as the one who has **not** “uncovered his face” and who needs assistance to keep him from revealing his condition, and from becoming a recipient [of charity].*

It would seem clear that Maimonides valued the commandment of *lending* money to “shamefaced poor”, that is to person who is poor due particular convergence of circumstances, over that of actual *charity* to the poor who became a dependent, due to living in permanent destitution, a “structural” state of deprivation. If I understand his view correctly, Maimonides is saying that the situation of the poor person who has already “uncovered his/her face” is less dire – since many people know of his situation and if not, the pauper will make it known to them. However, only a few people will have heard of the difficult straits that the “shame-faced” poor is in. Therefore, if the individual Jew happens to know about their difficult situation he is obligated to act – for if he doesn’t act chances are that on one else will! And the only way to assist such poor who is trying to “save face” is through lending – because he/she will never be willing to accept charity!

In short, we learn from this passage that Maimonides was acutely aware that “the poor” were not all cut from the same cloth. And just as there were different types of poor – there were also different type of support was needed to be employed in dealing with “poverty”.

What makes this even more interesting is that when one looks at the earlier Talmudic literature one also finds a strong indication that they were aware of this basic distinction between the “structural” permanent poor and the “conjunctural”, possibly only temporary poor. Commenting on the verse in Leviticus 25:35 "And if your brother grows poor, and his hand falls ..., then you shall uphold (or fortify) him ... and he shall live with you." The Rabbis explain that the verse is not dealing with all poor but rather a very specific one. They write (Sifra 5):

"If your brother grows poor, and his hand falls with you": Do not allow him to drop. To what may this be compared? To a burden upon a donkey. So long as it is still in its place, you can grab onto it and set it aright. *Once it has fallen to the ground, not even five can get it back again.*

Rashi the famous medieval commentator reformulates this teaching to make it even clearer. He writes:

THOU SHALT UPHOLD (or Fortify) HIM — *Do not leave him by himself so that he comes down in the world until he finally falls altogether when it will be difficult to lift him up, but rather uphold (or fortify) him from the very moment of the failure of his means.*

To what may this (i.e. the differences between whether you assist him at once or whether you wait with your help till he has come down in the world) be compared? To an excessive load on the back of a donkey. So long as it is still on the ass's back, one person is enough to take hold of it (the load) and to keep it (i.e. the donkey) up, as soon as it has fallen to the ground not even five persons are able to set it on its legs (Sifra, Behar, Section 5 1).

It is quite clear that this verse in Leviticus in the eyes of the Talmudic sages is dealing with the “conjunctural” poor, the one who has not yet fallen into complete destitute but is heading in that direction if no one comes to his assistance and lifts him up, or straightens him out. The example of the donkey who has not yet fallen clearly shows this understanding – it is much easier to keep up the falling donkey than to pick it up once it has fallen completely!

With all this as background let us now return to the highest level of charity in “Rambam’s Ladder” and see to what poor he was talking about.

Maimonides wrote: The highest level, higher than all the rest, is to fortify a fellow Jew who has become impoverished and give him a gift, a loan, form with him a partnership, or find work for him, **until he is strong enough so that he does not need to ask others [for sustenance]**.

Of this it is said, (**Lev. 25:35**) *[If your brother grows poor and his hand falls] and you shall fortify him, whether a stranger or a resident, he shall live with you*. That is as if to say, “**Hold him up,**” so that he will not fall and be in need.

First one should note the second paragraph – Maimonides Biblical source for this level of charity is Leviticus 25:35! Then notice how he utilizes the language of the verse already in the first part of his treatment where he writes about “fortifying” and finally note his ending which is a clear allusion to the Talmudic teaching we saw above from Sifra about the donkey “That is as if to say, “*Hold him up,*” so that he will not fall and be in need”. In short I would like to argue that this highest level of charity is actually an **exact parallel** to what he wrote about in his Book of Commandments – the need to give support to the shamefaced poor who refuses any kind of overt charity – for such a person one is obligated to give assistance that will help save the person from a complete fall into destitute and will allow him/her to be quickly rehabilitated.

The only real difference between Maimonides’ treatment in his Book of Commandments and in his Mishneh Torah is the way he **expands the various types of assistance** available to help strengthen and uphold the person who has started to fall but has not yet fallen completely. In his Book of Commandments, he only spoke about lending the person money. In Mishneh Torah he mentions lending of course but adds more options of assistance: a gift (i.e. between friends with the expected reciprocity, see previous class), forming with him a business partnership, or finding work for him. All these are aimed to ensure “that he will not fall and be in need”.

It would seem then that the first and highest level of charity is actually assistance (not a free gift of charity) to the shame-faced poor who needs to be rehabilitated whereas the seven other levels are actual charity for the poor who has already uncovered his/her face and to a certain extent has made peace with his/her “structural” state of deprivation. What Maimonides additionally teaches us – is that even for such poor one needs to make an effort to protect their dignity and self-respect by giving in a way that would cause the least amount of shame and embarrassment. Even those poor who have uncovered their face are clearly not at all happy with their lot of being recipients of aid and therefore it is best to give anonymously.

I will now attach the reading from Rambam’s Ladder mentioned above and you will find the summary questions on the last page after the reading.

At the top of the ladder is the gift of self-reliance. To hand someone a gift or a loan, Or to enter into a partnership with him, or to find work for him, so that he will never have to beg again.

Maimonides would have approved of John Ford. That thought occurred to me partway through a graduation ceremony at the Bowery Residents' Committee. These ceremonies celebrate the accomplishments of clients who have successfully completed various BRC training programs. The graduates can be young, but more often are middle-aged or older, having first matriculated at the school of hard knocks, which is not a cliché to them, but life.

The graduations are almost always emotional events. The clients tell their stories, sad and desperate histories of life on the streets, addiction to drugs or alcohol, time spent in jail. When they arrive at the BRC, they often belong to the category once described as the "undeserving poor." But no one would think they were anything but deserving by the time they graduate, having worked so hard to overcome their problems, so full of plans for self-sufficiency.

The Maimonides connection struck me during the ceremony for BRC clients who had spent a year in the agency's Horizons program, which prepares formerly homeless people to enter the work world. Some emerge as janitors; others have had specialized training in preparing food or working on computers.

John Ford, the charismatic man who runs the Horizons program, spoke that evening. But "spoke" doesn't really describe what Ford does at the meetings. He proclaims, he rumbles, he roars, he holds forth with the passion of a Holy Roller. But he doesn't sermonize. He comes to these events to praise, not to lecture. Tall, slender, and handsome, a former professional basketball player, Ford has a rich baritone voice and theatrical delivery. He'd stand out in any room; in this particular universe he's the North Star. Most of the people there had probably heard him tell his stories before, but that seemed only to reinforce their enthusiasm. They cheered as he began to speak with the rolling cadence of a minister in front of his flock.

"The ceremony reminds me of a fisherman who as he was going off to fish came upon a group of beggars and . poor people and they were asking him to give them some of his fish," he said and then paused, expertly, letting momentum build.

A little louder now,- Ford continued. "Give me some of your fish so I can eat today,' they told him."

The men and women in the graduation audience nodded encouragement.

Ford smiled, his appreciation of the response evident, an actor's pleasure mixed in with a social worker's empathy.

He went on. "The fisherman looked at them and said, 'If you come to me and tell me you're hungry and I give you a fish your hunger will be gone for today.' " Again, the deliberate pause.

Then he moved toward the finale, with a crescendo. "Why don't I teach you how to fish so you can eat for a lifetime?"

That was the traditional punch line, but not the conclusion he'd tailored specially for this crowd.

With the moral of the story driven home, Ford thundered his custom-made coda: "And I see before me a roomful of fishermen!"

The place went wild. At that moment, the wisdom of Maimonides (and Horatio Alger and scores of other optimist philosopher-cheerleaders), as interpreted by John Ford, seemed impeccable. What could be more rewarding to both participant and observer than this demonstration of triumph over adversity, this living proof that hard work and determination could vanquish endemic poverty, addiction, and bad luck?

Unquestionably these fishermen and women stood at the receiving end of the ladder's summit. They represented the BRC elite, and deserved applause. But they were a minority within a subset of the extreme down-and-out. Most of the agency's clients would never make it to self-sufficiency, or even halfway. They were too strung out-3 too mentally impaired, too unambitious. Did that make? them unworthy?

Consider the question from the giver's point of view; Is giving a homeless man a blanket tantamount to killing him?

That's more or less what Andrew Apicella believes, though he wouldn't put it quite that bluntly. He runs Project Outreach for the BRC, the program that actively enlists homeless people to leave the street.

Apicella told me, "Giving those blankets, you're enabling people to not be responsible for their basic necessities"

The question came up as we were driving around in the BRC's Project Outreach van with a couple of social workers for the agency. It had been a brutal winter-although the weather that day was comparatively mild, in the mid thirties, it was still far from comfortable or safe for those living outdoors. Every once in a while we stopped and tried to convince a homeless person to come back to the agency and try out a detox program. BRC vans cruise twenty-four hours a day. Only about a half dozen people, of the twenty or so the social workers might approach in a day, come in off the streets. It's a slow process.

Andrew and Kevin Martin, his boss, told me the story of Arthur Cafiero, a sixty-year-old alcoholic who had lived on the streets of the Upper West Side for more than a decade. "Everybody loved Arthur and that was his downfall," said Martin. "He lived on the steps of a church, and became known in the community. People brought him food and blankets. This kept him just comfortable enough to refuse help that might have saved his life."

I listened guiltily to the parable of Arthur, not confessing that if being a misguided do-gooder was a sin, I was surely a sinner.

It had been a couple of months since I'd seen David, "my" homeless man, looking thinner even through the camouflage padding of his large parka. He had reappeared in front of the corner store, his usual spot when he was in the neighborhood. I was rushing to the copy shop and then to the post office.

But I stopped to say hello, how are you, any luck starting up again with tube socks?

"I went belly up," he told me ruefully. "Financial reverses."

Then he told me his boots were killing his feet. I looked down and saw the boots were in bad shape. I remembered the Reeboks in my husband's closet. On more than one occasion he has inexplicably bought shoes that are too small, worn them for a week or two, and then been unable to return them because they'd been used. The Reeboks, the latest such purchase, had been weighing on his conscience.

"What size shoe do you wear?" I asked David, seeing a way to solve two problems.

"Ten."

"Would you like some brand-new Reeboks?"

He lit up. I told him to wait in front of the corner store. while I ran over to the copy shop and post office a few blocks away. I'd be back in ten minutes or so, I assured him.

It took me a little longer than I expected at the copy shop, but still just a few minutes. As I turned the corner heading for the post office I saw David coming out of the building.

"I was looking for you," he told me. A policeman had told him to move away from the corner so he had headed toward the post office, knowing that was my destination.

How little I knew of him or his life, the constant dodge.

“Come with me,” I said.

As we walked, I realized I didn’t want him to come to my home, even though I felt he was trustworthy. I didn’t want to subject him to the policeman again, either.

“Go meet me at the little park at the corner, by the benches,” I told him. “I’ll be there in five minutes—really.”

He nodded and walked one way while I ran the other. I quickly found the Reeboks in the closet, making sure to check they were size ten. They looked new. I found a nice shopping bag—this seemed important to me, to offer my gift with proper ceremony—and quickly walked around the corner to the little park. When he saw me coming David looked triumphantly toward a man standing near by. “I told that guy over there you were going to get me sneakers and he told me you wouldn’t come back,” he said.

Handing him the bag I felt genuinely happy, not superior or even particularly charitable, but rather as though I was giving a present to an appreciative friend. He reached over to hug me. Caught off guard, I hugged him back, knowing full well I had solved nothing for him—or for me—yet feeling no regrets either.

How quickly the ladder can turn into a slide. Or had I finally come to accept the paradox that may be part of any act of giving?

I posed this question to John Ford on another occasion, on a visit to his office at the Horizons job training program. As always, he was wearing an elegant suit, with the air of a man who felt comfortable wherever he was. It quickly became clear to me that this shrewd man knew very well the distance between moral purity and practical exigency. Just as Rambam did: putting his variation of teaching a man to fish—giving him a loan—at the highest level of giving, but offering theme and variation on righteousness so as not to discourage those trying to climb the ladder.

Forgetting that I had heard him speak at the graduation a week or two earlier, Ford said, “I always use this saying when I give speeches. ‘If you come to me, tell me you’re hungry and I have fish, I will not give you a fish sandwich. I’ll teach you how to fish.’ That is my philosophy. It doesn’t always work, but that’s my philosophy.”

I asked Ford if he ever gives money to people on the street.

“I do,” he said, without hesitation. “They say, ‘Hey, Big Brother’, or ‘Hey, Slim, give me something to eat’ and I say, ‘Okay, let’s go.’ And I’ll go into the store and buy them something. I will not give a guy money but I’ll go buy him something in the store. That’s what I do.”

I pointed out that he was contradicting himself, and he replied that contradiction may be part of the DNA of charity.

“I think about charity: How much does it help? How much does it hurt?” said Ford. “I talk to guys on the street and hear how they expect money, food, or help from white people, meaning the power structure. My question is this— and it’s rhetorical—if they didn’t get money from these people with power, would they then say, ‘Okay, I have to get up now?’ How much does it hurt when people come to depend on charity rather than on themselves? That’s the question I have and it’s a rhetorical question. I’m not sure.”

He continued. “Foundations that give us money, they want outcomes,” he said. “They want you to say they gave \$25,000 and that in turn helped seven people to get jobs. They want to know how many people can you get jobs for. They want outcomes. Not how many people did you feed. Not how many people did you talk to on the street and maybe get to the hospital.

“We have an outreach team who brings them in. We give them a shower and feed them and they walk out the door. We may or may not see them again. A very small percentage of those people, who may be scratching when they walk in the door because of bugs, who take a shower and want something to eat, it’s a small, small percentage that will move through the continuum of care that we have.”

As we talked about his life and how his ideas developed, I saw in John Ford's story—as in so many others—the multiple ingredients that develop an individual's sense of duty. Why some people give and others do not becomes a biographical detail of great importance, a significant landmark in the mapping of character. Just as some people from the same set of parents find it easier to ski or play music than their siblings do, some people seem to have an innate sense of justice. For others goodness feels like something learned, and their willingness to endure the lesson depends on circumstance and will.

Ford is a polished man who likes fine restaurants and elegant suits, and who easily moves between high and low, rich and poor, black and white. How did a man like that decide to devote himself to helping people so opposite in drive and ability from himself?

Ford, who was born in Tennessee in 1945, was one of three sons. He describes his family, which migrated north to Detroit, as a fairly typical working—class African American...

Summary Questions

In what way is the story of the fisherman and the beggars similar to Maimonides' highest level of giving?

In what way is the story of the fisherman and the beggars different from Maimonides' highest level of giving according to the way I explained his position?

Why do the people running the BRC outreach program think that giving a homeless person a blanked is wrong?

In what way did Julie Salamon discover that John Ford's approach to charity was more complex than it seemed at first?

What was John Ford's personal approach to charity?

In what way is my understanding of Maimonides first level of charity different than the accepted understanding?

What are the two types of poverty as described by scholars?

What are the two different types of support of the poor as described in the class?

Why are the words of Maimonides in his Book of Commandments important to understanding his highest level of charity?

For what purpose did I bring Rashi's commentary to the verse in Leviticus *If your brother grows poor and his hand falls....*

How did I try to prove that Maimonides in his level one is referring to a person who has begun to fall but is not yet a recipient of charity?

What lesson can learn from the donkey?

What is the difference between what Maimonides wrote in his Book of Commandments and his highest level of charity (as explained in the class)?