

There shall be no needy among you--since the Lord your God will bless you in the land which the Lord your God is giving you as a hereditary portion--if only you heed the Lord your God..." --- Deut. 15:4-5

For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land, which is why I command you: open your hand to the poor... --- Deut. 15:11

As long as you perform God's will, the poor will be among others and not among you. But if you do not perform God's will, the poor will be among you. --- Rashi

Mar Zutra said: Even the poor person who is sustained by charity, must give charity. --- Talmud, **Gittin** 7b

*If you lend money to My people, to the poor among you... (Ex. 22:24) This implies that if one of your own people or an outsider require funds, the first takes precedence; a poor person or a rich person who require assistance, the first takes precedence; the needy of your own family take precedence over the needy of your town, and those of your town take precedence over those from another town. --- Talmud, **Baba Metzia** 71a*

Rabbi Abba used to bind money in his cloth, sling it on his back, and place himself at the disposal of the poor. (I.e., they would undo the cloth behind him, and he would not see those who took.) He would however cast his eye sideways, to prevent rogues from taking. --- Talmud, **Ketubot** 67b

Our greatest spiritual heroes...Hillel, Rabbi Joshua, Rabbi Chanina...all lived in the most dire circumstances and earned their living as woodchopper, cobbler, porter, drawer of water, and by their example taught the teaching: "Live no better on Shabbat than on the rest of the week, but be independent." --- Talmud, **Pesachim** 113a; R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, 19th c. Germany

Many mitzvot are connected with the subject of tzedakah. This is similar to the number of organs in man's body which depend on the soul for survival. Some organs more than others are particularly dependent upon the health of the primary life-sustaining force. This is true in society at large, where the poor might often be led to engage in transgressions and tzedakah helps maintain a healthier society in this way; so is it also true within each one of us. The person whose hand is not sufficiently open to the poor, is insufficiently unified with the Higher, life-giving Force. --- R. Menachem Recanati, Italy, 13th-14th c.

Giving tzedakah “unifies,” so-to-speak, God’s Name. The coin that is given parallels the letter “**Yud**,” which, like the coin, is little more than a small dot. The five fingers of the giver’s hand parallel the letter “**Heh**,” whose gematria equals five. The giver’s outstretched arm parallels the letter “**Vav**,” which has an elongated shape. Finally, The five fingers of the recipient’s hand parallel the second letter “**Heh**.” --- R. Chaim Pallagi (Izmir, Turkey; 1788-1868) writes in the name of R. Yitzchak Luria, the “Ari”; Tzefat, 1534-1572), **Zekhirah L’Chaim Al Haggadah Shel Pesach**, p.88

There is a deep tension in our chapter. The opening verses imply the presence of poverty in Israelite society. But Deuteronomy is not content merely to ameliorate the suffering of the poor. It dreams bigger, telling the people that if they obey God's will, poverty can be eliminated. *There shall be no needy among you... if only you heed the Lord your God and take care to keep all this Instruction which I enjoin upon you this day.* (15:4-5) (This refers not just to the laws about treatment of the poor, but to Deuteronomy's social and religious vision more broadly.) And yet the Torah seems skeptical that the utopian possibility it holds out will be realized in practice, so it pulls back again into a sober realism: *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 midst.* (15:11) Although verse 11 offers what is clearly a "more realistic appraisal" of Israel's future, verses 4-5 make a claim that is at once inspiring and unsettling: Although there all but surely will be poor amongst Israel, there need not be.

The Torah's simple but radical claim is that the plight of the poor is our responsibility. A society in which there are no economic second-chances, let alone one with a permanent underclass, is intolerable to God. To be sure, it can be difficult to discern just how the Torah's vision should guide us in modern times. Ideological polemics notwithstanding, there is no one-to-one correspondence between Deuteronomy 15 and any particular contemporary social policy. But we must avoid the temptation to domesticate the Torah, to admire its dream even as we silence its message. It is a religious imperative to build a society in which the poor are seen and treated as truly equal, and to work to ensure that entrenched poverty does not rob people of the dignity of opportunity. Well-intentioned people will no doubt disagree about how best these goals can be achieved, but we are nevertheless obligated to keep them firmly in mind. Cynicism and empty rhetoric have no place in a life of religious integrity; we are summoned to open both our hearts and our hands. Deuteronomy makes clear that only a society truly committed to alleviating the suffering of those ravaged by poverty is worthy of God's blessing. --- Rabbi Shai Held, 2014

What do you do when two verses in the Torah, one a few passages after the other, totally contradict one another? Which is the truth? One verse teaches that there will no longer be poverty in the land. The other verse teaches that there will always be poor in the land. How can both be true?

Allow me to suggest a solution to this contradiction. It is a solution that I have not found in any commentaries. In my solution, the first verse deals with our own poverty, the second verse deals with other people's poverty. With this interpretation, we can discover some profound insights into poverty.

Let us start with the second verse *For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land*. This is speaking to those who have means, who are able to earn a living. When we earn money, we must never hide our heads from those who have less than us. We need to see the poor, and then give to the poor. The Hebrew word for charity is tzedakah, a word which actually means “justice” or “righteousness.” We should never say, “I earned it, it is mine, let the poor earn their own money.”

No matter how affluent a society, there will always be the needy in the land. We must always have our eyes open and put our hands out to the needy. The second verse is how we look at other people. It is a call to give, a call that will never cease. Only in a perfect world can we stop thinking about tzedakah.

There is a Hasidic story about a very righteous man who always gave a huge amount to the poor. He passed away and people gathered from far and wide to pay tribute to his righteousness. About one month later the righteous man appeared in a dream of the rabbi. The dream was vivid. The rabbi asked him, "Tell me, you must be in heaven, a perfect place. What is it like?" The righteous man answered, "It is beautiful, but I don't like it." The rabbi was surprised, "How can you not like it?" The man answered, "In heaven, there is no poverty, and so there is no chance to give tzedakah." There may be no poverty in heaven, but in this world the poor will never cease and there will always be opportunities to give.

So what about the first verse, the one that teaches, *there shall be no needy among you*. This verse speaks of how people view themselves. No one should see themselves as poor, as unable to provide for themselves. In particular, no one should see himself or herself as a victim of poverty. If a person does not have means to provide for their needs or their family's needs, that person should not be cursing the rich, society, racism, or some other malevolent force out there. They should say, "I am not poor and I am not a victim." --- Rabbi Michael Gold, 2003

In an attempt to resolve this apparent contradiction, the commentators interpret the first statement in a fascinating way. Due to the singular form of the verse, *there shall be no needy among you*, the rabbis understood this pronouncement as a reference to the individual: "there shall not be in you a destitute person." In other words, the Torah commands us to avoid our own poverty. As Rav Yehudah taught in the name of Rav: "The verse states, *In you there will be no destitute*. This teaches that your financial concerns take precedence over those of everyone else (Talmud, **Baba Metzia** 33a).

The mitzvah of ensuring one's own financial security has many different applications in Jewish law. In the realm of tzedakah, it is forbidden to impoverish oneself through exceedingly generous donations. The Talmud sets the limit for the maximum charitable contribution at twenty percent of one's wealth (**Ketubot** 50a). In addition, Jewish law suggests that charity begins in the home: "The Torah commands that the needy of his household comes first, then the poor of his city, and they in turn have priority over the poor of another city. Rabbi Saadiah Gaon wrote that a person is required to put his own sustenance first, and is not duty bound to give charity to others until after providing for his own (**Tur, Yoreh Deah** 251).

This Jewish strategy of prioritizing yourself first and then giving to those nearest you, in relation and in location, may seem painfully obvious to the modern American Jew. One might argue that in American society, we have taken the focus on self-preservation to an unhealthy extreme. Rabbis are certainly not rushing to lecture their congregants about the importance of putting oneself first and avoiding excessive generosity. In this culture, the desire to amass more and more wealth creates in us the illusion of relative “poverty.” Do I ever have enough for myself and for my family to give to others? Especially at this time of frightening market volatility, the fear for our future financial security may prevent many of us from ever giving freely to charity.

Therefore, the Talmud offers an important counterbalance to its message of self-concern. While Rav taught that one's financial concerns take precedence over those of everyone else, he continued with this caveat: “But whoever establishes such [a way of life] for himself will, in the end, come to poverty.” (**Bava Metzia 33a**)

As Rashi explains, a person who constantly fears for his own loss will throw off “the yoke of **gemilut chasadim** and tzedakah.” When one feels exempt from the obligation to act charitably, he is doomed to an impoverished life. In fact, Yosef Karo, the great 16th century legal codifier, writes that everyone is required to give tzedakah. “Even the indigent person sustained by charity must give from what has been given to him” (**Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 248**).

However, despite these rabbinic warnings against egocentric behavior, I believe that the Torah still provides us with a powerful message when it teaches that *There shall not be in you a needy person (ev'yon)*. The choice of language is instructive. The Hebrew word used in this verse for a needy person, **ev'yon**, is not the most common expression for a poor person (**oni**). Rashi explains the etymology of the word **ev'yon** from the Hebrew word **ta'avah**, longing or desire. Therefore, according to Rashi, an **ev'yon** is one “who longs for everything.”

The true danger of living with a sense of longing is that we feel bereft of the ability to give openly to others. When we are depleted of our own resources, we are incapable of providing for those around us. A rabbi who does not attend to her own spiritual needs will not be able to teach and inspire others. A doctor who does not safeguard his own health will lack the strength to heal the sick. A parent who does not find fulfillment and meaning in his own life will not be able to empower and guide his children.

The Torah commands us to avoid becoming an **ev'yon** - a person who is longing for everything. The purpose of this mitzvah is not to avoid becoming a giving person, to barricade ourselves from the world and to hold on greedily to what little we have. I believe that the Torah is encouraging us to address the longings within ourselves so that we may become more and more generous with those around us. ---Rabbi Lauren Berkun

When one departs from the world, one's hands are open, as if to say, "I inherited nothing from this world. --- **Midrash Kohelet Rabbah** 5:14