



# What gives?

Or, more correctly, who? And how? The tsunami on Boxing Day affected us all – the largest natural disaster in any of our lifetimes. There's nothing quite like watching a body count live on TV to make you re-evaluate your life's priorities.

My immediate thought was to do something to help. It was partly a basic human need to respond to such a huge level of suffering, and partly because I spent six months some years ago working in South-East Asia, so I felt a geographical connection. I went straight to the Disasters Emergency Committee website, and gave. This was better than buying new shoes, no question.

Remember that Woody Allen sketch? When the muggers come to his door, his response is 'I gave already.'

Tsunami-related news was the background to the winter break, and marketing executives the world over were rebranding cars and food previously emblazoned with this harmless-in-our-generation word. Much more important was the dawning realization that rebuilding the area would take years, and that regular funds directly supporting locals to restore their lives and livelihoods were required. It wasn't just about money – it wasn't *even* about money: it was about enabling meaningful social change, and that seems to me a very Jewish subject.

And then on New Year's Eve I fell into a disturbing discussion. 'Did you give as a Jew?' someone asked me.

How do Jews give? I wondered.

Don't say meanly, or with a beard, or a Fagin-like look.

I asked around. This may be a reflection of the circles in which I mix, but about 70 per cent of the people I approached responded that *of course* they gave as Jews to a Jewish organization. Why, did I not? Eyebrows arched.

I started feeling inadequate: I'm not Jewish enough, I've failed to grasp the subtle, complex requirements of contemporary Jewish social action. In my defence, my response had been instant and humanitarian. The thought never crossed my mind that someone might add up what all the Jews gave and say we are good or bad or better than some other group. Which is not the only argument for giving through a Jewish organization, although it is the most prominent for those wishing to disprove the they're-all-out-to-get-us lobby.

At a debate on charitable giving recently, I heard two people use an expression I'd never heard before. I ran

to google.com and discovered that the phrase 'I'm a tither' has only been used 107 times in the Internet universe. So, as an idea, this one isn't exactly big time.

But it interested me sufficiently to make me want to review my charitable giving. It wasn't something I felt I could discuss with other people: charitable donations are apparently the last taboo. While people are increasingly prepared to talk about their salary, and you can look up the price of their house on Nethouseprices.com, personal philanthropy is conversationally proscribed.

It's a taboo I'm more than happy to transgress. So (since you ask): I have a number of monthly standing orders to the causes close to my heart (Norwood Ravenswood, ChildLine and Limmud) and a charity account I transfer an annual sum to, and use on a generally responsive, *ad hoc* basis.

The world – and Jewish tradition – requires regular *tzedekah*, not just for the recipient, but for the donor. My life is enhanced by knowing I contribute – in whatever small way – to repairing the world. Now I'm wondering if what I do is enough. Maybe tithing is the way forward. Ten per cent.

Apparently the Jewish community gives more proportionately than any other 'ethnic' group. We come from a community that takes charity – giving and receiving – for granted.

We recognize there's a Jewish mandate to pursue justice and respond to the needs of whoever needs, whether from within our own community or outside. So maybe I can't even answer the question of whether I give as a Jew or not. Surely the very act of charitable giving is inherently Jewish.

I've discovered that it's nothing like the cricket test – am I a Jew first or English first? Like nearly every other issue in my life, the question of giving is coloured by my hyphenated, British-Jewish identity – my hybridity. (Jonathan Freedland inspired me, recently, talking about his new book and giving the concepts I've struggled with a name.) I'm not *just* anything: I'm a carefully concocted *milchig-und-fleishig*, right-and-wrong, *frum-*and-not-so celebration of bothness. 