

CHARITY AND MORALITY

As each mason is informed on his initiation, Charity may justly be denominated the distinguishing characteristic of a mason's heart.

In the Jewish tradition charity, or Tzedaka, is one of the cornerstone of the faith. For thousands of years, great Jewish scholars and philosophers have deeply contemplated this virtue and published many articles about it.



One of the most thought-evoking publications on the subject was by the preeminent medieval Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides (shown in the picture on the left).

Maimonides, also known as Rambam, was born in Córdoba, Spain in 1135, and died in Egypt in 1204. He worked as a rabbi, physician, and philosopher in Morocco and Egypt (Wikipedia)

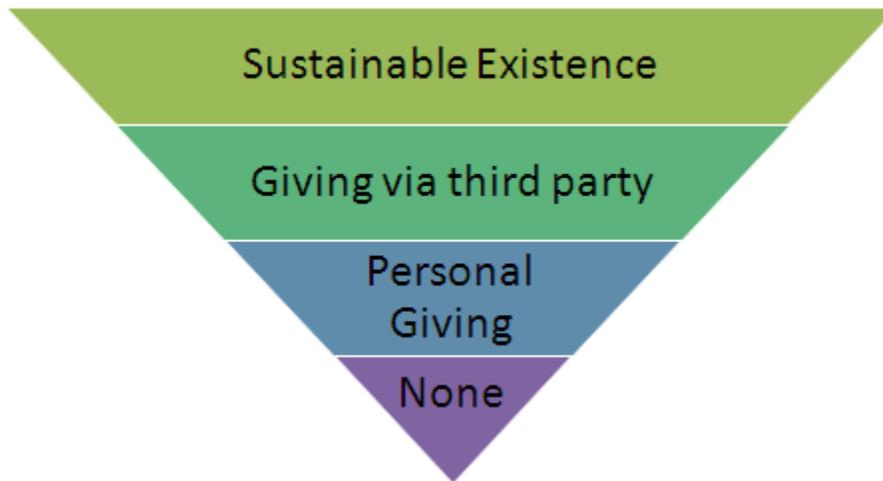
In his famous publication “Mishneh Torah”, Maimonides argues that not all acts of charity are equal. Maimonides then goes on to specify eight levels of charity, each one higher than the former ones.

Lisa Katz translated them beautifully to English, and following are Maimonides' eight levels of charity, from the least to the most honorable:

8. When donations are given grudgingly.
7. When one gives less than he should, but does so cheerfully.
6. When one gives directly to the poor upon being asked.
5. When one gives directly to the poor without being asked.
4. When the recipient is aware of the donor's identity, but the donor does not know the identity of the recipient.
3. When the donor is aware of the recipient's identity, but the recipient is unaware of the source.
2. When the donor and recipient are unknown to each other.

1. The highest form of charity is to help sustain a person before they become impoverished by offering a substantial gift in a dignified manner, or by extending a suitable loan, or by helping them find employment or establish themselves in business so as to make it unnecessary for them to become dependent on others.

I like to arrange Maimonides' eight levels of charity into four groups that form an inverted pyramid as shown below:

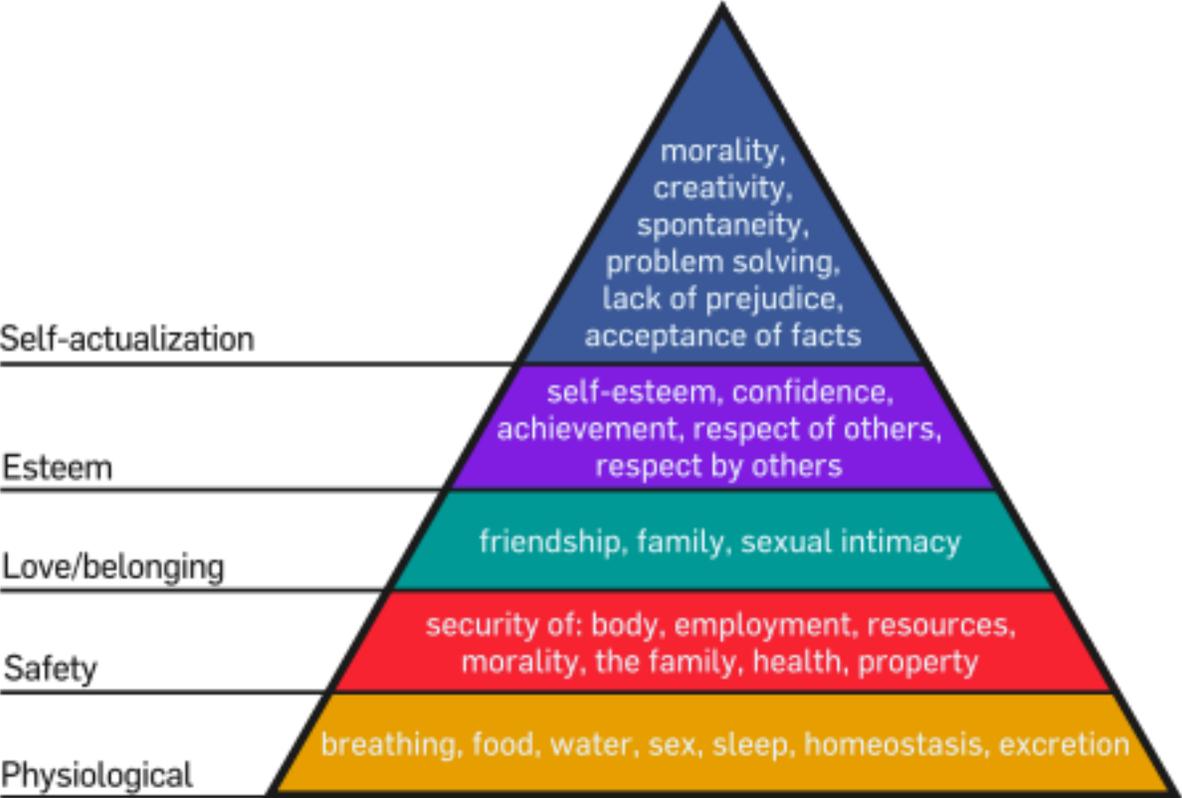


- The lowest group represents not giving at all or giving grudgingly
- The second lowest group represents levels seven to three and involves direct connection between the beneficiary and benefactor.
- The next group represents level 2, where both donor and recipient are unknown to each other, which is facilitated by a third party. This refers to activities taken by a charitable organization, like our own Lodge Benevolent Fund.
- The highest group represents level 1, where we provide sustainable existence to another person.

As we all know, Charity is about relieving the needs of another person. In order to better understand Charity, we need to better understand the human needs.

Abraham Maslow in his 1943 paper “A Theory of Human Motivation” proposed a theory about the human needs that has come to be known as “Maslow's hierarchy of needs”.

The following diagram from Wikipedia details Maslow’s hierarchy of needs in a form of a pyramid, where the lower needs need to be realized before the person may ascend to the next level. The hierarchy starts from the most basic needs (food and shelter) at the bottom all the way up to the highest of needs “Self-actualization” with Morality at the very top of the pyramid.



Contemplating Maimonides' eight levels of charity in conjunction with Maslow's hierarchy of needs one may note the following:

- Personal giving may be able to meet the basic physiological needs, but as it is reliant on one person, cannot meet the needs of safety.
- Charity via third party, being more stable as it draws from many sources, may meet the need for safety and also meet the need of belonging as the receivers of charity feels they are part of and are supported by their community.
- Providing sustainable existence meets all the needs of the person up to Self-actualization. This enables the individual to pursue its higher needs, and the highest of them all, namely morality.

When combining Maimonides' eight levels of charity inverted pyramid with Maslow's hierarchy of needs pyramid one may get the following image:



Masonry, being the most moral human institution, is looking to advance morality in all human beings. As the highest form of Charity (providing sustainable existence) enables its receiver to tend to his higher needs, of which the highest is morality, it is not surprising that:

the mason who is in possession of this virtue in its most ample sense, may justly be deemed to have arrived at the summit of masonry.

I would like to conclude with the following insight for your contemplation:

Q: What should you give a man who has nothing?

A: Dignity!

Q: What could you give a man who has everything?

A: Purpose!

By: Bro. Eyal Edelman, Kroy 676, G.R.C.

Published in Grand Lodge of Canada "Reflections" Volume 25 issue 4

Presented during Toronto Don Valley Education Event, April 2013

Reference:

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The Work, 2007