

8-8-14 Message to Roeh Israel Abilene

Torah Portion: Deuteronomy 11:26 – 16:17 *Re'eh* (See)

Haftarah: Isa 54:11-55:5

Suggested Acheron K'tuvim: Luke 16:19-31

G-d's Welfare System

Central question of this message: How are we to treat the poor among us?

We are in parasha *Re'eh*, which means “see.” Its name is taken from the first word of the parasha in English, and the first word in the original Hebrew.

Deut 11:26-29

26 "See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: 27 the blessing, if you listen to the commandments of the Lord your God, which I am commanding you today; 28 and the curse, if you do not listen to the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn aside from the way which I am commanding you today, by following other gods which you have not known.

וּקְלָלָהּ:	בְּרָכָה	הַיּוֹם	לִפְנֵיכֶם	נָתַן	אֲנֹכִי	רְאֵה	26
and a curse;	a blessing	this day	before you	set	I	Behold,	
<u>7045</u>	<u>1293</u>	<u>3117</u>	<u>6440</u>	<u>5414</u>	<u>595</u>	<u>7200</u>	
יְהוָה	מִצְוֹת	אֵל-	תִּשְׁמְעוּ	אֲשֶׁר	הַבְּרָכָה	אֵת-	27
the Lord	the commandments of		ye obey	if	A blessing,		
<u>3068</u>	<u>4687</u>	<u>413</u>	<u>8085</u>	<u>834</u>	<u>1293</u>	<u>853</u>	
		הַיּוֹם:	אֲתֹכֶם	מִצְוָה	אֲנֹכִי	אֲשֶׁר	אֱלֹהֵיכֶם
		this day:	you	command	I	which	your God,
		<u>3117</u>	<u>853</u>	<u>6680</u>	<u>595</u>	<u>834</u>	<u>430</u>
	מִצְוֹת	אֵל-	תִּשְׁמְעוּ	לֹא	אִם-	וְהִקְלָלָהּ	28
	the commandments of		ye will obey	not	if	And a curse,	
	<u>4687</u>	<u>413</u>	<u>8085</u>	<u>3808</u>	<u>518</u>	<u>7045</u>	
מִצְוָה	אֲנֹכִי	אֲשֶׁר	הַדֶּרֶךְ	מִן-	וּסָרְתֶם	אֱלֹהֵיכֶם	יְהוָה
command	I	which	the way	out of	but turn aside	your God,	the Lord
<u>6680</u>	<u>595</u>	<u>834</u>	<u>1870</u>	<u>4480</u>	<u>5493</u>	<u>430</u>	<u>3068</u>
לֹא-	אֲשֶׁר	אֲחֵרִים	אֱלֹהִים	אֲחֵרִי	לָלֶכֶת	הַיּוֹם	אֲתֹכֶם
not	which	other	gods,	after	to go	this day,	you
<u>3808</u>	<u>834</u>	<u>312</u>	<u>430</u>	<u>310</u>	<u>3212</u>	<u>3117</u>	<u>853</u>
יָדַעְתֶּם: ׀							
ye have known.							
<u>3045</u>							

This parasha is rich with commandments, but there seems to be one theme found in our parasha which resonates strongly with me regarding the philosophical and political divide which seems to be gripping our nation today. That of what are we to do with the poor among us, and especially regarding those who have come to America from other countries (whether invited or not).

As a society, it seems we have chosen to ignore the plight of the poor personally but have seen fit to delegate that task to federal and state governments. I will suggest to you that doing so, in my opinion, we have only made this problem worse. What is the solution to this problem? To get that answer, we need to understand some philosophy of government, and some history.

At their core, all governmental welfare programs take money from those who have money, and give it to those who do not have money. That is today understood under the umbrella term “socialism.”

In the classical sense of the term, “socialism” ideology advocates that the community (or state) collectively owns the land, and the means of production arising from that land (as well as any enterprises which are not tied to the land), and what is produced by the efforts of those producers is distributed by those in control. Those in control make decisions regarding who gets what, but two things in that process always seem to prove the inherent flaws in the system:

1. Those in control always seem to have plenty of whatever they want.
2. Those in control can set certain tests to be applied to and limits to be enforced upon those in need, assuring those in need

remain in need and ultimately dependent upon those in control. These constraints also assure the safety and security of those in control, keeping those in need unable to rise up against those in control.

There is a divergent range of socialistic systems:

Marxist-Leninist Socialism. This views socialism as a transitional stage to the ultimate goal of communism, where the central government takes over the means of production and control of the people.

Democratic Socialism. This seeks to eradicate capitalism through using political power, and replace it with classical socialism. Its most obvious technique of conversion is class hatred and a constant barrage of propaganda directed at those who are in favor of capitalism, especially those who are prosperous through their own (or their ancestors') innovation and hard work. It seeks to use the benefits of capitalism in a society to give itself sufficient power to destroy the society upon which it depends for its sustenance. This seems to fit the definition of a parasitic relationship, where the parasite eventually kills the host that gave it life.

Social Justice Democracy. This class seems to be a lesser form of Democratic Socialists. It is happy to retain the capitalistic framework of the society, but urges strong governmental intervention, regulation, and taxation of “the rich” to give special status and benefits to certain groups of people based upon things that they find worthy of promoting – such as skin color, sexual orientation, membership in a minority group, and immigrants from other countries, and so on. This model also mimics the idea of a parasite, but seems to be a bit more concerned about so damaging the host that it also dies with the host. This model is more akin to a chronic disease, which significantly draws the life away from the host, but allows it to function at a limited level indefinitely.

In the early days of the United States, there was no such thing as a “welfare program” at a governmental level. In fact, the first settlers in Plymouth were devout socialists. An excellent article was written by Jerry Bowyer in 2012 in Forbes magazine.¹ He wrote it to refute the “occupy Wall Street” movement we saw 15 years ago. In part, he said:

¹ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jerrybowyer/2011/11/23/occupy-plymouth-colony-how-a-failed-commune-led-to-thanksgiving/>

It's wrong to say that American was founded by capitalists. In fact, America was founded by socialists who had the humility to learn from their initial mistakes and embrace freedom.

One of the earliest and arguably most historically significant North American colonies was Plymouth Colony, founded in 1620 in what is now known as Plymouth, Massachusetts. As I've outlined in greater detail here before (*Lessons From a Capitalist Thanksgiving*), the original colony had written into its charter a system of communal property and labor.

As William Bradford recorded in his *Of Plymouth Plantation*, a people who had formerly been known for their virtue and hard work became lazy and unproductive. Resources were squandered, vegetables were allowed to rot on the ground and mass starvation was the result. And where there is starvation, there is plague. After 2 1/2 years, the leaders of the colony decided to abandon their socialist mandate and create a system which honored private property. The colony survived and thrived and the abundance which resulted

was what was celebrated at that iconic Thanksgiving feast.

As a nation, we learned early that independence and freedom lead to opportunity, and that capitalism fosters prosperity, based upon the desire of every person to have a better life.

I want to compare and contrast two persons, both are able-bodied and able to contribute in some way to their community, and also in a larger way to their society at large.

When a person who has ambition, integrity, inventiveness, and a strong work ethic desires to make his life better, that person will work hard and will build a life for himself and for others. He will offer a product or a service that others need, and will get money from others for his own needs and desires. This person is a “builder and giver.”

When a person who has no ambition, integrity, inventiveness, or work ethic desires to make his life better, that person will seek out those who have worked hard for their money, and will find ways to get money from them for his own needs and desires. This person is a “taker and destroyer.”

Regarding both of these people, self-interest is still the driving motivation. One person gives and reaps the benefits of his effort.

Also, the society in which that person lives receives the benefit of his contribution.

Thomas Jefferson reflected on the plight of the poor who were in that circumstance innocently, and who needed help. He did advocate for government assistance, but had a number of stipulations attached to that assistance. He wrote an essay on this issue entitled *A Bill for Support of the Poor*.² The essential aspects of Jefferson's position are these:

- The government of the community, not just private charity, assumes responsibility for its poor. This is far from the “throw them in the snow” attitude that is so often attributed to pre-1900 America.
- Welfare is kept local so that the administrators of the program will know the actual situations of the persons who ask for help. This will prevent abuses and freeloading. The normal human ties of friendship and neighborliness will partly animate the relationship of givers and recipients.
- A distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor is carefully observed. Able-bodied vagabonds get help, but they are required to work in institutions where they will be disciplined. Children and the disabled, on the other hand, are

² *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Julian P. Boyd (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1950), Vol. 2, pp. 422, 420.

provided for, not lavishly but without public shame. The homeless and beggars will not be abandoned, but neither will they populate the streets. They will be treated with toughness or mercy according to their circumstances.

- Jefferson's idea of self-reliance was in fact family reliance, based on the traditional division of labor between husband and wife. Husbands were legally required to be their families' providers; wives were not. Deadbeat husbands were shamed and punished by being sent to the poorhouse.
- "Poor laws" to support individual cases of urgent need were not intended to go beyond a minimal safety net. Benefit levels were low. The main remedy for poverty in a land of opportunity was marriage and work.

As is clearly seen, these principles have been gradually abandoned by us as a society, and beginning just following the Great Depression of 1929, organized government assistance was viewed as the answer to the issue.

In recent years, the left's "New Deal," "Great Society" and "War on Poverty" schemes have institutionalized and entrenched government welfare that has now created psychological and

financial barriers for the able-bodied poor, keeping them in relative poverty and persistently reliant upon governmental largess.

President Lyndon Johnson famously praised his scheme as saying, "I'll have them [black people] voting Democratic for the next 200 years," suggesting a strategy to cement political allegiance through federal welfare programs.

Contrast this thinking with the book *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, written in 1992 by Marvin Olasky.³ This work demonstrates that charity which promotes challenge, relationship, and spiritual growth was effective for addressing poverty. It is the only book of its kind showing the history of poverty-fighting efforts in the United States, showing what worked and what has not.

The essential points of his book are these:

- Communities and Churches Abdicated Their Role: A combination of rapid technological advances, resulting in massive population shifts, and cultural changes in the mid-1800s led to an increasing physical and relational separation of those with means from those without, as well as a belief that simply giving materially to the poor will solve poverty. As these changes

³ It is available in full online at <https://www4.wng.org/Tragedy-of-American-Compassion.pdf>

occurred and efforts became more challenging, communities and churches, who had already given into the changing tide of impersonal care for the poor, or “charity with tongs,” placed the role of “charity” into the hands of government bureaucracy.

- **Intelligent Giving and Intelligent Withholding:** True compassion that produces successful outcomes “suffers with” each individual to identify the actual roots of their poverty and walks with them, insofar as they are willing, to overcome those causes. When we give without discernment, we likely do more harm than good to that individual, and thus society as a whole.
- **Charity Must Be Challenging, Personal, and Spiritual:** Poverty cannot be resolved by simply material distribution. Olasky sifts his research on effective practices of charities in the late 1800s into what he calls “seven marks.” These are easily remembered as an alphabetic mnemonic: Affiliation, Bonding, Categorization, Discernment, Employment, Freedom, and God.

We know, as believers in the One true G-d, we are to have open hands. How is that to be lived-out? Let’s begin with Scripture.

Deut 15:1-6

15 "At the end of every seven years you shall grant a remission of debts. 2 And this is the manner of remission: every creditor shall release what he has loaned to his neighbor; he shall not exact it of his neighbor and his brother, because the Lord's remission has been proclaimed. 3 From a foreigner you may exact it, but your hand shall release whatever of yours is with your brother. 4 **However, there shall be no poor among you, since the Lord will surely bless you in the land which the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess,** 5 if only you listen obediently to the voice of the Lord your God, to observe carefully all this commandment which I am commanding you today. 6 For the Lord your God shall bless you as He has promised you, and you will lend to many nations, but you will not borrow; and you will rule over many nations, but they will not rule over you.

Deut 15:7-11

7 **"If there is a poor man with you, one of your brothers, in any of your towns in your land which the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart, nor close your hand from your poor**

brother; 8 but you shall freely open your hand to him, and shall generously lend him sufficient for his need in whatever he lacks. 9 Beware, lest there is a base thought in your heart, saying, 'The seventh year, the year of remission, is near,' and your eye is hostile toward your poor brother, and you give him nothing; then he may cry to the Lord against you, and it will be a sin in you. 10 You shall generously give to him, and your heart shall not be grieved when you give to him, because for this thing the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all your undertakings. 11 For the poor will never cease to be in the land; therefore I command you, saying, 'You shall freely open your hand to your brother, to your needy and poor in your land.'

These two passages, only a few verses separated, seem to be contradictory. This drew the attention of our Sages, who thought about this extensively.

I find the analysis of Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim Luntschitz (1550-1619), who taught in Lublin, Poland, compiled in his work entitled *Keli Yekar* (precious vessel), to be the best explanation.⁴

“There shall be no poor among you.” And below it says, For the poor shall never cease out of the land, and our Sages said (Sifrei Re’eh 132): “This [first verse refers to] when they do the will of the Omnipresent, and this [second verse refers to] when they do not do His will.” The proof of this is what is said, There shall be no poor among you, etc., only if you listen to the voice of the Lord. Meaning, only and exclusively on this condition if you listen. But what they said regarding the verse For the poor shall never cease out of the land requires explanation. What indicates that this verse speaks of a time when they do not do His will? Furthermore, what is the reason given [here] when it says therefore I command you, you shall surely open [your hand]? What is it teaching us? It is obvious that if there are no poor people, to whom would one give? Additionally, why does the passage begin with If there be among you a needy person... in your land, when charity is a personal

⁴ *Kli Yekar* on Deuteronomy 15:4:1

obligation and applies even outside the Land [of Israel]? Similarly, it concludes the passage with and to your needy in your land, while in the verse For the poor shall never cease it says out of the land and not “out of your land.”

And he continues to explain that the priority of our giving is to be to our own people, before considering the needs of others.

But certainly this is the meaning, that all the poor of your land should be prioritized over the poor outside the land [of Israel]. And the entire passage speaks of a time when they are doing God’s will, as understood from the language only if you surely listen, etc. And when it says if there is a needy person among you, from one of your brothers, in one of your gates, in your land, all these “ones” point with a finger that in a time when Israel is doing the will of the Omnipresent, blessed be He, then no needy person will be found there except for one from a city and one from a family, and it is not common at all. And when it says for the needy will not cease from the midst of the land, it speaks of outside the land [of Israel], and this is in a time when they are not doing His will, since they did not go up to the land of Israel with their

brothers, as happened in the days of Ezra when most of them did not go up from Babylon. And there, the needy will not cease from the midst of the land, meaning from the entirety of the land, and therefore it does not say “your land.”

So, if our people in the Land are following G-d’s instructions, His blessings will be so abundant that poverty will be eradicated. But when we, as a people group, trample underfoot G-d’s instructions, we forfeit the blessings that He promised to us, and many will become poor. We then will need to deal with the poor who may be quite abundant among us in the Land.

Do these principles of Torah also apply to other countries on this Earth? I think in this case, there is considerable application for us wherever we are.

In Jewish understanding, the giving of tzedakah (often very poorly translated as “charity”), is a very high command. It can be practiced in any time, any place, and regardless of what you personally have in your pocket, or in your bank account. There is always someone in your path who is in greater need than yours.

Moses ben Maimon (Maimonides), a prominent Jewish philosopher and physician (born ca. 1135, and died 1204) wrote a work called

Mishneh Torah. In that commentary, under the caption *Laws of Charity*, he postulated eight levels of tzedakah.⁵

There are eight levels of charity, each greater than the next.

[1] The greatest level, above which there is no greater, is to support a fellow Jew by endowing him with a gift or loan, or entering into a partnership with him, or finding employment for him, in order to strengthen his hand until he need no longer be dependent upon others.

[2] A lesser level of charity than this is to give to the poor without knowing to whom one gives, and without the recipient knowing from whom he received.

[3] A lesser level of charity than this is when one knows to whom one gives, but the recipient does not know his benefactor. The greatest sages used to walk about in secret and put coins in the doors of the poor.

[4] A lesser level of charity than this is when one does not know to whom one gives, but the poor person does know his benefactor.

⁵*Laws of Charity*, 10:7–14. Note: I have redacted the descriptions for benefit of brevity and clarity.

[5] A lesser level than this is when one gives to the poor person directly into his hand, but gives before being asked.

[6] A lesser level than this is when one gives to the poor person after being asked.

[7] A lesser level than this is when one gives inadequately, but gives gladly and with a smile.

[8] A lesser level than this is when one gives unwillingly.

With the high command of tzedakah, one would expect to find a blessing for such a mitzvah, right?

Search the siddur. Search the other books of our people. Is there not a blessing for everything? I will save you the time-consuming search. There is no blessing to be said upon the giving of tzedakah. Why? The blessings apply to events which have a beginning and an end.

But there are two mitzvot found as main aspects of the lives of a believer which once began, have no end.

One is prayer. Rv. Shaul (Paul) reminded us about the continuing nature of prayer.

1 Thess 5:17

17 pray without ceasing;

The other is tzedakah. We find an example of a sweet lady, who is memorialized in Scripture, as an example of how we are to live out that command.

Acts 9:36

36 Now in Joppa there was a certain disciple named Tabitha (which translated in Greek is called Dorcas); this woman was abounding with **deeds of kindness and charity, which she continually did.**

The commands to pray without ceasing, and also to give tzedakah, take on particular importance as we enter the end of days.

Events of the last several months have thrust the issue of how to treat the poor into the front-page of newspapers, and the lead stories in newscasts. Combine that with the flood of illegal immigrants

coming across our border, and we have real issues as a nation to face. We have real issues as believers to face.

These challenges are not new. Yeshua saw them in His day.

Luke 16:19-31

19 "Now there was a certain rich man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, gaily living in splendor every day. 20 "And a certain poor man named Lazarus was laid at his gate, covered with sores,²¹ and longing to be fed with the crumbs which were falling from the rich man's table; besides, even the dogs were coming and licking his sores.²² "Now it came about that the poor man died and he was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom; and the rich man also died and was buried.²³ "And in Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away, and Lazarus in his bosom.²⁴ "And he cried out and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue; for I am in agony in this flame.'²⁵ "But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your life you received your good

things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony.²⁶ 'And besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, in order that those who wish to come over from here to you may not be able, and that none may cross over from there to us.'²⁷ "And he said, 'Then I beg you, Father, that you send him to my father's house - ²⁸ for I have five brothers - that he may warn them, lest they also come to this place of torment.'²⁹ "But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them,'³⁰ "But he said, 'No, Father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!'"³¹ "But he said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead.'"

What was the sin of the rich man? Unbelief? No. It was violation of the commandment we find in our parashah today – the commandment of tzedakah. He had often stepped right over Lazer.

But let's look at the positive side of this commandment. When we do tzedakah, we do the true meaning of the Hebrew word. Justice and righteousness.

We just *do what's right*.

1 John 3:16-19

16 We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.

17 But whoever has the world's goods, and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? 18 Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.

We can see from the history of the Plymouth settlement, from Jefferson's analysis, from the history of socialist and communist societies around the world, from the writings of Maimonides, and Marvin Olasky many examples of techniques which work... and some that didn't.

Let's be salt and light in our nation. We can influence our government to some degree regarding the proper ways to treat the poor, and to not make the problem worse.

But we most certainly must live our lives in the way that G-d told us to live. We should be wise, and also compassionate. There is a balance.

If you will listen closely, the Spirit will guide you in how you should think, and how you should act regarding the poor around you.

Here is the story of a holy Jew who followed the commandment of tzedakah, in a wonderful manner, and received a great reward. Let his story inspire you as well.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oztt9DVAjxk>