

Should We Give Money to Beggars on the Street?
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Happy Thanksgiving Week! It's the week that keeps on expanding.

Thursday, of course, was Thanksgiving.

Friday was Black Friday.

Today, Saturday, is...Shabbat! As well as Small Business Saturday.

Sunday is...the Sunday after Thanksgiving. Also, travel day.

Monday is Cyber Monday.

And Tuesday is now Giving Tuesday. For the last seven years, it's been a day when many charities and non-profits make a big push for donations.

'Tis the season for giving charity, so today I want to speak about giving Tzedakah thoughtfully. Specifically a question I've been wondering about for years: Should we give money to beggars on the streets?

Before I answer, let me share a little of my own experience. I grew up in a nice suburb in Cincinnati. The rare occasion when I saw destitute people was downtown upon leaving a baseball game. I quickly learned to not look at them, as that made me uncomfortable; *nobody* else looked at them either.

It took me years and much effort to begin to even see poor and homeless people. This is not so easy, because the instinct is to look ahead down the sidewalk, not to the sides. When I lived in New York I noticed that even when a homeless person is walking barefoot in a subway car and they are literally right in front, *people instinctively look away* to the side. I understand that looking is uncomfortable. But we can do better.

This issue is quite complicated. As just one example, not all homeless people are beggars nor are all beggars homeless.

I honestly feel conflicted about giving a dollar to someone on the street.

On the one hand, I want to give. My heart breaks to see a human being without shelter, without food, without clean, warm clothes. The Torah teaches again and again to give generously to the poor, to see the image of G-d in every single person, to put ourselves in the other's shoes, even if they have none. These thoughts and others move us to open our wallets.

On the other hand, studies show that most - but not all - homeless people are dependent on drugs or alcohol and there's a real risk our dollars would go toward that. And there's simply so much we don't know about these people. These ideas and others move us to keep our wallets in our pockets.

So what are we to do?

As usual, our Jewish tradition has much guidance to share.

I begin with a well-known teaching from Maimonides - the Rambam - his famous ladder of gifts. It makes clear that in addition to the gift itself, maintaining the poor's dignity is a central consideration. From least virtuous to the most, here are his eight levels of giving.

1. Giving, but doing so begrudgingly.
2. Giving less than one should, but doing so with kindness.
3. Giving an appropriate amount, with kindness, after the person makes the request.
4. Giving an appropriate amount, with kindness, before the person makes the request.
5. Giving an appropriate amount, with kindness, and in a way that the donor doesn't know who they're giving to.
6. Giving an appropriate amount, with kindness, and in a way the recipient doesn't know who they're receiving from.
7. Giving an appropriate amount, with kindness, and in a way that neither the donor nor recipient knows the other's identity.
8. Finally, the highest form is to do something that allows the recipient to support themselves. Not a handout, but a loan or a job. It's teaching a person to fish rather than giving them a fish. (Mishnah Torah: Hilchot Mat'not Aniyim 10:7-14)

Here's the big picture: First, the recipient's dignity is paramount. What we give matters, as does how we give. We must look after their spirit as well as their body. Second, there is a range of appropriate responses, not just one.

I want to share a little more about my experiences, where I saw some of this play out. I went to seminary at JTS in Manhattan where beggars routinely sit on street stoops and subway stations. I felt moved by my growing commitment to Torah to do something. I began giving a dollar to some people. I also began keeping some snack bars in my backpack, which I would hand out if I had. Frequently, with the Rambam in mind, I began to ask the person what their name was, look them in the eye, and say, "Have a good day" with their name. The looks in their eyes when I said these few words was always full of surprise...and gratitude. Then they would always say something as I left. I'll share that at the end.

Based on my experiences and an excellent essay by Rabbi Elliot Dorff called "Giving Aid to Individuals," here is my own ladder of giving in the case of beggars on the street. This takes into consideration the dignity of people begging for money along with the uncertainty that comes with not knowing how they spend their dollars.

1. One can walk by a person, make eye contact, smile or nod, and say “Have a good day.” Melinda Strauss, Intake Coordinator of the Ark, says eye contact and smiles go so far. They don’t cost a dime, they take a moment, and they are oxygen for humanity.
2. If a person asks for money, stop to politely say, “Sorry, I don’t have cash on me. Have a great day.” With a smile.
3. One can give cash with a smile, though it’s best to give gifts that cannot be misused or abused. Recall there’s a real possibility that the beggar in front of us may actually use the dollar for food.
4. One can keep some food in their car or backpack and share it with the needy person, along with a smile and “Have a good day.” If one doesn’t have food on them, they can offer to buy a cup of coffee or sandwich if food is nearby. Asking for their name goes far too. Gloves or socks in the winter can also be kept in a car or backpack.
5. Ask the person, “What can I do to help you?” I spoke with Keith Freeman, Community Organizer for the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, and this was his first suggestion. Speaking from personal experience, he reminded me that people are different and have different needs. We shouldn’t assume what they need. Like us, they really value being heard even if we can’t provide the largest real needs, like a job.
6. Volunteer at a soup kitchen or homeless shelter. Every week the Thursday Kol Beth El Weekly email lists slots for our families to help out at JUF’s Uptown Cafe. This amazing organization serves hot meals in a restaurant-style setting, as it provides both food and dignity to people who need.
7. This next step is what I recommend for most of us. Donate to a charity that helps to combat hunger and/or homelessness. These agencies are best equipped to determine who really needs what help, and deliver it. They also preserve anonymity, which Maimonides encourages. Even if we don’t give beggars a dollar on the street, we can all help them by supporting a foundation that provides real assistance.
8. Refer people asking for money to find offices of organizations that deal with their specific needs, like shelters. This step is ideal because it focuses on the long term. Though many of us aren’t aware of these offices, we do have smartphones that can help.

We can’t all do everything, but everyone can do something. Consider how you can elevate their dignity when possible, even with a smile. Decide how you think it’s best to help. I acknowledge that we don’t want our dollars to be misused. But that shouldn’t deter us from helping out in a different way, like giving to a related charity.

Do you know what most beggars said to me after I gave them a dollar or a snack? In New York and Chicago and elsewhere, they say the same thing. “G-d bless.”

There's a verse from Isaiah, in the Haftorah of Yom Kippur morning. It says, "For thus said the One who high aloft forever dwells, whose name is holy: I dwell on high, in holiness; yet with the contrite and the lowly in spirit" (Isaiah 57:15)

G-d is both in the highest places and in the lowest. G-d is here today, when we are dressed in our *finest* clothes. And G-d is with the poor and homeless today, who are dressed in their *only* clothes. It's prophetic when a poor person says "G-d bless" when we give Tzedakah. They remind us that G-d is in the lowest places too.

Shabbat shalom.