

Some thoughts on Tzedakah:

Devarim Chapter 15; Verse 7 (JPS Translation)

ז כִּי-יִהְיֶה בְּךָ אֲדוּמָה בֶן-אֲדוּמָה אֶתְּיָן, בְּאֶרֶץ, אֲשֶׁר-יִהְיֶה אֵלַי כִּיךָ בַּיּוֹם לָךְ--לֹא תִאֲמַץ אֶת-לִבְּךָ, וְלֹא תִקַּף אֶת-אָדָם.
מְאִיִן, הָאֲדוּמָה.

If there be among you a needy man, one of thy brethren, within any of thy gates, in thy land which the LORD thy G-d giveth thee, thou shalt not harden thy heart, nor shut thy hand from thy needy brother;

Rashi on “Do not Harden”

Do not harden. לֹא תִאֲמַץ--

Some people agonize over whether to give or not; the Torah therefore says, "Do not harden." Some people open the hand, then close it; the Torah therefore says, "Do not close."²⁹¹

“A Hasidic rebbe, known as the Leover, taught, “If a person comes to you for assistance, and you tell him, ‘G-d will help you,’ you are acting disloyally to G-d. For you should understand that G-d has sent you to aid the needy person, not to refer him back to the Almighty.”

-Based on Lionel Blue with John Magonet, *The Blue Guide to the Here and Hereafter*, pg 168.

-Quoted by Joseph Telushkin in *Jewish Wisdom* on pg.12

Charity as Last Resort

“Whoever cannot survive without taking charity, such as an old, sick, or greatly suffering individual, but who stubbornly refuses to accept aid, is guilty of murdering himself. . . . yet one who needs charity but postpones it and lives in deprivation so as to not trouble the community, shall live to provide for others.

-Rabbi Yosef Karo, *Shulkhan Arukh*, Yoreh Deah 255:2

-Quoted by Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Wisdom*, p13

“In nineteenth-century Vilna, a wealthy man lost all he had. He was so greatly ashamed of being poor that he informed no one of his situation, and eventually died of malnutrition. Rabbi Israel Salanter (1810-1883) consoled the ashamed townspeople: “That man did not die of starvation, but of excessive pride. Had he been willing to ask others for help and admit to his situation, he would not have died of hunger.”

-Based on Shmuel Himelstein, *Words of Wisdom, Words of Wit*

-Quoted by Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Wisdom*, p13

Even a poor man who himself survives on charity should give charity.

-Talmud Bavli, Gittin 7b

Rav Kook on Parshat Kedoshim (Commenting on Peah – last corner of the field- and the Dignity of the Poor)

(taken from http://www.geocities.com/m_yericho/ravkook/KEDOSHIM60.htm)

The Talmud [Shabbat 23] notes that this provision prevents four potential problems:

Theft of the poor. The landowner could set aside the *peah* at some pre-arranged hour, in order to make sure the corner crop will go to friends or relatives.

Lost time of the poor. The needy won't have to hang around the field, waiting until the moment the owner arbitrarily decides to declare a section of his field is *peah*.

Unwarranted suspicions. People might not know that the farmer set aside his *peah* earlier, and suspect him of not fulfilling the mitzvah.

Swindlers. Unscrupulous owners could claim they set aside *peah* earlier, when they never did so.

According to Rav Kook, these four concerns clarify the Torah's outlook on charity.

- 1. Mere usage of the phrase, "*theft of the poor*", is very revealing. Helping the needy is not simply a matter of generosity and kindness. It's a social and moral obligation. The Hebrew word for charity ("*tzedaka*") comes from the root-word *tzedek*, justice. The individual who refuses to assist the poor does not lack generosity. He is a thief, stealing from what belongs to others! In general, the existence of poverty in the world should not be regarded as a negative phenomenon. There are many purposes for poverty, including its contribution to our pursuit of spiritual growth.**
- 2. If we only emphasize the obligatory aspect of *tzedakah*, however, we are concentrating solely on the giver's standpoint - and overlooking the needs of the receiver. This mitzvah also requires an attitude of generosity and kindness. We need to have empathy for the needy individual and his problems. For this reason, the Torah expresses concern for the poor person's time and his sense of self-respect. ... In short, the foundation of Jewish charity is duty, but the element of empathy is also a necessary ingredient, in order that its true goal may be achieved.**
- 3. Social mores serve to protect the weak and the destitute. Some people give because they are embarrassed to be looked upon as stingy and uncaring. Also, society honors generous donors and benefactors. The first two aspects mentioned, moral obligation and empathy, comprise our inner incentive to help the poor. Only taking into account these aspects, however, could diminish the importance of society's external impetus to support the needy. The individual who is fully aware of the ethical significance of charity does not require the motivation of social pressure. Not everyone, however, achieves this level of enlightenment. For the good of society as a whole, the Torah affirms the importance of social obligations to give and help. With regard to the mitzvah of *peah*, this is expressed by our concern that society may unjustly place suspicions on individuals who in fact did set aside *peah*.**
- 4. The fourth problem - closing off a potential loop-hole for swindlers - only applies to the lowest, most corrupt segments of society. Nonetheless, this is a sufficient reason to obligate all members of society. There exists an organic unity in society. People are influenced by one other; enlightened individuals cannot claim they are impervious to the moral deterioration that such a loop-hole might bring about in society's lower elements.**

[Ein Aya, vol. III, pp.74-75]

Telushskin's summary of self-respect/dignity for the poor

1. by reminding everyone that a certain amount of poverty is inevitable: For there will never cease to be needy people in your land, which is why I command you: open your hand to the poor and needy (15:7-8).
2. by teaching that rich people have a personal need to fulfill G-d's commandments through giving charity....
3. by impressing upon fortunate people that their current economic status may dramatically change:
 - a. Rabbi Hiyya advised his wife, "When a poor man comes to the door, be quick to give him food so that the same may be done to your children." She exclaimed, "You are cursing our children [with the suggestion that they may become beggars]." But Rabbi Hiyya replied, "There is a wheel which revolves in this world." – Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 151b.
 - b. Reuben, an honest man, asked Shimon to lend him some money. Without hesitation, Shimon made the loan but said, "I really give this to you as a gift." Reuben was so shamed and embarrassed that he would never ask Shimon for a loan again. Clearly, in this case, it would have been better not to have given Reuben a gift of that kind.
-Judah the Pious, Sefer Hasidim, paragraph 1691

Final Thought

To feel the obligation of tzedakah is to realize that each person belongs to others as others belong to him or her. It is to experience the emotion of the communal identity. To be a Jew in light of the mitzvah of tzedakah is to meet another human being face to face. To be sensitive to an individual's needs makes a difference not only to that person but also to one's own self-understanding. One cannot ignore the human traffic that crosses the threshold of sympathy. One must extend one's identity and concern to encompass the other, in an awareness that one's "I" is impoverished if it cannot bridge this moral space...

-David Hartman and Tzvi Marx, essay on "Charity" in Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought, 1988

Re'eh @ the DC Beit Midrash

Tuesday, August 10,
Monday, July 13, 2004; 23 Av 5764

Welcome to the DC Beit Midrash!

The *Chumash* (Five Books of Moses) is divided into 54 portions, which Jews read sequentially each week in services. This Shabbat, we will be reading *Parashat Re'eh* from the book of Dvarim (Deuteronomy).

Tonight, a member of our community will lead us in a text-study on the weekly Torah portion. The voices of both past and contemporary interpreters will inform our discussion.

Below you will find a summary of this week's Torah portion, along with brief biographies of the commentators cited. The presentation will be followed by *chavruta* (paired) study on a subject of your choice.

Re'eh, Devarim (Deuteronomy)

This week's parasha (Torah portions): ~~Matot-Mas'ei; Bemidbar (Numbers);~~ 11:26-16:17

This portion begins with one of the most powerful statements in the Torah affirming free will: "See, I set before you blessing and curse" - blessing if the people follow God's ways, and curse if they don't. These blessings and curses are actually to be articulated from the tops of two mountains when the Israelites enter into the Promised Land, and more detail is given about that ritual at the end of this discourse (Deuteronomy 27:12). The *parasha* continues with laws that are to be fulfilled by the Israelites in the land: the eradication of idolatry, and the centralization of sacrificial worship at specific sites which God will identify. Moses strongly warns the people about false prophets, idolaters, "lawless" cities, and the incorporation of any pagan practices into Israelite ritual. The remainder of the *parasha* outlines those *mitzvot* that set Israel apart from other nations: *kashrut*, tithing, laws regarding loans, the Sabbatical year, Israelite slaves, consecration of the first born, and the major festivals.

(http://www.kolel.org/pages/parasha/devarim_summary.html#reeh)

This week's sources:

Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo ben Isaac)

1040-1105

This French sage is regarded as medieval Judaism's greatest teacher. Since his death almost nine hundred years ago, Jews who study either the Torah or the Talmud invariably do so with the help of his commentary. In his Torah commentary, Rashi explains terms both on the basis of *peshat* (literal meaning) and *derash* (homiletical or sermonic meaning). He also makes use of words in his vernacular, Old French, for clarification. Rashi's Torah commentary achieved such wide acceptance that it became mandatory for Jews to review the weekly Torah portion with his commentary. In 1475, Rashi's commentary became the first book printed in Hebrew -- even before the Torah itself was.

(Excerpted from Harvey J. Fields, *A Torah Commentary for Our Times*, p 10-12, and Telushkin, *Jewish Literacy*, p 180-183.)

Talmud Bavli (Tractate Gittin)

c. 500

The Babylonian Talmud (Talmud Bavli) is a compilation of discussions on the Mishna, discussions which had been going on some three hundred years already at the time they were written down. Because the Babylonian edition is far more extensive than its Palestinian counterpart (Talmud Yerushalmi), compiled around 400, it has become the most authoritative compilation of Jewish law. A law from the Mishna is cited, which is followed by rabbinic deliberations on its meaning. The Mishna and the rabbinic discussions (known as Gemara) comprise the Talmud, although in Jewish life the terms Gemara and Talmud are usually used interchangeably. The rabbis quoted in the Gemara are known as Amora'im, explainers or interpreters. In addition to extensive legal discussions (halacha), the rabbis incorporated into the Talmud guidance on ethical matters, medical advice, historical information, and folklore (aggadata). Tractate Gittin deals with matters related to a *get*, a religious bill of divorce.

(Excerpted from Telushkin, *Jewish Literacy*, p 150-153)

Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaCohen Kook

1135-1204

A Jewish scholar and philosopher, Rav Kook settled in Palestine in 1904, where he became the chief rabbi of the Ashkenazi community in 1921. He attempted to show that Palestine and Zionism were an integral part of Judaism; that those secularist Jews who worked to build up the Jewish homeland were unknowingly doing God's work, which one day would become evident to them; and that nationalism was a necessary step on the way to universalism. He was the author of several books that were influential among Jewish nationalists.

(<http://www.infoplease.com/ce6/people/A0828092.html>)

(over)

Rav Yosef Caro

1488-1575

Rabbi Joseph ben Ephraim Caro was born in Toledo, Spain and he died in Safed, Israel. He is also called Maran ("our master") or Ha-Mechaber ("the Author," i.e. the halachic author par excellence). He left Spain in 1492 as a result of the Spanish expulsion of the Jews, and settled with his family in Turkey. In 1536, he emigrated to Israel and became the chief rabbi of Safed, an important center of Jewish learning and industry. His principal teacher in Safed was Rabbi Jacob Berab. Caro's magnum opus is his Beit Yosef ("House of Joseph"), an encyclopedic commentary on Rabbi Jacob ben Asher's Tur, a halachic code. Bet Yosef presents an extensive survey of relevant halachic literature, from the Talmud down to works of Caro's contemporaries. Caro's halachic decisions were codified in his Shulchan Aruch (which was actually a digest of Bet Yosef). This work quickly became accepted throughout the Jewish world as halachically authoritative. Likewise, Caro's commentary on Maimonides' code, the Kesef Mishneh, is one of the standard commentaries on Maimonides' work.

(<http://www.ou.org/pardes/bios/caro.htm>)

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin is the author (with Dennis Prager) of two of the most influential Jewish books of the past decade: *The Nine Questions People Ask About Judaism* and *Why the Jew? The Reason for Antisemitism* as well as the "Rabbi Daniel Winter" murder mysteries. He lectures widely throughout North America and serves as an associate of CLAL, the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership. He was ordained at Yeshiva University and pursued graduate studies in Jewish history at Columbia University.

(<http://www.barnesandnoble.com>)

Rabbi David Hartman

1931-

Born in 1931 in Brooklyn, New York, Prof. Rabbi David Hartman received his rabbinical ordination from Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik of Yeshiva University, New York, and his Ph.D. in Philosophy from McGill University, Montreal. In 1971, after serving for many years as a rabbi in Montreal, David Hartman immigrated with his family to Israel. In 1976, he founded the Shalom Hartman Institute, dedicating it in the name of his father. Through his academic research, publications, public lectures and work as director of the Institute, Prof. Hartman has endeavored to foster greater understanding among Jews of diverse affiliations - both in Israel and the Diaspora - and to help build a more pluralistic, tolerant Israeli society. In October 2000, David Hartman was awarded the prestigious AVI CHAI Prize in Israel, the aim of which is to recognize and reward individuals who contribute toward increasing mutual understanding and sensitivity among Israeli Jews of different backgrounds and commitments to Jewish heritage.

(excerpted from <http://www.hartmaninstitute.com>)

Dr. Tzvi Mark

Dr. Tzvi Mark's research deals with Modern Hebrew Literature and Jewish Thought. He lectures at Bar-Ilan University on Modern Israeli Literature and is a faculty member of Midreshet Lindenbaum in Jerusalem, where he teaches Hassidut and Jewish Thought. His doctoral dissertation, to be published in 2002, is entitled, *Mysticism and Madness in the Works of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav*.

(excerpted from <http://www.hartmaninstitute.com>)

This week's teacher:

Dan Levenson

ravlump@yahoo.com

Dan Levenson lives in Silver Spring and works as an Executive Aide/Office Manager at the Equal Employment Opportunity office at George Washington University. Dan spent time studying at Pardes in Israel.

This week's food sponsor:

Mark Livingston, in memory of his grandmother on the occasion of her *yahrtzeit*

Wanna teach, think about teaching, or suggest a teacher? teachers@dcbeitmidrash.org

Wanna sponsor food? food@dcbeitmidrash.org

Questions, feedback, wanna join our email list? Anything else? Email info@dcbeitmidrash.org

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