

The Hierarchy of Tzedakah

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Question: Everybody has different worthy causes that speak to them and to which they like to give priority when giving *tzedakah*. For example, some people prefer to support yeshivos, while others like to give most of their *tzedakah* money to poor people in Eretz Yisroel. Are there halachos that dictate which causes one should give priority to when allocating his *tzedakah* money?

Answer: This question is really more relevant to *ma'aser* than it is to *tzedakah*. The obligation of giving *tzedakah* is an obligation to donate when a poor person asks for a donation. *Ma'aser*, however, is an obligation to give 10% of one's earnings to charity, and would be more dependent on one's personal preferences.

There is a *machlokes* Rishonim if *ma'aser* can be given to any worthy cause or if it must be given specifically to poor people. Since *ma'aser* is not a *d'oraysa*, one may be lenient and give *ma'aser* to any cause. That being said, the Chofetz Chaim (Sefer Ahavas Chesed) writes that the highest level of *ma'aser* is to support poor Torah scholars. The next level is to support other poor people.

Beyond that, some Poskim say that *pidyon shevuyim* should be given preference, followed by personal causes like marrying off children and health expenses. These are causes that one may accept charity funds for even if one is not technically a poor person, and therefore are given precedence to other needs (This will be defined more in future shiurim). After that, the donor may give preference to whatever worthy cause he prefers.

It should be noted that one may not use *ma'aser* money to pay for a mitzvah that he is obligated to perform on his own. For example, *ma'aser* money cannot be used to buy matzah for Pesach or for *matanos l'evyonim* on Purim, as these are his personal obligations; therefore he must use his personal funds to pay for them. Other than that, *ma'aser* money can be used for any other mitzvah.

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