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CHESED AROUND THE WORLD Ideas worth imitating

A smarter approach TO CHESED



BY ILAN PRESKOVSKY

GIVING TZEDAKAH MAY WELL BE ONE OF THE MOST CENTRAL

of the Torah's 613 commandments, but it's nowhere near as straightforward as we may expect. Invariably, helping someone out who is in need can only be seen as a good thing, but when it comes to actually fulfilling the mitzvah of tzedakah, things get somewhat more complicated – especially if we wish to do it well. There are questions of who to give to, how much to give, and even how to give. And the answers aren't any simpler. The Rambam (Maimonides) identifies no less than eight different levels of giving tzedakah.

Even the word tzedakah doesn't mean what most of us think it means. Tzedakah doesn't actually mean 'charity' – which is often seen as voluntary in nature – but 'righteousness' or 'justice': acts that are not only mandatory but character-defining, as can be seen by the famous Talmudic axiom that tzedakah is equal to all of the other mitzvot (Bava Batra 9a).

Ramat Beit Shemesh, Israel has seen the creation of an innovative approach to tzedakah by an organisation called Lema'an Achai (www.lemaanachai.org), which specialises in what it calls 'smart chesed'. While most tzedakah organisations are primarily focused on providing for the less financially fortunate in any given community, Lema'an Achai specifically focuses on ending the cycle of poverty that causes people to rely on receiving help from such organisations in the first place.

With the help of around 500 unpaid volunteers, including specialists in related fields such as social workers and financial advisers, as well as permanent professional workers, Lema'an Achai makes use of a combination of different programmes to 'rehabilitate' struggling families, to try and get them back on their own two feet so they can support themselves in the future without having to rely on help from others. It's an organisation that caters to all of the diverse members of the Ramat Beit Shemesh community, from secular to modern orthodox and even charedi families, and raises money mostly through donations from the RBS community itself.



Their approach represents the highest level of tzedakah as prescribed by Maimonides himself, enabling a person to lift himself out of poverty via opportunities such as providing him a long-term loan, giving him additional education, or entering into a business partnership with him. Lema'an Achai's various programmes are too numerous to go into here (check out their website for a full list), but a testimonial they posted on their site is a pretty good indicator of just how wide-ranging their brand of 'smart chesed' truly is:

A woman who had just gone through quite a long and arduous divorce and was left taking care of her two children, notes how Lema'an Achai was with her every step of the way, starting with the divorce proceedings, where they provided legal aid and social care at home. But they certainly didn't stop there, as they helped her transition into a new life as a single parent by providing financial counselling that outlined a budget that would support her and her family, while also enlisting the aid of an employment adviser to help her get a better and better paying job, including updating her CV and re-evaluating her most marketable skills.

Beyond such "big picture" matters, they also helped out on smaller, day-to-day challenges. Lema'an Achai offers a single-mothers' support group, which provided emotional as well as practical help for this woman, and her children benefited from their "Big Brother" programme, which connected her young son with a yeshiva student, and their joint programme with a local girls high school, which sent girls to help out at their home. Through their summer camp program, the woman was even able to send her son to his regular summer day camp, which she would never have been able to afford otherwise.

As she succinctly put it: "It's easy to hand out money... but it's a lot harder to care... and Lema'an Achai does both... to the fullest." There is something terrifically Jewish about the very idea of 'smart chesed'. Lema'an Achai may be a localised phenomenon, but its message is one that resonates in the hearts and minds of Jews everywhere. **IL**

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