



## WORDS TO THE WISE

*Rabbi Aryeh Dachs*

### Behar: Putting the “We” in Charity

I once read an excerpt from a talk given by Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik where he contrasts the root of the word charity with the root of the Jewish word *tzedakah*. Charity is derived from the Latin word *caritas*, loving kindness. Whereas *tzedakah* is derived from *tzedek* justice. His point is that a Jew is obligated to give because he understands that money is directly apportioned by G-d. A Jew who has the means has a great responsibility to administer that money the right way. R’ Ovadia Sforno (1475-1550), simply referred to as *Sforno*, offers a unique lens to better understand this responsibility.

One of the primary sources for the mitzvah of *tzedaka* is in *parshas Behar*. The Torah describes an unfortunate common occurrence where a member of the community is *yamuch* – reduced, financially at risk. The Torah directs us to help this individual get back on his feet by providing him with charity and free loans. The Torah then concludes with a verse that addresses the entire community, “*I am Hashem your G-d, who has taken you (eschem) out of Egypt ...to be for you (lachim) a G-d*”. It seems that the mitzvah of *tzedaka* is somehow linked to our nationhood and our national commitment to Hashem. This act of *tzedaka* contributes to making Hashem “Our G-d.”

The *Sforno* explains that the ideals of the Torah cannot be attained by individuals alone. Rather, the “mission” of the Torah is designed to be fulfilled communally, by all of us - together. We are a team unified by our charge to accomplish G-d’s purpose of creation. When a member of our community is in difficult straits, our mission is jeopardized. With this in mind, we can see a clear link between our glorious national mission and the mitzvah of *tzedaka*. *Tzedaka* transcends the individual mandate to give. We have a responsibility to ensure that every Jew is well suited to perform their duties. To achieve our national mission and indeed make Hashem, our G-d, we need to ensure everyone in our community is taken care of.