

A Weekly Shabbat Torah message from Rabbi Rheins

A Contradiction in the Torah?

Sometimes we look at the state of the world and see so many problems that we can feel overwhelmed and powerless. A list of all the dire issues facing our society and our environment is depressingly long. But there is hope that we are still capable of creating a more peaceful, respectful world. Hope, not in miracles but in the things that we can do to make things better.

In this week's Torah portion, *Re-eh*, contains a seemingly contradictory teaching about the poor in our communities.

Deuteronomy 15:4-5; 6- 11

ד אָפֶס כִּי לֹא יִהְיֶה-בְּךָ אֲבִיּוֹן כִּי-בְרַךְ יְהוָה בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן-לְךָ נַחֲלָה
לְרִשְׁתָּהּ: הֲרַק אִם-שָׁמוֹעַ תִּשְׁמָע בְּקוֹל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשׁוֹר לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת-כָּל-הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת
אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי מִצְוֶה הַיּוֹם: ז כִּי-יִהְיֶה בְּךָ אֲבִיּוֹן מֵאַחַד אַחֶיךָ בְּאַחַד שְׁעָרֶיךָ בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר-יְהוָה
אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לְךָ לֹא תֵאֲמָן אֶת-לִבְּךָ וְלֹא תִקְפֹּץ אֶת-יְדֶיךָ מֵאַחֶיךָ הָאֲבִיּוֹן: ח כִּי-פָתַח תִּפְתַּח
אֶת-יְדֶיךָ לּוֹ וְהֶעֱבַט תִּעְבִּיטֵנוּ דִּי מַחֲסֵרוֹ אֲשֶׁר יַחֲסֵר לּוֹ: ט הַשְּׁמֹר לְךָ פֶּן-יִהְיֶה דָבָר
עִם-לִבְּךָ בְּלִיעַל לֵאמֹר קָרְבָה שְׁנַת-הַשְּׁבַע שְׁנַת הַשְּׁמִטָה וְרַעַה עֵינֶיךָ בְּאַחֶיךָ הָאֲבִיּוֹן וְלֹא
תִתֵּן לּוֹ וְקָרָא עָלֶיךָ אֱלֹהֵי-יְהוָה וְהָיָה בְּךָ חַטָּא: י נָתַן תִּתֵּן לּוֹ וְלֹא-יִרַע לִבְּךָ בְּתִתֵּן לּוֹ כִּי
בְּגִלְלֵי הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה יִבְרַךְ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל-מַעֲשֶׂיךָ וּבְכָל מְשֻׁלַּח יְדֶיךָ: יא כִּי לֹא-יִחַדֵּל אֲבִיּוֹן
מִקְרֵב הָאָרֶץ עַל-כֵּן אֲנֹכִי מִצְוֶה לֵאמֹר פָּתַח תִּפְתַּח אֶת-יְדֶיךָ לְאַחֶיךָ לְעֹנִיךָ וְלְאֲבִינֶךָ
בְּאֶרֶץ:

⁴ *There shall be no needy among you -- since Adonai your God will bless you in the land that the Adonai your God is giving you as a hereditary portion.* ⁵
But you must follow Adonai your God and take care to keep all this Instruction that I enjoin upon you this day. --- ⁷ *If, however, there is a needy person among you, one of your kinsmen in any of your settlements in the land that Adonai your God is giving you, do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kinsman.* ⁸ *Rather, you must open your hand and lend him sufficient for whatever he/she needs.*
⁹ *Beware lest you harbor the base thought, "The seventh year, the year of remission, is near," so that you are mean to your needy kinsman and give him nothing. He will cry out to Adonai against you, and you will incur guilt.* ¹⁰
Give to him readily and have no regrets when you do so, for in return Adonai your God will bless you in all your efforts and in all your undertakings. ¹¹ *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.*

How are we to reconcile these seemingly contradictory statements: "There shall be no needy among you" (15:4), and just a few lines later, "For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land" (15:11)?

On the one hand, the Torah claims that it is possible that, one day, poverty could be eradicated. But that is contingent on our living up to the Torah's ethical and moral laws and standards ---a code of conduct that very well may be beyond reasonable

expectation.

It is not as though we've never tried. Both FDR's "New Deal" in the 1930's and LBJ's "Great Society" legislative initiative in the mid-1960s made admirable strides. Alas, despite those noble efforts, poverty still afflicts far too many. Perhaps the goal of eliminating poverty was but an ideal that is simply beyond our human capacity. Indeed, doesn't the Torah admit that "*For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land*" (15:11). While that line seems to contradict the message from 15:4, it also serves to remind us that while we may never achieve the morally perfect society that can eradicate poverty, we can be generous with the poor and thereby relieve some of their suffering. "Do not harden your heart." "Open your hand." And give "sufficient for whatever he/she needs."

And there it is. We can best address the ills of society through our action. God's blessings are in our hearts and hands. With open hearts and hands we can respond to those suffer with love and compassion.

This Shabbat begins Rosh Chodesh Elul which marks one month before the High Holy Days. As we prepare for the New Year 5779, let us reflect on the ways we could have responded with greater kindness, compassion and generosity. *Tikkun Olam*, the correction and perfection of the world will not happen with one grand event. Rather, it will take place bit by bit, one loving act at a time.

Shabbat Shalom!

Rick