Adult Education Series

Choices in Allocating Resources

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# Choices in Allocating Resources: How Judaism Enables Us to Prioritize Our Wealth

**Introduction:**

Judaism contains a large number of mitzvot, commandments, which guide the individual’s and the community’s activities. Embedded within the mitzvot are the priorities we use in making ethical decisions. That is, we not only identify what is the right thing to do, but we choose our actions between competing “good” choices. What is the *best* decision?

When it comes to making ethical decisions, we usually have to expend resources – wealth, the stuff we have – in order to act. This discussion therefore wades into the pool of resources and seeks to provide a basis for setting priorities.

**The Problem:**

Judaism identifies those actions which we should do, and those which we should not do. Often, we cannot simultaneously satisfy all the requirements of Judaism. And, even when we are able to, we cannot satisfy everything equally. The most obvious case is the allocation of our financial resources, our money. How much do use to provide for our own needs and how much do we give as tzedakah? And if we give tzedakah, to whom do we give?

Setting priorities becomes more complex when we compare apples and oranges: how do we compare health costs with support for the synagogue? Or spending more time at our employment vs. time visiting the sick?

Wealth is the sum of all of the resources we have available to us. An individual, or a community, may have money, labor, time, land, water, food, and space.

**Setting Priorities in Judaism:**

Judaism and the rabbis of old rarely give an ordered list of the important things in life. We only get glimpses of the order of the mitzvot, and we are left to make the list ourselves.

**Jewish Imperatives, or the Major Values:**

There are a number of values which we know steer our priorities:

Praise, Honor and Recognition of God

The sanctity and preservation of Life

The pursuit of Peace

Loving Your Neighbor as Yourself

The acceptance of the consequences of our choices

(directly from Torah)

*Mishnah – Pirkei Avot, Chap. 1:*

***2.*** *Shimon the Righteous was among the last surviving members of the Great assembly. He would say: The world stands on three things: Torah, the service of G-d, and deeds of kindness.*

Other priorities come from Torah but may require interpretation (from the Aseret haDibrot, the 10 Commandments):

Not murdering

Not stealing

Not coveting your neighbor

Not engaging in adultery

Keeping the Sabbath

Honoring your Father and Mother

*Ex. 20:1-14*

***Chapter 20****1 God spoke all these words, saying: 2 I the Lord am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage: 3 You shall have no other gods besides Me. 4 You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth. 5 You shall not bow down to them or serve them. For I the Lord your God am an impassioned God, visiting the guilt of the parents upon the children, His name. 8 Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 10 but the seventh day is a sabbath of the Lord your God: you shall not do any work — you, your son or daughter, your male or female slave, or your cattle, or the stranger who is within your settlements. 11 For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth and sea, and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it. 12 Honor your father and your mother, that you may long endure on the land that the Lord your God is assigning to you. 13 You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. 14 You shall not covet your neighbor's house: you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male or female slave, or his ox or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor's.*

Beyond these are other, seemingly strong commandments:

Keeping the laws of Kashrut

Keeping the holidays

Fasting on Yom Kippur

Judging wisely

Keeping fair business practices

Avoiding Lashon hara

Other values are implied from the text:

Taking care of the environment (from Bereishit)

Valuing knowledge

Valuing our ancestors

Honoring and caring for the dead

Taking care of the sick, the widow, the orphan and children

*Mishnah – Pirkei Avot, Chap. 1:*

***4.*** *Yossei the son of Yoezer of Tzreidah, and Yossei the son of Yochanan of Jerusalem, received the tradition from them. Yossei the son of Yoezer of Tzreidah would say: Let your home be a meeting place for the wise; dust yourself in the soil of their feet, and drink thirstily of their words.*

*If there is a needy person among you, one of your kinsmen in any of your settlements in the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kinsmen. Rather, you must open your hand and lend him sufficient resources for whatever he needs…For the poor will never disappear from the earth, which is why I command you: open your hand to the poor and needy kinsman in your land (Deut 15:7-8, 11)*

**But how do we order all of these values?**

Basic Principle in Halakha: No commandment is any more important than another!

*So great is human dignity that it supercedes a negative commandment of the Torah (Bavli, Berakhot 19b)*

*It is permitted to lie to people who are in conflict and to tell them that the other party esteems them and wishes to make peace (Yevamot 65b)*

*Torah study – equal to all other mitzvot…*

*Hillel, Mishnah and Talmud:*

*He is popularly known as the author of two sayings: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And when I am for myself, what am 'I'? And if not now, when?"[2] and the expression of the* [*ethic of reciprocity*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethic_of_reciprocity)*, or "*[*Golden Rule*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden_Rule)*": "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the whole* [*Torah*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Torah)*; the rest is the explanation; go and learn."[3]*

*"As Hillel the Elder had stated, whosoever destroys a soul, it is considered as if he destroyed an entire world. And whosoever that saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world."*

**Examples to Consider:**

Personal Decisions

1. How much of my salary should I contribute to tzedakah?
2. How much of my salary should I contribute to tzedakah if I am below the poverty level?
3. Suppose I am a farmer – I know I should leave the corners of my field for unharvested for the poor, but where do I define the end of the corners?
4. Should I be paying for my children’s college education? When is it their responsibility to pay for themselves?
5. Do I give a major donation to the synagogue, or spread my available money around to different organizations?

Communal Decisions

1. Should we, as a community, build a hospital, or a cemetery?
2. Is it a communal decision to have a physician, or a personal decision?
3. Should we pool our resources to send all of the Jewish children in the congregation to Israel, or support the Hebrew school?