

Shabbat-Table Talks: Perashat Re'eh

By: Rabbi Ralph Tawil

Value: Helping needy people with our possessions. Contributing money to the needy is a value that plays an important role in Judaism. The Hebrew word for such contributions is "sedaqa," which is often translated as "charity." This translation does not reflect the full meaning of the Hebrew word. The Hebrew word "sedaqa" contains within it the idea of "sedeq" which is often coupled with the idea of justice. Helping out the needy financially and in other ways is not an act of "charity," but of "justice" and righteousness. The Torah view is that God gave us our possessions as the vehicles to best serve Him. Sometimes the way to serve Him is by contributing to those less fortunate who are in financial need. This way we become Hashem's agents to bring prosperity and sustenance to the world.

Context: In this week's perasha Moshe tells Bne Yisrael the laws that are to be enacted upon entry into the land of Israel. One of these laws is the law of cancellation of debts due to loans at the end of the shemitah (seventh) year. (This year is a shemitah year and the cancellation of debts goes into effect at its end.) One of the negative consequences that the Torah foresaw was that some people might hesitate to give loans as the shemitah year approached. This is the concern of our section.

Text: Deuteronomy 15:7-11

If there will be a destitute person from one of your brothers in one of your cities in the land that Hashem your God gives you, do not harden your heart and do not close your hand from your destitute brother. Open, yes, open your hand to him and lend him yes lend him whatever he is lacking. Beware that there be not a thought in your wicked heart, saying, the seventh year, the year of release, is at hand; and your eye be evil against your poor brother, and you do not give him; and he cries to Hashem against you and it will be a sin for you. You will surely give him, and your heart shall not be sad when you give him: because for this thing Hashem your God shall bless you in all your works, and in all that you send your hand to do.

For the poor shall never cease out of the land: therefore I command you, saying, You shall open your hand wide to your brother, to your poor, and to your needy in your land.

Discussion: This text is dealing with the "obligation" to lend money to those who need it. How could Hashem command you to lend money? Isn't your money yours to do what you want? (Answer: No! Our money is not "our own" but given to us by Hashem to better achieve what He wants with it. If we have the opportunity to help someone by lending him money we must do it.) Rambam writes:

The highest degree [of *sedaqa*] that there is no higher than it is to hold the hand of a Jewish person who has fallen and to give him a gift or a loan or to make him a partner or to create a job for him in order to strengthen his hand until he no longer needs to ask people [for help]. About this it is said: Let him dwell and live with you," in other words support him so that he does not fall and does not become needy. (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Gifts to the Poor, 10:7)

This is the highest form of *Sedaqa* because you help a person to be self-sufficient and to stop being needy. Often giving a loan and some advice to the person can turn him around.

The Torah repeatedly calls the needy person "your brother." What is the Torah trying to tell us by using that word? (One answer is that it is trying to teach Bne Yisrael to treat all Jews as brothers in this respect. Just as you would surely lend your brother so should you lend any Jew should he need a loan.)

Ask: Why do you think the Torah says: "For the poor shall never cease out of the land?" (There will always be needy people. We might use the excuse that there are no needy people around us. Yet if we search harder we will find some truly needy people that we can help. This verse is pushing us to search for those who could benefit from our contribution, even if they are not readily apparent. They exist—find them.)

Why are some people rich and others poor? Other than the reasons of family wealth, diligence, good or bad fortune, the Talmud answers the question from a theological perspective:

The wicked Tunusrufus asked R. Aqiba the following question, If your God loves the poor why doesn't He sustain them? R. Aqiba answered: In order that we should be saved through them from judgment in Gehinam. (Baba Batra 10a)

R. Aqiba sees the existence of poor people as a means whereby we can do good and spare ourselves any punishment for wrongdoing. Hashem gives us the opportunity to do good by allowing people to be needy. It is the needy that give the opportunity to those of means to provide for them.

Applications: Giving sedaqa should be a normal part of our children's life. In addition to giving sedaqa in school, help them think of different charitable acts that they could do. Let them hear your discussion as you evaluate which organization to contribute to. Part of your children's allowance could be earmarked for Sedaqa.

Additional Idea: This week's perasha mentions the "Shalosh Regalim" or the three pilgrimage festivals. The unique aspect of this mentioning of the "shalosh regalim" is that the Torah commands us to consider the disadvantages of society and include them in our festivities. The Torah concludes the section by saying "and you shall only be happy" ("vehayita akh sameah"). Happiness that includes the disadvantaged of society is true happiness. What are some ways that we can benefit the disadvantaged of our society at our periods of rejoicing or happiness? (In addition to inviting people to our affairs these are some suggestions: Donating leftover food from affairs to places that could use it. Donating flowers from affairs to others who could reuse them.)