

“There Shall Be No Needy Among Us” – Parashat Re’eh 5774

Rabbi Michael Safra, August 23, 2014

I’m not sure how many of you watch *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart, the fake news program that is either really funny or quite obnoxious, depending on your viewpoint. But he does this bit when he returns from vacation where he’ll say something like, “It’s so nice to be back with you after my vacation. I hope you didn’t miss me, and anyway nothing really exciting happened while I was gone.”

Then there is a flash of news stories – plane crashes, wars, economic troubles - and the camera returns to Jon Stewart with his hands over his face for a “crisis scream.”

So let’s see. It’s the end of vacation; we haven’t had a sermon for 8 weeks. And in that time: three Israeli teens were kidnapped and murdered; there was a revenge killing, universally condemned by Jews and non-Jews alike; a war in Gaza; a passenger airplane shot out of the sky; people are rioting in St. Louis; the Islamic State is on the march; an Ebola outbreak in West Africa; and an immigration crisis at our borders. ... You kinda’ wish you could shut the door, close the shades, turn off the television, and walk away from it all. Why should I worry about everyone else’s problems?

The trouble is that their problems are our problems as well, and not just because we need to stop them “over there” before they hurt us “over here.” As Jews and as human beings, we share responsibility for other people’s troubles.

I invite you to turn to p. 1077 in the *Etz Hayim Humash*. The context is a description of Shmitah, the Sabbatical year – which, incidentally, begins in about a month on Rosh Hashanah. In Exodus and Leviticus, Shmitah is an agricultural mandate. But here it is economic; we are commanded to release the poor from their debts in the sabbatical year. And then we read in verse 4:

There shall be no needy among you – since the Lord your God will bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a hereditary portion – if only you heed the Lord your God and take care to keep all this Instruction (*mitzvah*) that I enjoin upon you this day. For the Lord your God will bless you as He has promised you: you will extend loans to many nations but require none yourself; you will dominate many nations, but they will not dominate you.

If, however (actually, a better translation): **When 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. Rather, פתח תפתח, **you must open your hand** and lend him sufficient for whatever he needs. Beware lest you harbor the base thought, ‘the seventh year, the year of remission (*shmitah*) is approaching,’ so that you are mean to your needy kinsman and give him nothing. He will cry out to the Lord against you, and you will incur guilt. Give to him readily and have no regrets when you do so, for in return the Lord your God will bless you in all your efforts and in all your undertakings. **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 kinsman in your land.”

The Rabbis are puzzled by the sequence. In verse 4, “There shall be no needy among you”; and then in verse 7, “When there is a needy person among you” and in verse 11, “For there will never cease to

be needy ones in your land”. The 11th century scholar Rashi, citing an earlier Midrash, says that it all depends on our commitment to the commandments: If you observe *mitzvot*, particularly the Sabbatical laws, there will be no poor among you; but if you fail to observe, there will be poor people and you will be forced to help.

Now of course we can't take seriously the notion that our observance of ritual commandments makes a difference for the plight of the poor. The world just doesn't work that way. But the larger principle is key. Poverty does not happen by itself. We can't just blame the poor for their predicament and pretend that the rest of society has nothing to do with it. Rashi is saying that our actions matter; we can help determine whether there will be needy among us.

And it's not just poverty.

The crisis in Ferguson Missouri has pushed a lot of us to think about the state of race in America today. I can paraphrase Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who said that there is never an excuse for thuggery or violence or looting by people who feel aggrieved. The Police should not feel threatened because they put on a uniform to serve the community. But 50 years after the passage of the Civil Rights Act, there are still well-documented challenges in the African American community – from poverty to unemployment to a host of social-cultural issues.

A part of us wants to say that these issues are the results not of systematic racial bias and discrimination, but of poor choices by too many individuals. Personal choice and individual responsibility are hallmark values of our society; we need look no further than the opening line of today's *parasha*, “Re'eh, See I set before you this day blessing and curse” – make the right choice. But as the New York Times columnist Charles Blow writes, there is no “either/or” here. Individual choice is not enough to explain it. A recent CBS News poll suggested that while most Americans do see real progress since the 1960s, 66% – two thirds, 65% of whites and 88% of blacks – believe there is some or a lot of discrimination today. It's not just about race. The fact is that Americans do not all share the same educational, economic, or judicial opportunities. There are legitimately competing solutions to these problems, but we cannot pretend that their challenges are entirely separate from ours. Our deeds matter. We have a role and a responsibility in the effort to create a more perfect society.

Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch of Nadvorna, the late 18th century Hasidic preacher, describes the responsibility as being more like God. The human tendency, he says, is to hold wealth like a sponge. So long as the hand is open, nothing comes out; we *squeeze* to let the water flow. But that is not the case with God. When the heavens are “closed”, there is drought; God *opens* the heavens and the rains gush out. And God's stream is endless – as long as the hand is open, we experience the blessing. The divine sponge never runs out of water.

Our task, says the Hasidic master, is to be more like God. “פתח תפתח את ידך, You must **open your hand**,” to lend whatever the distressed person needs. We all share the responsibility of helping to spread God's blessing around.

Going in a completely different direction, I saw an article in *Tablet* by a woman who decided after more than 20 years that she was quitting her Reform synagogue. It's a familiar story: her kids went through the school; she and her husband tried to get involved in various committees but they decided the

temple was no longer “speaking to them”. Now, they were not “switching” to another synagogue; she was abandoning membership entirely because, in her words: “I didn’t need to belong to a temple to feel Jewish.”

And that’s where I had it. Of course she is technically correct. Identity is an intensely personal thing, as is the relationship with God. But affiliation is not just about me and my identity and what “they” do that I find worthwhile. That’s a part of it, but affiliation is also about what *I* do to enable the rest of the community to function. When that woman’s children were in religious school, there was an older generation that remained connected and actually subsidized their education. When “the synagogue” takes a stand for Israel or organizes a project to help the poor or innovates to expand the reach of Torah, who’s doing that? It’s not just the staff or the people who are able to participate at that particular day and time. It’s everyone who supports the institution. We cannot abandon the needs of the community as a whole, even as we recognize that our individual needs change over time.

A favorite teaching from Pirkei Avot, the remarkable collection of early rabbinic teachings, continues to haunt:

There are four types of people.

One who says “שלי שלי ושלך שלי, What’s mine is mine and what’s yours is mine” – that person is wicked.

“What’s mine is yours and what’s yours is yours” – that person is saintly.

“What’s mine is yours and what’s yours is mine” – that is naïve.

And what about the “ordinary” person - “What’s mine is mine and what’s yours is yours”? That seems ordinary, but some call it “*Middat Sedom*”, the characteristic of Sodom, the most wicked community in history. They built up walls: “I worry about me and you worry about you; my problem is not your problem and your problem is not mine.” And for that attitude they were reduced to fire and brimstone.

That’s the essential message of Shemitah: My stuff doesn’t really belong to me; “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof.” God gives us the opportunity and the right to exploit, to derive benefit, to amass wealth. And in return, God demands that we look out beyond our walls to recognize the needy who should not but probably always will live among us, and that we open our hands.

As we now begin the monthlong journey of introspection leading up to Rosh Hashanah, let us ask ourselves: What can I do? How can I matter? How can I make a difference so that more people will experience God’s blessing and society as a whole might realize the promise that “There will be no needy among us”? Shabbat shalom.