

The Importance of Tzedakah

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One of the most recommended methods of atonement for spilling semen in vain and sexual transgression is the generous giving of tzedakah – charity. Nowadays, when it is extremely difficult for people to undertake the numerous fasts which the Arizal prescribed for these sins, tzedakah is the recommended replacement.

The Baale HaTanya writes:

'The latter Mussar sages — those who lived after the Arizal — were divided in their opinions about one who repeated a sin many times. Some contend that he must fast the number of fasts appropriate to that sin according to the number of transgressions. For example, the number of fasts prescribed in the writings of the Arizal for wasteful emission of semen is eighty-four. According to them, if someone commits this sin ten or twenty times, say, he must fast ten or twenty times eighty-four, and so on in all instances.

'This is comparable to the chatat offering. Others compare these fasts to the olah offering brought for neglect of a positive command. The violation of a number of positive commands is atoned for by one olah.

The accepted decision in this dispute is to undertake three times the number of fasts prescribed for that particular sin, i.e., 252 fasts (three times eighty-four) for wasting semen.

'This is based on a teaching in the Zohar, at the end of Parshat Noach “As soon as mortal man sins one time against the Holy One Blessed Be He, he makes a blemish [Above, at the root of his soul]… The third time he commits the sin, the stain penetrates from one side through the other....” Therefore the number of fasts ought also be three.

'However, all this applies to the strong and robust, whose physical health would not be harmed at all by repeated fasts, as in the generations of yore. But whoever would be affected by many fasts, and might thereby suffer illness or pain, G d forbid, as in contemporary generations, is forbidden to undertake numerous fasts, even for sins punishable by excision or execution.

'Instead, the measure of fasting is the personal estimate of what will not harm him at all. For even in those early generations, only the robust who could mortify themselves fasted so frequently. Whoever cannot fast, yet does so, is called a “sinner” (Tractate Taanit 7A). Especially if he is a student of Torah, in which case he is doubly punished, for the weakness resulting from his fast prevents him from studying Torah properly.

'What, then, is his remedy [in order to be beloved by his Creator,] as he was before his sin? He should comply with the verse that says, “Redeem your sin with charity” (Daniel, 4:24).

[Nevertheless, every man of spirit who desires to be close to G d, to repair his soul, and to return it to G d with the finest and most preferred repentance, should be stringent with himself. He should complete, at least once during his lifetime, the number of fasts for every grave sin incurring death at least, if only death by Divine agency. For example, for wasting semen, he should undergo the series of eight-four fasts once in his lifetime.]

'Since the number of fasts enumerated in the above-mentioned penances of the Arizal is exceedingly great, all who revere the word of G d are now accustomed to being unstintingly generous with charity, which is given in place of fasting, for the prevalent lack of stamina prevents them from mortifying themselves with numerous fasts' (Igeret HaTshuva, Ch3).

One way of understanding the rectifying power of tzedakah is that a person who masturbates, or commits some other sexual transgression, does so out of his own selfish pleasure. By giving charity, he does the opposite – instead of thinking about his own pleasure, he thinks first about the welfare of someone else. Furthermore, by giving charity, a person follows the ways of the Almighty who grants life and sustenance to all creatures. By wasting his seed in vain, a person shows indifference to the myriad of souls that are lost through his transgression – and now, by giving charity, he adds life to the world, as its says, 'Tzedakah saves from death' (Proverbs 10:2).

As part of our High Holiday prayers, we say, 'Tshuva, and tefillah, and tzedakah remove an evil decree.' The Talmud also states that tzedakah can save a person from death (Baba Batra 10A). The special healing power of tzedakah is not something limited to the world of Hasidut or Kabbalah, rather it is brought down as halachah in the standard treatises of Jewish Law (See Shulchan Aruch, Orach Haim 334:26, see the Rama; also Tur, Yoreh Deah 185; and Kaf HaHaim 334:134-153).

The main thing is repentance with the giving of tzedakah, not just the charity itself (Rambam, Laws of Tshuva 2:4). The greater one's feelings of repentance, the more effective the atonement through the giving of charity. But even if a person gives the charity with the main purpose of saving himself from Divine punishment over his sins, and not because of his concern with the welfare of the receiver, his act of charity is nonetheless praiseworthy and serves towards his atonement.