

Tzedakah in Hester Street: Charity and Generational Conflict in *Bread Givers*

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At the end of the eighteenth chapter of *Bread Givers* (1925), the second novel by Anzia Yezierska, the heroine's mother dies, and the coffin that carries her body is put into the hearse and then taken to the cemetery. On her way to the cemetery, the heroine, suffering deep sorrow over her dearest mother's death, hears beggars on the street clanking coins in tin cans and urging passersby to give them money by saying repeatedly, "Charity saves you from death!" (256). Those who are unfamiliar with Jewish culture might find the scene a bit puzzling and wonder what the beggars have to do with the funeral, but the scene reflects one of the long-standing *shtetl* traditions pertaining to *tzedakah*.¹

Tzedakah is a Hebrew word, which originally means justice or righteousness, and the word has also come to connote charity or alms (Mauss 18). According to Jewish religious laws, performing charity is a way of conducting *mitzvoth*, religiously good deeds. Although charity or philanthropy seems a secular conduct, Jacob Neusner asserts that "*tzedakah* is the highest expression of the holy way of living taught by Torah," and hence, he says, "*tzedakah* defines a way of being Jewish for many Jews" (2).

Tzedakah had been an integral part of the *shtetl* life, and it functioned as mechanism for re-distributing wealth, religious learning, and services within the community. Every member of

the community was encouraged, or sometimes compelled, to give regardless of age, sex or social status, and from childhood, they learned to identify with the community through the act of giving. One of the aspects that characterize *tzedakah* in the *shtetl* life is that giving was not regarded as a simply altruistic act; giving was considered as reciprocal. It was held that those who give also receive rewards both on earth and in heaven; by giving alms to the poor, for instance, you can earn not only earthly prestige but also heavenly merits. For that reason, though recognized as despicable, beggars had their own utility within the community. In other words, people needed beggars in order to receive earthly and heavenly rewards. Some, therefore, made it a business to ask for charity and were called the *shnorer* (meaning “seeker of funds” in Yiddish); they frequented weddings and funerals, reaching their hands for alms (Neusner 24-25; Zborowski and Herzog 193-211). The aforementioned scene in *Bread Givers* is a reminder of the *shtetl* tradition transplanted in the Lower East Side of New York.

Although we can find quite a few references to the practices of *tzedakah* in *Bread Givers* and other works of Yezierska, those descriptions of *tzedakah* have not gained much serious critical attention yet.² In this paper, I would like to examine the generational conflict in *Bread Givers* in its relation to *tzedakah*. Centering on the Bildungsroman-like development of the heroine’s life, the novel has often been read with feminist interest, and thus in many scholarly readings, the generational conflict in the novel has been interpreted as the one between the stubborn and tyrannical father and the daughter who struggles to escape from a culture which frustrates women’s self-realization.³ This paper aims at interpreting the story in a new light, especially by examining the attitudes of the father and the heroine toward *tzedakah*. Charity is a multi-layered issue. It concerns

economy, and it is a matter pertaining to the Jewish community as well, due to its reciprocal character within the context of the *shtetl* tradition. Moreover, it also touches on the issue of the Jewish cultural tradition. Through reading the narrative in terms of its treatment of charity, I would like to show that the generational conflict is a clash over economic, communal, and cultural issues.

1. Mercenary Attitude of Smolinsky

The economic standpoint of Reb Smolinsky is, we admit, of great ambivalence. Being a Talmudic scholar, he is expected to be the last person that seeks for material wealth; yet, as some critics point out, he exhibits extraordinary interest in money as well (Wilentz 35-36; Japtok 20-21). Such an odd mixture of a holy man and a money-seeker within Smolinsky, however, is the result of his efforts to keep religious learning away from the marketplace. While his wife tries to nudge him into earning some money as rabbi, Smolinsky instantly dismisses her suggestion, claiming that his “religion is not for sale,” and instead of working in a synagogue, he looks for a secular job “that will not take too many hours a day” so that he can devote as much time of the day as possible to his religious activities (111). Thus, unlike the figure of the impoverished scholar in contemporaneous Jewish American fictions,⁴ Smolinsky is trying to make it in the United States, “where everything is only business and business,” as his wife claims (16), while retaining the Old World culture, in which “men were supposed to be—and sometimes were—concerned mainly with the rigors of learning” (Howe 173). It seems to be more reasonable, then, to see that his willingness to be engaged in economic activities has more to do with preserving the Old World heritages than accumulating wealth and property.

Likewise, it is debatable whether or not Smolinsky’s

merchant-like behaviors should be translated as such. Not least in the first segment of the tripartite novel, “Hester Street,” Smolinsky looks like he were a merchant. The segment is filled with scenes where Smolinsky seems to be avariciously engaged in money-making activities, and thereby Thomas J. Ferraro calls it, after an Abraham Cahan novel, “The Rise of Reb Smolinsky’s Family” (61). The most salient example of Smolinsky’s engagement with the pursuit of money would be the marriages of his three daughters: Bessie, Mashah, and Fania. Smolinsky marries up three out of his four daughters, against their will, with *nouveau riche* Jewish Americans. What is interesting about the marriage scenes is that the arrangements of the marriages resemble market exchange; Smolinsky appears to marry off his daughters as if he sold off commodities in the marketplace.

However, we have to remind ourselves that the whole story is narrated by Sara; all the events in the novel are described from the perspective of the narrator-protagonist. It is Sara who insinuates to the reader that the marriage arrangements are tantamount to commercial transactions. Enumerating the father’s tyrannical behaviors, for instance, Sara compares what he has done to Fania and Mashah to “bargaining”: “His heartlessness to Mother, his pitiless driving away Bessie’s only chance to love, bargaining away Fania to a gambler and Mashah to a diamond-faker” (135).

A more obvious example is the scene in which the Smolinskys are trying to show off Bessie’s virtues in an effort to “buy” Zalmon’s heart. In the scene, Sara narrates how Smolinsky gets upset at Bessie’s attitude toward Zalmon, implying that the father is making a mercenary calculation in settling the match: “One look at Bessie, and Father [sees] how all the chickens he [has] been counting from the money that Zalmon [is] to give him [are] not yet hatching in the icy air of Bessie’s coldness” (102). After

that, in describing the way her parents talk about Bessie, Sara utilizes the language of mercantile activities. The father, praising Bessie as a good cook and hard worker, “[spreads] his sweet salesman’s talk so thick that [Sara is] afraid that even Zalmon would see through it” (103), and the mother, too, tells the lie that Bessie herself sewed the magnificent readymade dress she is wearing (104). And Bessie is deeply ashamed of “the fake talk they [are] making to sell her over to Zalmon” (104). If we assume that those marriages are arranged for monetary gain, it is the language Sara employs to describe her sisters’ marriages that leads us to interpret them as such.

If Sara translates the way the father arranges the marriages as a kind of market exchange, this might be because she was transplanted from the *shtetl* to America at quite an early age, probably before turning ten; her perspective of the world, therefore, has been affected more by American culture than the *shtetl* culture. In proof of that, none of her sisters, who grew up in the *shtetl* culture and must have been much more influenced by it than Sara, voices that Smolinsky is selling them off to wealthy men. In contrast, when trying to cut off connections with the father, Sara says to him, “You think I’ll slave for you till my braids grow gray—wait till you find me another fish-peddler to sell me out in marriage” (138). The chances are that, growing up in a culture where, as her mother asserts, “everything is only business and business” (16), Sara’s perspective is colored by the language of market exchange.⁵

It is certainly hard to say that Smolinsky does not expect any monetary gain from his daughters’ marriages; he asks Berel for some money to start a business in exchange for taking Bessie to wife (48), and he demands the same from Zalmon and successfully receives five hundred dollars from him (97). However, as his intent to do business is motivated by an effort to

preserve the Old World heritages, we have to understand his economic activities in relation to the *shtetl* customs as well. Otherwise, we will miss a fuller picture of Smolinsky.

2. The Influence of *Tzedakah* on Smolinsky

Smolinsky's economic activities are overlapping with practices of *tzedakah*. While always trying to get economic security, he is also committed to the tradition of *tzedakah*; he never fails to donate a tenth of his daughters' wages to charity (89); he belongs to a variety of charity societies (90); he announces he will give to charity the first hundred dollars earned from the grocery store business in order to thank God for bringing him good luck (117).⁶ From the father's standpoint, arranging the marriage between Bessie and Zalmon is also translated as a charitable conduct. Announcing his intent to marry Bessie with Zalmon, the father "beam[s] with the bigness of charity on Zalmon," and then says to the fish-peddler, "[s]ee what I'm giving up for you!" (97). In settling the match, to be sure, the father is not solely motivated by charitable intent. While exalted at his charitableness, he demands some money from Zalmon to start a business in exchange for letting Zalmon marry Bessie (97). However, it is to be noted that Smolinsky considers the marriage of Bessie as an act of giving. Such is by far a different perspective from that of Sara.

Another interesting example in which *tzedakah* gets involved in Smolinsky's economic activities is the scene where he is duped into buying an empty grocery store in Elizabeth, NJ from a Jewish immigrant. This scene seems just to exemplify the arrogance of Smolinsky—ignoring his wife's warning against his buying the store without consulting her—but this episode, especially the reason why he has determined to buy the store, also shows how he is influenced by the heritages of *tzedakah*.

Smolinsky's explanation for deciding to purchase the store suggests that the principles of *tzedakah* inspired him to do so. Grumbled by his wife about his foolishness, Smolinsky justifies purchasing the store from the former owner as follows:

How could I dream that the man was such a crook? He made me feel such faith in him, I was ready to give him not only the \$400, I would have given him \$4,000 if only I had it. I would have given him my whole life. (123-24)

This remark might sound puzzling to some readers: Why does the father feel faith in the owner? Indeed, it is hard to imagine that Smolinsky and the owner talked about their faith, because the owner has been busy tending customers all the time until the store is closed at night. One plausible reason is that Smolinsky judges the owner to be faithful because he has sold Smolinsky the store and Smolinsky finds the spirit of *tzedakah* in that act. In other words, Smolinsky interprets the selling of the store as a practice of *tzedakah*, fulfillment of *mitzvah*.

Of course, in a general sense, the owner's act, selling the store to an impoverished man at a bargain price, can be regarded as a conduct of giving. Yet, in the owner's act, there is another aspect that corresponds specifically with a code on *tzedakah*. According to Moses Maimonides, a scholar who compiled codes about *tzedakah* in the medieval period, there are eight degrees of *tzedakah*, and he wrote on the highest degree as follows:

The highest degree [of *tzedakah*], than which there is none higher, is the one who upholds the hand of an Israelite reduced to poverty by handing that person a gift or loan, or by entering into a partnership with him or her, or by finding that Israelite work, in order to strengthen that person's hand, so that she or he will have not need to beg from others. (qtd. in Neusner 10)

The law here prescribes that the most ideal way of giving *tzedakah* is not just give alms to the poor, but help the poor

become financially independent. Provided that the store owner is not deceiving Smolinsky, selling the store to Smolinsky exactly fulfills the highest degree of *tzedakah*. Smolinsky was trying to be economically independent of his wife and daughter by starting his own business. Even if the owner does not know it, his conduct could be translated by Smolinsky as a helping hand to him. Thus the father falsely regards the crook as faithful, and in return for his spirit of *tzedakah*, Smolinsky feels like giving as much as he can to the owner.

Interpreting the episode of the store purchase as such, we have to revise the impression of Smolinsky as a money-grubber. Still we cannot assert that he is a pure giver, either. Clearly, a merchant and a giver coexist within him. On the one hand, he makes a mercenary calculation in arranging his daughters' marriages, and the episode of his jumping to the bargain sale of the grocery store shows his intent to outsmart and make it in the New World. On the other, taking it into consideration that he incurs a financial loss because of the principles of *tzedakah*, we have to say that he is also under the lingering influence of the *shtetl* heritage to his detriment.

The same episode also indicates a plight of *tzedakah* in America. It shows not only that the principles of *tzedakah* do not hold true in America but also that *tzedakah* could be exploited in the marketplace competition; the store owner takes full advantage of charitableness in order to dupe Smolinsky into buying an "empty" store and crop as much profit as possible. It is fitting, then, that after this episode in the second part of the novel the narrative moves away from Smolinsky and centers on Sara's independent life and upward mobility. For if Smolinsky is a man of *tzedakah*, Sara chooses the opposite; she denies charity and aspires for a self-reliant way of life.

3. Self-Reliance and Sara's Refusal of *Tzedakah*

Whereas Smolinsky holds the *shtetl* tradition of *tzedakah*, Sara struggles to distance herself from charity as much as possible and embraces the American tradition of self-reliance. The second part of the novel is all about Sara's independent life; throughout that part, she supports herself on her own, and finally achieves college education. After leaving home, Sara looks for a place of her own, "burning to get on [her] feet" (142). Having no one but herself to turn to, she rents a room, which is uncommon for a girl of her age (159-60), and gets a job in a garment factory, after proving that she is as able an ironer as "a husky German woman with giant, red arms, who iron[s] a white dress with big, steady strokes" (161). With the wage of only five dollars a week, she tries to meet all her needs (165). Even though nearly starving to death, she sticks to her self-reliant way of life and never turns to charity.

After entering college, too, Sara keeps being independent; there is no indication that she gets any scholarship in the story. As she did before coming to the college town, she supports herself by working at a factory through college while attending classes and, though with some difficulties, fulfilling academic requirements. At the end of the Part Two, at the commencement, Sara wins the first prize of one thousand dollars for her essay with the title, "What the College Has Done for Me" (232). What she wrote in it seems to be concerned with the difficulties of studying and earning a living at the same time. She writes, for instance, about how she got infuriated at being required of taking a physical education class while she got fatigued from laboring in a laundry shop until late at night (214-17). It can be said that the prize money is a reward for her supporting herself all those years in an effort to lift herself up in America. Thus the second part clearly marks contrast to the first, which presents Smolinsky's

charity-oriented life while the second shows Sara's self-reliant one.

In the first part, too, however, as if in preparation for the second, there are some scenes where Sara voices her uneasiness about charity. These scenes exemplify her attitude toward charity in general; it also shows how her notion of charity and giving is different from what is expressed in the principles of *tzedakah*, and moreover, how it is closely related to her fervent aspiration for self-reliance.

At the beginning of the story, for example, it is told that Sara remembers charity as a traumatic experience. Relating an event that transpired before the time the narrative begins, Sara talks about the day when the family was evicted from the apartment probably due to unpaid rent. All the belongings are thrown into the street "like a pile of junk," and at their side, there is "[a] plate of pennies like a beggar's hand reaching out of our bunch of rags" (1-2). Then she makes a statement which characterizes her perspective on charity: "Each sign of pity from the passers-by, each penny thrown into the plate was another stab into our burning shame" (2). For Sara, to become the receiver of charity is an utterly disgraceful matter. Here is no place for the principles of *tzedakah*, which propagates the idea that even a beggar can be a kind of giver; as Jacob Neusner states, the codes concerning *tzedakah* provide that "begging [gives] the donor a chance to acquire the merit of giving, hence, to fulfill the *mizvah* of *tzedakah*" (25). Yet from the way she relates her experience of being given charity, we cannot see that Sara holds such a notion of charity.

Another episode of Sara's childhood is indicative of the relationship between her uneasiness about charity and her aspiration for independence. The episode tells about a routine that little Sara performs every early morning. Since the family

is too impoverished to buy coal to put on the fire, Sara wanders through the neighborhood in search of unburned pieces of coal in ash cans. Yet she always feels like “a beggar and thief” (7) whenever she hunts for discarded coal, and then she implores her mother to let her go to work in a factory instead. Technically speaking, picking up garbage is not the same as begging. People have thrown away those pieces of coal because they do not need them anymore. However, picking up someone’s garbage and begging are comparable in that both of those conducts mean depending on another person. Her family can warm themselves up by using a piece of coal that once belonged to somebody. To put it another way, the Smolinskys owe the warmth they can feel to that person. Sara refuses to go and hunt for coal because she perceives such dependence as shameful. Therefore, she prefers to go to work and earn wages on her own, so that she does not need to depend on anyone. Her uneasiness about charity, then, can be translated as her refusal to be dependent.

In the tradition of *tzedakah*, people are supposed to be interdependent. Of course, it goes without saying that the recipient depends on the donor, but what is intriguing about *tzedakah* is that the donor also depends on the recipient. The receiver enables the giver to earn both earthly and heavenly rewards. Yet the *shtetl* tradition of *tzedakah* does not stop there; in the *shtetl*, performing *tzedakah* ensured membership in the community as well as fulfillment of *mitzvah*. “The compulsion to give and to share is,” write Zborowski and Herzog, “not merely moral, not merely calculated in terms of earthly *koved* [honor] and heavenly *zkhush* [merits]. It comes partly from a sense of place and identification” (209-10). In other words, refusal of giving could mean denial of communal membership in the community where everyone, even the poor, is obliged to give. In the novel, too, Smolinsky touches on such relationship between giving and

communal membership; explaining to his wife the reason why he belongs to so many charity organizations, Smolinsky says, “Those societies I belong to are more to me than my life. I’m not living for myself. I have to go among people” (90).

Obviously, Sara’s perspective on charity does not go well with such a view of charity, which stresses interdependence and interconnectedness of its participants. Charity is a shame for her. And the way of life she aspires for does not seem to want anyone to get involved in it. In the second part of the novel, after realizing that she cannot turn to her sisters, Sara almost keeps to herself to achieve her goal: to get educated and become a teacher. In order to stay focused on studying, for instance, Sara does not make any friends at workplace and even pretends to be a greenhorn who does not speak English, so that she can avoid interacting with the other girls working in the factory (180). Thus, in her solitary journey of self-reliance, Sara distances herself from people as well as *tzedakah*, unlike her father, who desires to stay connected with people through giving.

4. Sara’s Reconciliation with *Tzedakah* and Her Father

We have so far seen how clearly contrasted the father and Sara are in relation to their perspectives of *tzedakah*. It is sometimes implied in the text, however, that Sara actually get involved in the world of *tzedakah* from her childhood. One example is the episode in which Muhamenkeh, a neighbor, gives Sara an old spring bed so that Sara’s family can charge their boarders twice as much (15). Another is the one in which the neighbors collect a fund in order to bail Smolinsky out, who was arrested on a charge of assaulting a rent collector (24). Both episodes suggest that the family has been saved by *tzedakah* in their time of impoverishment and owes their survival to *tzedakah*. Sara is, therefore, dependent on and is part of the tradition of *tzedakah*.

throughout her family life.

Moreover, there are episodes which indicate that Sara's independent way of life is also dependent on *tzedakah*. One shows Sara peddling herrings for the first time in her life (20-23), and another depicts Sara's mother coming all the way from Elizabeth to Sara's apartment in New York at night and brings her a feather bed and foods (170-72). Both episodes are the epitome of Sara's dependence on others' help.

As Alice Kessler-Harris notes (viii), the episode of Sara's first peddling, her first experience of earning money on her own, could be interpreted as a glorious first step in her journey toward self-reliance. Yet this episode also reveals that her triumphant declaration of independence through fish-peddling cannot be realized without *tzedakah*. From the standpoint of a ten-year-old girl, indeed, Sara earns the profit of twenty-five cents all by herself. She says, "It began dancing before my eyes, the twenty-five herring that earned me my twenty-five cents" (22). What she does not mention here is where those herrings that bring her the twenty-five cents come from; they are given to her by Muhmenkeh. To be sure, she purchases the twenty-five herrings from Muhmenkeh. When asked by Sara to sell them to her, Muhmenkeh, sympathizing with the little girl, offers to give the fish to her free of charge. Still Sara vehemently refuses to rely on her: she says, "No—no! I'm no beggar! [. . .] I want to go into business like a person. I must buy what I got to sell" (21). In the first place, though, the money with which Sara buys the herrings is the quarter Muhmenkeh has left as *tzedakah* when she visited the impoverished Smolinskys to comfort them (19). That means, from the start, Sara is dependent on Muhmenkeh's *tzedakah*.

Likewise, it is plausible that Sara succeeds in selling all her fish because of her neighbors' *tzedakah*. In the scene where Sara

peddles fish, “some women [do not] even stop to pick out the herring, but let [Sara] wrap it up for them in the newspaper, without even a look if it was squashed or not” (22). As Yezierska frequently depicts in her works, the Jewish immigrant women, especially those who have many mouths to feed waiting at home, were notorious for going any lengths to buy a better good a penny cheaper. In light of such a ghetto “custom,” it is unthinkable that the female customers do not even try to gauge the quality of the fish before their purchase. The chances are that they buy the fish from Sara out of sympathy; that is a sign of *tzedakah*. The fish peddling episode should grace the beginning of Sara’s long journey toward independence and self-realization. It is quite ironical, though, that from the start, her independence is built upon *tzedakah*.

Furthermore, the episode in which the mother brings a feather bed and foods to Sara also indicates that Sara’s self-reliant way of life could be supported by the spirit of *tzedakah*. However, this episode is a bit different from that of the peddling; while the ten-year-old-girl Sara delusively believes that she can earn money on her own, the seventeen-year-old Sara realizes that she can keep being independent with the help of her mother’s spirit of giving. Feeling extremely thankful that the mother makes a visit on a freezing winter night, Sara acknowledges the virtues of *tzedakah*: “How much bigger Mother’s goodness [is],” she says to herself, “than [her] burning ambition to rise in the world!” (171). What must be noted here is that she weighs the mother’s spirit of giving against her aspiration for independence and upward mobility. Obviously, Sara feels that her mother’s *tzedakah* weighs much more than her aspiration, and hence, she gravitates toward the world of *tzedakah* here; she offers to give something back to the mother: “Mother! You’re so good to me. What can I do back for you?” (171). This episode, thus, marks a turning point where

Sara comes to acknowledge the virtues of giving and of interdependent relationship formed through *tzedakah*.

Eventually, Sara's yearning to be away from father and the community and to live her own life is to be thwarted in the third part of the novel, because she desires to give *tzedakah* back to the mother in return for her giving. In many scholarly readings of *Bread Givers*, Sara's eventual return to her father in the third segment is interpreted in terms of the issue of ethnic identity. Unable to assimilate into the American society, critics argue, she finally returns to the Jewish immigrant community to feel at home.⁷ Ferraro is one of the few scholars who point out that the mother's self-sacrificing deed—bringing a feather bed and foods to her youngest daughter—is of great relevance to Sara's seeming reconciliation with the father at the end of the story (78-80). As Ferraro notes, Sara gets into “debt” due to the mother’s giving. Asked what she wants in return, the mother begs Sara to come to see her soon (171). Having no time to waste in order to study, though, Sara fails to answer her at that point, and then, she delays giving *tzedakah* back to the mother until she graduates from college in six years. But it is too late when she is ready to do so, and the only way to give *tzedakah* back is to obey the demand the mother makes at her deathbed—to take good care of Smolinsky after the mother’s death (245).

Translated as such, it will become more understandable why Sara decides to return to the father. The mother leads Sara to the world of *tzedakah*, and by taking care of the father the daughter performs *tzedakah* for her mother’s sake. She is still hesitant to support not only ailing father but also her new wife, Mrs. Feinstein, who is healthy enough to go to work. And once again, she weighs the life of fulfilling *tzedakah* against her independent way of life: “What was my duty? Was it to give my hard-earned school money to this woman healthy enough to go to work?”

(268). The teenage Sara would have come to the conclusion that Mrs. Feinstein should not depend on the charity of her daughter-in-law. But now, after acknowledging the virtues of giving through mother's self-sacrificing act, Sara reasons that her duty is to conduct *tzedakah*, and hence, she decides to give away part of her wages to her mother-in-law (291).

5. Conclusion

Toward the end of the story, Sara finds out that the father does not want to live with his new wife, and the narrative ends with Sara's daunting realization that she has to support and live with him. Looking after the father will eventually lead to supporting the people to whom he gives charity. Even though physically made weak, it is unconceivable that he will stop practicing charity, which he claims is "more to [him] than his life" (90). As she realizes that she has to live with Smolinsky, it dawns on her that no matter how hard she may struggle to escape, "the shadow of burden" (295) is always at her side. The "burden" here can be interpreted as the *shtetl* heritages that father holds; it would include, for instance, the duty of obeying parents or men. And the obligation of *tzedakah* can also be included in it. Indeed, Sara has been trying as hard as she can to sever herself from charity and become independent; yet the irony is that part of her self-reliance is built upon *tzedakah*. Touched by the mother's self-sacrificing act of giving, Sara comes to make a pact with the interdependent world of *tzedakah*. However, that will not necessarily lead to the peace of her mind; at the very end of the story, Sara narrates, "But I felt the shadow still there, over me. It wasn't just my father, but the generations who made my father whose weight was still upon me" (297). The confession reveals that she is still swaying between the tradition of *tzedakah* and that of self-reliance even at the end of the story.

By reading the generational conflict in *Bread Givers* through the lens of *tzedakah*, we can gain an insight that it is a conflict related not only to the issues of culture and communalism but also to the economic issue. Though not having received much attention in the past scholarship of Yezierska, *tzedakah* and acts of giving frequently appear as minor or major motifs in the other novels and short stories of Yezierska. By closely examining those descriptions of *tzedakah* in her works, we can throw new light not only on *Bread Givers* but also on the other novels and short stories of Yezierska.

Notes

- 1 *Shtetl*, meaning “small town” in Yiddish, is a term commonly used to refer to the small-town Jewish community of Eastern Europe. Many of the Jewish immigrants to the United States around the turn of the twentieth century were from the *shtetls* in czarist Russia. After Russian empire annexed a part of Poland, which had been a hub of Jewish culture in Europe since the medieval period, in the eighteenth century, the Jews residing in the Russian territory were confined to an area called the Pale of Settlement, which lasted till 1915 (Rischin 20-22). The *shtetl* culture and traditions in the Eastern Europe, which had developed and endured through the medieval and modern times, have disintegrated due to the world wars of the twentieth century (Zborowski and Herzog 34).
- 2 In “Wings,” for example, referring to a code regarding *tzedakah*, a Jewish woman says, “It stands in the Talmud that a man should take the last bite away from his mouth to help an orphan get married” (8). Even if not directly referring to Torah’s codes, there are many scenes where poor Jewish immigrants help the poor. See, for instance, “Brothers” (196-97) and “The Lord Giveth” (237-38). For an example of scholarly works that focus on the issue of charity in Yezierska’s fictions, see Batker. Batker’s paper deals with how settlement movement is criticized in some of Yezierska’s works.
- 3 For examples of scholarly works that read *Bread Givers* with special interest in its relation to gender issues, see Dearborn

- Pocahontas's Daughters*, Kessler-Harris, and Wilentz.
- 4 At the turn of the twentieth century, the pious scholar figure was frequently employed in Jewish American fictions as the representative of those who failed to go through the economic upheaval that greeted most of the Jews from the *shtetl* (Baum 188-189). Yezierska also utilizes that stereotype in such works as "The Lord Giveth" and *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*.
 - 5 In fact, the way Smolinsky arranges the marriage engagements is not as outrageous as Sara implies in light of the *shtetl* customs. In the *shtetl*, marriage was a familial matter; the piety and wealth of the family was taken into consideration when matching a couple. Each family chooses a bride or a bridegroom depending on what they can offer or gain. A wealthy family, for example, chooses a promising religious scholar as a bridegroom, so that the bride's family can get honor in exchange for ample dowry. The same might happen between a daughter of a Talmudic scholar and a man of a wealthy family (Baum 62-63; Zborowski and Herzog 272-73). Even after choosing a bride or a bridegroom, the marriage arrangement has not settled down yet. The families of the bride and the bridegroom go to great lengths to negotiate over the amount of dowry and the present to be given to the bride or the groom (Zborowski and Herzog 274-75).
 - 6 A code pertaining to *tzedakah* stipulates that it is required to donate one-fifth of the whole income in order to achieve the highest fulfillment of the *mitzvah* of *tzedakah*; in achieving average fulfillment, it is needed to give away up to one-tenth (Neusner 26).
 - 7 For example, see Japtok, Levinson, and Wilentz.

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