

Ways of Giving

Lesson plan for family or congregational education

This lesson plan is part of a larger lesson entitled "Benevolent Societies and Tzedakah," which can be found at <http://jwa.org/teach/golearn/oct05/>.

- 1. Introduce the concepts of *tzedakah* and *gemilut chesed*.** Explain that *tzedakah*, from the root work *tzedek* (justice), is translated into English as "charity," but unlike the Christian word *caritas*, meaning love, *tzedakah* means "just," "right," or "righteous." And unlike charity, which is voluntarily given, in Judaism, giving *tzedakah* is a commandment. *Gemilut chesed*, acts of lovingkindness, is distinguished from *tzedakah*; while not commanded, *Gemilut chesed* is clearly encouraged by our tradition.
- 2. Read or describe the background text on Jewish women's benevolent societies.** Discuss: Why were these charitable and philanthropic organizations the first ventures of Jewish women out of the sphere of home and family?
- 3. Choose three participants to perform speeches** by Rebecca Gratz, Hannah Greenebaum Solomon, and a Representative of Chicago's South Side Ladies' Sewing Society (on next page). This can be done simply by "introducing" the three women and having each of them read their paragraph, or you could make it more elaborate (requiring more preparation) by having the participants read the women's biographies (available at www.jwa.org/exhibits/wov) beforehand and introduce themselves, wearing costumes, etc.
- 4. Divide participants into small groups.** Give each group the texts of the women's speeches and the traditional Jewish texts found on the next page. Ask groups to discuss:
 - What do our traditional texts teach us about engaging in *tzedakah* and *gemilut chesed*?

- If *tzedakah* is commanded, why do you think the rabbis said that *gemilut chesed* is “greater”?
- Why do the rabbis say that *tzedakah* collectors are like “the stars forever and ever”?
- In what ways do each of the three women we heard from today, and the organizations they work with, enact *tzedakah* and *gemilut chesed*?
- What are your favorite contemporary *tzedakah* organizations, and why?

Hannah Greenebaum Solomon, founder of the National Council of Jewish Women

Text: from “An Interview with Mrs. Hannah G. Solomon” (*The American Hebrew*, April 23, 1920)

The women of the council had vision and they had a definite plan of work, which looked far ahead of the generation in which they themselves were working. At our first triennial we had two aims: religious work and philanthropy. We hoped to establish Sabbath schools and to extend the study of Jewish literature and history. In philanthropy we wanted to introduce preventive work, making the family rather than the individual the object of our care. By these plans, you can readily understand how limited was our field of endeavor in 1896. Charity and religion – these two were the province of womankind. Women’s sphere is in the home, they told us. The last thirty years have been devoted to proof of our boast that women’s sphere is the whole wide world, without limit.

Rebecca Gratz, founder of the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society of Philadelphia

Text: excerpt from Gratz’s 1837 report on the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society

To the Jews, who have no country, and whose brethren come from every clime, it is incumbent wherever a few are collected together in a community, to form societies for the relief of the wayfarer, the poor, and the stranger; for in all their borders God has blessed them...

Representative from the South Side Ladies' Sewing Society Of Chicago

Text: excerpt from an 1895 report

We had in our midst such ardent and indefatigable workers that the success of the society was assured, philanthropically, financially and socially. The plan of making many of our poor Jewish women self-supporting is steadily increasing. Our disbursements [distributed gifts] have amounted to \$5,187.49, out of which we have supplied 400 families, numbering more than 1,850 persons, with bedding and clothing as well as boy's underwear and complete children's outfits.

Maimonides (Rambam), Mishneh Torah, Laws of Gifts to the Poor 10:7-14

The highest degree of charity – above which there is no higher – is he who strengthens the hand of his poor fellow Jew and gives him a gift or [an interest-free] loan or enters into a business partnership with the poor person.

Babylonian Talmud, Baba Batra 8b

The verse, "They who provide tzedakah for the many are like the stars forever and ever" (Dan 12:3), refers to collectors for tzedakah.

Babylonian Talmud, Sukkot 49b

Our masters taught: Gemilut chesed is greater than tzedakah in three ways. Tzedakah is done with one's money, while gemilut chesed may be done with one's money or one's person. Tzedakah is given only to the poor, while gemilut chesed may be given both to the poor and to the rich. Tzedakah is given only to the living, while gemilut chesed may be shown to both the living and the dead.

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