



Foundation *Insider*



Many of us learned in Hebrew school about levels of tzedakah as Maimonides saw them. His levels are, from lowest to highest: 8) Giving grudgingly, 7) Giving cheerfully but less than one should, 6) Giving only when asked, 5) Giving directly to the needy without an ask, 4) Donations for which the recipient knows the donor's identity but the donor doesn't know the recipient's, 3) Donations for which the donor knows the recipient's identity but the recipient doesn't know the donor's, 2) Anonymous donations to anonymous recipients, and 1) Giving that prevents poverty and/or creates self-sufficiency.

Maimonides's rubric incorporates donor attitude, attention to power imbalances, and sustainable outcomes as concerns. The highest level of creating self-sufficiency mirrors another common conception of levels of charity, comparing giving someone a fish to teaching a person to fish.

One additional metaphor that I've heard often lately compares some philanthropy to a person pulling babies out of a river, where they will presumably drown, with other philanthropy that looks upstream to figure out "How exactly are all these babies ending up in the river?"

This always struck me as odd, because I can't imagine that not being my very first question! Consider maternal and infant mortality in the United States. There are plenty of donors who are moved to give to organizations that help infants or mothers. It's a cause that tugs the heartstrings. But many of those donors are not aware that the United States is unique among developed nations in just how many of our mothers and infants die, or that the US maternal mortality rate more than doubled since 1999. A lot of babies, and their mothers, are being thrown in our rivers.

If you give to organizations that combat maternal mortality, that means you care, and caring necessitates understanding why our healthcare system produces such poor outcomes. It means understanding the forces that have shaped that system. We alone among developed nations lack universal healthcare. Access to reproductive care is being taken away from women and increasing mortality. The religious freedom of Jews, for whom abortion care is ethically required when a mother's health is threatened, is also being curtailed.

This system is dumping too many mothers and babies into the river. We must continue to pull them out, but caring about these mothers and babies, as many donors do, requires us to also work toward understanding how such a system ever got built, who benefits, how it could be allowed to persist, and ultimately dismantling it. I believe this understanding of systems aligns closely with Maimonides's description of the highest level of tzedakah.

J. Sam Cone, Board Chair

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