

Philanthropy with a soul – Opinion

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Philanthropy means giving unselfishly, without concerning ourselves with all kinds of considerations that would deprive the act of its soul.



Philanthropy is, first and foremost, an act of giving motivated by our sense of care and responsibility for our fellow human beings and by our concern for the destitute, whether they need food, clothes, education, or meaning. It is a moral gesture of wealth redistribution in the context of a global economy that constantly seeks to erode social regulations and protections. Philanthropy means giving unselfishly, without concerning ourselves with all kinds of considerations that would deprive the act of its soul. Instead, by devoting ourselves to a lofty cause, we give meaning to life and to the world, and receive meaning in return.

Philanthropy becomes a moral act when the giver perceives their giving as a commandment and duty. With Levinas' words in mind, we

can say that it is not man who gives to men, but God. A gift made by one individual to another is, in fact, a gift from God—or, in Hebrew, *matan el*. This idea might seem pretentious, but it is essential for maintaining our humility and compassion. It can help prevent philanthropists from becoming patronizing and from sermonizing and forestall the humanitarian neo-colonialism practiced by many major foundations today.

Charity is a corrective commandment which the Jewish people have always striven to fulfill in an honorable manner.

Regrettably, the prominence of this practice in our collective heritage has proved damaging in the context of Israeli national sovereignty. The State of Israel still carries in its DNA the culture of the *halukka*, the organized collection and distribution of funds for Jews in the Holy Land, which supported residents of Jerusalem and other cities for many generations. In turn, the *halukka* was replaced by the generosity of Baron De Rothschild, “the well-known benefactor” and father of the pre-state Zionist Yishuv. After 1948, Israel demanded and received reparations from Germany, and later developed a dependency on American generosity, to the tune of several billion dollars a year.

Most damagingly, Israel has allowed Jewish philanthropic foundations to take over many of the functions and responsibilities of the state itself, undermining its very sovereignty. This large-scale involvement of foreign philanthropy (at the level of several hundred million dollars a year) corrupts public morality by absolving the government from its duty to confront social, educational, and cultural problems. Furthermore, it enriches a tiny stratum of activists who control the flow of funds and tend to behave as unbearable “philanthropic colonialists.”

Many of these donors are motivated by a true love for the State of Israel. They wholeheartedly believe that they are contributing to the development of the country, helping the needy, and advancing *tikkun olam*, the Reparation of the World, which requires justice and charity. However, they are mostly unaware of the negative implications of their actions. Hannah Arendt underlined the risk of mutual hatred between donors and their beneficiaries: On the one hand, the donors enjoy the honors bestowed on them, and the power, real or imaginary, that their money buys them, while simultaneously hating the beneficiaries who are unable to extricate themselves from their backwardness. On the

other hand, the beneficiaries flatter the donors while at the same time hating them in proportion to their own dependence on them. In this way, philanthropy can easily deteriorate into “philanthropic colonialism.”

As against this, I wish to argue for the practice of giving without expecting anything in return, out of a duty of “charity and justice,” in the words of Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz. This is the form of spiritual philanthropy that we champion at the Matanel Foundation—one that serves not only people’s physical needs, but also their search for meaning in their life, be it religious or philosophical. All of us at Matanel seek to communicate these ideals not only to our philanthropic partners, but also to our beneficiaries, who, in turn, will hopefully become philanthropists themselves when their situation changes for the better. In this way, we aim to remind ourselves, and all our Jewish brothers and sisters, that we are simply one link in a long chain of giving, in the age-old tradition of *tzedakah*.

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