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Yeshivat Ateret Yerushalayim

IN THE HEART OF THE OLD CITY OF JERUSALEM

Ha-Rav Shlomo Aviner on...

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Giving Tzedakah to Beggars

Question: When I visit the Kotel, there are so many people asking for money, should I give money to the beggars? What about people on the street? What about people who knock on my door and ask for money?

Answer:

A. Most Beggars are Swindlers

The Halachah is that we do not give money to beggars until we clarify that they are truly poor. This is a "Takanat Chazal" (Ruling of our Sages) since most beggars are swindlers. This ruling is found in the Gemara in Baba Batra (9a) and the Shulchan Aruch (Yoreh De'ah 251.10) and it applies to this day. Ninety percent of people who ask for money today are swindlers. If someone asks for money we do not give it until he provides verification from a reliable Rabbi. If someone asks for food, however, we give him immediately. What if he is being deceptive? It is a potentially life-threatening situation and we therefore provide food without delay. Today, most beggars in Israel do not ask for food because there are many soup kitchens, and if you offer them food, they say that they prefer money.

B. Is Giving Tzedakah to Someone who is not Poor a Mitzvah?

The halachic authorities discuss if one fulfills the mitzvah of giving tzedakah if the recipient is in fact not poor. They point to the Gemara in Baba Batra (8b) and explain that not only does one not fulfill the mitzvah, but he also loses out on the mitzvah to give that money to

truly poor people. Perhaps you will say that giving tzedakah is still worthwhile even if the person is not poor since it strengthens one's personal character traits (tikkun midot), as the Rambam explains in his introduction to Pirkei Avot, that by performing an act over and over, one will achieve proper characteristic traits. This, however, does not occur when one is performing an act which is not beneficial. A person is cruel if he does not give to the poor, but he is not kind if he gives to the wealthy. We have to give to truly poor people. A person should not buckle under emotional pressure from a beggar. I have many children and a husband who is sick, you have a kippah but you are not really observant, you give a shekel and they throw it down, etc... If a person was poor before he asked for money at the Kotel, after a day he would no longer be considered poor. They collect 1000 shekels a day!

C. Rabbinic Verification

Even to provide rabbinic verification is problematic today. Anyone can print a Rabbi's letter or signature off the internet in thirty seconds. One time some people from a tzedakah organization in Ashdod came and asked for my signature. I did not know them and asked if they had other Rabbis' signatures. They told me that they had the support of the Lubavitcher Rebbe. I said: If so, I will blindly support it. Please send me the letter. When I received it, I saw that in the signature there was an extra "alef" in the last name "Schneerson" and instead of being signed by the last Rebbe – Ha-Rav Menachem Mendel, it was signed by the previous Rebbe – Ha-Rav Yosef Yitzchak, who died almost sixty years ago! It was a forgery! Often times there are people who request money for yeshivot or organizations which do not exist, never existed and will never exist. One time I signed a letter in support of giving money to the poor. I found out that they were giving \$1000 to anyone about to be drafted into "Nachal Ha-Charedi" (Ultra-Orthodox unit in the army) to convince them not to join. They claimed they were poor. They were in great spiritual poverty if they were about to join Tzahal. I called and requested my name be removed from the letter, but they did not. I called again, no response. I called again, no response. I sent a letter, no response. I sent a letter from a lawyer and they called: "Why not talk like a mensch? Come on, let's talk," etc... We have to be extremely careful about where we give our money.

In sum. We only give tzedakah to people who we can verify are poor or to trustworthy organizations. Give to one, two, three trustworthy organizations. It is not possible to provide for every poor person in any event. Most beggars are not evil people, they are mentally and emotionally unstable. We do not judge them, but we only give tzedakah to actual poor people.