

PARSHAT R'EI

August 15, 2020 – 24 Av 5780

Annual (Deuteronomy 11:26-16:17): Hertz p. 799

Haftarah (Isaiah 54:11-55:5): Hertz p. 818

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Torah Portion Summary

Moshe tells the people that they are being given a choice between blessings if they obey God's commandments and curses if they do not. When they enter the land they will reaffirm this at a covenant ritual at Mounts Grizim and Eival. Moshe begins to review the commandments that God has given to the Israelites. He begins by telling them that they must obliterate all the sites and objects tied to Canaanite idolatry. Even after they have done this, they are not to worship God in these places. Instead, they must bring their offerings and tithes to the central sanctuary in the place God will designate. Animals intended for food do not have to be brought to the sanctuary to be slaughtered.

The people are warned about false prophets. Even if such a person is able to produce signs and wonders, if he urges the people to turn away from God he is a false prophet and must be put to death. Similarly, any person, even a relative or close friend, who urges a Jew to worship "other gods" must be executed. If an entire town has turned away from God, all its inhabitants must be put to death and all the property within it must be destroyed.

The people are warned against extreme mourning rites and against eating non-kosher animals, and they are taught about the remission of debts in the sabbatical year and the obligation to support the poor. The three pilgrimage festivals are reviewed.

I. If however, there is a needy person among you, one of your kinsmen 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 kinsman. (Deuteronomy 15:7)

1. [If a rich man says to a poor man], "Why don't you go out and work at a job? Look at those thighs! Look at those legs! Look at that belly! Look at that brawn!" the Holy One will then say to the rich man, "Is it not enough for you that you gave him nothing of yours? Must you also begrudge what I gave him?" (Midrash Vayikra Rabbah 34:7)
2. If you are mean to your needy kinsman, not only will you not help him, but you will seek reasons to justify why he does not deserve to be helped. "He will cry out to the Lord against you" (15:9) – if that is the case, in Heaven they will begin to investigate your actions as well, "and you will incur guilt" – and they will remember all your sins. (Rabbi Shmelke of Nikolsburg, 1726-1778, Poland)
3. "Do not rob the poor because he is poor" (Proverbs 22:22). If you don't want to give tzedakah, don't give any, but do not steal from the poor man his poverty – do not say that he is not worthy of receiving tzedakah. (Rabbi Ze'ev of Strikov, 1807-1891, Poland)
4. We have been taught that when a poor man says "Provide me with clothes," he should be investigated. When he says "Feed me," he should not be investigated. (Talmud Bava Batra 9a)

5. Rabbi Chaim of Sanz (d. 1786) said: "The merit of charity is so great that I am happy to give to 100 beggars even if only one might actually be needy. Some people, however, act as if they are exempt from giving charity to 100 beggars in the event that one might be a fraud." (Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Wisdom*, p. 19)
6. Our rabbis taught: If a man pretends to have a blind eye, a swollen belly, or a shrunken leg, he will not leave this world before actually coming into such a condition. One who accepts charity and is not in need of it, his end will be that he will not leave this world before he comes to such a condition. (Talmud Ketubot 68a)

Sparks for Discussion

How do we determine who is entitled to receive our tzedakah? Our commentators clearly are suspicious of the motives of those who would investigate claims of poverty too closely. Why? Do you think fraud is very common among those who seek support from the community or from government programs? What about beggars on the street? Do you give money to panhandlers? Why? In a time when online fraud is likely, are we allowed to be more skeptical?

II. Rather, you must open your hand and lend him sufficient for whatever he needs. (Deuteronomy 15:8)

1. Our sages deduced from this verse that there is a positive commandment from the Torah to give tzedakah. Why, then, do we not recite a blessing before giving tzedakah? The reason is because we do not recite a blessing on any commandment whose fulfillment requires the participation of another person. After all, if the poor person refuses to take the tzedakah, the person will have uttered a blessing in vain. (Rashba--Rabbi Shlomo ben Aderet, 1235-1310, Spain)
2. Another reason why there is no blessing on giving tzedakah: A person has to be totally at ease with himself and joyful in order to recite a blessing. In most cases, a person is not totally at ease with giving away his money and the money is given begrudgingly. (Rabbi Mendel of Rimanov, 1745-1815, Poland)
3. Another reason: As you can only give tzedakah if there is a poor person to give it too, it is improper to recite a blessing at another person's misfortune. (Itturei Torah--Rabbi Aharon Yaakov Greenberg, 1900-1963, Poland and Israel)
4. Another reason: If you had to recite a blessing, the truly pious would go through so elaborate a ritual before reciting the blessing – they would wash their hands, say a *L'shem yichud* (a personal meditation announcing one's intention to perform a mitzvah) with the greatest of concentration, etc. – that the poor person would die of hunger in the interim. (Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Przysucha, 1765-1827, Poland)

Sparks for Discussion

Considering that we have *brachot* to say before fulfilling a mitzvah, do you find it surprising that we have no *bracha* to say before writing a check for tzedakah or dropping a few coins in the pushke? Our commentators offer several explanations to explain this. Which, if any, makes sense to you? Can you think of other important mitzvot for which there are no *brachot*? What explanation might you offer?