

Rabbi Lewis' Message for January, 2010

In the old days, a *pushke* sat on the windowsill in the kitchen of every Jewish household. Sometimes it was the blue box of the [Jewish National Fund](#), its funds used in supporting efforts to develop the modern State of Israel. Sometimes, it was just a plain wooden or metal box. What mattered wasn't how it looked; what mattered was the coins that rattled around inside of it.

You may have noticed the new tzedakah box hanging on the wall to the right outside the sanctuary doors. It is simple and unobtrusive, in keeping with the character of our congregation. We have talked about putting up a tzedakah box for many years. We saw it as a visual reminder of the Jewish value placed on tzedakah. The word's root is *tzedek*, meaning not charity but justice. The distinction is an important one. Charity is a voluntary giving out of your own benevolence; tzedakah is giving out of religious obligation, regardless of your feeling at that moment.

What is the function of this new tzedakah box? You already give tzedakah to the Center when you make donations in observance of a *yahrzeit*, in honor of a special occasion or in gratitude for the Center itself. That is the purpose of those envelopes in the wooden boxes in the pews. This new box isn't intended to replace the donations you already make to the Center. It is intended to expand the range of our giving to the community outside our Center.

It has always bothered me that we as a synagogue do not regularly give tzedakah to the community. We have at times adopted individual causes; some years ago, we contributed substantial funds when the [Jewish Federation](#) was raising money for an ambulance to send to Israel. Our [Sunday School](#) children bring tzedakah weekly. When the box is full, each class (with the teacher's guidance) votes on where to make its donation. Now we have an opportunity to learn from our children's example – and to set an example for them as well - and donate regularly to causes beyond our own.

You could make the argument that we should be the recipient of our own tzedakah. We live in difficult economic times, after all. Despite the many needs in our small beloved congregation, those needs don't obviate the requirement for us to give to others who have less. Even a poor person is not exempt from the mitzvah of tzedakah, as this story (clipped ten years ago from a New York Times Metropolitan Diary by Enid Nemy) illustrates:

Nat Helfand was walking past Madison Square Garden recently when a homeless man, holding a cup for contributions, approached him. Mr. Helfand reached into his pocket, retrieved some change and put it into the cup. The homeless man then passed

a table with two large jars on it and a man exhorting passers-by to donate. “Just one penny to feed the homeless,” he intoned. “One penny can make a difference. Can you find it in your heart to give just one penny?” The homeless man reached into his cup, selected a penny, deposited it in the jar and continued on his way.

I have used this story in my classes to illustrate an important Jewish teaching about tzedakah: everyone is obligated to give no matter how much or how little you have.

When might you drop some money in that box? Your own creativity will answer this question. You could drop some money in on your way into Friday night services. One of our b’nai mitzvah tutors requires her students to give tzedakah before beginning the weekly Hebrew tutorial (she teaches that “we pay before we pray”). You can create your own occasions (and then let me know what they are – we can include your ideas in future issues of [our newsletter](#)). The idea is to make giving tzedakah a habit.

Once we have some funds, we will have the opportunity to decide where those funds should go. I look forward to those conversations.

Helen Mattson has been working on getting this box since she chaired the [Ritual Committee](#). It was her inspiration to turn to a former member and ask him to create it. We offer our thanks for its design to Ken Weiland, a former member now living in Connecticut. Ken also designed and made the tzedakah boxes (the ones that contain donation envelopes) on the sanctuary pews. We hope to find a time when he can join us for a service and we can officially dedicate his gift to us.

Rabbi Israel Salanter once said, “The material needs of my neighbor are my spiritual needs.” I can’t say it any better than that. May the mitzvah of tzedakah bring spiritual warmth to these cold winter days.

Rabbi Ellen J. Lewis