

“The Parsha Discussion” by Rabbi Alex Israel

<http://www.alexisrael.org/parshadiscussion> . <https://www.facebook.com/parshadiscussion/>

Re'eh –Open Hearts Open Hands



If there is a needy person among you, one of your brothers in any of your settlements in the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy brother. Rather, you must open your hand wide (*pato'ach tiftach*) and lend him sufficient for whatever he lacks. (Deut. 15:7-9)

This is the main source for the law of Tzedaka in the Torah. Tzedaka is a paradoxical term. It indicates “Tzedek-Justice” but also a sense of charity or kindness. Rabbis Sacks writes:

Tzedakah cannot be translated because it joins together two concepts that in other languages are opposites, namely charity and justice. Suppose, for example, that I give someone £100. Either he is entitled to it, or he is not. If he is, then my act is a form of justice. If he is not, it is an act of charity. Tzedakah is therefore an unusual term, because it means both. (Covenant and Conversation, 5767)

In Judaism it seems, we can be commanded to be genuinely caring! The opening text, above, from our Parsha, highlights many behavioural and emotional instructions which should inform our thoughts and emotions in the sphere of Tzedaka, social welfare. Let us study the verses.

What stands out to you in these verses?

I will focus upon several phrases that stand out for me:

- “Open hands” and “closed hands”. What is our default position - Hand open or closed? What does the Torah think in the way that it phrases the law?
- “Do not harden your heart and shut your hand”. What precedes the shutting of the hand? – the hardening of the heart! How do you understand that psychologically? Have you ever been in a situation in which you see a homeless person on the street. He or she looks at you, and you feel

“The Parsha Discussion” by Rabbi Alex Israel

<http://www.alexisrael.org/parshadiscussion> . <https://www.facebook.com/parshadiscussion/>

a need to look away. Why do we look away? Is that this “hardening of the heart” that precedes the “shutting” of the hand?

- Do these lines from Devarim/Deuteronomy promote lending or giving? The Torah would seem to prefer a loan to a donation. Why is a loan preferable to a handout?
- What term is repeatedly used by the Torah for the “needy person”?
- Lastly, “lend him sufficient for whatever he lacks.” Why the duality? How far shall we support the poor? Is it “sufficient” or “whatever he lacks”? Relating to that, see the following challenging text from the laws of charity codified by the Rambam:

You are obligated to give the poor person what he lacks. If he does not have clothing, clothe him. If he does not have furniture, buy him furniture. If he is single, marry him/her off. Even if the poor person used to be extremely rich and ride a horse everywhere and had a slave to run before him, provide that as well as it says "whatever he lacks." You are commanded to make up what he lacks, but not to enrich him. (Laws of Gifts to the Poor 7:3)

Now this is a peculiar law. If the poor person in question as a chauffeur-driven limousine, should I provide it for him? If he is accustomed to designer suits and fine wines, and has now fallen on bad times, shall we pay for those luxury items? According to Halakha, this will only be relevant if the funds are available and not need for more basic needs, but we can well ask, could the money not be spent better elsewhere? Should we prop-up this person at a standard of living which he cannot possibly sustain?

Rabbi Sacks explains

The first provision (‘sufficient for his need’) refers to an **absolute subsistence level**. In Jewish law this was taken to include food, housing, basic furniture and if necessary, funds to pay for a wedding. The second (‘that which he lacks’) means **relative poverty** – relative, however, not to others but to the individual’s own previous standard of living. This is an indication of something which plays an important role in the rabbinic understanding of poverty. Beyond sheer physical needs is a **psychological dimension. Poverty humiliates, and a good society will not allow humiliation.**

What should welfare services provide for the poor? Should a poor person live in a shared room or a private room. Should he or she be fed a one-course meal, or a 3-course meal? Should we pay their bus-fare or can they walk?

Well let me change the question. What if this person-in-need was your brother or sister? I would hope that then, we would do anything and everything to assist! The Torah repeatedly uses the term “*brother*” to depict the recipient of welfare. If we viewed a needy person as a sibling, would we not be more thoughtful, more generous? Obviously, the community has limited funds, frequently a poor person will be supported at a basic level, but might that attitude, the understanding that charity is as much about dignity as about money, might that attitude be able to permeate our thinking?

Shabbat Shalom!