



Purim Gifts to the Poor By Rabbi David Silverberg

Toward the end of Maimonides' presentation of the laws regarding Purim (Hilkhos Megila 2:17), he writes:

It is preferable for a person to increase his gifts to the poor than to increase his meal and sending packages to his friends. For there is no greater and more exalted joy than bringing joy to the hearts of the needy, orphans, widows and foreigners – for one who brings joy to the hearts of these downtrodden people resembles the *Shekhina* [Divine Presence], as it says [about the Almighty], “to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the depressed” (Yeshayahu 57:15).

Maimonides here establishes a clear hierarchy with regard to the various obligations that apply on Purim. Namely, priority should be given to the *mitzva* of *matanot la-eyyonim* – gifts to the poor – rather than the Purim meal and *mishlo'ach manot* (sending food packages to one's friends). People with a limited budget for Purim expenses should limit their spending on *mishlo'ach manot* and the Purim meal, in favor of donating money to charity, which must take precedence.

Unfortunately, few people follow Maimonides' admonition to prioritize *matanot la-eyyonim*. It is all too common for people to spend large sums of money for a lavish Purim meal and to send expensive *mishlo'ach manot* packages to scores of friends, while allocating much smaller amounts for charity. Quite possibly, Maimonides observed this practice among the Jews of his time, and for this reason emphasized so strongly the importance of giving priority to *matanot la-eyyonim*.

It is well worth noting the reason Maimonides gives for this priority scale. Interestingly, he does not write that the value of charity supersedes that of the Purim celebration, that when these two values clash, precedence is given to helping the poor. Rather, Maimonides writes that giving charity is the highest and loftiest form of celebration. Charity doesn't override the Purim festivities; it is the greatest form of Purim festivity. As Maimonides writes, “For there is no greater and more exalted joy than bringing joy to the hearts of the needy.” The highest level of Purim celebration is to assist those in need of assistance. The reason, as Maimonides proceeds to explain, is because one thereby “resembles the *Shekhina*.” If we wish to celebrate the deliverance God granted our ancestors in Persia at the highest level, then we should follow His example of compassion and loving kindness, and lend a hand to the underprivileged.

Maimonides' comments here bring to mind his more famous remarks in the context of the celebration of *Yom Tov*:

And when a person eats and drinks, he is obligated to feed and give drink to the foreigner, orphans, widows and other despondent, poor people. But one who locks the doors of his yard and eats and drinks with his children and wife, without feeding and giving drink to the poor and the downtrodden – this is not the joy of a *mitzva*, but rather the joy of his belly...
(Hilkhhot Yom Tov 6:18)

Once again, Maimonides emphasizes the importance of charity in the context of *simcha* – religious festivity. In his view, the obligation of *simchat yom tov* (rejoicing on the festivals) requires not only personal enjoyment, but also sharing with the underprivileged. This is the greatest form of joy and celebration – doing what we can to “resemble the *Shekhina*” by bringing joy to those who have all but forgotten how to rejoice.