

(Editor's Note: Arthur Kurzweil has graciously granted his permission for the dissemination of this lesson over the internet.)

# I Can't Read Much Hebrew, I Can't Read Much Aramaic, I Never Went to Yeshiva, But I Study Talmud Every Chance I Get.

## Brother, Can You Spare a Dime; The Treatment of Beggars According to Jewish Tradition: A Case in Point.

By Arthur Kurzweil\*

In my neighborhood in Manhattan there is hardly a day when I am not approached by an individual who asks me for spare change, a quarter, a subway token, or some other request of similar nature. These individuals (whom I will call "beggars" from this point on, though I am aware that this label is narrow and therefore unfair to use to describe a human being) come in various forms:

1. Some are bag ladies, dragging the sum-total of their worldly possessions with them in numerous shopping bags.
2. Some are "street people" who most probably live on the street, in the subway, or other public places.
3. Some are idle welfare recipients who would strike you as people who would probably be able to get some kind of job.
4. Some are alcoholics, constantly with bottle in hand or nearby.
5. Some are obvious drug addicts.
6. Some show no immediately-apparent reason to be asking for anything as they are well-dressed, groomed, etc.
7. They are of all ages (literally from 8 to 80).
8. They are both men and women.
9. They are usually black or Hispanic (in my neighborhood, but in Greenwich Village however, where I often walk, they are mostly white and sometimes Jewish).
10. 99 times out of 100 they are nonthreatening (though I am a male and I imagine that if I were a woman I would have a significantly different perspective on this item.)

\*Arthur Kurzweil, a resident of New York, is America's most important Jewish genealogist. He lectures in communities throughout the country, moving his audiences to greater understanding of, and commitment to, their Jewish roles in history through the search for their unique Jewish roots. Arthur and I [Danny Siegel] studied together for two years, *but because of a language-learning disability*, he was unable to master the original languages of the texts. He is convinced that others experiencing these same language problems can still benefit fully from exploring Jewish texts - even in translation, and has begun speaking on that topic, also. This article represents his first study-in-print of such an approach to Jewish learning. His chosen top -- Tzedakah.

Though the organized Jewish community has gotten the mitzvah of giving tzedakah down to a virtual science, and though I have also been a member of an alternative form of giving tzedakah for 4 years (a "tzedakah collective;" see *The Third Jewish Catalog*, p. 31, Jewish Publication Society, 1980), I was confused as to what I should do about beggars I meet almost daily. My habit regarding beggars was inconsistent:

1. Sometimes I gave nothing, both in one given day as well as for occasional blocks of time
2. Sometimes I'd get into a giving mood and give to beggars in a flurry of giving over a period of time
3. Sometimes I'd get into angry moods over the issue and never give a penny, thinking that they "ought to get a job" or "ought to go on welfare."
4. Sometimes I'd give consistently though selectively to people I decided were worthy recipients (the standards for *that* decision might be impossible for me to even document).
5. Sometimes I'd give enthusiastically to a familiar beggar, only to ignore the person the next day or week.

There were other inconsistencies as well, but those five listed above are enough to indicate that my thinking on the subject was, as I said, confused. But more than confused, I was troubled by it. A question loomed in my mind: What should my attitude toward beggars be? And secondly: Did Jewish tradition have anything to teach me on the subject?

The following are the results of my own exploration of those two questions. First, though, I would like to make a few things clear regarding my research:

1. I am not a Talmudic scholar.
2. I do not have a working knowledge of Hebrew or Aramaic, so all of the sources I have consulted are in English.
3. Every source quoted comes from my home library.

This third point is made for two reasons. First, I want to stress that the sources I have checked are limited. But secondly, I want to indicate that quite a bit of research of this kind can be productive by using readily available sources - again - in English. I will indicate more about my own research methodology later.

My approach to the first question of "What should my attitude toward beggars be?" was to first sit down and list all of the questions I could possibly think of relating to my own personal dilemmas in regard to the subject. I came up with 15 questions:

1. Do Jews give to beggars? (Is there precedent for my giving to beggars - as a Jew who wants to fulfill the mitzvah of tzedakah).
2. What if they are fakes or frauds? (How many times I have wondered whether they are making more than me!)
3. What if they are nasty or otherwise offensive in looks, smell, etc.?
4. What if I feel I simply can't afford to give to beggars (having already given through other means)?
5. Aren't there better causes to give to than these people?
6. Shouldn't these beggars be supported by official or organized agencies?
7. Shouldn't I just ignore these people?
8. What if I am in a rush? (In my hectic life I barely have time to stop and negotiate a quarter for a "wino.")
9. What if they aren't Jewish? (Should my tzedakah priorities go to worthy Jewish causes exclusively?)
10. What if I have no money on me, or no spare change?
11. If I do give, how should I treat these people? What should I say to them?
12. What if I see the same people every day? (They'll get to know me as an easy sucker.)
13. What if I've give to a few beggars in one day? (Is there a limit to this?)
14. If they ask for money, perhaps I should go buy them a cup of coffee instead. After all,

they will probably spend it on booze anyway!  
15. Finally, if I do give to beggars, how much should I give?

The fifteen questions seemed to cover just about every possible question or issue I could possibly come up with regarding beggars. Interestingly, I noticed that the first 10 questions raised objections to giving to beggars while the last 5 seems to admit defeat, wondering just how and what to give if I must. In all, my questions reflected a resistance to giving to beggars - while my eagerness to do research on the subject balanced that resistance.

While I was apparently born with an interest in research, I grew up in a home where my parents were constantly asking questions and forever referring to the family encyclopedia. Adding that to my training as a librarian, I find it rather easy to find simple answers to simple (and not so simple) questions. But I am also convinced that without any training - other than learning a few principles and doing a minimum of creative thinking - anyone can master the art of elementary research.

**Joshua ben Perahyah says: Provide thyself with a teacher.**

*Pirke Avot*, Chapter 1, Mishnah 6

No research skill, however creative, can endure without it being directed by a teacher, and as the Talmud urges in the quote offered above, I provided myself with the finest. Danny Siegel, teacher, poet, scholar and friend, guided me, on a weekly basis (a few hours each) for two years through the great works of our tradition. While we now live in different cities, hardly a week goes by when I am not on the phone to him, asking him for an explanation, a source, or simply a "talking out" or some Talmudic question. So, principle number one for the kind of research that I am about to explain in detail, is, in the words of the Talmud: provide thyself with a teacher. You may not have the opportunity to sit with a teacher on a regular basis, but even to have a knowledgeable person who can get you out of some muddy water would be important.

At the end of this article I will provide a bibliography of the sources I consulted. Some, like the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, cost a few hundred dollars. Others, like some paperback, cost a dollar or two. I'd suggest you examine as many of the sources as you can to decide which would be of particular interest to you. (I have put an asterisk next to the items which I highly recommend.)

The most critical items on the list - in my opinion - are also the most expensive. But for a basic Jewish home library they are essential. They also will last a lifetime and will be as valuable generations from now as there are to you. Invaluable in my research - and constant companions for me - are:

1. *Encyclopedia Judaica* [n.b. now available on CD-ROM from Davka at [www.davka.com](http://www.davka.com)]
2. *The Talmud* (Soncino Edition) [n.b. available on CD-ROM from Davka]
3. *The Midrash Rabbi* (Soncino Edition) [n.b. available on CD-ROM from Davka]
4. *The Minor Tractates* (Soncino Edition)
5. *The Legends of the Jews* by Louis Ginzberg

And perhaps the most valuable one volume item in my library is *A Book of Jewish Concepts* by Phillip Birnbaum, Hebrew Publishing Company. Whenever I need a good explanation of a phrase, a topic, a notion, or a subject within Jewish studies, Birnbaum provides it. He gives the name of the item in Hebrew as well as English, so my limited knowledge of Hebrew is growing too. By the way, for those of you who do not know what items 2 through 4 are (above), Birnbaum's volume is the place to start - with definitions of "The Talmud," "The Midrash Rabbah," and "The Minor Tractates." (Consider that your first assignment!)

In my opinion, one of the great inventions of all times is the index. An index to a book or a set of books is a magic doorway into the work. Some people begin a book with the first page; I start with the index. While the "Table of Contents" of a book is theoretically the place where you will find the "contents" of the work, it is actually the index where you will get a good picture of the inside workings. (In library school we used to play a game: can you guess the subject of a book by examining the index? With a good index, it should be possible.)

Fortunately most of the books - including the Soncino edition of the Talmud (18 volumes) - have an index. So, my first question when looking for insight into the Jewish view of beggars is to figure out what key words would help me to "dig out" the material. With some creativity and a lot of trial and error I found that beggars would appear under the following topics:

1. beggars
2. poor
3. charity

"Tzedakah" was never a category; it was always translated as "charity" in the indexes. I spent a frantic and exciting few days running up and down my shelves, grabbing books which I thought might have items under these three headings. In a great number of cases I was quite successful. I read an enormous amount, copying lines, passages, quotes, and paragraphs. If a secondary source (such as a Jewish quotation dictionary) gave me a Talmudic passage, I was able to go to the Talmud itself - in English of course, and see it a little closer to the original - as well as the context in which it appeared. Often, by going to the "original" I was able to find more material on the subject which the secondary source left out. I was also able to compare translations (and when there were significant conflicts between translations I'd be on the phone to Danny Siegel once again for a glimpse - through his eyes - at the *original* original!)

After going through every book in my home library, I put each source on beggars which I had found on separate note cards. By the end I had about 60 cards! That is, 60 different times when some source added to my knowledge of how Jewish tradition views beggars. In the process, I read a great deal, learned more than I ever hoped to, and most remarkably I felt that I had a significant insight into the subject at hand.

Perhaps the most amazing result of my search on this subject (which might come as a surprise to some and none at all to others) is that each of my 15 questions about beggars was dealt with by one or more of the sources I discovered. Our tradition is amazing: what I would have thought was a quite contemporary question - such as what do you do if you think the beggar is a fake? - is dealt with in ancient texts. The following is the result of my exploration:

There was never any doubt in my mind that the giving of tzedakah was an essential part of being a Jew. One need only read "A Study Guide to Tzedakah" by Danny Siegel in his book *Angels* to see just how many sources urge the performance of this mitzvah in so many ways. But again, what about beggars? Here are my fifteen questions and the material I found which corresponds to each one:

## **1. DO JEWS GIVE TO BEGGARS?**

Our Rabbis taught: If an orphan boy and an orphan girl applied for maintenance, the girl orphan is to be maintained first and the boy orphan afterwards, because it is not unusual for a man to go begging, but it is unusual for a woman to do so.

*Ketubot 67a*

(Already there are two things to note. One is that the passage is a bit sexist - reflecting the times in which it was written, of course. But I put it here, and put it first to indicate that it is sometimes difficult to "swallow" everything one comes across in the texts.

The second thing of note is: what does "*Ketubot 67a*" mean? "*Ketubot*" is the name of a section of the Talmud. "*67a*" is the page number. Every page of the Talmud is numbered - but rather than each side getting a number, each leaf gets a number, with a side "a" and a side "b". So, this quote can be found in section *Ketubot* in the Talmud, on the second side of page 67.)

R. Hiyya advised his wife, "When a poor man come to the door, give him food so that the same may be done to your children." She exclaimed, "You are cursing them (by suggesting that they may become beggars)! But R. Hiyya replied, "There is a wheel which revolves in this world."

*Shabbat 151b*

(The "R." before a person's name denotes "Rabbi.")

R. Abun said: The poor man stands at your door, and the Holy One, blessed be He, stands at his right hand. If you give unto him, He who stands at his right hand will bless you, but if not, He will exact punishment from you, as it is said, "Because He standeth at the right hand of the needy." (Psalm 109:31)

*Midrash Ruth V:9*

R. Isaac said, "He who gives a coin to a poor man is rewarded with six blessings. but he who encourages him with friendly words is rewarded with eleven."

*Baba Bathra 9a*

Question #1 is therefore answered. There is no question but that it is within the Jewish tradition to give to beggars. But we have 14 questions remaining, each of which tries to obtain a better understanding of the complexities of the whole issue.

## **2. WHAT IF THEY ARE FAKES OR FRAUDS?**

Our Rabbis taught: If a man pretends to have a blind eye, a swollen belly or a shrunken leg, he will not pass out from this world before actually coming into such a condition. If a man accepts charity and is not in need of it, his end will be that he will not pass out of the world before he comes to such a condition.

*Ketubot 68a*

R. Akiva said, He who takes even a penny from charity when he needs it not will not die before he requires the help of man. He said, He who binds rags on his eyes or on his loins and says, "Give to the blind man," or "Give to the man who is smitten with boils," will end by having good cause to utter this cry.

*Avos d'R. Natan I,iii,8a*

He who needs not and takes will not reach old age and die before he will really need help from others . . . He who is not lame or blind but pretends to be so, will not reach old age and die before he becomes really blind and lame.

*Jerusalem Talmud, Pe'ah 8:9*

If anyone is not in need of relief and yet receives it by deceiving the public, he will not die of old age before becoming a public charge. Such a person is included in the Biblical utterance: "A curse on him who relies on man." (Jer. 17:5)

*Rambam, Mishneh Torah*  
*"Gifts to the Poor" 10:19*

(These first 4 items agree and even seem to quote from each other. The message is clear, but it still doesn't help us. Should we give to the fakers? All we know so far is that they'll be punished for faking. Onward:)

R. Eleazar said: Come let us be grateful to the rogues for if not for them we (who do not always respond to every appeal for charity) would have been sinning every day.  
*Ketubot 68a*

R. Hanina was wont to send a poor man four zuzim every Friday. Once he sent them by his wife, who reported on her return that the man was not in need. "What did you see?" said the Rabbi. "I heard how he was asked, 'Would he use the silver outfit or the gold outfit.'" Then R. Hanina said, This is what R. Eleazar said: We must be grateful to the deceivers, for were it not for them, we might sin every day.  
*Ketubot 68a*

(In other words, the fakers keep us in the habit of giving.)

A beggar once came to the city of Kovna and collected a large sum of money from the residents. The people of the town soon found out that he was an impostor; he really was a wealthy man. The city council wanted to make an ordinance prohibiting beggars from coming to Kovna to collect money. When R. Yitzchok Elchonon Specter, the Rabbi of Kovna, heard about the proposed ordinance, he came before the council and requested permission to speak. He told them that although he sympathized with them, he had an objection to raise. "Who deceived you, a needy person or a wealthy person? It was a wealthy person feigning poverty. If you want to make an ordinance, it should be to ban wealthy persons from collecting alms. But why make a ban against needy beggars?"  
*Ethics from Sinai, III, p. 121*

Rabbi Chayim of Sanz had this to say about fraudulent charity collectors: "The merit of charity is so great that I am happy to give to 100 beggars even if only one might actually be needy. Some people, however, act as if they are exempt from giving charity to 100 beggars in the event that one might be a fraud."  
*Darkai Chayim (1962), p. 137*

(The last quote, for the Sanzer Rebbe Chayim Halberstam, who was the teacher of my great-great-great grandfather, Chayim Joseph Gottleib, the Stropkover Rebbe, seems to sum up question #2 clearly: Don't let the frauds stop you from giving. And as the earlier sources quoted point out: the frauds will get theirs!)

### **3. WHAT IF THEY ARE NASTY OR OTHERWISE OFFENSIVE?**

The Chofetz Chayim's son wrote that his father was particularly careful not to hurt the feelings of beggars, although sometimes these unfortunate people say things that could arouse one's anger.

*Michtevai Chofetz Chayim (1953)*  
*Dugmah Midarkai Avi, p. 38*

Rabbi Shmelke of Nicholsburg said, "When a poor man asks you for aid, do not use his faults as an excuse for not helping him. For then God will look for your offenses, and He is sure to find many of them. Keep in mind that the poor man's transgressions have been

atoned for by his poverty while yours still remain with you.

*Fun Unzer Alter Otzer, II, p. 99*

(The last quote, couple with the first one, is somewhat helpful when dealing with the question of the alcoholic who asks for money. In some ways, the suffering he is undergoing is "punishment" enough. My denying him money "because he'd only use it for booze" is not helping anyone.)

#### **4. WHAT IF I FEEL I SIMPLY CAN'T AFFORD TO GIVE TO BEGGARS?**

To him who has the means and refuses the need, the Holy One says: Bear in mind, fortune is a wheel!

*Nahman, Tanhuma, Mishpatim #8*

Even a poor man, a subject of charity, should give charity.

*Gittin 7b*

#### **5. AREN'T THERE ANY BETTER CAUSES TO GIVE TO THAN TO THESE PEOPLE?**

While it is commendable to aid students of the Torah more than commoners, the Jewish law knows no such distinction. The latter must also be aided.

*Nachman of Bratslave*

*quoted in Hasidic Anthology*

(This "excuse" noted below is a familiar one to me. How often I have passed by a beggar thinking: I gave to Oxfam International - The World Hunger Organization. The irony is too obvious to explain!)

#### **6. SHOULDN'T THESE BEGGARS BE SUPPORTED BY OFFICIAL OR ORGANIZED AGENCIES?**

In answer to an enquiry from a community, overburdened with beggars, Solomon b. Adret ruled that although, "the poor are everywhere supported from the communal chest, if they wish in addition to beg from door to door they may do so, and each should give according to his understanding and desire."

*Responsa, pt. 3, #380*

#### **7. SHOULDN'T I JUST IGNORE THESE PEOPLE?**

R. Joshua b. Korkha said, "Anyone who shuts his eye against charity is like one who worships idols."

*Ketubot 68a*

*also Jerusalem Talmud, Peah 4:20*

R. Joshua b. Korkha said, "He who closes his eyes to a request for charity is considered as one who worships idols."

*Baba Bathra 10a*

(The same person with the same thought, in two different locations in the Talmud)

A blind beggar accosted two men walking on the road. One of the travelers gave him a coin, but the other gave him nothing. That Angel of Death approached them and said: "He who gave to the beggar need have no fear of me for 50 years, but the other shall speedily die."

"May I not return and give charity to the beggar?" asked the condemned man.  
"No," replied the Angel of Death. "A boat is examined for holes and cracks before departure, not when it is already at sea."

*Midrash in Me'il Zedakah*

If one noticed a poor man asking for something and ignored him, and failed to give tzedakah, he has broken a prohibitive command, as it is written: Do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy brother. (Deut. 17:7)

*Rambam, Mishneh Torah*

*"Gifts to the Poor" 7:2*

Rabbi Itzikel of Kalish was known for his kindness for everyone. Once a non-Jewish beggar asked the Rabbi's wife for some bread. At the moment she had only a full loaf, newly baked, and she disliked cutting it lest it become dry. But the Rabbi enjoined her to give the beggar a portion of this bread. A few years later, the Rabbi was traveling through the Carpathian Mountains toward Hungary. On the way brigands captured him and his companions, and brought them to their chieftain. The latter recognized the Rabbi as his benefactor when he came begging at his door. He freed Rabbi Itzikel and restored to him his possessions.

*Or ha-Meir (Lemberg, 1926), p. 15*

(The above is a strange story for a few reasons. First, the lesson is clearly not: give to beggars because they might become crooks and rob you. Second, like too many stories, the hero is the Rabbi, while the insensitive one is the wife. Thirdly, the beggar is a non-Jew. Despite all this, the moral message still manages to sneak through: don't ignore beggars.)

Rabbi Aharon Kotler once gave alms twice to the same beggar, upon entering and leaving the synagogue. He was afraid that someone noticing him pass the second time without giving might assume that he had reason not to give to this particular beggar.

*R. Shaul Kagan in Jewish Observer, 5/7*

## **8. WHAT IF I AM IN A RUSH?**

(The following story, from the Talmud, is one of the most vivid and powerful ones I've ever encountered. Every detail is radically unsettling.)

It is related of Nahum of Gamzu that he was blind in both his eyes, his two hands and legs were amputated, and his whole body was covered with boils and he was lying in a dilapidated house on a bed the feet of which were standing in bowls of water to prevent the ants from crawling on to him. On one occasion his disciples desired to remove the bed and then clear the things out of the house, but he said to them, "My children, first clear out the things from the house and then remove my bed for I am confident that so long as I am in the house it will not collapse." They first cleared out the things and then removed the bed and the house immediately collapsed. Thereupon his disciples said to him, "Master, since you are wholly righteous, why has all this befallen you?" and he replied, "I have brought it all upon myself. Once I was journeying on the road and was making for the house of my father-in-law and I had with me three asses, one laden with food, one with drink, and one with all kinds of dainties, when a poor man met me and stopped me on the road and said to me, 'Master, give me something to eat.' I replied to him, 'Wait until I have unloaded something from the ass; I had hardly managed to unload something from the ass when the man died (from hunger). I then went and laid myself upon him and exclaimed, 'May my eyes which had no pity upon your eyes become blind, may my hands which had no pity on your hands be cut off, may my legs which had no pity upon your legs be amputated,' and my mind was not at rest until I added, 'may my whole

body be covered with boils." Thereupon his pupils exclaimed, "Alas that we see you in such a sore plight." To this he replied, "Woe would it be to me if you did not see me in such a sore plight."

*Ta'anith 21a*

## **9. WHAT IF THEY AREN'T JEWISH?**

(The irony of this question is that when I was in Israel and when I met poor Jewish beggars in Eastern Europe, I never questioned the idea of giving to them. My own prejudices became crystal clear with this question!)

A Jew should give charity to poor non-Jews.

*Rambam, Mishneh Torah*

*"Gifts to the Poor" 7:7*

Poor Gentiles should be supported along with poor Jews; the Gentile sick should be visited along with the Jewish sick; and their dead should be buried along with the Jewish dead, in order to further peaceful relations.

*Gittin 61a*

(These last two items reflect a limitation on my part. In my reading I know that there are long discussions as to the true meaning and nature of the phrase "peaceful relations." On the surface it sounds as if we must do it not because it's right but for peace. The matter is much more complicated than that and is one that I do not have the ability to examine at this point. This is clearly one of the drawbacks of my own limited background.)

## **10. WHAT IF I HAVE NO MONEY ON ME OR NO SPARE CHANGE?**

If a poor man requests money from you and you have nothing to give him, speak to him consolingly.

*Rambam, Mishneh Torah*

*"Gifts to the Poor" 10:5*

If the poor man stretches out his hand and he has nothing to give him, he should not scold and raise his voice to him, but he should speak gently to him and show him his goodness of heart; namely that he wishes to give him something but cannot.

*Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah, 249:3-5*

Walking one day in Jerusalem, Rabbi Aharon Kotler turned around, ran after a beggar, and gave him some coins. Rabbi Kotler explained that several years previously, the same beggar had approached him for alms, but he was carrying no money. Spotting that beggar now, he hastened to make up for lost opportunity, and gave him a double amount.

*R. Shaul Kagan, Jewish Observer, 5/73*

## **11. IF I DO GIVE, HOW SHOULD I TREAT THESE PEOPLE? WHAT SHOULD I SAY? HOW SHOULD I APPROACH THEM?**

Rabbi Chana bar Chanila'i . . . would leave his hand in his pocket so that (by the immediacy and naturalness of handing him money) a poor person who came to ask would not feel humiliated.

*Brachot 58b*

R. Eleazar stated, The reward of charity depends entirely upon the extent of kindness in it.

*Sukkah 49b*

Anyone who gives tzedakah in a surly manner and with a gloomy face completely nullifies the merit of his own deed, even if he gives him a thousand gold pieces. He should rather give him cheerfully and gladly, while sympathizing with him who is in trouble, as it is written, "Did I not weep for him whose day was hard? Was not my soul grieved for the poor?" (Job 30:25)

*Rambam, Mishneh Torah*

*"Gifts to the Poor" 10:4*

## **12. WHAT IF I SEE THE SAME PEOPLE EVERY DAY? WON'T THEY GET TO KNOW ME AS A SUCKER?**

Though you may have given already, give yet again even a hundred times, for it says, "Give, yea, give thou shalt . . ." (Deut. 15:10-11)

[n.b. the repetition of the word for "give" teaches that the action is to be repeated]

*Sifre Deut., Re'eh, 116*

## **13. WHAT IF I ALREADY GAVE TO A FEW BEGGARS IN ONE DAY?**

If you have given a 'perutah' to a man in the morning, and there comes to you in the evening another poor man asking for alms, give to him also . . .

*Avot d'R. Natan 19b*

## **14. IF THEY ASK FOR MONEY, PERHAPS I SHOULD BUY THEM A CUP OF COFFEE INSTEAD?**

Nehemiah of Sihin met a man in Jerusalem who said to him, "Give me that chicken you are carrying." Nehemiah said, "Here is its value in money." The man went and bought some meat and ate it and died. Then Nehemiah said, "Come and bemoan the man whom Nehemiah has killed."

*Jerusalem Talmud, Pe'ah, VIII: 9,21b*

(In this example, the case was reversed: the person wanted an item of food rather than money. But the point is the same: don't decide what is best for the beggar.)

## **15. HOW MUCH SHOULD I GIVE?**

There was a poor man who begged from door to door, and R. Papa paid no attention to him. R. Samma, the son of R. Yiba, said to R. Papa, "If you pay no attention to him, then no one will, and he may starve to death." But is there not a baraita which tells us that if a man begs from door to door, the community has nothing to do with him? "The baraita is simply trying to tell us that he should not be given a large amount, but a small contribution should be made."

[n.b. a "baraita" is an alternative to the generally agreed upon interpretation of a matter]

*Baba Bathra 9a*

A penny here and a penny there adds up to a great sum.

*Nachman of Bratslav, quoted in*

*Hasidic Anthology*

A pauper who begs from house to house should be given only a small sum.

*Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah, 250: 1-5*

It is forbidden to turn away a poor man entirely empty-handed. Let him give something, if only a fig, for it is written, "Oh, let not the oppressed return ashamed." (Psalm 74:21)

*R. Moshe Isserles*

*note on Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah, 249: 3-5*

A poor man who goes begging should not be given a large donation, but a small one. One must never turn a poor man away empty-handed, even if you give him a dry fig."

*Rambam, Mishneh Torah*

*"Gifts to the Poor" 7:7*

A penny for the poor will obtain a view of the Shekhinah.

*Dosetai b Yannai in*

*Baba Bathra 10a*

R Eleazar used to give a coin to a poor man and straightaway say a prayer because, he said, it is written, "I in righteousness shall behold thy face."

*Baba Bathra 10a*

As tiny scales join to form a strong coat of mail, so little donations combine to form a large total of good.

*Baba Bathra 9b*

Just as in a garment every thread unites with the rest to form a whole garment, so every penny given to charity unites with the rest to form a large sum.

*Baba Bathra 9b*

The message seems clear; don't ignore the beggar, don't treat him or her with anything but kindness, don't find excuses as to why not to give. Rather, give to everyone, regardless of who he or she is, but just give a little.

**R. Assi observed: Tzedakah is as important as all the other commandments put together.**

*Baba Bathra 9a*

[The original purpose of this article to serve as a model for text study in English. Since this site is devoted to Tzedakah, I have not included the additional bibliographic information that accompanied the original article. - ed.]