

# K1 – What's a Mitzvah?



Aims:

- 📖 Understand what a mitzvah is.
- 📖 Learn about the concept of "Greater is one who is commanded and does."
- 📖 Explore the connection between a mitzvah and a good deed

## What is a mitzvah?

Simply, a 'mitzvah' is a commandment. This doesn't necessarily mean that they are G-dly commands. In fact, the word 'mitzvah' is explicitly mentioned outside of the context of a Divine command, as Rivka says to Ya'akov: *"Now, my son, listen carefully as I command [m'tzava] you."* (Bereishit 27:8)

However, we all immediately associate the concept of a mitzvah being G-d-given. This idea is not radical. If we journey back to the beginning of human existence we find:

*The L-RD G-d took the man and placed him in the garden of Eden, to till it and tend it. And the L-RD G-d commanded the man, saying, "Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat; but as for the tree of knowledge of good and bad, you must not eat of it; for as soon as you eat of it, you shall die."* (Bereishit 2:15-17)

וַיִּקַּח ה' אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם וַיִּנְחָהוּ  
בְּגֵן־עֵדֶן לְעַבְדָּהּ וּלְשִׁמְרָהּ: וַיֹּצֵו ה' אֱלֹהִים  
אֶת־הָאָדָם לֵאמֹר מִכָּל־עֵץ־הַגֶּן אָכַל  
תֹּאכֵל: וּמֵעֵץ הַדַּעַת טוֹב וְרָע לֹא  
תֹאכַל מִמֶּנּוּ כִּי בַיּוֹם אֲכַלְךָ מִמֶּנּוּ מוֹת  
תָּמוּת: (בראשית ב:טו-יז)



Therefore, a mitzvah, as we generally understand it, is a commandment from Hashem. These commandments relate usually to actions – classic examples being Shabbat and Kashrut – however this is not always the case. Additionally, on account of mitzvot being commanded by Hashem, it's ingrained in our psyche that a mitzvah is an expression of ratzon Hashem - the will of Hashem (*Remember this term!!*).

### Point to ponder:

🗣️ Which mitzvot don't relate to actions? What do they relate to instead?

## "Greater is one who is commanded..."

Perhaps this understanding of mitzvot as a way of fulfilling ratzon Hashem can help us understand a perplexing statement recorded in the Gemara: "Rabbi Chanina says: Greater is one who is commanded [to do a mitzva] and performs [it] than one who is not commanded and performs [it]." (*Avoda Zara 3a*)

This seems highly counterintuitive – we tend to regard volunteers in a much better light than those who don't have a choice to do something or not. We're proud to be a tnuva built on volunteering. So how can we value doing something because you have to over giving up your time and doing something *you've* chosen to help?



Tosafot, the group of medieval commentators on the Gemara, explain "The explanation is that someone who is commanded must constantly struggle to overcome his own desires to fulfil the commandments of his Creator."

As Rabbi Tatz puts it:

*When you are commanded to act, you are immediately confronted by resistance – your lower self steps in and says, "Don't tell me what to do!" The ego, the "I," that deep root of the personality wishes to assert itself, refuses to be subdued. Therefore, in order to fulfill a command you must overcome this inner resistance ... However, when you act spontaneously there is no resistance to overcome and the action is easy."*

*(The Thinking Jewish Guide to Life pg. 105)*



If this is the case, then we can accept that Mitzvot are Divine, and therefore we can learn an infinite amount from every mitzvah and every element of every mitzvah, since they are a vehicle by which to fulfil G-d's will.

### Discussion Ideas:

- 📖 Does the idea of mitzvot being an expression of *ratzon Hashem* mean that they are beyond human comprehension?
- 📖 Or are there any mitzvot we can understand? What about Shabbat? Kashrut? Brachot?
- 📖 Does the fact that we do/don't understand the reason for mitzvot impact your performance of them or desire/yetzer hara to not perform them? (We still need to do them regardless though!!)

### Mitzvot = Good Deeds?

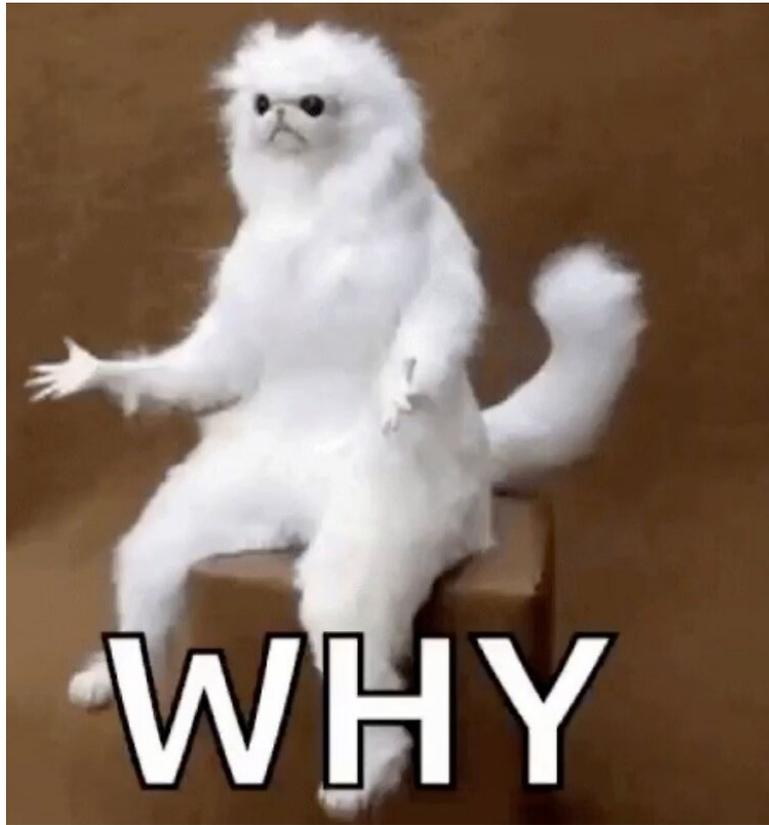
How often have you heard someone ask a favour and then say, "You'll be doing a mitzvah!?" Without getting into the discussion of whether this would actually be a fulfilment of the mitzvah of *v'ahavta l'reacha k'mocha*, how should we respond to these situations? We've discussed that mitzvot, as they are commonly referred to, are Divine commands. Is it therefore negative, or even heretical to associate G-d-given commands with someone asking you to help an old lady cross the road?

Rav Lichtenstein zt'l, the former Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Har Etzion (Gush), explains that "We must learn to avoid the notion that the two [being '*frum*' and being 'good'] are simply synonymous. They are not; one is included within the other." (*By His Light*) He continues to explain that this idea can be learnt from the passuk: "One thing G-d has spoken, two things I have heard." (Tehillim 62:12) We learn how to be 'good' by listening to that which G-d has spoken. This idea is the overall aim of this chomer and the chinuch part of this Machane – learning that we learn Middot – how to be 'good' – from Mitzvot.

### K1 Summary:

- 📖 Mitzvot are a way of fulfilling the *ratzon* of Hashem.
- 📖 Given this, we can learn plenty from each Mitzvah.
- 📖 Notably we can learn Middot (values) from Mitzvot.

## K2 – Ta'amei haMitzvot



### Aims:

-  **Learn** about the 'reason' for mitzvot according to Rambam, Rav Soloveitchik and Rav Hirsch.
-  **Understand** the difficulties in trying to discern Hashem's reason for giving us mitzvot.
-  **Appreciate** that mitzvot can teach us Middot.

## The 'reason' for Mitzvot according to Rambam:

Rambam provides a radical idea regarding the reason for mitzvot. He explains, that there are those who believe that there is no discernible reason for any of Hashem's mitzvot. This is because giving any human reason would prove that they are not G-dly in origin. If a human can understand them, how could they possibly be Divine? Rambam rejects this perspective, calling such people "weak-minded." He then proceeds to prove that the various mitzvot do, in fact, have humanly discernible reasons (and that this is not a cause for concern).

Rambam explains in Moreh Nevuchim, the Guide to the Perplexed:

*And it is stated "who shall hear all those chukkim, and say, surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people" (Devarim 4:6). – I have already explained that even every one of these "statutes" convinces all nations of the wisdom and understanding it includes. But if no reason could be found for these statutes, if they produced no advantage and removed no evil, why then should he who believes in them and follows them be wise, reasonable, and so excellent as to raise the admiration of all nations?*

ואמר "אשר ישמעון את כל החוקים האלה ואמרו רק עם חכם ונבון הגוי הגדול הזה" - כבר באר שאפילו ה'חוקים' כולם יורו אל כל הגוים שהם 'בחכמה ותבונה' ואם היה ענין שלא תודע לו סיבה ולא יביא תועלת ולא ידחה נזק - למה יאמר במאמינו או בעושהו שהוא 'חכם ונבון' וגדל המעלה ויפלאו מזה האומות?

Therefore, there must be a humanly discernible reason for mitzvot, otherwise how could we be an or l'goyim, a light unto the nations?

However, Rambam still acknowledges that human reasoning and logic are fallible, yet even without understanding the reason, we still must perform each and every mitzvah.

***And something for which you do not find a reason and you do not understand, do not view it lightly in your eyes... and do not consider it as you consider regular, worldly things. Come and see how stringent the Torah is***

וְדָבָר שֶׁלֹא יִמָּצָא לוֹ טַעַם וְלֹא יֵדָע לוֹ עֵלָה אֶל יְהִי קֵל בְּעֵינָיו... וְלֹא תִהְיֶה מַחְשְׁבָתוֹ בּוֹ כְּמַחְשְׁבָתוֹ בְּשָׂאֵר דְּבָרֵי הַחַל. בּוֹא וּרְאֵה כִּמָּה הַחֲמִירָה תּוֹרָה בְּמַעֲלָה... הֲרִי

*in regards to [a decree for which a reason is not clear like] meilah [the misuse of Temple property]... and as it says "keep all the [arbitrary] decrees..."*  
**And Chazal said to watch and guard and perform these [arbitrary] decrees just as the mishpatim.** And Mishpatim are those commandments for which their reason is revealed and the good they cause in the world is known, like the prohibition of stealing, murder, or the obligation of respecting one's mother and father. And the [arbitrary] decrees are the commandments for which the reasons are not known, and all korbanot are of this category of [arbitrary] decrees. As Chazal said, the entire world is contingent on the korbanot. **With the performance of [arbitrary] decrees and mishpatim one is worthy of the World to Come.** And the primacy of Torah is contingent on the [arbitrary] decrees. As it says "and keep the [arbitrary] decrees and mishpatim, for you shall do them and live by them." (Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Meilah 8:8)

נֶאֱמַר בַּתּוֹרָה (וַיִּקְרָא יִט-לז)  
 (וַיִּקְרָא כ-כב) "וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת כָּל  
 חֻקֵּי וְאֵת כָּל מִשְׁפָּטֵי וְעֲשִׂיתֶם  
 אֹתָם". אָמְרוּ חֻכְמִים לִתֵּן שְׁמִירָה  
 וְעֲשִׂיָה לְחֻקִּים כַּמִּשְׁפָּטִים...  
 וְהַמִּשְׁפָּטִים הֵן הַמִּצְוֹת שֶׁטַעֲמָן  
 גְּלוּי וְטוֹבַת עֲשִׂיתָן בְּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה  
 יְדוּעָה כְּגוֹן אֲסוּר גִּזְל וְשִׁפְיֻכוֹת  
 דְּמִים וְכַבּוּד אָב וְאָם. וְהַחֻקִּים הֵן  
 הַמִּצְוֹת שֶׁאֵין טַעֲמָן יְדוּעָה... וְכָל  
 הַקְּרִבָּנוֹת כָּלֵן מְכַלֵּל הַחֻקִּים הֵן.  
 אָמְרוּ חֻכְמִים שֶׁבְּשִׁבִיל עֲבוֹדַת  
 הַקְּרִבָּנוֹת הָעוֹלָם עוֹמֵד. שֶׁבְּעֲשִׂית  
 הַחֻקִּים וְהַמִּשְׁפָּטִים זוֹכִין הַיִּשְׂרָאֵלִים  
 לְחַיֵּי הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא. וְהַקְּדִימָה תּוֹרָה  
 צוּוּי עַל הַחֻקִּים. שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (וַיִּקְרָא  
 יח-ה) "וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת חֻקֵּי וְאֵת  
 מִשְׁפָּטֵי אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה אֹתָם הָאָדָם  
 וְחִי בָהֶם."

(משנה תורה, הלכות מעילה ח:ח)

Thus, even when he explains mitzvot in his Moreh Nevuchim, he is giving **a** reason not **the** reason.

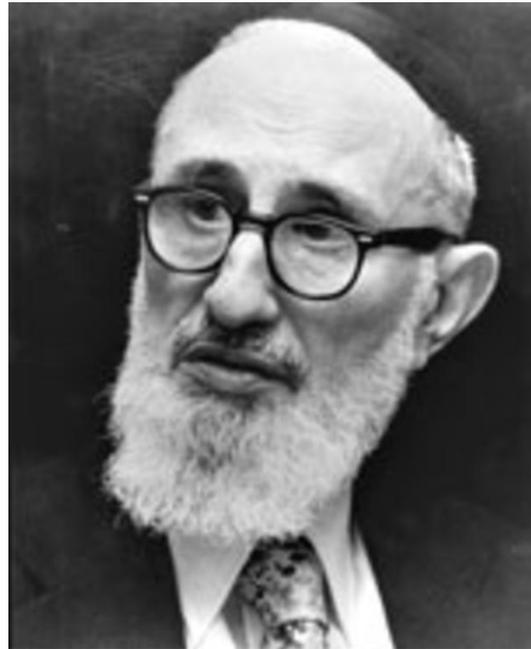
### The 'reason' for Mitzvot according to Rav Soloveitchik:

However, any level of rationalisation is naturally more complicated than it seems. There is a fundamental concern with trying to discern the reason for mitzvot. Rav Soloveitchik zt'l, the leading 20<sup>th</sup> century Jewish thinker, succinctly explains this issue: "If rationalisation is guided by the "how" question ... then it is detrimental to religious thought." We, as humans, naturally cannot even begin to rationalise the Divine.

**Point to ponder:**

- 📖 If we acknowledge that mitzvot are an expression of ratzon Hashem, then can we not get an insight into Hashem's reasons from His ratzon? Why is this not the case?

Rav Soloveitchik explains that we lose absolute objectivity and instead assign our values to try explain Hashem's values. *"For example, should we post the question: why did G-d forbid perjury? The intellectualist philosopher would promptly reply, "because it is contrary to the norm of truth." Thus, **he would explain a religious norm by an ethical precept, making religion the handmaid of ethics.**"*



Instead, Rav Soloveitchik suggests that we must bypass the 'why' question and instead ask 'what?' *We cannot qualify mitzvot, but rather quantify them, and by looking at the data of mitzvot (i.e. halacha) we can reverse-engineer a fundamental principal to learn from a mitzvah. We shouldn't ask למה, 'why?' but rather ל-מה, 'for what?'* It is for this reason that he translated 'ta'amei hamitzvot' as the 'taste of mitzvot' rather than the 'reason'.

**Point to ponder:**

- 📖 Why is it a problem for religion to be subservient to ethics?

**The 'reason' for Mitzvot according to Rav Hirsch:**

This idea is shared by Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch. Rav Hirsch was a pioneering Jewish thinker who founded the neo-Orthodox movement in the 19th century in Germany, emphatically makes this point. He asks, "What's the purpose of learning

about mitzvot if we can never hope to understand the reason for them?" He provides two answers. Firstly, it can help us best perform the mitzvot. Secondly, "to obtain a clearer insight into the meaning of the world and of our life in it." In

other words, mitzvot can teach us Middot. It is for this reason that when discussing this topic, Rav Hirsch did not refer to it as 'ta'amei hamitzvot', the reason for mitzvot but rather 'the spirit of mitzvot.'



The very act of thinking about mitzvot must enhance our mindset towards performing mitzvot. The result of this is that "In performing such commands we shall feel ourselves called upon to look for the relation in which the outward actions prescribed for us stands to the thought which is to be expressed, and equally to consider and ponder on this thought in all its scope and consequences."

*This is to say that mitzvot contain core ideas and values which we must think about and reflect upon.*

This concept will be explored throughout this chomer featuring the mitzvot of V'ahavta L'reacha K'mocha, Tzedakah and Lashon Hara.

### Point to ponder:

- 🔊 Can you think of any Middot (values) which you can learn from mitzvot?

### K2 Summary:

- 🔊 It is difficult for us as humans to discern Hashem's reasons for mitzvot.
- 🔊 Rambam - there must be a reason we can understand for mitzvot.
- 🔊 Rav Soloveitchik - We shouldn't ask למה, 'why?' but rather ל-מה, 'for what?'
- 🔊 Rav Hirsch - mitzvot contain core ideas and values which we must think about and reflect upon.

## K3 - V'ahavta L'reacha K'mocha

SCAN ME



### Aims:

-  **Learn** the source of this mitzvah.
-  **Understand** the importance and essence of this mitzvah.
-  **Know** how to act/ behave in fulfilment of this mitzvah.

## What is the source of v'ahavta l'reacha k'mocha?

This mitzvah appears at the end of a list of 27 consecutive mitzvot (according to Sefer haChinuch) which all relate to social welfare and interactions. After obligating us to leave a portion of crops for the poor – the mitzvot of pe'ah and leket among others – the Torah discusses honest dealings bein adam l'chavero, between people.

*"You shall not steal; you shall not deal deceitfully or falsely with one another. You shall not swear falsely by My name, thereby profaning the name of your G-d: I am Hashem. You shall not defraud your fellow. You shall not commit robbery. The wages of a worker shall not remain with you until morning. You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind. You shall fear your G-d: I am Hashem. You shall not render an unfair decision: do not favour the poor nor show deference to the rich; judge your kinsman fairly. Do not be a gossipmonger among your people. Do not stand aside while your fellow's blood is shed: I am Hashem. You shall not hate your brother in your heart. Reprimand your kinsman and do not bear a sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the members of your people. **Love your neighbour as yourself:** I am Hashem."* (Vayikra 19:11-16)

Therefore, we can see that the mitzvah of v'ahavta l'reacha k'mocha is the crowning social mitzvah, the umbrella-mitzvah bein adam l'chavero; and indeed its importance in Judaism cannot be overstated.

## What is the essence of v'ahavta l'reacha k'mocha?

The Talmud Bavli, in numerous places uses this concept as the source to give someone who has been sentenced to the death penalty a "good death," which Rashi explains to mean a quicker, and thus less painful death (Bava Kama 51a). Therefore, the Gemara seems to suggest the essence of this mitzvah is compassion.

Alternatively, and perhaps more positively, the Sefer haChinuch (published anonymously in Spain in the 13<sup>th</sup> century), explains that the root of this mitzvah is that by performing it, by loving your neighbour as yourself, then there will be peace among mankind.

Ibn Ezra, also commentating in Medieval Spain, explains, based on the conclusion of the passuk which teaches "Love your neighbour as yourself: I am Hashem," that the essence of this passuk is equality. By including the final three words, the passuk is, in effect telling us that this commandment is intrinsically linked to Hashem Who created everyone, and it is due to this that we should love our neighbours like ourselves.

### How important is v'ahavta l'reacha k'mocha?

Rabbi Akiva, the namesake of our beloved tnuva, famously stated (Sifra Kedoshim 4:12) about this mitzvah: "זה כלל גדול בתורה", "This is a critical principle in the Torah," since so many other mitzvot are dependent on this. Similarly, Hillel paraphrased this commandment in teaching: "What is hateful to you do not do to another; that is the entire Torah, and the rest is its interpretation. Go learn."

Moreover, we know the importance of mutual respect in contemporary society, and its prominence in ensuring a fair and just society. Indeed, perhaps this is the reasoning behind American political philosopher John Rawls' Veil of Ignorance theory. This theory suggests that the best way to create and build a fair, just and overall ideal society is to imagine yourself behind a veil to the extent that you are oblivious to your strengths and weaknesses, advantages and privileges. Then, when designing a society you are forced - by virtue of self-interest - to build it so that the poor and the rich are treated equally well, and thereby treating your neighbour as you would like to be treated.

However, Rabbi Sacks points out that the mitzvah of v'ahavta l'reacha k'mocha is far more reaching. It is not just treating your neighbour as yourself, but rather v'ahavta l'reacha k'mocha - **loving** your neighbour as yourself. We must elevate our care and feelings for each other to even greater heights.

Indeed, the Talmud Yerushalmi teaches: "One who is honoured by the disgrace of his fellow has no share in the world to come, but one who treats his fellow with love, peace and neighbourliness, seeks their benefit and is happy about their good, the passuk (Yishaya 49:3) states about him, 'Israel, about you will I be glorified.'" - Yerushalmi Chagiga 2:1

## How can we fulfil this mitzvah?

Rambam, in his halachic Mishnah Torah Hilchot De'ot 6:3, writes "one is obliged to speak in praise of his neighbour, and to be considerate of his money, as he is considerate of his own money, or desires to preserve his own honour."

Similarly, the Kitzur Shulchan Aruch, written by Rabbi Shlomo Ganzfried and published in 5624 (1864), explains that "you should relate [their] virtues and treat [their] property with [the same] concern as you have for your own property, or for your own honour."

Therefore, we can see the all-encompassing nature of this mitzvah – it is both financial, and personal – and therefore there are numerous ways in which we can demonstrate our love for each other like for ourselves and thereby fulfil this mitzvah.

Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg, writing in Germany in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, offers, in his commentary on the Torah HaKtav V'Hakabbalah, some realistic ways to fulfil this mitzvah:

1. Your affection for others should be real, not feigned.
2. Always treat others with respect.
3. Always seek the best for them.
4. Join in their pain.
5. Greet them with friendliness.
6. Give them the benefit of the doubt.
7. Assist them physically, even in matters that are not very difficult.
8. Be ready to assist with small or moderate loans and gifts.
9. Do not consider yourself better than them.

### K3 Summary:

- 📖 V'ahavta L'reacha k'mocha teaches compassion, the importance of peace between people, and equality.
- 📖 V'ahavta L'reacha k'mocha is super important!!
- 📖 Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg gives 9 steps how to fulfil this mitzvah.

## K4 – Tzedakah



**SPENDING  
MONEY  
ON MYSELF**



**GIVING  
TO CHARITY**

### Aims:

-  **Learn** the source of the mitzvah of tzedakah.
-  **Understand** the essence and importance of tzedakah.
-  **Know** how to fulfil this mitzvah.

## What is the source of the mitzvah of tzedakah?

The mitzvah of tzedakah is found in a series of passukim stressing the importance of being open-handed and gracious to one another:

*"If, however, there is a needy person among you, one of your kinsmen in any of your settlements in the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kinsman. Rather, **you must open your hand and lend him sufficient for whatever he needs.** Beware lest you harbor the base thought, "The seventh year, the year of remission, is approaching," so that you are mean to your needy kinsman and give him nothing. He will cry out to the LORD against you, and you will incur guilt. Give to him readily and have no regrets when you do so, for in return the LORD your God will bless you in all your efforts and in all your undertakings. For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land, which is why I command you: **open your hand to the poor and needy kinsman in your land.**" (Devarim 15:7-11)*



We may think that the mitzvah of tzedakah is only giving money to charity or poor people, as the passuk states "you must open your hand and lend him." However, Rambam explicitly quotes the conclusion of the passuk in outlining the commandment as being far greater than simply giving money:

*"One is commanded to give to a poor person according to what he lacks. If he has no clothes, they clothe him. If he has no utensils for a house, they buy [them] for him. If he does not have a wife, they arrange a marriage for him. If [the poor person] is a woman, they arrange a husband for marriage for her. Even if it was the custom of [a person who was rich but is now] a poor person to ride on a horse with a servant running in front of him, and this is a person who fell from his station, they buy him a horse to ride upon and a servant to run in front of him, as it is said, (Devarim 15:8) "Sufficient for whatever he needs". You are commanded to fill whatever he lacks, but you are not commanded to make him wealthy." (Rambam Mishnah Torah Hilchot Matanot Ani'im (Gifts to the poor) 7:3)*

Therefore, we can see that even from its most fundamental source, the mitzvah of tzedakah is more than just putting money in a tzedakah box – it also involves human interaction, compassion, and empathy.

### Okay, Tzedakah is a good thing to do, but is it a significant mitzvah?

The short answer is yes. Emphatically yes. Rav Yosef Karo, author of the Shulchan Aruch – the foremost halachic text, written in Tzfat in the 1500s – explains the extreme significance of this mitzvah:

*And he who closes his eyes to [the needs of the poor] is called wicked and is regarded as if he worships idols. Whosoever has compassion on the poor, haKadosh Baruch Hu (the Holy One, blessed be He), has compassion on him. Charity prevents harsh decrees from Heaven.” (Yoreh De’ah 250:1-3)*

Rema, Rav Moses Isserles who commented on the Shulchan Aruch, explains this as follows: *“Let man realize that he himself is forever seeking sustenance at the hand of haKadosh Baruch Hu, and just as haKadosh Baruch Hu answers his prayer, so should he answer the prayer of the poor. Let him also realize that the world is a revolving sphere, and that eventually he or his son or his grandson may be reduced to such circumstances.”*

#### Point to Ponder:

📖 Is giving to the poor with an ulterior motive compassionate?

### What can we learn from the mitzvah of tzedakah? What is the essence of the mitzvah of tzedakah?

The Shulchan Aruch states: *“Charity should be given with a friendly countenance, with joy, and with a good heart; the giver should, sympathize with the poor man, and should speak words of comfort to him. If he gives with a displeased countenance, he loses his reward.” (Yoreh De’ah 249:3)*

This suggests that it is not enough to just donate money, it must be done with joy and respect. Perhaps this hints to the essence of the mitzvah of tzedakah. Maybe tzedakah can teach us altruism and selflessness. Indeed, this is the opinion of Me’iri, a 13<sup>th</sup> century commentator. He explains that the mitzvah of tzedakah accustoms a person to copy this character (Beit haBechira, Shabbat 156a).

Additionally, Rambam maintains a similar idea: *"all that is contained in the Torah concerning the giving of ma'aserot (tithes), leket (the gleanings of the harvest), shich'cha (the forgotten sheaves)... the giving of charity according to the wants of the needy one, all these approach the extreme of lavishness to be practised in order that we may depart far from its opposite, stinginess, and thus, nearing the extreme of excessive lavishness, there may become instilled in us the quality of generosity"* (Shemona Perakim 4). He explains that the mitzvah of tzedakah forces people to become accustomed to giving.



### Sounds great! How do I fulfil this mitzvah?

Famously, Rambam (*Hilchot Matanot Ani'im 10:7-14*) lists eight levels of giving tzedakah, in ascending order of importance:

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

#### Point to Ponder:

- 🗣️ Do any of these surprise you? Do you think Rambam specifically tried to ensure that the recipient's dignity would be upheld?

Whilst tzedakah is fundamentally financial, and therefore perhaps not so relevant to the chanichim at this age and stage, they can still fulfil this mitzvah in some manner. Additionally, we can learn to be more altruistic and learn to become more giving through this important mitzvah.

### **K4 Summary:**

- 📖 Tzedakah teaches us altruism and to be more giving.
- 📖 Tzedakah k'mocha is super important!!
- 📖 Rambam lists eight levels of fulfilling the mitzvah of tzedakah.

## K5 – Lashon Hara



### Aims:

-  **Learn** about the source of the mitzvah of Lashon Hara.
-  **Understand** the essence of this mitzvah and what this teaches us.
-  **Discover** how we can fulfil this mitzvah.

## What is the source of the mitzvah of Lashon Hara?

The Torah commands us, *"You shall not go out 'rachil' among your people, don't stand by the blood off your fellow, I am Hashem."* (Vayikra 19:16) Rashi explains that "rachil" means to gossip, and further comments that the word "rachil" is related to the word "ragel", meaning "spy," as in the case of someone who "spied treacherously so as to say evil about me." Rambam codifies this as halacha, writing "He who spies on [i.e. gossips about] his friend violates a negative commandment." (Mishneh Torah, Hilchot De'ot 7:1)

Additionally, there is a further prohibition against listening to Lashon Hara. The Torah in Sefer Shemot explicitly states: *"You shall not listen to lies"* (Shemot 23:1) The Chafetz Chaim, explains that: *"It is prohibited by the Torah to accept and believe lashon hara. ... It is also forbidden to intentionally listen to lashon hara even if one has no intention of believing it. However, there is a difference between listening versus believing lashon hara."*

### Point to Ponder:

🗣️ What's so bad about merely listening to Lashon Hara?



He continues to explain that, *"Listening to lashon hara is forbidden if the information does not pertain to him. However, if the information being said might pertain to him in the future, it is permitted to listen in order to be prepared and protect himself [from damage or harm]. It is permitted because his intent is not to hear the derogatory information about the person, but rather to protect himself from harm. However, it is forbidden under all circumstances to believe the lashon hara and decide in your heart that the information is true."* (Sefer Chofetz Chaim, Hilchot Lashon Hara 6:1-2)

## Learning from Lashon Hara #1 – The Power of Speech:

This first thing that we can learn from the prohibition against speaking and listening to Lashon Hara is the power of speech. All social interaction is built on speech. Non-verbal or (where appropriate) physical communication can only ever be supplements to the verbal relationships we have with each other. This is true of our relationships with our parents, our friends, and our Chanichim, but also with complete strangers. Consider, for example, the power of a political speech to rouse a whole nation to violence or peacefulness.



This potential for good or harm in speech was picked up on in Tanach where it says, *"Death and life are in the hands of the tongue"* (Mishlei 18:21).

While this can clearly be seen as true in a literal sense (e.g. when a judge/army general/medieval king issues a death sentence), it can also be figurative. Through the way we speak we can become truly "living" or, alternatively, "dead," and cause the same for others. The Talmud (Archin 15b) explains that negative speech is worse than a sword – as it kills many people at once and even over great distances.

### Point to Ponder:

🗣️ How can speaking about someone make them "truly live"?

## Learning from Lashon Hara #2 – Respecting Others:

Additionally, Rav Hirsch points out that Lashon Hara is about respecting other people, specifically their honour. He explains, *"The image of a person as it appears in others' minds is called his honour. This image determines the others' attitude towards him and impression of him ... this image determines the sentiments, the respect and love, which one has towards a person and ... there is nothing more"*



*comforting and rewarding for a man than the respect and love which his fellow-men give him." By virtue of mutual honour, the greatest goal – peace – is realised.*

How terrible, therefore is Lashon Hara, which cuts through a person's honour and impression to others! It dispels any peace and goodwill between people and overall leads to a hostile environment for everyone.

#### Point to Ponder:

- 🗨️ Why are whistle-blowers described as brave, yet the term 'snake' is an insult?

#### How can I fulfil the mitzvah of not speaking Lashon Hara?

There are five categories of prohibited speech, which all come under the banner of what we call 'Lashon Hara.'

The first is Rechilut. Rav Yosef Karo, author of the Shulchan Aruch explains, "One who "peddles gossip" [rechilut, Vayikra 19:16] refers to a person who says, "So-and-so said such-and-such about you", or "So-and-so did the following to you ..." even though the information is not necessarily intrinsically negative [but can nevertheless provoke arguments between parties] ... Since he carries the information around from one person to another, he is called a "peddler" [a traveling salesman of gossip]." (Kesef Mishneh, Hilchot De'ot 7:1)

Secondly, there is Lashon Hara as its literal definition: 'bad speech'. Rambam writes, "This refers to someone who speaks in a derogatory manner about someone else – even if what he says is true ...Someone who speaks lashon hara

will say negative and derogatory things like, "So-and-so did the following ..." or "So-and-so's parents did the following ..." or "I heard the following about So-and-so ..." (Mishneh Torah, Hilchot De'ot 7:2). Additionally, he explains the prohibition of harmful speech: *"Lashon hara also consists of information that, if publicized, could cause physical, financial or emotional harm (it also includes causing a person emotional pain or giving him a fright)."*



The third category is Motzei Shem Ra. This is *"Someone who speaks derogatory or harmful information about someone that is untrue – he is called a slanderer (motzei shem ra)."* (Mishneh Torah, Hilchot De'ot 7:2)

Fourth is Ona'at Devarim, which are words which cause pain. This is in stark



contrast to the common saying that "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." Rambam codifies this prohibition: *"We are instructed not to cause emotional distress to each other with our words [ona'at devarim]. This includes statements that cause another person pain, anger, or embarrassment... The source in the*

*Torah is, "Do not aggrieve your fellow, and you shall fear your God" [Vayikra 25:17]. The Talmud tells us that the verse is referring to causing emotional distress with our words [ona'at devarim]."* This includes insulting comments, hurtful nicknames and comments reminding people of their past misdeeds or embarrassing actions.

Finally, we have Avak Lashon Hara – speech bordering on Lashon Hara. Rambam writes: *"There are certain things that, although they are not actual lashon hara, are considered "avak lashon hara," literally "dust of lashon hara," or something close to the actual transgression. Some examples of avak lashon hara are: "Who would have thought that so-and-so would turn out like he is today?" [Implying that in the past he had a negative reputation.] Or, "Let's not talk about So-and-so. I don't want to say what happened with him." [Implying that there is something wrong with the subject]. Speaking positively of someone in the presence of his enemies, for this will surely cause them to start speaking negatively about the subject. Speaking lashon hara without malice, rather as a joke or light heartedly. Similarly, one who feigns innocence, as*

*though he were not aware of the fact that he is speaking lashon hara." (Mishneh Torah, Hilchot De'ot 7:4)*

### **K5 Summary:**

- 🔊 The prohibition of Lashon Hara can teach us the power of speech, importance of respecting others.
- 🔊 This negative mitzvah is one of the most important in our day and age.
- 🔊 There are five categories of Lashon Hara.