

Parashat Re'eh 5776, 2016:

The Unique Importance of Tzedakah

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, David ben Elazar Yehoshua, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, Leah bat Shifra and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* contains two seemingly contradictory *pasukim* (verses). Initially we are taught, “However, there will be no needy (*evyon*) among you, for the L-rd will surely bless you in the land the L-rd, your G-d, is giving you for an inheritance to possess.” (*Sefer Devarim* 15:4) Seven verses later, however, we encounter, “For there will never cease to be needy (*evyon*) within the land. Therefore, I command you, saying, you shall surely open your hand to your brother, to your poor one, and to your needy one in your land.” (15:11, these and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) The question is quite clear: “How can the first *pasuk* proclaim, ‘there will be no needy (*evyon*) among you’ while the second no less explicitly states, ‘For there will never cease to be needy (*evyon*) within the land?’” The second century *Midrash Sifrei* suggests the following answer: “When you (i.e. the Jewish people) perform the will of the Omnipresent, the poor will reside [solely] among the other nations; when, however, you fail to fulfill the will of the Omnipresent, then there will be poor among you.” (Section 118, translation and brackets my own)

Unfortunately, to paraphrase the *Sifrei*, we live at a time in history when there are many

poor among us. As such, we are obligated to fulfill Hashem's decree, as found in the second half of the latter verse: "You shall surely open your hand to your brother, to your poor one, and to your needy one in your land." This, of course, is the *mitzvah* of *tzedakah*. The word "*tzedakah*," derived from the root word "*tzedek*" connoting justice, is used precisely in this sense in the well-known verse, "Justice (*tzedek*), justice shall you pursue, that you may live and possess the land the L-rd, your G-d, is giving you." (*Sefer Devarim* 16:20) Therefore, *tzedakah* is an authentic representation of distributive justice, in the Jewish community, since, in essence, it embodies the fair apportionment of resources among various members of a community."

Tzedakah looms large in the collective mind and experience of our people. Little wonder, then, that the Rambam (Maimonides 1135-1204) devoted an entire chapter of his *Mishneh Torah* to a discussion of the singular import of *tzedakah*. Moreover, even though the Mishnah teaches us that Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi declared, "Be as careful with a minor *mitzvah* as with a major one, for you do not know the rewards of the *mitzvot*," (*Pirkei Avot* 2:1) Maimonides, basing himself upon *Talmud Bavli, Baba Batra* 9b, unhesitatingly wrote: "We are obligated to be careful with regard to the *mitzvah* of charity (*tzedakah*) to a greater extent than all [other] positive commandments... (*Sefer Zeraim, Matnot Aniyyim*, 10:1, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger) In other words, even though we are urged to treat all *mitzvot* as being equal to one another, *tzedakah*, in Maimonides' view, is somehow different in kind and degree than all other positive commandments.

At this point, and in classic Jewish cadence, we may very well ask, "How and why *is* this *mitzvah* different than all other positive commandments?" The Rambam responds to our

question in the following fashion: "... because charity (*tzedakah*) is an identifying mark for a righteous person, a descendant of Abraham, our Patriarch, as [the Torah] states: 'I have known him, because he commands his children... to perform charity (*tzedakah*).'" (*Sefer Bereishit* 18:19) Congruent with *Talmud Bavli*, *Yevamot* 79a, Maimonides is teaching us that giving *tzedakah* and performing other acts of *tzedek*, embody one of the essential character traits of a member of the Jewish people, so much so that "whenever a person is cruel and does not show mercy, his lineage is suspect" (i.e. we question whether or not they are Jewish, *Sefer Zeraim, Matnot Aniyim*, 10:2, based upon *Talmud Bavli, Beitzah* 32b)

Given the fundamental nature of *tzedakah* within the collective consciousness of the Jewish people, the Rambam urges us to look upon all members of *Klal Yisrael* (the Congregation of the Jewish people) as being inextricably bound to and responsible for one another: "*Kol Yisrael aravim zeh l'zeh.*" As such Maimonides states:

The entire Jewish people and all those who attach themselves to them are as brothers, as [the Torah] states: "You are children unto G-d your L-rd." (*Sefer Devarim* 14:1) And if a brother will not show mercy to a brother, who will show mercy to them? To whom [in this world] do the poor of Israel lift up their eyes? [Clearly, to one another.] (*Sefer Zeraim, Matnot Aniyim*, 10:2, brackets my own)

We have just entered *Chodesh Elul*, the month dedicated to introspection, self-analysis and authenticity in our *mitzvot* observance. It is equally the time, as well, to embrace new and better behaviors toward each other, and begin to live lives whereby *tzedakah* is truly the litmus test of who and what we are. With Hashem's help may this be so. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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They may also be found on YUTorah.org using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha's name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.