

Granted to Give

When it comes to resources, the Matanel Foundation is not a large philanthropic entity, especially in comparison to such major funds as the Rockefeller or Ford Foundations. It is a small foundation with a limited budget, and, therefore, cannot take upon itself large-scale projects. Jerusalem is filled with buildings whose value is estimated in the millions of dollars while their designated purpose remains unknown, with many others now under construction; such undertakings are beyond the Foundation's reach. Yet the history and technology of small states, such as those of Israel and Japan, teach us that a more modest size bears several advantages: It is precisely their small dimensions that enable them to bring about great improvements. With this in mind, the Matanel Foundation's financial limitation led the Foundation to incorporate a mode of operation that is more compact, more intensive, and more creative.

Indeed, the Matanel Foundation serves essentially as a catalyst and, as such, is involved in accelerating processes. It does not possess the capacity and power to get into the thick of things, but it can stimulate activity. The power of a catalytic substance lies in that, while it is typically present only in small quantities, it is able, at the critical moment, to facilitate a process much greater than itself. The catalyst is expected to remain present and continue its catalytic activity.

Alternatively, one could say that the Matanel Foundation acts like a capital venture fund—that is, a fund that gets involved with innovative ideas and projects and supports them until they start to grow. The seed of a large technological project develops in a technological incubator, where it is transformed from being one person's idea or dream to something greater, more substantial. It is then sold to a large entity with sufficient funds, such as a university, government, or television network, that is willing to expend the project further. The Foundation will be content to be remembered and mentioned at a later date, when the project has proven its worth.

In any event, the Matanel Foundation assists new projects mature to the point where they prove their worth and other entities are willing to take on advancing the projects further. A major focus of the Foundation, therefore, is to find good ideas and good people.

What does the term 'good people' refer to? 'Normal people' look for a place where they can work and earn a decent salary and respect. People who do not follow this path are typically eccentric, and these are exactly the people the Matanel Foundation seeks and selects: people with a passion for a particular project and the ability to bring it to fruition.

Some ask: Why do philanthropic foundations aid only projects that ensure the emergence of smiling children two years later? Why not support the poor and the downtrodden, the truly unfortunate ones? The answer lies in the difference between *tzedaka* and *g'milut chasadim*. *Tzedaka* is a great and important enterprise, and it is written of the giver that, "His righteousness endures forever" (Psalms 112:9). However, a person basically gives charity to the poor to assuage his own pain: It grieves me to know that someone is ill or in a tough situation, so I give something to that person so I can feel calmer and better. According to the *Halakha*, there is something far nobler. The highest degree of *tzedaka* is loaning money to a person so that he may rehabilitate himself. Why a loan? To spare the recipient the feeling of shame in receiving a gift; rather, it is a loan that he will return when he is able to do so.

Tzedaka and *g'milut chasadim* can be compared, in a way, to Magen David Adom (Red Star of David) and ZAKA (Disaster Victim Identification volunteer unit). Magen David Adom transfers to ZAKA the cases it no longer can take care of. In any medical organization, the main principle is to start with a preliminary diagnosis to determine who should be treated before all the rest. First to receive care will be the difficult cases, but not the hopeless ones. In a totally different context, flight safety instructions on airplanes stipulate that, in case of emergency, those sitting adjacent to infants or elderly people must adjust their own oxygen masks before turning to assist the child or elderly person. Why is that so? Because the child or elderly person cannot help you, while you are able to assist others—and at least this way, you increase the chances, in such an unfortunate event, that only one person will die rather than two.

All this is true also for *tzedaka*. There are, of course, cases in which *tzedaka* should be provided, and I know the people behind the Matanel Foundation give to charity, and they do well in doing so. Their hearts go out to the widow who will receive a few hundred Shekels for Passover, and that will warm her heart—but they won't really solve her problems. Indeed, the Matanel Foundation is not a *tzedaka* fund but, rather, a *g'milut chasadim* fund; that is, it takes upon itself to assist projects that have a chance of making a positive impact. Is there confidence that this chance will be realized? Certainly not! It may be realized, but it may also fail.

Moreover, the Matanel Foundation has adopted a generalized approach to philanthropy; it does not deal with or nurture projects in a specific field. The Foundation can be considered 'color-blind,' as it does not make any distinction between Sepharadi and Ashkenazi Jews, or between Ethiopian and Russian Jews. I think this is the right approach. All these 'color differences,' along with the insults, discrimination, and distress that are sometimes associated with them, belong in the past. If we wish to build something for the future, we should not forget the past, but we must also not act like a child who, after receiving a kick, carries the feeling of that kick for the rest of his life. The universality of the Matanel Foundation is reflected, among other things, in the list of projects with which it is connected. This list includes religious and non-religious projects distinctly targeting Jewish populations, as well as various initiatives around the world not concerning the Jewish people, in places like Panama and Central Africa—not because the Foundation can solve all the problems there, but simply because a helping hand can be extended there, too.

In addition, the Foundation's work involves a diverse set of people—academics, professional activists, and others—representing a wide range of opinions. If we were to hold a political discussion here, we would discover little agreement among the participants, but this is not what counts. Of course, there are highly important political issues, but the main concern is that we need to be little angels ourselves, without any connection to the question of whether Angel Gabriel will actually come to one specific place and not another.

And as for what the future holds for the Matanel Foundation in one, two, or three years—it all depends on what will happen. The Matanel Foundation is not the JNF or Keren Hayesod (The Foundation Fund); it is a dynamic foundation, and this is one of its most appealing characteristics. Can you ask a person whom or what will he love next year? You can tell a child, no matter how old, 'Love someone who is worth loving.' This guidance will be as true in 50 years as it is today. But parents have nothing to counsel their children when it comes to anything related to the specific object of love—if only because children will not listen, or will hear but do the exact opposite.

In summary, I hope there will be constant surprises in everything concerning the Matanel Foundation. The people behind it live in Luxemburg, one of the world's least-poetic places, and yet, in spite of this, they come up with fascinating ideas every year. This year, for example, there are two people involved in *Kabbala*. How will these projects aid autistic children? I do not know. Maybe they will help and maybe they will not—one must try. But this is all part of an overall existence. Altogether, it can be said that the Matanel Foundation is a character, and an amiable one at that. And unlike other entities, it enjoys the freedom to undertake a wide range of projects and strive to build a brighter future.



Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz's speech at the Matanel Foundation Convention
Jerusalem, June 2013
Attended by the Foundation's leaders and partners in Israel and abroad