

## Lesson Plan on Tzedakah

**Context:** This lesson is for a sixth grade class of roughly 14 students at a Los Angeles synagogue's Religious School. These students have been studying various Jewish values for the past few months and attending Religious School for several years. They are somewhat familiar with the concept of tzedakah already, particularly in the form of collecting money each week at Religious School.

### Goals:

1. Broaden the students' conception of tzedakah.
2. Engage students in learning through play.
3. Demonstrate the biblical precedent for tzedakah.
4. Teach Maimonides' view of tzedakah from the thirteenth century.
5. Communicate that tzedakah can include nonmonetary donations.

### Objectives:

1. Explain that Jews practice tzedakah differently now than we did 2,000 years ago.
2. Describe the limited ability of the poor and the landless priests/levites to have enough food, if the farmers had not tithed in biblical times.
3. Recall at least 2 of the forms of tzedakah that Maimonides described.
4. Provide two examples of nonmonetary forms of tzedakah.

### Materials Needed:

- White board/chalk board
- Dry erase marker/chalk
- Board eraser
- Printouts of farm sheets
- Printouts of Maimonides' tzedakah levels sheet  
(All but one of these sheets should be cut into separate slips, so scramble the order)
- Laptop with loud speakers
- Internet connection
- Spoons
- Chopsticks
- Skittles
- Paper

### Set Induction:

(5 minutes)

Ask students to define tzedakah.

What is tzedakah?

What does not count as tzedakah?

- Does giving someone a dollar count as tzedakah?
- Does giving someone a burger count?
- What about giving someone a job?
  - Why do some or all of these things count as tzedakah?

### **Justice and the Root of Tzedakah**

(5 minutes)

Write tzedakah and tzedek on the board. Explain how tzedakah is linked with tzedek (justice).

**Ask students:** What is justice? What kinds of things in life are fair or not fair?

Example: It is not fair that some people do not have the food and other things they need to live in safety or in dignity. That is why we give tzedakah—to make things more just or fair in our society.

### **Transition**

(1 minute)

The concept of tzedakah can be traced back to the Torah, which commands us to pursue justice and give something called tithes.

We are going to play a game to learn about the system of tithing described in the Torah. For this game, we will need people to play different roles in society. Tithing was about making sure that everyone, no matter their role in society, had enough to eat.

### **Tithing Game**

(15 minutes)

1. Assign each student one of the following roles: farmer, priest, levite, or poor person.  
*(In a class of 14, pick 1 priest, 4 levites, 6 farmers, and 3 poor people.)*
2. Give farmers a farm sheet. *(See end of lesson plan for farm sheet.)*
3. Scatter skittles (or a similar food) across the tree section of each farm sheet. Be sure that skittles land in corners and on dark tithing row trees.
4. Explain that the farmer must gather the skittles from the darker green trees (representing the tithe) and give them to Levites. (They can use their hands to be more precise, because the tithe was very important.)

5. Levites will receive them and must give one tenth of their skittles to the priests.
6. Poor people can collect any skittles from the corner trees, or that the farmer dropped/left behind while harvesting, but they must wait until the farmer is done harvesting to get their skittles.
7. Demonstrate how farmers will “harvest” the skittles by trying to pick them up with a chopstick and a spoon. If they drop any skittles, those must be left for the poor to pick up using their fingers.
8. Have students switch roles and repeat the activity.

### **Debrief on the Tithing Activity**

(5-10 minutes)

Ask students:

- What was it like to be each of the roles?
- Did this model provide food for everybody? Was it enough food?
- How is this model like our society today?

### **Transition**

(2 minutes)

Some groups still tithe today. Mormons in particular follow these rules very closely and give 10% of their yearly income to their churches. But Jews do not follow this exact model anymore. We have a more updated version of tzedakah today.

The idea of tzedakah has been around for a very long time. It began with tithing over 2,000 years ago, but it has changed quite a bit since then (just as most things change over time).

We are now going to investigate what tzedakah became in the 1100's, or about 900 years ago. A famous rabbi named Maimonides, who was also a medical doctor and a philosopher, had a lot to say about tzedakah. He talked about 8 different forms of tzedakah and ranked them in order of what he thought was best.

In just a moment, we will be acting out the different forms of tzedakah and seeing if they are more like what we know in modern life than the tithing model in the Torah.

### **Maimonides Ladder of Tzedakah Activity**

(25 minutes)

1. Divide students into pairs.
2. Give each pair of students a slip (or two slips) with one of the 8 ways of giving tzedakah that Maimonides describes. *(Make sure they do not destroy these slips. They will need them later!)*
3. Give students a few minutes to plan out a skit so they can act out the scenario.
4. Have students act out these scenarios for the class.

**Ask students:**

- Was it easy to act out these situations?
- Would these situations be likely to happen today?

Emphasize that many of the situations Maimonides described happen even today. Perhaps people were not so different 900 years ago when Maimonides lived.

5. Then have the students, as a whole class, rank the 8 ways of giving tzedakah in order from worst to best.
6. Finally, have them look at Maimonides' order. *(See order on Maimonides tzedakah level sheet.)*
  - Do the students agree with his order?
  - What would they add to the list (to make it 10 rungs)?

**Transition:**

(1 minute)

The highest form of tzedakah, according to Maimonides, is helping someone to provide for themselves (job, loan, etc). It is a big, big mitzvah to help someone get a job, so that they do not have to be embarrassed about needing tzedakah.

It is pretty easy now to give someone a loan to help them start a business. It used to be that only very wealthy people could help someone start a business, but now we have something called microloans that allow anyone with a little bit of money to help someone else out.

In just a moment, we are going to watch a clip from YouTube about microloans and how they work.

**Microloan Clip and Discussion**

(10 minutes)

Watch YouTube clip on microloans in Peru:

CBS "The World of Microloans" <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D11nCY40ZGg>

**Ask students:**

- What did you learn about microloans from this clip?
- How did the loan help Paulina (the pottery maker) and Justin (the investor)?
- Do you think a microloan should count as a form of tzedakah? Why or why not?
  - Yes, because giving a business loan is at the top of Maimonides' list of tzedakah.
  - No, because the investor is getting interest (more money back than he originally lent), and you shouldn't be able to make money by giving tzedakah.
- Poll: Who thinks "yes, a microloan counts as tzedakah?" And who thinks, "no, it shouldn't count"?

**Transition**

(30 seconds)

We can understand tzedakah in many different ways. Some people might chose to participate in microloan programs as a form of tzedakah. Other people might take a different approach. Some might not even give money when they give tzedakah.

**Nonmonetary Forms of Tzedakah**

Tzedakah doesn't have to be about money.

- Remember that tzedakah used to be about sharing your food with the poor, like in the tithing game we played earlier.
- Now we can donate food to organizations like Sova or Mazon.
- We can donate old toys and old clothes to organizations like Goodwill.
- We can even volunteer our time and energy as a form of tzedakah.
- A good tzedakah project might be visiting people in retirement homes and bringing joy to the homebound (people who can't leave their house).

Above all else, tzedakah is about helping the vulnerable and doing what needs to be done.

Some people desperately need food. Others really need clothes or company. Jewish tradition teaches that everyone, even the poorest person, is required to give tzedakah. We can all find a way to look after the vulnerable people, even if we are poor and vulnerable ourselves. We can all make a difference.

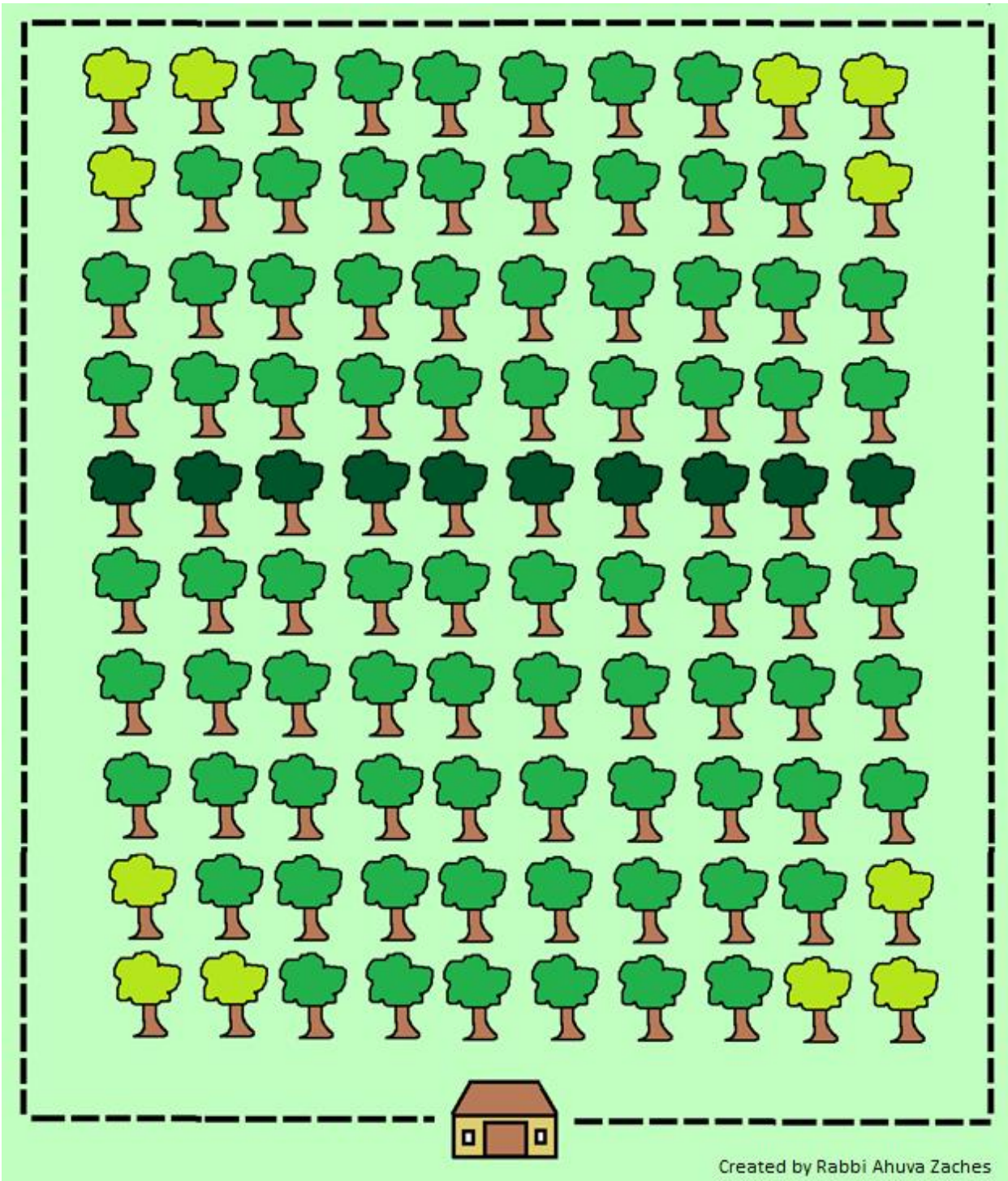
Now to get back to a question from earlier...

**Ask students:** What is tzedakah? Does anyone want to try defining it now?

A good answer will

- Explain how the idea of tzedakah has evolved over time
- Suggest that tzedakah now includes many things that we may not have considered to be tzedakah at the beginning of this class.

“Farm Sheet”



## Maimonides Tzedakah Levels Sheet

Giving *tzedakah* with a frown.

Giving directly to the person in need, but giving too little, even though the *tzedakah* is given cheerfully.

Giving money directly to the person in need after being asked.

Giving money directly to the person in need before being asked.

The person who receives the *tzedakah* knows who has given it, but the person who is giving the *tzedakah* has no knowledge of the person in need.

The giver knows who will get the money, but the person who receives the *tzedakah* doesn't know who has given it.

The giver doesn't know who will receive the money, and the person who receives doesn't know who has given it.

Help people help themselves by entering into a partnership or helping them find a job.