

Parashat R'eih: There shall be no needy...There will never cease to be needy

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Deuteronomy 15:4-11

אָפֶס כִּי לֹא יִהְיֶה בְּכֶם אֶבְיוֹן כִּי־בִרְךָ יְהוָה בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן־לְךָ נַחֲלָה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ: רַק אִם־שָׁמוּעַ תִּשְׁמָע בְּקוֹל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשׁוֹמֵר לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת־כָּל־הַמִּצְוֹת הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוְךָ הַיּוֹם: כִּי־יְהוּ אֱלֹהֶיךָ בִּרְכֶךָ כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתָּ וְהִעֲבַטְתָּ גוֹיִם רַבִּים וְאַתָּה לֹא תִעֲבֹט וּמִשְׁלַת בְּגוֹיִם רַבִּים וּבָךְ לֹא יִמְשְׁלוּ: { ס } כִּי־יְהִי בְּךָ אֶבְיוֹן מֵאַחַד אַחֶיךָ בְּאַרְצְךָ אֲשֶׁר־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לְךָ לֹא תֵאֶמֶץ אֶת־לִבְּךָ וְלֹא תִקְפֹּץ אֶת־גִּידְךָ מֵאַחֶיךָ הָאֶבְיוֹן: כִּי־פָתַח תִּפְתַּח אֶת־יָדְךָ לוֹ וְהִעֲבַט תִּעֲבִיטְנוּ דֵי מַחְסְרוֹ אֲשֶׁר יַחְסֹר לוֹ: הַשְׁמֵר לְךָ פְּרִי־יְהוָה דְּבַר עִם־לִבְּךָ בְּלִיעַל לֵאמֹר קָרְבָה שְׁנַת־הַשְּׁבַע שְׁנַת הַשְּׁמִטָה וְרָעָה עֵינֶיךָ בְּאַחֶיךָ הָאֶבְיוֹן וְלֹא תִתֵּן לוֹ וְקָרָא עֲלֶיךָ אֱלֹהֵי הַיְהוָה וְהָיָה בְּךָ חֲטָא: נָתַן וְתָתַן לוֹ וְלֹא־יִרְעַע לִבְּךָ בְּתַתָּךְ לוֹ כִּי בְגַלְלָהּ הַדְּבַר הַזֶּה יְבָרְכֶךָ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל־מַעֲשֶׂיךָ וּבְכָל־מַשְׁלַח יָדְךָ: כִּי לֹא־יִחַדֵּל אֶבְיוֹן מִקְרֵב הָאָרֶץ עַל־כֵּן אֲנִי מְצַוְךָ לֵאמֹר פָּתַח תִּפְתַּח אֶת־יָדְךָ לְאַחֶיךָ לְעֹנִיךָ וּלְאֶבְיֹנְךָ בְּאַרְצְךָ: { ס }

(4) There shall be no needy among you—since your God Adonai will bless you in the land that your God Adonai is giving you as a hereditary portion— (5) if only you heed your God Adonai and take care to keep all this Instruction that I enjoin upon you this day. (6) For your God Adonai will bless you as promised: you will extend loans to many nations, but require none yourself; you will dominate many nations, but they will not dominate you. (7) If, however, there is a needy person among you, one of your kin in any of your settlements in the land that your God Adonai is giving you, do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kin. (8) Rather, you must open your hand and lend whatever is sufficient to meet the need. (9) Beware lest you harbor the base thought, “The seventh year, the year of remission, is approaching,” so that you are mean and give nothing to your needy kin—who will cry out to Adonai against you, and you will incur guilt. (10) Give readily and have no regrets when you do so, for in return your God Adonai will bless you in all your efforts and in all your undertakings. (11) For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land, which is why I command you: open your hand to the poor and needy kin in your land.

Rashi on Deuteronomy 15:4

וְלִהְיוֹן הוּא אֹמֵר "כִּי לֹא יִחַדֵּל אֶבְיוֹן"? אֵלָּא בְּזִמּוֹן שְׂאֵתֶם עוֹשִׂים רְצוֹנוֹ שֶׁל מְקוֹם אֶבְיוֹנִים בְּאַחֲרִים וְלֹא בְּכֶם, וְכִשְׂאִין אֵתֶם עוֹשִׂים רְצוֹנוֹ שֶׁל מְקוֹם אֶבְיוֹנִים בְּכֶם:

“There shall be no needy among you,” but later it states, “For there will never cease to be needy ones.” When you do the will of God the needy will be among others and not among you, if, however, you do not the will of God, the needy will be among you.

Mishneh Torah, Gifts to the Poor, 7:3

לְפִי מָה שְׁחָסַר הָעֲנִי אַתָּה מְצַנֵּה לָתֵן לוֹ. אִם אֵין לוֹ כְּסוּת מְכַסִּים אוֹתוֹ. אִם אֵין לוֹ כְּלֵי בַיִת קוֹנִין לוֹ. אִם אֵין לוֹ אִשָּׁה מְשִׂיאִין אוֹתוֹ. וְאִם הִיתָה אִשָּׁה מְשִׂיאִין אוֹתָהּ לְאִישׁ. אֶפְלוּ הִיא דָרְכָה שֶׁל זֶה הָעֲנִי לְרַכֵּב עַל הַסּוּס וְעָבַד רַץ לְפָנָיו וְהָעֲנִי וְיָרַד מִנְכָסָיו קוֹנִין לוֹ סוּס לְרַכֵּב עָלָיו וְעָבַד לְרוּץ לְפָנָיו שְׁנַאֲמַר (דְּבָרִים טו ח) "דִּי מְחָסְרוֹ אֲשֶׁר יִחְסַר לוֹ". וּמְצַנֵּה אַתָּה לְהַשְׁלִים חֲסָרוֹנוֹ וְאֵין אַתָּה מְצַנֵּה לְעֲשֹׂרוֹ :

We are commanded to give a poor person according to what he lacks. If he lacks clothes, we should clothe him. If he lacks household utensils, we should purchase them for him. If he is unmarried, we should help him marry. And for an unmarried woman, we should find a husband for her.

Even if the personal habit of this poor person was to ride on a horse and to have a servant run before him and then he became impoverished and lost his wealth, we should buy a horse for him to ride and a servant to run before him. [This is implied by Deuteronomy 15:8 which] speaks [of providing him with] "enough to [fill the] lack that he feels." You are commanded to fill his lack, but you are not obligated to enrich him.

Rabbi Jen Clayman, "Kavod – Honor: Encounters with the Other," *The Mussar Torah Commentary*

While the word *kavod* is not used here, the concept is nevertheless present. In order to give people "sufficient to meet the need," we must have some level of understanding of what they are going through. Understanding derives from taking people seriously, from giving weight to their experiences. Conversely, it is easier to close our hearts to others and disregard their needs when we do not regard them as worthwhile, when we take their experiences too lightly.

Our society too often makes light of, or even ignores, the experiences of others. We ascribe genius to the wealthy and blame poverty on the poor. Policymakers and pundits claim that government assistance for poor people is equivalent to unnecessary coddling, while they simultaneously approve tax relief and massive corporate subsidies for the wealthiest among us, thereby honoring the rich and privileged while dishonoring the poor and unprivileged. Such actions reveal that underneath all the rhetoric about helping "ordinary" people, the "haves" are honored, while the "have-nots" are not. A society that values *kavod* would be far fairer and more just; it would require us to honor the experiences of everyone.

Notes on the Parsha

- List of laws, lots of reminders about when we get into the Land
- Sense of anxiety, but also reminding and reworking
- We get another list of the holidays, with a focus on the pilgrimage
- Also many laws about the centralization of worship –
 - There is a sense of change, anxiety, anticipation – whether its from desert to Israel, or pre-Deuteronomist to after
 - Scary but also an opportunity taken advantage of, a perspective we can use in our own lives

Read Deuteronomy 15:4-11

- What jumps out at you?
- Where might there be contradictions?
- What is the text concerned about

Read Rashi

- Rashi brings the standard explanation of these two ‘contradictory’ verses
- Does this make sense to you?
- What other reasons can we come up with for the text to be written this way?

On the back, a separate issue, about “whatever is sufficient to meet the need”

Mishnah Torah

- Maimonides, 12th C, law code, major development in Jewish thought
- How does he understand “sufficient”? Does this surprise you?
- He implies restoration to former self. Is this the right standard?

Rabbi Jen Clayman

- How does Kavod relate to Deuteronomy according to her? To you?
- What is Deuteronomy trying to teach us about how we treat the poor?