Charity (Tzedaqah) as a Late Antique Rabbinic Religious Idea

By Alyssa M. Gray

The rabbis of late antiquity, protagonists and producers of the canonical texts of Rabbinic Judaism, are the progenitors of all contemporary varieties of Judaism. Anyone who has ever read from a “Haggadah” during a Passover Seder or been part of a Jewish wedding has engaged in a practice that is at least inspired by Rabbinic Judaism.

The late antique rabbinic enterprise is divided into two historical periods and between two geographical centers: the period of the “tannaim” (“repeaters”) in second- and early third century CE Palestine, and that of the later “amoraim” (“sayers” of tradition) of Palestine (third-late fourth century CE) and of Babylonia (third-sixth century CE). My purpose in this article is to highlight a few key findings about the rabbis' views on charity as a religious idea from my recent book Charity in Rabbinic Judaism: Atonement, Rewards, and Righteousness.
“Charity” is a convenient lexical shorthand for the provision of money or property to the poor that emerges from a Christian ideational matrix. The amora'im of Palestine occasionally use “mitzvah” (“commandment”) to refer to monetary provision for the poor, but they, and the amora'im of Babylonia, overwhelmingly prefer “tzedaqah.” “Tzedaqah” is ubiquitous in the Hebrew Bible, where it neither typically nor (with one exception) unambiguously refers to providing for the poor. Its range of meanings includes “righteousness,” “justice,” and also at times meanings akin to “forbearance” or “undeserved grace.” The Hebrew Bible also refers to the “doing” of tzedaqah, as in Genesis 18:19, in which God observes that Abraham will instruct his children in “doing” what is “just (tzedaqah) and right.”

[Tzedakah motif on a Jewish gravestone. Jewish cemetery in Otwock, Poland.]
There is a scholarly consensus that Daniel 4:24’s “tzidqah” (Aramaic for “tzedaqah”) likely does refer to providing for the poor and a minority scholarly view that “righteousness (tzedaqah) saves from death” (Proverbs 10:2, 11:4) does as well. For the rabbis “tzedaqah” is a lexical and theological “force-field” that holds its various meanings together, and they intertextually enrich “tzedaqah” by layering other meanings onto “providing money or property to the poor” (or vice versa). One example is the idea that by “doing” tzedaqah (assisting the poor) the donor thereby demonstrates his “righteousness” to God, the monetary tzedaqah being the concrete manifestation of that “righteousness.”

The late antique rabbinic canon includes hundreds of passages about providing for the poor (not all of which use “tzedaqah”). There are also a few lengthy sequences of tzedaqah material in the compilations known as Mishnah (third century CE), Tosefta (second-third century CE), Talmud of the Land of Israel (“Yerushalmi”; fifth century CE), Leviticus Rabbah (fourth-fifth century CE), and Babylonian Talmud (“Bavli”; seventh century CE). Like late antique Christians, the late antique rabbis inherited various religious ideas about “charity” from the Second Temple period. One is “redemptive almsgiving,” the notion that charity atones for sin and amasses heavenly merits (or “treasure in heaven”) for the donor. Tannaim straightforwardly teach redemptive almsgiving, while tacitly conceding the difficulty of locating it in the Hebrew Bible. The amoraim of Palestine illustrate redemptive almsgiving through narrative and by highlighting how the poor’s invitations to
potential donors to “gain [heavenly] merit,” “be merited,” or “gain merit for yourself” through the poor are requests for tzedaqah phrased in terms redolent of redemptive almsgiving.

19th century Persian tzedakah box.

Silver tzedakah box, Halberstadt, Germany, 1761.
The Bavli acknowledges several times that a person who does *tzedaqah* with the explicit intention of earning its redemptive reward is considered “a completely righteous person.” But the Bavli is uniquely and strikingly ambivalent about redemptive almsgiving. The scarlet thread of its ambivalence wends its way through a long narrative that begins with the iconic sage Rabbi Aqiva’s robust proclamation of redemptive almsgiving (“we are saved through the poor from the judgment of hell!”), goes on to describe his parrying of rhetorical thrusts against redemptive almsgiving by a scripturally literate Roman named Tineius Rufus, and ends with Rabbi Aqiva’s reaffirmation of the importance of providing for the poor—but with a new, noticeable silence about redemptive almsgiving. Does Rabbi Aqiva still maintain his initial robust embrace of redemptive almsgiving? It seems not, but the end of the narrative artfully leaves his view unclear.

One explanation for the Babylonian ambivalence about redemptive almsgiving is that it is but one instantiation of a broader Babylonian tendency to place limits on the divine role in human affairs and accentuate the human role. That being so, it is unsurprising that only the Bavli uses the phrase “*tzedaqah lishmah*” (“*tzedaqah for its own sake*”). “*TZedaqah lishmah,*” which implies unconcern with reward, seems to be the opposite of redemptive almsgiving. But “*tzedaqah lishmah*” coexists with redemptive almsgiving in the Bavli; the Bavli is skeptical about redemptive almsgiving but does not reject it. So, does *tzedaqah* atone for sin? Yes and...it doesn’t matter. Rabbi Aqiva’s last words on the subject are Isaiah 58:7 (“It is to share your bread with the hungry, and to take the wretched poor into your home”) and his insistence that the verse’s mandate is to be fulfilled “Right now.” “Right now”—presumably regardless of whether or not one’s giving will atone for sin.

Apropos, there is continuity between the *tannaim*, the *amoraim* of Palestine, and the Bavli in their suggestions of tension between *tzedaqah* and the simultaneously developing rabbinic concept of “*teshuvah*” (“repentance”) as means of atonement. *Tzedaqah* and *teshuvah* do not overlap in the *tannaim*’s literary compilations, although one passage there hints that God is more likely moved by the interior spiritual work of the sincere penitent (true “*teshuvah*”) than by the mere expenditure of money. The *amoraim* of Palestine bring together “*tefillah, tzedaqah, teshuvah*” (“prayer, *tzedaqah*, repentance”) into a formulaic triad of pious acts that “nullifies the [adverse divine] decree” (of death or infelicitous afterlife). They do not privilege *tzedaqah* over the other two.

The Bavli later produces its own tetrad (*tzedaqah*, “crying out,” “change of name,” “change of deeds”) and separately mentions a fifth act: “change of place.” The Bavli seems to
elevate *tzedaqah* by placing it first, but, on closer inspection, *tzedaqah* is most likely first because it requires the least of the penitent—merely that he give someone something. “Crying out” (in prayer) demands more of the penitent, as do “change of name” and “change of deeds,” both of which essentially require the penitent to become a new person. The last pious act, “change of place” (i.e., exile) is also the most demanding. *Teshuvah*—an amalgam of “crying out” and the three “changes”—is superior to *tzedaqah* as a mode of atonement because *teshuvah* “changes” the penitent inside and out. *Tzedaqah* merely requires that he put a hand into his pocket.

In sum, *tzedaqah* for the rabbis is a commanded religious act layered with religious ideas that imbricate heaven and earth. The *tannaim* and *amoraim* of Palestine teach redemptive almsgiving while hinting at *teshuvah*’s superiority as a mode of atonement. The Bavli agrees that *teshuvah* is superior and only ambivalently accepts redemptive almsgiving, hinting that whether or not *tzedaqah* atones for sin is not particularly important. One must do *tzedaqah* “right now,” and (ideally) “for its own sake.” For the rabbis overall, monetary *tzedaqah* is indeed a concretization of righteousness, justice, forbearance, and mercy, and by doing *tzedaqah*—regardless of whether it is atonement—one demonstrates righteousness before God.

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