

Maimonides set out 8 levels of tzedaka, each one higher than the one before.

8. To give grudgingly
7. To happily give, but to give less than one should
6. To give directly to the poor, but only after being asked
5. To give directly to the poor without being asked
4. To give a donation when the recipient is aware, though the donor is not.
3. To give a donation when the recipient is not aware, though the donor is.
2. To give tzedaka or g'milut chasadim in a way where neither the donor nor the recipient is known to the other.
1. To help a person before they become so impoverished that they need charity in the first place. To give them a job, loan, help them start a business, etc.

This week's Torah portion, Ki Tavo, talks about the bringing of 'bikkurim'- the first fruits of land, which were given to God. When bikkurim were brought to God, one had to profess out loud their gratitude to God for life, freedom, and the bounty of the land.

According to the rules set down by God, parts of one's land were set aside for those who could not provide for themselves; the levite, the stranger, the orphan, the widow. These were called tithes. Once the tithes had been given, one would come into God's presence, and ask God to bless the Israelites and the soil.

These statutes and ordinances were to be fulfilled with all your heart and all your soul (Deut 26:16).

In chapter 27 of Ki Tavo, there is an interesting ritual that was performed at Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Ebal. Six of the 12 tribes stood on one mountain and six on the other facing each other. The levites stood on the ground below, between the two, and called up God's blessings and curses. After each one, all the Israelites atop the two mountains called out, 'Amen!'.

It's an odd ritual. But also quite beautiful to have all the tribes- all the Israelites- take responsibility for the blessings and curses brought down upon the community. It also, one might surmise, might make individuals more invested in helping each other do what was needed to ensure that the community would receive the blessings and not the curses.

Rabbi Hillel said, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?". Today, it is not enough to bring 'bikkurim' to God. To give a gift, say we are grateful for the bounty we have, and to give tzedaka. Today, we must BE bikkurim. We must bring the best of ourselves to each new day, to God, to each other, and to the world- in order to balance the blessings and curses around us.

Hillel then adds, "If I am only for myself, what am I?". As on the mountain tops of Gerizim and Ebal, we are responsible for each other. Responsible for the blessings and curses that surround us. It is our willingness to be a change for the better that will bring blessing to the world. Maimonides gives us a glimpse into the mirror of our own folly. We trick ourselves into indifference because we can say we are helping. Our willingness to really be there for each other in meaningful ways is what will bring blessing to the world.

This is not an easy task. It won't be finished in a day, and we cannot do it alone. But, as Hillel says, "If not now, when?"