

## Pesach, Japan and the Global Village

“Let All who are Hungry Come and Eat”

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Many authorities have pointed out that Judaism believes that charity benefits the giver at least as much as the taker. By showing solidarity and respect for others created in the image of God, when a Jew gives *tzedekah* he is actualizing his human essence.

Maimonides points out that if we celebrate the holidays with our families but don't take care of the needy, holiday meals simply become an excuse to indulge our physical urges. By doing so, we only disgrace ourselves and the holiday. It is perhaps in this vein that a small curious phrase made its way into the beginnings of our haggadah recital, asking all who are hungry to eat with us. According to the great 18<sup>th</sup> century German rabbi, R. Yakov Emden, this call is directed specifically to gentiles in need. R. Manfred Lehmann goes even further by writing that we should make such an invitation to all men, even to those that hate us.

Symbolic as this statement might be, it is a most appropriate reminder of how we see the interplay between physical enjoyment and helping others. It tells us that a person who is not sensitive to others cannot truly know human pleasure, only animal pleasure.

Of course, a symbol is not meant to have intrinsic value. Rather, it is designed to elicit tangible action when needed. The small but important phrase we say at Pesach has helped create a valuable ethic. In fact, Jews have reason to be proud of our generally healthy response to others in need.

So far, so good. Then why does the recent catastrophe in Japan make our phrase at Pesach seem so empty? After all, Jews are still ready to help. Israel has sent aid with the same aplomb that it did not so long ago in Haiti. The problem with this help – and in this Israel is certainly no worse than any other international actor – is that it doesn't go beyond the symbolic. Sure, it responds to a real need, but making efforts to help the ill and homeless in Japan while doing almost nothing for others in similar situations around the world is of limited value. On the symbolic level it is commendable, but if it doesn't lead to more tangible action on behalf of others in distress, it fails to truly do the job.

In many countries less fortunate than Japan, there is no need for a natural disaster to bring about hunger and illness. Where is the human concern for those people and why is it that we are only cognizant of human suffering far away when we see a major catastrophe?

Perhaps the size of the need is so great that we are numbed by it, realizing that we will not do much for the global poor by simply cutting our own checks. That is true. But if we can't truly make a difference as individuals, we can make a difference by teaching the world what needs to be done. We live in a unique time when there is enough wealth and enough suitable communication and transportation to bring every human being out of abject poverty. Of course, such an accomplishment is beyond the abilities of any single people, especially a small one like the Jews. But the strength of the Jews has never been in numbers. Rather it is through the

example that they set, trying to teach others how to create a better world. But in what way are we trying to set that example today?

In the past, the Jewish ethic of helping the gentile has been primarily directed at those who live among us, formally defined by the category of *ger toshav* (resident alien). This made perfect sense when ethical responsibility was more localized. The standards of communication made it difficult to know who was in need outside of the local venue. And even if the Jewish community would have been able to find out who was in need further away, the lack of suitable transportation would have prohibited getting food, clothing and other necessities across large distances.

But things have changed and we need to meet the challenges of today. In this respect, the metaphor of the global village is very much to the point. The same way that we are aware of what happened in Japan and were able to do something about it, we are also aware of suffering in the third world and are able to do something about that as well. Today, we need to have a more global vision for tzedekah. If we want to continue to be an ethical vanguard, it is not enough to stand on our laurels.

In the meantime, until we come up with a suitable response, our Jewish moral intuition should make us lose sleep at night. It should also prevent us from having Pesach dinner without thinking about what "Let all who are hungry come and eat" means today.