



Jewish Tales of the Storyteller: Charity Saves from Death

Grade: 4 - Adult

Time: 1- 2 Hours

Subjects: Gamilut Chasadim (kindness for others), Tzedakah (charity/righteous giving), death,

Charity Saves from Death **The Materials and the Educational Model**

Jewish Tales of the Storyteller is a collection of lessons that are designed to serve two purposes:

- ❖ To allow teachers to introduce Jewish values through the study of traditional Jewish stories and folktales. A short series of texts is included to help to explain the stories.
- ❖ To provide teachers with a collection of stories to teach about values used throughout the Jewish lifecycle

Storytelling is an ancient art. The storyteller's stories passed down knowledge of culture, history and language from one generation to another. In more recent times, folk tales have proved valuable in teaching morality and problem solving to children. The stories convey hopeful messages, create positive physical changes within the body, and relax the listener.

The mystery, magic and excitement of Jewish stories can bring the classroom alive as they stimulate students and encourage critical thinking skills. Jewish stories can better explain history, ethics, holidays and the Jewish lifecycle while creating an atmosphere to strengthen Jewish identity.

There is a rich history of Jewish stories and folktales that suggests that stories are a powerful method to transmit, store, and access values. Basically when a story is told, the story's context gives the value a reality that isn't communicated without a clear example. Stories, however, are remembered much more than information or statements. They take on a life of their own in a student's memory. Students may often draw from stories on their own to solve real life situations. A story also gives a teacher a simple way to reference a story. It is fairly hard to ask a student, "Don't you remember the when we learned about "Gamilut Chasadim"? A Hebrew term and a new idea are not likely to remain active long in the memory when is not reinforced. On the other hand, if the teacher should ask, "Remember the story about the rabbi who fixed the flawed stone?" is much more likely to be remembered and retained.

Each of the Jewish Tales of the Storyteller lessons allows students develop an appreciation for Jewish values through hearing stories and "finding its meaning." A

series of short Jewish texts allows students to explore the nuances of uniquely Jewish insights into its application. The values remain with the listener giving them the tools to address situation or conflicts they may experience at a later time. This in turn will allow later experiences to become insightful and heartfelt learning opportunities.

This Unit

This unit is made up of five learning activities. Each is designed to take at least a few minutes, and together they should take up (depending on how you structure your class time) one or two 45-minute class sessions.

- ❖ Activity One: Read and discuss the story "The Beggar at the Wedding."
- ❖ Activity Two: Discuss the meaning of the story.
- ❖ Activity Three: Thinking about the Story: Look and learn with Jewish texts having to do with *tzedakah*, in *chevrusa*.
- ❖ Activity Four: Explore the value. "tzedakah saves from death", by analyzing a few interpretations of its meaning,
- ❖ Activity Five: Closing Thoughts: Discuss students' own interpretations of the story's message.

Concepts

- ❖ There are many reasons why giving *tzedakah* is a good thing to do.
- ❖ Giving *tzedakah* is a very important mitzvah.
- ❖ Giving *tzedakah* is one way that human beings can be "partners" with G-d.
- ❖ *Tzedakah* saves from death. It benefits both the recipient and the giver.
- ❖ Jewish people have an obligation to take personal responsibility for committing acts of *tzedakah* and *gamilut chasadim*.

Goals

- ❖ Students will demonstrate their understanding of the story by retelling the story or answering questions about the story.
- ❖ Students will answer questions about the "moral of the story."
- ❖ Students will successfully interpret and answer questions about Jewish texts relating to *tzedakah and death*
- ❖ Students will list and explain several ways in which "*tzedakah* saves from death."
- ❖ Students will personalize the story (and the supplementary material) by developing and articulating their own ideas about *tzedakah*.

I The Beggar at the Wedding

Concept: There are many reasons why giving *tzedakah* is a good thing to do.

Goal: Students can demonstrate their understanding of the story by retelling the story or answering questions about the story.

Method:

Introduce students to this story by (a) reading it, (b) having them reading it silently, or (c) retelling it.

To present the story to the class, you may read or retell the story to your students, have students read the story aloud, or have your students read the story alone or in small groups.

One good strategy is to have student work as chevrusa (pairs) to read the texts and answer the questions before you go over them.

Also, in addition to the questions at the end of the story, it might be useful to ask questions as you read, like, "Why did Yosef believe that everything would be all right?", "Why did Yosef become upset with Dovid's offer to change his mind about marrying Chanah?" or, "Why did Yosef serve the beggar in the middle of his wedding?"

II The Meaning of the Story

Concept: Giving *tzedakah* is a very important mitzvah.

Goal: Students can answer questions about the "moral of the story."

Method:

The teacher can ask these questions to the class and ask for answers, or the teacher can have students work with each other in small groups and share their answers with the whole class. Some good answers to expect:

1. What caused Yosef to be saved?

There are two good answers to this question:

The basic answer is that Yosef was saved when he listened to the advice he was given by Eliyahu haNovi and served the beggar at his wedding.

The more complex answer — which you shouldn't expect from your students at this point — is that Yosef's act of *tzedakah* overcame the decree of the Angel of

Death." If your students bring this up, allow for some discussion, but don't be worried if they don't. This theme, that *tzedakah* "saves from death," will be discussed later at some length.

More simple put – Was it a coincidence or a G-d planned miracle.

2. Why did Chanah think she did something wrong?

There are two good answers to this question:

The basic answer is that her previous husbands died.

The more complex answer — which you shouldn't expect from your students at this point – Yosef was meant to be her husband because he was good, kind and learned.

3. What lesson(s) does the story teach us?

The story teaches us several lessons about *tzedakah* and *gamilut chasadim*:

That giving *tzedakah* is important, even on your wedding day; that even "fate" can be overcome by the power of doing *mitzvot*; that *tzedakah* can deliver us from death. It is a Jewish tradition to make weddings and other times of joy into times of *tzedakah* wedding. Shtetl weddings used to have a beggars table and everyone was served food as part of the celebration.

III Thinking about the Story

Concepts:

- ❖ Giving *tzedakah* is a very important mitzvah.
- ❖ Giving *tzedakah* is one way that human beings can be "partners" with G-d.

Goal: Students will successfully interpret and answer questions about Jewish texts relating to *gamilut chasadim* and *tzedakah*.

Method:

This activity — designed to be completed by students in *chevrusa* (learning partnerships) — is a set of five texts about *tzedakah*. Let students work through them (and answer the questions) in *chevrusa*, then discuss the questions as a class, allowing each pair to share their answers.

- A. "Yose ben Yochanon, of Jerusalem, taught: said: Let your house be wide open and let the needy be members of your household ... (Pirke Avot 1.5)

We have learned that “**Let your house be wide open**” means to guests, so that all who are hungry or thirsty, all the weary and exhausted, may enter your home without embarrassment, and find relief from hunger, rest for their bodies and comfort for their souls, **and let the needy be members of your household** means receive them graciously and with a pleasant disposition to make them feel as members of your family,

The MaHaRaL of Prague explained this mishnah to suggest that just as members of the household bring merit to the home. When we invite the poor into our home regularly, they become like part of the household and can be supported with honor and dignity.

Judah Loew ben Bezalel, a 16th century rabbi widely known to scholars of Judaism as the Maharal of Prague, or simply The MaHaRaL, "**Moreinu ha-Rav Loew**," ("Our Teacher, Rabbi Loew") was an important Talmudic scholar, Jewish mystic, and philosopher who served as a leading rabbi in the city of Prague in Bohemia for most of his life.

Within the world of Torah and Talmudic scholarship, he is known for his works on Jewish philosophy and Jewish mysticism and his work *Gur Aryeh al HaTorah*, a supercommentary on Rashi's Torah commentary.

The Maharal is particularly known for the legend that he created The Golem of Prague, to defend the Jews of the Prague Ghetto from anti-Semitic attacks; particularly blood libels coming from certain sources.

1. Why do we need to treat the poor like members of our family?

The rabbis are suggesting that providing tzedakah to the poor should be as natural as giving something to a member of our family. Students should be able to identify with this idea. Just as it's natural for their parents to feed them and buy them clothes, it should feel just as natural for us to feed and clothe people in need.

Allow your students to share their own ideas on this passage. What do they think the Maharal was teaching us?

2. How can we treat the poor like members of our family?

Some ideas:

We can give charity, as the commentary suggests *and let the needy be members of your household means receive them graciously and with a pleasant disposition to make them feel as members of your family*, We can treat the poor with dignity and respect. We can make time for *tzedakah*, even at special moments in our lives (like a wedding).

The Maharal “suggests that just as members of the household bring merit to the home. When we invite the poor into our home regularly, they become like part of the household and can be supported with honor and dignity.”

- B. Shmuel and a Persian astrologer named Avlat were sitting together while certain people were passing on their way to a swamp. Avlat said to Shmuel, "That man is going, but he will not come back, because a snake will bite him, and he is going to die." Shmuel replied, "If he is Jewish he will go and come back." While they were sitting there, the man went and returned. Seeing this, Avlat got up, threw down the man's knapsack and found in it a snake that was cut into two pieces. Shmuel asked the man, "What good deed did you do to deserve this?" The man replied, "[I am with a group of people, and] every day we placed our bread into a basket, and then we ate together; but today one of us had no bread, and he was ashamed. So I told my friends, "Let me collect the bread." When I came to him I pretended to take bread from him, so that he should not be embarrassed." "You did a mitzvah," said Shmuel to him. "That's why you were saved." Shmuel then went out and explained: "Charity saves a person from death" (Proverbs 11:4)-not only will it save him from an unnatural death, but also from a natural death.

Shabbat 156b

1. Why did Avlat think the man was not going to come back?

Avlat was a Persian astrologer and believed that everything is foretold in the stars. He did not believe that faith and mitzvot supersede fate.

2. What mitzvah did the man do?

He provided tzedakah for someone less fortunate without causing any embarrassment to the poor man.

- C. "You should give charity with joy and happiness. When you do, you help to comfort the poor and 'wash away' their sorrow. If someone gives charity with a frown, he loses the reward from giving." (*Yoreh Deah* 249:3)

1. How does giving charity with joy and happiness help wash away a person's sorrow?

When we give charity grudgingly, out of feelings of guilt or necessity, we make the people receiving it feel as if they're accepting a "hand out." We deprive them of dignity. When we give "with joy and happiness", we allow them to maintain dignity.

2. What is "the reward from giving"?

One reward we get from giving is that it makes us feel good. We get the

privilege of knowing we helped someone and the privilege of helping G-d make the world a better place. (These are just a few examples.)

3. Why does someone lose their "reward from giving" if they give with a frown?

Think of the "rewards from giving" the class just discussed. (It may help to write a list on the board.) When we give with a frown, how many of these positive results are negated?

For example, if we give with a frown in the first place, it's far more difficult — maybe impossible — to reap the good feelings we can get from giving to someone.

- D. Rabbi Judah used to say: Ten strong things have been created in the world. The [rock of the] mountain is hard, but iron cleaves it. Iron is hard, but fire softens it. Fire is powerful, but water quenches it. Water is heavy, but clouds bear it. Clouds are thick, but wind scatters them. Wind is strong, but a body resists it. The body is strong, but fear crushes it. Fear is powerful but wine banishes it. Wine is strong, but sleep works it off. Death is stronger than all, yet charity delivers from death, as is written, "Charity delivers from death" (Prov. 10:2).

Bava Batra 10a

1. According to Rabbi Judah, what is the strongest thing?

Death is stronger than all, yet charity delivers from death, as is written, "Charity delivers from death" (Prov. 10:2).

2. What do we learn about *tzedakah* (charity) from this account?

Answers will vary

3. What makes *tzedakah* so strong?

It can overcome evil.

4. Why are we taught that *tzedakah* can overcome all evil?

Perhaps we this teaching is in the Talmud so as to encourage us to give *tzedakah*.

5. How does *tzedakah* overcome evil?

Tzedakah can do a lot. Charity can be the difference between life and death, as in the story, or in the case of a gift of food to a starving person.

E. One may think, "nobody escapes death." The Talmud teaches:

"Charity saves from death." This shows that a person is granted reward in accordance with the good deeds that he did. A person, by giving Tzedakah, intends to ensure that the poor man should live and not die. For that reason, G-d sees to it that the benefactor should also live and not die. (Tanna D'Vei Eliyahu Zuta, Ch. 1)

What death does charity save from?

We learn two important things: First, that we can be G-d's partners in creation by working to make the world a better place. Second, that doing *tzedakah* is a way of taking an advantage of an opportunity G-d gave us to earn ourselves a "good eternity."

The idea of *Olam haBa*, world to come, is a rabbinic notion that in the future there will be a time when everything is perfect. People earn a place in this perfect world through good actions.

(This question touches on the idea of being "partners in Creation." Human beings have free will because it's our job to complete G-d's Creation of the Earth. We do so by helping ourselves and helping others.)

IV. Explore the value

Concept: Tzedakah saves from death. It benefits both the recipient and the giver.

Goal: Students can list and explain several ways in which *tzedakah* saves from death."

Method: This activity is designed to let students wrestle with a difficult idea, that "Tzedakah saves from death." They are provided with five possible explanations/interpretations, and are invited to explore each one. This activity is well suited for a classroom discussion, but is also another ideal *chevrusa* activity.

To the rabbis of the Talmud who first wrote down the following story, the most important part was the value where we learn that *tzedakah* saves from *death*. Sometimes, people have trouble figuring out what the rabbis meant when they taught us this lesson.

What do you think they meant?

The sages tell a story about Benjamin the righteous, who was in charge of the *tzedakah* box. One day, in the years of drought, a woman came to him and said, "Rabbi, provide for me." Benjamin said to her, "By God, there is nothing left in the *tzedakah* box." But the woman continued, "If you do not provide for me, a woman and her seven children will die." So he took from his own [funds] and gave her money.

Only a few days later, Benjamin fell ill and was close to death. The ministering angels came to the Holy Blessed One and spoke [on Benjamin's behalf]: "Master of the Universe, You have said that 'if one saves a single life, it is as if that individual had saved the entire world.' Benjamin the righteous kept alive a woman and her seven children. Should he die in his early years [as a result of his charity]?" Instantly, his sentence of death was torn up and twenty-two more years were added to his life.

Bava Batra 11a

1. *Tzedakah* saves the life of the person who receives it.

According to this answer, how does *tzedakah* save from death?

Tzedakah provides the poor/needy with things that are necessary in their lives, like food, shelter, and clothing.

2. *Tzedakah* gives the giver a good eternity.

According to this answer, how does *tzedakah* save from death?

By giving *tzedakah*, the giver is engaging an act that will ensure a place in *olam ha'Ba*, the "World to Come."

If we are ensured a good eternity, than we are saved from "death."

3. God protects people who give *tzedakah*.

According to this answer, how does *tzedakah* save from death?

If you give *tzedakah*, God will make sure that bad things will be less likely to happen to you.

4. *Tzedakah* makes the giver feel better and enjoy life more.

According to this answer, how does *tzedakah* saves- from death?

Tzedakah saves the giver from death in that it makes life more worth living.

5. *Tzedakah* makes the receiver feel better and enjoy life more.

According to this answer, how does *tzedakah* save from death?

Tzedakah saves the receiver from death in that it makes life more worth living.

V Closing Thoughts

Concept: Jewish people have an obligation to take personal responsibility for committing acts of *tzedakah* and *gamilut chasadim*.

Goal: Students will personalize the story (and the supplementary material) by developing and articulating their own ideas about *tzedakah*.

Method: These are "thought questions" that really have no right answer. Make sure that you give students ample "space" to answer them for themselves using the Jewish tools provided by this lesson.

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Tales of the Storyteller



The Beggar at the Wedding

Once upon a time, long ago, there was a man whose fame had spread far and wide in the land where he lived. He was exceedingly good-hearted, and as he had plenty of money he was able to help the poor. Dovid, for that was the man's name, had a gentle and good wife. They had an only daughter, named Chanah.

Charity Saves from Death

Rabbi Rachmiel Tobesman
Illustrated Shoshanah Tobesman

In time, Chanah grew up into a most lovely young woman, whose hand and fortune were wanted after by many young men. One young man succeeded in gaining her favour by giving a few coins to the poor whenever Chanah drew his attention to the one in need. This charity, however, was not genuine, for if alone the young man would refuse to listen to the poor. Chanah consented to accept this young man as her husband, and at last, the wedding day was fixed. When the day arrived, her home was filled with the songs of joy and gladness. At the marriage feast happy laughter cheered the hearts of all the guests.

Next day all this happiness was suddenly, changed into grief, for death had claimed the bridegroom as his victim. The lonely bride weeping and lamenting, had laid aside her beautiful wedding dress and her bridal decorations and had put on the black dress of a mourner. All that had happened seemed as though it were a dream to the poor girl. Even her parents could hardly realize the terrible misfortune which had so suddenly befallen them. Yesterday saw the wedding and to-day was to see the funeral of the luckless husband.

In time, their sorrow gradually became less intense and the tears of the widow dried off her beautiful face, for time cures every unpleasantness under the sun. Chanah's beauty and wealth soon brought new young men who wanted to marry her, and she accepted as a husband a man who was harsh and domineering by nature. He wooed Chanah for the sake of her fortune.

Again, the bridal eve was followed by a night of death. Grief and tears again followed the joy and happiness of the marriage day. For a second time this cruel fate overtook the unfortunate bridegroom, who, like the first young man, had only married for the sake of money.

Chanah turned to her parents and the many friends and family and cried, "The world is a strong sea and time forms a frail bridge over it.¹ With time, my sorrow will grow less and I will again be happy.

After awhile a young man came to Chanah. He was learned, handsome and enjoyed being in the company of Chanah. He spoke words of wisdom and studied much, but he did not put his learning into practice.

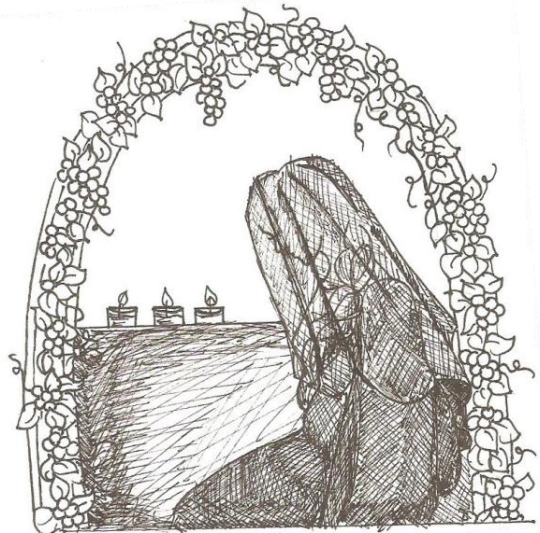
¹ Bechinas haOlam

The young man was indeed a scholar of note, but he sought the knowledge for his own glory. He sought Chanah for her wealth and influence. His love was for himself and not her.

Everyone gathered to celebrate Chanah's wedding. The happiness and joy went into the night with dancing and blessings. But, alas, death struck the young groom before morning and so the wedding day was followed by a funeral.

In the presence of all the friends of her dear parents Chanah cried, "Three times have I married and each time I have lost my husband. Never again will I marry, for I will not again lead my beloved to death. G-d's hand is stretched out against me for some unknown sin. Three times was I married in order to increase the joy of my dear parents, but this joy has been changed three times into heartbreaking sorrow for all of us. From this day on, I will remain a widow. Everyday will I weep and pray to the Holy One, blessed be He to forgive me the sin which has cost so dearly."

Her friends held their peace and left the sorrowing girl and her parents to comfort one another as best they could.



Dovid had an old classmate and dear friend named Shmuel, who lived in a far-off country. For many years they had not heard from one another. In their youth they had parted, each bent on seeking his fortune. As we have seen, Dovid had become very wealthy. Shmuel, however, although blessed with a worthy wife and ten children, had remained a poor man. He and his oldest son collected wood in the forest near their hut. Sometimes they were lucky and sold all the wood that they had gathered. One day they failed to find any customers, and when they returned home at night they were penniless. The result was that next day the entire family was without food.

The next day Shmuel and his eldest son, whose name was Yosef, went to the marketplace to sell the wood, but without any success. They resolved to spend the night in the forest rather than see the misery of the starving children in their unhappy home.

Shmuel and Yosef prayed to G-d for help. After a while Yosef turned to his father and suggested that the best thing to do would be to go to his rich friend, Dovid and to ask his assistance. Shmuel gladly agreed to this plan.

Early next morning they returned home and told their dear ones about the plan which they had adopted. Yosef took leave of his beloved parents, sisters and brothers and set

out on his journey strengthened by the prayers and blessings of all the family.

When his father's friend saw him, he, his wife and daughter rejoiced with him very much and asked about his father, mother and brothers. When they heard of the terrible poverty in Yosef's home they immediately sent their trusty servant to help the family with food, money and clothing. Yosef wished to return home in company with the servant, but he was persuaded by Dovid for a short visit. His warm presence soon brought comfort and happiness to the sad Chanah. Often they sat together in the beautiful garden around Dovid's house and read and spoke about the stirring stories of the Torah and other holy books.

A few weeks of unclouded happiness soon passed by, and Yosef thought that the time had come when he should return home. He went to Dovid one morning and said to him, "Let me ask you, dear friend on my father, to do me a favour, which you can readily promise to do. You have given me so much already. I shall never forget all your love and kindness. One thing only is still wanting to complete my heart's desire. Well do I know how generously you have assisted my beloved father and mother. You have fed and clothed my poor sisters and brothers. You have kept me here for many a happy day as your guest. If you do not promise to do this one favour which I am about to ask, I must at once leave you and return to my own home, for I fear I have already stayed here too-long"

"How can I refuse you your request, dear Yosef," cried Dovid. "I faithfully promise on my word of honour to do what you ask, for I know that you are a good and noble lad with an honest and kind heart. I am sure you would never ask for anything which is neither, right nor just."

That is so," said Yosef. "Now, dear friend of my father, since you have given me your promise, listen to my request. I know you do not really wish me to return home. I will agree to stay with you on one condition and make your home mine also."

What is the condition?" cried Dovid impatiently.

"The condition," continued Yosef, "is that you give me your consent to marry your dear daughter Chanah. When we are married, we will live with you and comfort you and your dear wife for the rest of your lives."

Dovid's face became white and with tears in his eyes he shook his head. What you are asking is impossible. Do you not know, dear Yosef, that Chanah has already been married three times and each time her husband died in the night following the wedding. Yosef, beloved son of my dear friend, please do not insist, for you are really asking me for leave to die, and I dare not consent. Please do not try to persuade me to agree to your proposal. If you do, it will be to your own hurt."

"But you have given me your word of honour to grant my request," said Yosef," and your word is your bond. Well do I know the sad story of dear Chanah's weddings. I am fully

aware that the three husbands who in turn married her died in the first night of their marriage. The fault was not Chanah's. She is so good and loving, so true and innocent. I trust in the Holy One, blessed be He with all my heart and soul, and I will gladly risk my life and happiness in marrying her. The love of Holy One, blessed be He will shield me from all harm. Have no fear, give your consent and we shall all be happy."

Dovid with quivering voice addressed the young man, saying, " Yosef, I love you as though you were my son. Listen well to what I am about to say. If by marrying my daughter you think you will obtain her fortune, tell me if this be the case, truthfully and I will satisfy you and redeem my pledge by giving you her dowry. Nay, I will double the amount if you agree not to wed my child. If this should not satisfy you, name the sum of money you desire, and if I possess it, it shall be yours. I will gladly give it with a good will, only do not risk your precious life by running into danger. You have been a source of real comfort and happiness to us all ever since you set foot in our house. Do not I beseech you, plunge us all into indescribable misery by risking your life. To marry Chanah is to die."

Dear friend of my father! "Yosef cried, "Do you really think for one moment that I wish to marry Chanah for the sake of money. Do not even think that I would take a single coin if I am not allowed to marry her. I do not think of money or worldly things now, for I know that love is the best of all treasures. In Chanah have I found my beshert (chosen one), she alone of all women on earth will be mine, even as I alone of all men will be hers, now and always. Fate is not against us, for I feel that we are destined to make one another happy. What is more, in our happiness you and dear aunt will find your true peace and joy. My love for Chanah is stronger than death.²"

Seeing the foolishness of continuing the discussion, Dovid consented to carry out his promise, and said that he would at once tell the news to Chanah and her mother. No sooner had he related the proposal to his daughter than she began to weep bitterly and raised her eyes toward heaven and prayed, "Ribbono shel olam (Master of the Universe), let Your hand strike me but do not have Yosef die through me." Joyfully would she have suffered death sooner than see any harm befall Yosef, whom she loved with all her heart. She knew how noble was his character, and she realized that nothing would induce him to change his mind. She felt that she was helpless and that there was nothing to be done except to put her life and that of her beloved Yosef in the hands of G-d.

Later in the day Yosef came to her and placed the engagement ring on her finger, meanwhile saying, "With *this ring* are you betrothed unto me according to the Law of Moses and of Israel."

They sealed their engagement by a sweet kiss, exchanging promises of love and faithfulness. In spite of her happiness, tears welled up in her eyes, for she knew that their great joy and love were in the balance. Yosef tried to console her by telling her that

² Song of Songs 8:6

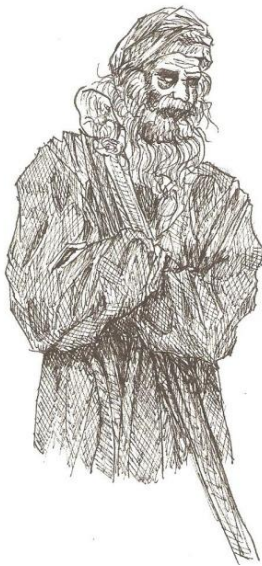
all would be well.

The news of their engagement soon spread in the town where they lived, and the friends of Chanah's parents came to wish the couple joy and good luck, thinking that their congratulations would gladden the hearts of Chanah and of her parents. Yosef's usual good humour was intensified by the happy event. He sought out the poor, to whom he gave gifts of money, well remembering the poverty in which he had lived until he came to his uncle.

A few weeks later, the wedding ceremony was fixed to be celebrated. Once again Chanah put on her bridal gown, thinking the while of the terrible misfortunes she had experienced. At last the hour came when she stood with Yosef at her side beneath the chuppah.

Just as everyone was gathering under the chuppah, an old man, unknown to all the assembled guests, approached Yosef and asked him to give him a moment's attention, because he had to tell him something of very important. Yosef immediately turned aside with the stranger and asked him if he required any help. The stranger replied, "I come to help you, for I know that you have a good and kind heart. I ask you to remember that wealth will not avail in the hour of your need, charity alone will save you and deliver you from death.³ Be hospitable this day and invite to your wedding feast the poor who will bless you for your kindness. This is all I have to say, and now let me go, for I wish you well."

The stranger was Eliyahu haNovi (Elijah the Prophet), the friend and comforter of all in trouble and distress.



The wedding began, and the guests took their places at the feast. At the head of the table sat the bridegroom, and at his side was his beautiful bride. The guests began to eat and to drink, when all of a sudden there was seen at the door of the room a beggar in rags and tatters, his skin yellow and unwashed, his hair sticking up like spikes, barefoot and his stature bent. His eyes were flaming like fire, and as he entered a overwhelming silence fell upon the meal. Not a sound was heard within the room, all was hushed in strange suspense, until Yosef in a loud and fearless voice cried, "Come here, good friend, you are most welcome at this, my marriage feast. At my side shall you sit, for here all are most heartily welcome." Yosef told the servants to go to the door of the house and to invite all the poor who passed by to join his guests.

³ Proverbs 10:20 and Bava Basra 10a

The beggar went to the seat next to Yosef's and sat down. Yosef waited on his unknown guest and gave him of the best of the foods and drink. When the banquet was over the bride arose and went to her chamber. Yosef arose likewise and was about to follow her when the beggar placed his hand on Yosef's shoulder and said in a whisper "I must have just one word with you in private, please. I cannot stay here much longer, but I have to tell you why I am with you today."

Yosef led him to an empty room and requested him to be seated. After a moment or two had gone by the stranger began to speak as follows, " My friend, I am truly sorry for your own and also for your dear wife's sake, but I have come here on a very sad errand. I am sent to you against my will. It is Highest Judge who has sent me here to take you to Him. Prepare now to leave the world and all its joys."

Yosef looked at his guest without fear, and in a very calm voice he said, "If this be the will of the Holy One, blessed be He, so be it done in love and obedience. All the same, I ask you to grant me a delay of just one year in happiness with my wife, and then I promise to go with you." "No, my good friend, it cannot be," cried the Angel of Death, who was disguised as the beggar. "Not even a month," said the angel, "not even the seven days of rejoicing given to the bride and bridegroom, not even one day's delay, but this very day must you die even as the former three husbands of your beloved wife."

Yosef quickly replied, "G-d's word is true, and He is true. If you cannot grant my request to delay your task, give me leave to go to my wife and to bid her farewell."

"This will I gladly allow, "the angel sadly replied," in return for your kindness to me this day, you knew me not yet have you treated me as a friend."

The angel spoke so gently because his heart was full of sorrow. He knew that Yosef was a good and true man, and it grieved him to lead him through the valley of the shadow of death.

Yosef went quickly to his wife's chamber and entered. He found her crying and praying with a broken heart. "Quick, my beloved," he whispered, "my time is very short, I cannot stay here, I must leave and go far away with the strange beggar. He has come to fetch me. Let me bless you for your unfailing sweetness and love, come, let me kiss you for the last time."

"If," she cried, " you must leave I will go with you, for now we are one and nothing shall ever part us, not even cruel death itself."

With a passionate grip, she took his hand and told him to lead her to the beggar. When she saw him, she said, "Stranger! You are still our guest beneath our roof. If you would repay our hospitality this day just grant me one little favour. Take me with my husband to the Eternal Judge and I will ask Him whether His holy word in the Law is true. Is it not

written: `And what man is there that has betrothed a wife, and has not taken her, let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man take her'⁴ and is it further stated, 'When a man has taken a bride, he shall not go out with the army, nor shall he be required for any business, he shall be free for one year for his home for one year, and he shall gladden his wife whom he has married?'⁵ The Holy One, Blessed be He is true and His Torah is true, and if you take the soul of my husband, you will be turning the Torah into a falsehood. If you accept my words, it is well, but if not, then come with me to the Great Court before the Judge of all judges." "

"This I cannot do" cried the angel, "I will go for you and present your request and will bring you the answer from the heavenly court."

His sorrow for the unfortunate bride and bridegroom prompted him to do this service of love. The angel added, " I will join in the choir of angels who praise G-d morning and evening, and I will put your question before se Father of Mercy who dwells with the meek and the broken-hearted. I hope for` the sake of both of you that Yosef's life will be spared."

In a moment the angel was gone and in another moment he returned. His face was shining with heavenly light and his voice was sweet and soft.

"Listen," he said. "Good friends! I rejoice to tell you that your prayers have been heard. Live well and long together, enjoy your life. The other husbands died because they married, not for love, but for greed of gold. They were hard-hearted, scorning the poor and the weak. You shall live to help others to live and to prosper. Farewell! "and in a second the angel was seen no more.

The bride and bridegroom spent that night in giving praise to G-d for His love and mercy. The parents, however, were weeping throughout the long night, while their friends had prepared the grave for Yosef's body. At dawn, Yosef went to his Dovid and his wife to greet them. They were greatly overcome with joy and comforted one another by praying together to the Almighty. All then rushed to fill in the unused grave. In this plot they planted seeds of daffodils, so that in time to come they might look upon the beautiful flower` as an emblem of the Divine Mercy.



Yosef continued to be charitable and kind to all who needed his help. Whenever the people saw him, they were wont to exclaim, "Truly charity delivers from death."

Midrash Tanchuma, Ha'azinu, § viii.

⁴ Deuteronomy 20:7

⁵ Deuteronomy 24:5

THE MEANING OF THE STORY

1. What caused Yosef to be saved? _____

2. Why did Chanah think she did something wrong? _____

3. What lesson(s) does the story teach us? _____

THINKING ABOUT THE STORY

This story was first told by the rabbis of the Talmud. They told lots of stories about tzedakah. They taught us that as Jews, we are obligated to fulfill the mitzvah of tzedakah because it's the just thing to do, since the word tzedakah comes from the word for "justice."

Here are some Jewish texts that discuss some of the same ideas as the story. Read each one with a partner and answer the questions. When you're done, pick which ones do the best job of teaching the lessons that the story teaches.

- C. "*Yose ben Yochanon, of Jerusalem, taught:* said: Let your house be wide open and let the needy be members of your household ...

(Pirke Avot 1.5)

We have learned that "**Let your house be wide open**" means to guests, so that all who are hungry or thirsty, all the weary and exhausted, may enter your home without embarrassment, and find relief from hunger, rest for their bodies and comfort for their souls, **and let the needy be members of your household** means receive them graciously and with a pleasant disposition to make them feel as members of your family,

The MaHaRaL of Prague explained this mishnah to suggest that just as members of the household bring merit to the home. When we invite the poor into our home regularly, they become like part of the household and can be supported with honor and dignity.

1. Why do we need to treat the poor like members of our family? _____

2. How can we treat the poor like members of our family? _____

D. Shmuel and a Persian astrologer named Avlat were sitting together while certain people were passing on their way to a swamp. Avlat said to Shmuel, "That man is going, but he will not come back, because a snake will bite him, and he is going to die." Shmuel replied, "If he is Jewish he will go and come back." While they were sitting there, the man went and returned. Seeing this, Avlat got up, threw down the man's knapsack and found in it a snake that was cut into two pieces. Shmuel asked the man, "What good deed did you do to deserve this?" The man replied, "[I am with a group of people, and] every day we placed our bread into a basket, and then we ate together; but today one of us had no bread, and he was ashamed. So I told my friends, "Let me collect the bread." When I came to him I pretended to take bread from him, so that he should not be embarrassed." "You did a mitzvah," said Shmuel to him. "That's why you were saved." Shmuel then went out and explained: "Charity saves a person from death" (Proverbs 11:4)-not only will it save him from an unnatural death, but also from a natural death.

Shabbat 156b

1. Why did Avlat think the man was was not going to come back? _____

2. What mitzvah did the man do? _____

E. "You should give charity with joy and happiness. When you do, you help to comfort the poor and wash away their sorrow. If someone gives charity with a frown, he loses the reward from giving." (*Yoreh Deah* 249:3)

1. How does giving charity with joy and happiness help wash away a poor person's sorrow? _____

2. What is "the reward from giving"? _____

3. Why does someone lose their "reward from giving" if they give with a frown?

F. Rabbi Judah used to say: Ten strong things have been created in the world. The [rock of the] mountain is hard, but iron cleaves it. Iron is hard, but fire softens it. Fire is powerful, but water quenches it. Water is heavy, but clouds bear it. Clouds are thick, but wind scatters them. Wind is strong, but a body resists it. The body is strong, but fear crushes it. Fear is powerful but wine banishes it. Wine is strong, but sleep works it off. Death is stronger than all, yet charity delivers from death, as is written, "Charity delivers from death" (Prov. 10:2).

Bava Batra 10a

5. According to Rabbi Judah, what is the strongest thing? _____

6. What do we learn about tzedakah (charity) from this account? _____

G. One may think "nobody escapes death." The Talmud teaches:

"Charity saves from death." This shows that a person is granted reward in accordance with the good deeds that he did. A person, by giving Tzedakah, intends to ensure that the poor man should live and not die. For that reason, G-d sees to it that the benefactor should also live and not die. (Tanna D'Vei Eliyahu Zuta, Ch. 1)

1. What death does charity save from? _____

Exploring the Value: Tzedakkah Saves From Death

To the rabbis of the Talmud who first wrote down the following story, the most important part was the value where we learn that *tzedakah* saves from *death*. Sometimes, people have trouble figuring out what the rabbis meant when they taught us this lesson.

What do you think they meant?

The sages tell a story about Benjamin the righteous, who was in charge of the *tzedakah* box. One day, in the years of drought, a woman came to him and said, "Rabbi, provide for me." Benjamin said to her, "By God, there is nothing left in the *tzedakah* box." But the woman continued, "If you do not provide for me, a woman and her seven children will die." So he took from his own [funds] and gave her money.

Only a few days later, Benjamin fell ill and was close to death. The ministering angels came to the Holy Blessed One and spoke [on Benjamin's behalf]: "Master of the Universe, You have said that 'if one saves a single life, it is as if that individual had saved the entire world.' Benjamin the righteous kept alive a woman and her seven children. Should he die in his early years [as a result of his charity]?" Instantly, his sentence of death was torn up and twenty-two more years were added to his life.

Bava Batra 11a

Here are five suggestions. Each is an interpretation of the phrase *tzedakah saves from death*. For each one, answer the question.

1. *Tzedakah* saves the life of the person who receives it.

According to this answer, how does *tzedakah* save from death?

2. *Tzedakah* gives the giver a good eternity.

According to this answer, how does *tzedakah* save from death?

3. God protects people who give *tzedakah*.

According to this answer, how does *tzedakah* save from death?

4. *Tzedakah* makes the giver feel better and enjoy life more.

According to this answer, how does *tzedakah* save from death?

5. *Tzedakah* makes the receiver feel better and enjoy life more.

According to this answer, how does *tzedakah* save from death?

Closing Thoughts

1. Do you believe the world really works the way it does in the story?

2. In what ways do you believe *Tzedakah* saves from death?
