

INSIGHTS

Into The Weekly Parsha

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"May her Neshama have an Aliya!"

22 IYAR

Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

PARSHAS BEHAR-BECHUKOSAI

Brotherly Love

If your brother becomes impoverished and his hand falters in your proximity, you shall hold on to him [...] (25:35).

A puzzling Midrash Tanchuma discusses the concept of having the responsibility to help a poor person. The Midrash states that if we don't help a poor person now, the following year he will need a lot more help (very similar to what Rashi comments on our *possuk*; see Rashi ad loc). The Midrash ends by saying that if we neglect to fulfill our responsibility to help we are actually robbing the poor.

This Midrash statement requires clarification: Why is it that if we don't help a poor person he will need exponentially more help later? Perhaps we can reasonably assume that he will need twice as much help (last year's shortfall and this year's shortfall), yet Rashi says that not helping immediately will cause the future need to be more than five times the present need. How can this be true?

Additionally, how is not giving charity equal to stealing from the poor? It seems very difficult to equate not giving charity with stealing when one is a sin of omission and the other is a sin of commission.

We find a remarkable Gemara (*Brachos* 6b) that discusses an enigmatic admonition from the prophet Yeshaya: "What you have stolen from the poor is in your houses" (*Yeshaya* 3:14). Rashi (*Brachos* 6b) explains that the Gemara wonders why we are singling out stealing from the poor. After all, stealing from the rich is also a terrible sin! Additionally, it doesn't even make sense to expend the

effort to steal from the poor; how much can one realistically take? (As the famous bank robber Willie Sutton supposedly answered when asked why he robs banks: "because that's where the money is.")

To explain what it means to steal from the poor the Gemara says, "This is referring to a situation where one greets you and you ignore him." Obviously, this is improper, even boorish, behavior; but why do Chazal refer to this as stealing? What in fact did you actually take?

The answer is that you took his self-respect. By ignoring his friendly overture you actually made a very clear statement about what you think of him – that he isn't an entity worthy of a response. You denigrated his very existence. Obviously, this is very painful for anybody to experience, but it is particularly devastating to a poor person who already feels depressed about his situation and his stature.

The *possuk* in this week's *parsha* instructs us very explicitly on how we should view a fellow Jew who has fallen on hard times, "If your brother becomes impoverished [...]." In other words, we have to treat someone who needs our help as we would a blood brother. When a person helps his brother, he does not consider it charity; a person ought to consider it a privilege to be able to help his family because he wants to see them succeed. A child who receives help from his parents isn't made to feel like a



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charity case. Quite the opposite, he feels love and support, and ultimately validation, from his parents.

When we ignore the needs of a poor person we are taking away his self-esteem, and telling him that he isn't worthy of our help. Destroying a person's self-respect will predictably lead to dire consequences. A person with low self-esteem has no interest in improving his situation because he feels inadequate, incapable, and unworthy of better circumstances. This is why if you don't help a poor person the following year it becomes exponentially worse; destroying his self-esteem creates a devastating downward spiral.

Therefore, when we give charity, we must make every effort to ensure that the recipient doesn't feel like a charity case; he must feel that it is our honor to be able to help because we believe in him and respect him. If a person knows that he has a backer who believes in him, he will inevitably "pull himself up by the bootstraps" and improve his own situation. The Torah is teaching us that the antidote to poverty is creating a relationship with someone who needs our help. Ultimately, this validation enables them to help themselves.

Jewish American or American Jew

If you walk in my statutes, and keep my commandments, and do them [...] (26:3).

The second *parsha* of this week's double *parsha* Torah reading delves into great detail about the rewards for following the commandments and the absolutely horrific consequences for not doing so. Interestingly, Rashi (ad loc) actually redefines walking in the statutes as being deeply immersed in the study of Torah. Likewise, when the Torah begins to describe the tragic consequences of not listening to Hashem (see 26:14 and Rashi ad loc), Rashi comments that these terrible punishments come as a result of not being deeply immersed in Torah study.

Yet when the Torah explains why all these terrible consequences will eventually befall the Jewish people, the Torah explicitly, and repeatedly, lays the blame on Bnei Yisroel for not keeping the laws of *Shemittah* (see 26:34-35 ad 26:43). In fact, Rashi himself goes through the calculation of the years of exile to reconcile it exactly with the amount of *Shemittah* years Bnei Yisroel didn't keep while in Eretz Yisroel, and states that this inexorably led to the expulsion of Bnei Yisroel from Eretz Yisroel (see Rashi 26:35). So why does Rashi feel compelled to cite the sin of not being immersed in Torah study as the key failing that led to the exile of Bnei Yisroel when it seems to contradict what the Torah outright tells us?

As explained in prior editions of INSIGHTS, the key test in leaving Egypt was whether Bnei Yisroel identified themselves as Jews or as Egyptians. This is why they had to place the blood on the doorways of their houses; to visibly declare that it was a house of proud God fearing Jews. This explains many of the details relating to who left Egypt and who didn't.

Perhaps the greatest spiritual test in the history of the Jewish people has been that of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The clearest example is the ubiquitous adoption by the Jewish community of the surrounding secular

culture. A simple but telling proof is the obsession with sports. While our Jewish institutions (*shuls*, schools, *mikvaot*, etc.) have to beg people to attend their functions, these very same religious Jews clamor to spend \$4,000 for a seat at a playoff basketball or football game.

Historically, Jewish exile has brought Jews closer to one another and caused them to identify themselves in a distinctly Jewish manner. A prime example of this was the development of a uniquely Jewish language by which to communicate. In European countries there was Yiddish, in the Spanish countries there was Ladino, and in Iran it was a Judaeo-Farsi dialect. In other words, and for a variety of reasons, we chose to culturally identify as Jews.

Today, Jews are more comfortable identifying with sports teams. We wear clothes and other memorabilia carrying our "home team" colors and logos. We proudly adorn our children with team jerseys of the local sports' "heroes." Some of us go so far as to obtain significant sports memorabilia and decorate the walls of our homes with it. This odd behavior is unique to the current American (and perhaps western society) exile. Can anyone possibly imagine our great grandparents in Europe wearing a sports jersey of the Polish national team? They would probably look at you cross-eyed and say, "What connection do I have to a couple of crazy goyim kicking a ball down the field like six year olds?"

The entire purpose of Hashem throwing us into exile is to bring us closer as a people; to learn to take care of one another, reinforce within us the unique qualities we have as Jews, and make us appreciate who we are. After all, nothing brings us together more than a mortal enemy and an existential threat. Today we have lost sight of this ideal; is it any wonder it has led to one of the greatest spiritual holocausts in the history of the Jewish people? We are embracing the

surrounding non-Jewish cultures and ideals and it is killing us.

This is what *Shemittah* was supposed to reinforce. While we don't work the fields or harvest the fruits, we are brought closer as a nation, and a familial feeling is developed. Anybody can walk onto anybody else's field and take whatever he needs, as if it was one of their closest relatives property. Just as I would be comfortable walking into my sister's home and opening the refrigerator to see what she had to eat, so too I can pick my neighbors fruit. *Shemittah* provides a sense of shared space like one big family.

This is also the reason that *Shemittah* causes all personal loans to be cancelled. After all, if my brother can't pay me back would I really want to pressure him? Would I ever dream of charging my mother interest on a loan?

The fact that Bnei Yisroel didn't keep a single *Shemittah* means that they were estranged from one another. Naturally, the consequence for this lesson not learned is to be exiled and forced to learn how much we need each other. Unfortunately, only by being thrown to the wolves of the nations of the world, where we are constantly hounded for being who we are, do we learn how badly we need one another as Jews.

Rashi is saying that if we had only immersed ourselves in Torah we could have avoided all the pitfalls. That alone would have been enough to establish our unique cultural and familial bond. We would then understand that we are a unified nation; and that would have been the basis on which to build a cohesive and supportive society. As Chazal teach us; the study of Torah builds unity – *Talmidei Chachamim* bring shalom to the world (*Brachos* 64b). Had we properly devoted and immersed ourselves in Torah we would have avoided the need for the punishment of exile.



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