

Distinctions among Three Similar Concepts

קהילה • גמילות חסד • צדקה

Tzedakah, Gemilut Chesed, and Kehillah

THE CONCEPTS BEHIND the Jewish value terms *tzedakah*, *gemilut chesed*, and *kehillah* share at least three aspects: (1) They relate to monetary donations; (2) those donations are often made to a not-for-profit agency and may be tax deductible under U.S. law; and (3) their meanings are not easily translated. As a result of these similarities, many Jews confuse these values with each other.

But Judaism offers us three separate terms for good reason. What follows is my re-statement of the nonsystematic discussions found in traditional rabbinic sources.

- TZEDAKAH (“entitlement”) presumes that individuals deserve help to meet basic human needs, in ten areas: food, shelter, clothing, health care, starting a new home (newlyweds), traveler’s aid, ransom from captivity, burial, and education.
- GEMILUT CHESED (“conveyed love”) is an act of kindness to another person—whether that person be poor or rich, living or dead.
- KEHILLAH (“community”) refers to acts or monetary contributions that helps the community function well.

Of the three values, *kehillah* is the least well known. That’s because it used to be a given. As recently as two hundred years ago, all of us Jews paid our taxes directly to our local Jewish government; and those revenues maintained the community’s infrastructure. But in the modern world, Jews no longer live in self-governing Jewish communities, and so our communities must function on voluntary contributions.

In today’s setting, *kehillah* deserves mention as a value in its own right. General donations to the Taos Jewish Center (TJC), for example, come under the category of *kehillah*, because such donations maintain a vital communal institution.

In practice, when householders budget their expenses, Jewish tradition implies that we set aside funds both for *tzedakah* and for *kehillah*, because each category is essential in its own way. Likewise, there should be two *pushkes* (Yiddish for “charity boxes”) near the Sabbath candlesticks, not just one.

For its part, *gemilut chesed* only sometimes involves an expenditure of funds. Doing an errand for someone who is sick is *gemilut chesed*, though no money may change hands. And giving a meal to a homeless person is both *tzedakah* and *gemilut chesed* when it is done graciously, with a smile.

To further clarify the distinctions among these three Jewish values, let me close with three related examples, all having to do with physical disability:

- When you assist an individual with disabilities to attend a TJC function, that is *gemilut chesed*;
- When you improve overall access to TJC events for persons with disabilities, that is *kehillah*; and
- When you donate money for a poor person with disabilities to get proper health care, that is *tzedakah*.