

## Or Shalom Dialogue Project: Tzedakah Dialogue

### How Do We Allocate Tzedakah, Individually, and Communally?

The second session in Or Shalom's ongoing Dialogue Project was held Sunday night 10 September 2017, with about 40 participants contemplating how we allocate Tzedakah individually and communally. Breakout sessions in small groups were led by Or Shalom members training in dialogue facilitation, followed by a concluding session with all the participants.

It was a rich evening characterized by mutual curiosity about our personal and communal values and challenges, marked by the enthusiastic, powerful and deep conversations that emerge through respectful listening. Many participants noted appreciation for the process, valuing the honesty and depth resulting from using dialogue as our format. The opportunity of speaking from the heart, and getting to know each more intimately, were viewed as important outcomes. Engaging outside of Shabbat davening was seen as an additional way to further grow Or Shalom's sense of community.

The first breakout session focused on **personal values and challenges** around Tzedakah. The commitment to personal giving was notable among the participants, ranging from preparing food items for distribution on the streets to working in diverse capacities for social justice, volunteering time for clothing drives to donating funds towards myriad causes, among many other forms of Tzedakah.

A consistent theme expressed by all groups was that Tzedakah is complex: the process of choosing how to give is deeply personal and variable over time. How we donate often depends on what's needed, elbow grease or cash, individual action or a group effort. Coincidence plays a role, with Tzedakah focused on whatever issues come before us.

A number of groups expanded the idea of Tzedakah beyond donating and volunteering to encompass social justice, giving in a way that addresses systemic social inequity and power imbalances. Another common theme was that respect is critical for those you support and for the way people choose to live.

Groups noted that the need is overwhelming, and we can be overcome by the volume. There is much more required than we have capacity to give, and many more causes than we can realistically support. Personal connections influence our giving. Sometimes we are reactive, and at other times our giving is more planned and organized, but it's important to recognize that we can't solve every problem and meet every need. We do what we can.

Participants also discussed whether appreciation and/or recognition are important. There was no consensus on this theme, but most agreed that Tzedakah provides positive feedback to the giver as well as hopefully being valuable for recipients.

In the second session, we focused on **Or Shalom's community values and challenges** around Tzedakah. Community giving is an integral part of Or Shalom's identity, including money, support, advocacy, energy, time and focused attention. How we make decisions around Tzedakah may be as important as the outcomes. Transparency is vital. The community has understandable curiosity and wants to know the values behind our decisions. Presentations to the community to familiarize members with the charities we support, and why those were chosen, are helpful.

One breakout group noted the importance of establishing ongoing relationships, which may have a larger impact than financial contributions. We should push to open our hearts and create ways to serve collectively. The idea emerged to ask members to pledge an annual number of Tzedakah hours to contribute toward external projects, or the equivalent in funds.

Another group suggested sustainability as one guiding value in our Or Shalom's Tzedakah decisions. Many noted the tension around political implications underlying donations, and recognized the complexity in differentiating clearly between political and humanitarian causes. There was general agreement that we should avoid giving to political organizations, but less clarity on how to define "political" in our decision making.

Or Shalom is composed of members with a great diversity of personal values and decisions around Tzedakah, and it's not surprising that community decisions around donations and communal volunteering raise uncomfortable issues. Still, the choices recommended by our Tikkun Olam committee and approved by the Board in recent years had wide support among the participants, and our involvement with Syrian refugees was highlighted by many as a model that galvanized our communal expression of Or Shalom's underlying Tzedakah values.

*Summary compiled by Mark Winston*