

Grade Level: Middle School Lesson Length: 1 Hour	Lesson Topic: PART 2 (B): IS ONE MITZVAH MORE VALUABLE THAN ANOTHER?
Lesson Authors: Metropolitan Council on Jewish Poverty Date Created: 2007	

Goal(s):

- Teach students about Maimonides' Ladder of *Tzedaka*.
- Question whether certain mitzvahs are more valuable than others.

Suggested Learning Sequence: Week five. Fifth out of six lessons.

Objective(s):

- Matching real examples of *mitzvahs* to Maimonides' Ladder.

Equipment and Materials:

- Journals
- Pencil/Pens
- Handout #12 Maimonides' Ladder Worksheet *Teacher's Copy*
- Handout #13 Background Information on Maimonides
- Handouts:
 - Handout #10 'Which *mitzvah* is better' signs
 - Handout #11 Maimonides' Ladder Worksheet
- Take Home Handouts:
 - Handout #14 Contemporary Reading on Maimonides' Eight Levels

ACTIVITY

Warm Up (15 Min):

A. Directions: Moving Mitzvah

1. Place handouts #10 around the room, one on each wall.
2. Have students move chairs or desks out of the way so the room is bare in the middle, but still have access to walk to the area where the signs are posted.
3. Have all students stand in the middle of the room.
4. Ask if anyone knows what a *mitzvah* is.
 - i. Call on students to give opinions.
 - ii. **Dictionary definition of *mitzvah*:** *Mitzvah* literally means "commandment." However, the term *mitzvah* has also come to express any act of human kindness.
5. Directions: Read one mitzvah example aloud at a time. After each *mitzvah* is read, ask students to 'rate the *mitzvah*.'

6. Students choose one out of the four rating options in the room. Walk over to whichever rating you agree with most. The choices are:
 - **This Isn't Really a Mitzvah**
 - **Good, Decent, Nice Mitzvah**
 - **Great, Cool, Special Mitzvah**
 - **Out of This World, Amazing Mitzvah**
 - ii. A list of mitzvahs are provided below
 - iii. It is encouraged to add more *mitzvahs* drawn from current news events or local happenings in the community.
7. Using handout #13, record the number of students that go to each sign in order to compare students' choices now and after they learn about Maimonides.
8. Have students put the room back together and sit down once Moving *Mitzvah* activity is completed.

Mitzvah list:

- Ann helps her brother Avi clean up his room because her mom asked her to.
- Jane owns a clothing store. Dan has applied for a job at the store and is hard-working, but unfortunately just lost his job at a restaurant. Jane hires Dan.
- Josh sends a donation to a local food warehouse to buy canned goods.
- Amy knits scarves to donate to the local homeless shelter so that volunteers at the shelter can give them to the needy for the winter. Amy will not be distributing the scarves herself.
- Joe is asked to volunteer at a local after-school program. Joe is thrilled about the project and immediately offers to help.
- David decides after services that he will clean up the prayer books. No one has asked him to help.
- In memory of her grandmother's death, Julie donates money each year to a local animal shelter.
- Janet loves working with children. She decides to help in a local preschool one day a week.
- Eliana was extremely sad to hear about Hurricane Katrina. She decided to collect clothing in her town and send it to Louisiana. The local paper heard about her efforts and wrote an article about her.
- Joel got in trouble at school. As his punishment, he has to help the janitor clean up the classroom one day a week. Joel is angry about this because he misses basketball practice.
- Debby is the owner of a local bank. She gives Ann a loan to start a new furniture company.

Exercise (30 Min):

B. Directions: Maimonides and Mitzvahs

1. Have students take turns reading Maimonides' short bio in handout #14.
2. **Class Discussion:** Maimonides ladder tells us there are different levels of mitzvahs. Should we value one *mitzvah* over another?
 - i. Pick the mitzvah that had the most variance and ask students why they chose that particular rating?
 - ii. Did any trends arise for certain types of *mitzvahs* on the list ?
 - iii. Does it feel appropriate to make one *mitzvah* more important than another? Why or why not?
3. Pass out worksheet #11 and have students decide which level of *Tzedakah* matches with each *mitzvah*.
 - i. This can either be done in small groups or individually.

4. Once students are finished with the worksheet, go over each *mitzvah* and find out which level the majority of the class chose.
 - i. Did most people agree or disagree? Find out the reasoning behind their choices.
5. Go over each *mitzvah* and give students correct answers. Compare current student answers to answers during warm up activity.
6. **Reflection:** Explain how Maimonides levels compare to ratings during warm up.
7. **Class Discussion:**
 - i. After learning about Maimonides Ladder, do students agree with his rating system?
 - ii. Is there still meaning behind a lower level *mitzvah*? Is it worth doing?
 - iii. Does this make you want to change the type of *mitzvah* you do?

Teacher Wrap Up (15 Min):

C. Conclusion and Journal Entry:

1. Have students save handouts #12 in their journals for further use.
2. In journals, have students write down 3 *mitzvahs* they want to complete as an individual.
 - i. What level is each *mitzvah*?
 - ii. Have a few students share *mitzvahs* with whole class.
3. Pass out handout #14 as further reading for students to take home and discuss with parents or other adults.
4. Teacher opens the floor for any other questions students would like to talk about regarding *Tzedakah*, Maimonides or *mitzvahs*.

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**Out of
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UNDERNEATH THE SITUATION, PICK ONE OF THE 8 LEVELS
YOU THINK THE MITZVAH APPLIES TO MOST

1. Ann helps her brother Avi clean up his room because her mom asked her to.
2. Jane owns a clothing store. Dan has applied for a job at the store and is hard-working, but unfortunately just lost his job at a restaurant. Jane hires Dan.
3. Josh sends a donation to a local food warehouse to buy canned goods.
4. Amy knits scarves to donate to the local homeless shelter so that volunteers at the shelter can give them to the needy for the winter. Amy will not be distributing the scarves herself.
5. Joe is asked to volunteer at a local after-school program. Joe is thrilled about the project and immediately offers to help.
6. David decides after services that he will clean up the prayer books. No one has asked him to help.
7. In memory of her grandmother's death, Julie donates money each year to a local animal shelter.
8. Janet loves working with children. She decides to help in a local preschool one day a week.
9. Eliana was extremely sad to hear about Hurricane Katrina. She decided to collect clothing in her town and send it to Louisiana. The local paper heard about her efforts and wrote an article about her.
10. Joel got in trouble at school. As his punishment, he has to help the janitor clean up the classroom one day a week. Joel is angry about this because he misses basketball practice.



Maimonides' Ladder

Eight Levels of *Tzedakah*

1. Allows a person to become self-sufficient; gives a gift, gives a job, or provides a partnership before a recipient is dependant on help
2. Recipient and Giver do not know each other
3. Recipient of *Tzedakah* does not know the giver
4. Giver of *Tzedakah* does not know recipient
5. Giving before we are asked
6. Giving after we are asked
7. One who gives with a happy expression
8. One who gives out of sadness

Teacher Copy: Maimonides' Ladder Answer Key

1. Ann helps her brother Avi clean up his room because her mom asked her to.
2. Jane owns a clothing store. Dan has applied for a job at the store and is hard-working, but unfortunately just lost his job at a restaurant. Jane hires Dan.
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11. Debby is the owner of a local bank. She gives Ann a loan to start a new furniture company.

Background Information on Moses Maimonides (1135-1204):

Also known as the Rambam, Moses Maimonides is known as the greatest Jewish philosopher and codifier of Jewish law in history. Born in Spain, he was forced to flee from persecution at the age of thirteen. He eventually settled with his family in a place called Fostat - which is currently known as Cairo, Egypt.

Throughout these journeys, the young Maimonides learned Torah with his father. With the financial support of his brother, Maimonides wrote a great deal about Jewish and non-Jewish topics and was known all over the world for these writings. Unfortunately, his brother died and Maimonides had to go to work to support the family. Because he was so smart, he was appointed chief physician of the Sultan!

Even with this great responsibility, Maimonides still managed to continue writing - making his work an even greater feat. He is best known for writing "The Guide for the Perplexed" and the *Mishnah* - a commentary on the Torah.

While he was undoubtedly the leader of Judaism at the time, his writing was very controversial. Many felt that because he used secular ideas in his commentaries, he was somehow going against Judaism. Many were worried his works would lessen the importance of Rabbis.

However, Maimonides' works survived and he is now known in history as one of the most important leaders in all of Judaism. As it says in the popular expression, "From Moshe (Rabbeinu, in the Bible) till Moshe (ben Maimon), there arose none like Moshe."



Image: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moses_Maimonides

How to give *tzedakah* according to Maimonides

In Maimonides' work the "*Mishneh Torah*" he wrote an outline of how to give *tzedakah*. He compiled a list of the ways one can give and organizes them from most preferable to least preferable. There are 8 steps to the Maimonides Ladder, listed below:

1. Giving someone a loan, job or partnership so that he can support himself and no longer have to beg from other people.

Example:

If you know of a friend or another fellow Jew that needs a job or needs money and you are in the position to hire him, you should do it. Not only for the reason of giving a form of *tzedakah* but you know if you were in his position you would want somebody to do that for you.

2. Giving without knowing who you gave to and the recipient does not know the donor.

Example:

If you put money in a *tzedakah* box you do not know who exactly is getting the money, and the person who gets the money does not know who gave it to him. Also the person on the receiving end is assured that his secret is safe and he is spared the embarrassment.

3. The donor knows the recipient, but the recipient is not aware who the donor is.

Example:

If you know of somebody who is in need, you can either mail them money or just leave it by their door so that you know they will find it. Even though you know that this person needed money the recipient might have been uncomfortable to take the money in person or even ask for it.

4. The recipient knows the donor but the donor does not know the recipient.

Example:

Righteous people used to put money into their scarves and put them behind their backs, so the poor would be able to come and take the money and they would not feel uncomfortable. Nowadays you can give money to an organization for a specific cause without knowing the exact person who is getting the money, but the recipient will know who gave it to him.

5. Giving directly to the poor, but doing so before being asked to give.

Example:

If you are walking down the street and you notice a person in need, you should not wait for them to ask you for money. You have to imagine how hard that is for them, so it's best to give them before they ask you to save them the humiliation.

6. Giving, only after being asked, but giving the appropriate amount.

Example:

If you had already been asked for money, try to give them the appropriate amount so the people who asked do not have to ask again. That way you maintain a good relationship with the one who asked and future donations will be conducted smoothly.

7. Giving to the needy after being asked but giving them less than the appropriate amount. This should be done with a smile.

Example:

If you do not have a lot of money to spare give whatever you can with a smile because otherwise the person in need might leave the situation feeling that they were looked down upon and judged unfavorably. A joyful reaction might even inspire to give even more the next time.

8. Giving less than appropriate amount and doing so unwillingly.

Example:

If a person came up to you and asked for money and you sigh and then reluctantly give over some money. This is the lowest form of *Tzedakah*. Even though in the end of the day you gave and the person received; we should nevertheless strive to fulfill this commandment in the best way possible.

Compiled by Daniel Schaffer and the management team at Yeshiva University, New York.

