

Lo T'Ametz Levav'kha, Shabbat Re'eh 5779

Rabbi Michael Safra

This weekend, of course, is Labor Day. Weather and traffic reports emphasize that this is summer's last hurrah, a chance for one more trip to the beach or family barbecue, but that was not the original intention. Congress legislated the legal holiday in 1894, in an effort to build bridges after a particularly brutal response to a strike by the American Railroad Union in Chicago. Working conditions then were unsafe and often consisted of 12-hour days and seven-day weeks. I want to dedicate my remarks this morning, if not specifically to "The American Worker," then to people around us in need; people whose contributions and presence in our midst may go unnoticed; people who may be exploited or otherwise harmed by the systemic aspects of racism, poverty, and inequity.

There is a story of the Amshinover Rebbe, Rabbi Yaakov Dovid Kalish, who lived in the middle of the 19th century, that that he once visited the home of a particularly wealthy Jew to solicit him on behalf of a fellow who had fallen on hard times. And the wealthy man demurred – "Who is this man? I don't really know him." The rebbe was persistent, and he asked this wealthy man: "Do you pray every day?" And the man answered: "*Mah she'elah zo hi?* What kind of a question is that? Of course, certainly, I pray every day."

The rebbe continued, "So how does the *Amidah* begin?"

"Praised is the God of our Ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob." Today we would have added Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah.

And the rebbe asked, "So, when did these ancestors of ours actually live?" And the wealthy man answered that it was more than 3,000 years ago. "So how can it be," the rebbe asked, "that you feel like you know these people who lived 3,000 years ago well enough to mention them in your prayers and request divine blessing on the merits of your relationship with them, but when I come to ask for assistance for one fellow – a distant relative, a person who lives in your community – that you can claim the relationship is too distant to warrant your assistance?"

It seems natural to think of *tzedakah* in concentric circles – I have a greater responsibility to my family, to my people, then I might to a complete stranger. But the message is clear. We can't use one set of responsibilities as justification to ignore others, because the need is so great.

I invite you to turn in your *humashim* to p. 1077. Parashat Re'eh, is a long portion with multiple themes. Here in chapter 15, the topic is *tzedakah*, and we read in verse 7:

If, however, there is a needy person among you, [why "if"? Because the paragraph just before states that there will never be needy among you if you follow the commandments; but that was wishful thinking, and this is reality]. If there is a needy person, 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, you must open your hand and lend him sufficient for whatever he needs.”

Now, the Hebrew for those words, “Do not harden your heart,” is strange. *Lo t’amez et levav’kha*. We have other instances where the Torah speaks of hardening the heart, particularly Pharaoh in Egypt. But there, the word is either *hikshah*, hardened; or *hizek*, strengthened. This is the only place where the word *t’amez* is used in connection with one’s heart. Our translation may be a fair one, but Rashi – following the Midrash– asks why this word *t’amez* is used. Maybe this is “hardening the heart” in a different way.

Rashi says, “*Yesh lekha adam she-mitztaer im yiten im lo*, There are people who worry – *mitztaer* sounds a little like *t’amez* – they go back in forth in their mind whether to give or not to give. “*I’khakh ne-emar lo t’amez*, and that’s why the text says ‘do not harden your heart,’ *lo t’amez*.” It isn’t that the person is obstinate; he doesn’t hate poor people; he isn’t evil like Pharaoh. He worries, *mitztaer*.

And what is he worried about?

I think it might be some of the same things we worry about. Is this really a need I should support? Maybe I should save my money to help a different person, maybe a relative; in today’s context, maybe a fellow Jew is more deserving. Maybe this person isn’t poor; how can I really know? Maybe I don’t have enough money to support this individual.

And the Torah is telling us not to overthink. Tzedakah doesn’t work that way; it isn’t a zero-sum game. Opening up to another person, taking on a new cause is more likely to get me into the habit of giving than it is to suddenly make me destitute. More giving leads to more giving, not an appreciable diminution of resources. And that’s not to mention the other positive effects. Studies suggest that giving makes us happier; it is good for our health; it promotes cooperation and social connection; evokes gratitude; and giving is contagious.

Rashi continues on the second half of the verse, “*Yesh l’kha adam she-poshet et yado v’kof-tzah*, There are people who extend their hands to the poor and then draw them in; *lekhakh ne’emar ‘v’lo tikpotz’*, and that’s why the verse concludes, ‘and do not shut your hand to the needy.’” Don’t act on the fear that helping another person will negatively affect my bottom line.

At the beginning of the summer, our JCRC hosted a conversation at B’nai Israel to discuss racial equity in our county, as Noa alluded to earlier. The statistics are alarming, particularly for a community like ours that prides itself for its diversity, generally progressive outlook, and all-around high quality of life. The unemployment rate among blacks is 5 times higher than that of whites. The average household income for Blacks and Latinos is just over half that of whites, and about 30% lower than Asians. Three times more Black and Latino residents of Montgomery County live in poverty than do whites. Our group met to talk about these numbers and to think about what greater racial equity might look like.

It's not without controversy; the path forward is not entirely clear. The reasons for these disparities are complicated; it isn't enough to say "systemic racism" as if all wealth is misbegotten or illegitimate.

There are the "zero-sum" questions – how might this affect *me*? If more resources are directed to areas designated as underserved, does that imply money being *taken away* from areas that are doing well? Is there a way to bring people *up* without bringing other people *down*? Our Jewish community consistently worries about priorities – does turning our eyes to individuals we do not know in the larger community mean turning away from Israel or other needs right here?

In general, we can and do ask if Jews have a greater responsibility to support Jewish causes than to do Tikkun Olam for refugees on our southern border. Many worry about the feasibility of our national ideal to bring in the tired, poor, huddled masses yearning to be free. That sounds good, but are they going to take *my* job, travel on *my* roads, use *my* kids' schools, redirect *my* community's resources?

These are legitimate, or at least reasonable concerns; but that's why the Torah says "*lo t'amez et levav'kha.*" At the moment when you have the opportunity to help another, don't worry about those things. Don't worry that supporting a just cause now will cause stress sometime in the future – because it won't; and, in any case, that is then and this is now. Or as Hillel famously put it, "If I am *not* for myself, who will be for me; but if I am *only* for myself, what am I?"

The same descendants of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah who created charity societies in the Old World; the same descendants who settled Jewish refugees in the New World and then marched with African Americans in their fight to own property, vote, and be treated equally under the law. ... We still have work to do on Shabbat Re'eh, and on Labor Day, and on Rosh Hodesh, and throughout the year. "Do harden your heart or shut your hand to the needy. Rather, you must open your hand and lend sufficiently for whatever he needs." We must give, with the hope that our commitment to giving will bring blessing to us, the Jewish people, and our entire world.

Shabbat Shalom.