

Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk**



The Needy Among You

My first SH'MITA in Eretz Yisrael coincided with my induction into the Israel Defense Forces. I had been preparing for the experience by studying the Laws of Sh'mita with an eye towards all sorts of leniencies and loopholes, because I assumed being in the army would limit my SH'MITA options. So, of course, at my first meal on base, I was approached by a nice graduate of Merkaz HaRav asking me to eat at the Mehardrin table, because they might not keep their special status if they didn't fill the table. So, not only did I keep many stringencies never considered by Rav Kook Z"L, but there was a D'var Torah at each meal. So much for leniencies and loopholes. Even the officers were intimidated by these guys.

So, now we're preparing for another SH'MITA. I can tell because every bookstore I pass is featuring books on SH'MITA. Who needs calendars? And, of course, this week's Torah reading features another aspect of SH'MITA -

Our parsha states: Every seventh

year you shall practice remission of debts (D'varim 15:1). We call this Mitzva SH'MITAT K'SAFIM, and requires the cancellation of all private loans at the end of the SH'MITA cycle. Since, it doesn't include public debts (sorry, if you're behind on your taxes), individuals can transfer their debts to a BEIT DIN, through a legal instrument called PROZBUL (from a Greek word meaning 'deliver'). This ingenious process was devised by Hillel, because too many wealthy people weren't lending money as SH'MITA approached.

The ingenuity of Hillel was necessary, but very sad. The Torah is very clear: If, however, there is a needy person among you, one of your kinsmen in any of your settlements in the land that HaShem 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. Beware lest you harbor the base thought, "The seventh year, the year of remission, is approaching", so that you are mean to your needy kinsman and give him nothing. He will cry out to HaShem against you, and you will incur guilt (verses 7-9).

A funny thing happens on the way

towards these important social mores. In verse 4, it states, 'There shall be no needy among you.' However, in verse 11, it declares, 'For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land.'

Nu, which is it?

The Ramban immediately explains the seeming contradiction. There will be no needy if the nation observes the Torah diligently. However, the sad reality is that there are often those who don't fulfill the Torah, therefore the needy will persist, and must be cared for. The Ramban further notes that this promise of universal prosperity is only proffered for those living in Eretz Yisrael.

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch was intrigued by the fact that our verses continually refer to the poor as ACHICHA, your sibling (6 times in 10 verses). It's like that wonderful Israeli usage of calling total strangers, ACHI, my brother. Maybe that's the key item in this equation. When we consider the poor within the Jewish nation as our family and our responsibility, then we have the chance to eliminate poverty. It's relatively easy for many people to know about suffering strangers, but few of us can see family in need without reacting.

Rav Hirsch goes on to observe: Every Jew must regard himself as the administrator of a charity fund, large or small, that has been entrusted to his care by God and consecrated to God. Hence, one is pleased when finding an opportunity to do a good deed with these assets, which are not really his, but have been entrusted to him for charitable purposes.

It's easier to feel that way when we feel connected to the indigent, not so much when we view them as strangers. I think that point is critical to the equation.

The Ohr HaChayim similarly notes: Why does the Torah have to write "among you" in addition to writing "any of your brothers"? Perhaps Moshe was alluding to what we learned in Bava Batra (10a), where the Talmud says that the reason God chooses to afflict some people with economic hardship in this life is to afford their wealthier fellow Jews the opportunity to help such destitute people support themselves with dignity. The words "a destitute person among you" may be read to mean "the poor on your account", i.e. it is for your sake that there will be a destitute person. The Torah writes "any of your brothers" to remind you not to evaluate people on the basis of their economic prosperity. The fact

that he is destitute does not make him a lesser person: he still is your brother ... Sometimes the portion that is the due of the poor person has been entrusted by God to a wealthy person instead, and all his wealth is in truth a collection of what originally was allocated to the poor person. If the rich man keeps this in mind, he will never begrudge any support he extends to the poor person, as he is only giving to the poor person what was rightfully his in the first place.

Wealth is indeed a great blessing. Our verses are teaching us that this great blessing is also an amazing opportunity. According to our verses, the rich among us can literally end Jewish poverty. It's just about reading these verses as our Torah giants have. This coming SH'MITA is a great time to start. 🙏