

Matanos La'evyonim

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Megillas Esther teaches that one of the mitzvos established by Mordechai and Esther was “matanos la’evyonim,” giving gifts to the poor. Since the megillah states one should give gifts “La’evyonim,” which is plural, we derive that one must give gifts to at least two poor people (Gemara Megillah 7b).

WHAT IS THE MINIMUM GIFT TO FULFILL THE MITZVAH?

There are several opinions regarding the minimum gift needed to fulfill the mitzvah. The Maharasha contends that one must give each person an amount significant enough to be respectable (Chiddushei Agados, Megillah 7a s.v. shadar). Some contemporary poskim rule this way.

Zera Yaakov (Shu”t #11) contends that it is sufficient if the poor person could purchase a minimum meal with the gift, which he defines as bread the size of three eggs (quoted in Pischei Teshuvah 694:1). Thus according to this opinion, one fulfills matanos la’evyonim if one gives three slices of bread to each of two poor people (or enough money for each to purchase three slices of bread).

Ritva contends that one is required to give only the value of a prutah, a copper coin worth only a few cents (Ritva, Megillah 7b; Menoras HaMaor; Shu”t Maharil #56). Mishnah Berurah (694:2) rules this way and one can certainly follow this approach.

HOW MUCH SHOULD ONE STRIVE TO GIVE?

The above amounts are indeed extremely paltry matanos la’evyonim and only define the minimum amount to fulfill the mitzvah. There are two other rules that are important:

Firstly, one should give money to every person who asks for a tzedakah donation on Purim without verifying whether he has a legitimate tzedakah need (see Yerushalmi Megillah 1:4). We will explain the details of this halacha later. (It is obvious that one should not make a major donation without verifying that the need is legitimate.)

Secondly, one should calculate how much one intends to spend for shalach manos and the Purim seudah and then designate a greater amount of money for matanos la’evyonim (Rambam, Hilchos Megillah 2:17).

MATANOS LA’EVYONIM VERSUS SHALACH MANOS

Question: Assuming that one has limited resources, which is more important to give, many gifts to the poor or many shalach manos?

One should give a greater amount of matanos la'evyonim and limit how much shalach manos he sends (Rambam, Hilchos Megillah 2:17).

IS IT BETTER TO GIVE A LOT TO A FEW POOR, OR A LITTLE TO EACH?

The Bach rules that someone with 100 gold coins to distribute for matanos la'evyonim should distribute one coin to each of 100 poor people rather than give it all to one individual because this makes more people happy (Bach 695 s.v. v'tzarich lishloach). According to Rav Elyashiv, it is better to give two large gifts that will make two aniyim happy than to give many small gifts that are insufficient to make the recipients happy (quoted in Shevus Yitzchok on Purim, pg. 98).

These two Piskei halacha are not in conflict — quite the contrary, they complement one another. The mitzvah of matanos la'evyonim is to make as many poor people happy as possible. Receiving a very small gift does not place a smile on a poor man's face, although it fulfills the minimal requirements of the mitzvah as noted above. However, both the Bach's gold coin and Rav Elyashiv's large gift accomplish that the poor person becomes happy. Therefore, giving each person enough of a gift to bring a smile to his face is a bigger mitzvah than giving a very large gift to one person and being unable to bring a smile to the others. Thus, the optimal way to perform the mitzvah is to make as many people happy as possible.

MAY MATANOS LA'EVYONIM COME FROM MAASER FUNDS?

The minimal amount that I am required to give may not be from maaser funds just as one may not spend maaser money on other mitzvos (Shu"t Maharil #56; Magen Avraham 694:1). The additional money that I give may be from maaser (Magen Avraham 694:1). However, since I concluded that one is not required to give more than one perutah to each of two poor people, two perutos are worth only a few cents. Therefore, one can assume that virtually all one's matanos la'evyonim may come from maaser money.

DO I FULFILL THE MITZVAH WITH MONEY GIVEN BEFORE PURIM?

If the poor person receives the money on Purim, one is yotzei (Be'er Heiteiv 695:7; Aruch HaShulchan 694:2). Therefore, one can fulfill the mitzvah by mailing a contribution if one is certain that the poor person will receive it on Purim. If the poor person receives the money before Purim, one is not yotzei (Magen Avraham 694:1).

Similarly, one does not fulfill the mitzvah of matanos la'evyonim if the ani does not receive the money until after Purim.

DO I FULFILL MATANOS LA'EVYONIM BY DONATING MONEY TO AN ORGANIZATION?

If the organization distributes the money to the poor on Purim, I can perform my mitzvah this way.

DOES GETTING A TAX DEDUCTION PRECLUDE ME FROM FULFILLING MATANOS LA'EVYONIM?

If I donate the money through an institution that will distribute the money on Purim, I can fulfill the mitzvah and also deduct the donation from my tax liability.

CAN I FULFILL THE MITZVAH BY CHECK?

If the poor person can convert the check into cash or food on Purim, then I fulfill the mitzvah (Shvus Yitzchok pg. 99, quoting Rav Elyashiv).

DOES MY WIFE NEED TO GIVE HER OWN MATANOS LA'EVYONIM?

A woman is obligated in matanos la'evyonim (Shulchan Aruch 695:4). Magen Avraham states "I did not see that people are careful about this, possibly because this rule applies only to a widow or other woman who does not have a husband but that a married woman fulfills her obligation by having her husband distribute for her. However, one should be more machmir." Thus according to the Magen Avraham, a woman should distribute her own money to the poor. It would be acceptable for a husband to tell his wife, "I am giving matanos la'evyonim specifically on your behalf," but it is better if he gives her the money for her to distribute or gives the money to a shaliach to be zocheh for her, and then gives the money to the ani. Although most poskim follow the Magen Avraham's ruling, some rule that a married woman fulfills the mitzvah when her husband gives, even without making any special arrangements (Aruch HaShulchan 694:2), and others contend that a married woman has no responsibility to give matanos la'evyonim (Pri Chodosh, quoting Maharikash).

MUST I GIVE MONEY?

No. One fulfills the mitzvah by giving the poor either food or money (Rambam). However, one should give the poor person something that he can use to enhance his celebration of Purim (see Pri Megadim, Mishbetzos Zahav 694:1).

MUST THE POOR PERSON USE THE MONEY FOR PURIM?

No. The poor person may do whatever he wants with the money (see Gemara Bava Metzia 78b).

MAY ONE FULFILL THE MITZVAH AT NIGHT?

One does not fulfill the mitzvos of matanos la'evyonim, shalach manos, or the Purim meal if they are performed at night (see Machatzis HaShekel 694:1).

HOW POOR MUST A PERSON BE TO QUALIFY FOR MATANOS LA'EVYONIM?

The Mishnah (Peah 8:8) states that someone who owns less than 200 zuz qualifies to collect most of the Torah's gifts to the poor, including maaser ani, the second tithe reserved for the poor, and peah, the corner of the field left for them. What is the modern equivalent of owning 200 zuz? Contemporary poskim rule that someone whose income is insufficient to pay for his family's expenses qualifies as a poor person for all halachos including matanos la'evyonim. This is assuming that he does not have enough income or savings to support his family without selling basic essentials (Piskei Teshuvos 694:2).

DOES A POOR PERSON HAVE A MITZVAH OF GIVING TO THE POOR?

Does the mitzvah of matanos la'evyonim apply to the poor? Is there an easy way for him to perform it?

The Tur (694) states that "Chayov **kol** adam litein matanos la'aniyim," "Every person is obligated to give matanos la'evyonim." What is added by emphasizing "kol," everyone? The Bach explains that this emphasizes that even a poor person, who is himself a tzedakah recipient, must also give.

Is there an inexpensive way for a poor person to give matanos la'evyonim?

Yes, he can give part of his seudas Purim to another poor person and the other poor person reciprocates. Thereby, they both fulfill matanos la'evyonim (Mishnah Berurah 694:2). Also, note that according to what I concluded above, a poor person can give a quarter to each of two other paupers and thereby fulfill the mitzvah.

MAY ONE USE MONEY COLLECTED FOR MATANOS LA'EVYONIM FOR A DIFFERENT PURPOSE?

One may not use money collected for matanos la'evyonim for a different tzedakah (Gemara Bava Metzia 78b). This is because the people who donated the money expect to fulfill two mitzvos with their donation: tzedakah and the special mitzvah of matanos la'evyonim. Thus, if one uses the money for a different tzedakah purpose, they fulfilled the mitzvah of tzedakah, but not the mitzvah of matanos la'evyonim.

If someone decided to give money for matanos la'evyonim, he is required to give it for this purpose even if he did not say so (Mishnah Berurah 694:6, quoting Hagahos Ashri).

PURIM VERSUS SHUSHAN PURIM

Do residents of Yerushalayim and other ancient walled cities who observe Purim on the fifteenth of Adar (often referred to as "Shushan Purim") fulfill the mitzvah of matanos la'evyonim by giving to the poor who observed Purim the day before? Do people who observe Purim on the Fourteenth fulfill the mitzvah by giving to the poor of Yerushalayim when it is not yet Purim for them? These are good questions that are debated by contemporary poskim.

In the words of the Rambam (Hilchos Megillah 2:17), "It is more important to provide more gifts to the poor than to have a more lavish Purim seudah or send more shalach manos. This is because there is no greater and honored joy than bringing happiness to orphans, widows and the needy. Someone who makes the unfortunate happy is likened to Hashem's Divine Presence, as the pasuk says: 'He who revives the spirit of the lowly and brings to life the heart of the crushed,'" (Yeshayah 57:15).