

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

Emor 5780

Even a cursory reading of the "Festival Chapter" (23) in our Parsha reveals a clear disruption in the text. In discussing the holiday cycle, after mentioning the holidays of Pesach and Shavuot and before continuing with Rosh HaShana, Yom Kippur and Sukkot, the Torah interrupts the flow of these celebratory occasions with this verse: "And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not remove completely the corners of your field as you reap, and you shall not gather the gleanings of your harvest; for the poor and the stranger you shall leave them; I am HaShem, your Gd" (23:22).

Our Sages raise a number of questions: first, almost the exact same command is mentioned earlier (Vayikra 19:9 - in the previous sedra); why repeat it? And second, why place it in the middle of a discussion about the Jewish holidays? Many of the commentators (Ibn Ezra, Chizkuni, among others) propose that since Shavuot marked the reaping season - Z'MAN HAKATZIR, the Torah wanted the Jew to be mindful of his obligation to provide for the impoverished from the produce of his fields.

Rashi, however, veers from this simple interpretation and quotes a Midrash (Torat Kohanim 13:12), which at first blush, appears quite puzzling. The

passage states that the reason for this inclusion among the festivals is to teach "that whoever properly gives gleanings - LEKET, "forgettings" - SHICH-CHA, and the corner of the field - PEI'A, to a poor person, is considered as if he built the Beit HaMikdash and brought his offerings therein." Apparently, Rashi sought to convey a different message here, but its meaning is somewhat obscure. Exactly what does the observance of these charitable gifts have to do with the Mikdash and its sacrifices?

The Meshech Chochma (R. Meir Simcha, Dvinsk, 19th c.) offers this explanation: On Shavuot, the Jewish People had just celebrated the great revelation of Gd's Torah, a religious experience of unparalleled spiritual intensity and awe-inspiring grandeur. What then ought to have been their first concrete act upon "coming down from the mountain" of MATAN TORAH? Meditating upon the ethereal event they just witnessed? Contemplating how best to preserve the sanctity they just experienced? Neither. "I am HaShem, your Gd", concludes the verse. The lesson was plain. The Gd Who presented you with the 10 Commandments is the same Gd who now expects you to straightaway burden yourself with the needs of those less fortunate. Why must you share with others what you possess? Because, in reality, you possess nothing at all. All you have has been given to you by divine grace. As such, the charitable deed undergirds and brackets the very Torah itself (See Sota

14a). Adds the Yalkut Yehuda (R. Yehuda Ginsburg, 20th c.): If the reception of Torah does not immediately precipitate acts of chesed towards the underprivileged in society, "then it is as if one has no Gd" (Avoda Zara 17b).

What then of the connection between these acts of tzedaka and the remaining Yamim Tovim? Ramban asserts (Vayikra 23:2) that the festivals were a time for all the People to gather as one - MIKRA'EI KODESH to appreciate their shared destiny, and recognize the indispensability of each and every Jew in the realization of that lofty objective. In Jerusalem, homes were open to everyone. The indigent were treated on par with the wealthy. The orphan, widow and stranger were not neglected. And more, the communal holiday sacrifices themselves aimed at engendering this powerful sense of unconditional belonging and togetherness. As such, we can now understand why a Jew who cares for the lonely poor - worrying about his sorry state and refusing to relegate him to the dregs of society - why such a Jew deserves the reward of bringing Gd's sacrifices in the Beit HaMikdash. (See Yalkut Yehuda, Vayikra, p. 144).

One final observation is made by the Meshech Chochma (23:22). He questions how these mitzvot are related to Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, whose presentation follows immediately after this tzedaka mandate. His answer begins by reminding us that our prayers on the High Holidays are for life - our own

longevity. How best though can this vital request be satisfied? When a person, after toiling in his fields, is prepared to leave over his hard-earned produce to total strangers, people who appear to be averse to working and choose to beg for a living; and when by his actions, he demonstrates that he is making no value judgment about whether these poor deserve to live or not, then - "measure for measure" - such a Jew, by sustaining the life of these poverty-stricken individuals, himself deserves to live!

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Ed. note: As I'm sure you have noticed, I have been using Rabbi Bienenfeld's "Hi, ALL"s from a year or two or three ago. Mostly, his pieces have a timeless quality that need no amending or editing. The following two paragraphs were written during the Covid pandemic. You might think it is out of date, but with a little tweaking (which I am not going to do - you, dear reader, can do it on your own), as you read, mentally replace the pandemic with the war against Hamas, and see how up-to-date the observation is...

Among the many noteworthy observations that many have made during the world's struggle against this malicious virus has been the astonishing sense of fellowship that has emerged from this crisis. We have witnessed an extraordinary camaraderie which has seen strangers helping strangers without regard to age, gender, economic status or social rank. It has been a remarkable display of communal responsibility where people have abided by many

stressful restrictions and inconveniences so as to not only protect themselves but to make sure that others are safe as well. Even erstwhile enemies have joined in a global effort to develop a vaccine to defend against this pandemic illness.

With Gd's help, we pray that a cure will be found and life can return to some sense of normalcy. But, hopefully, the acts of kindness and charity will not be forgotten and that such chesed and tzedaka will continue to light-up the marquee of mankind and brighten and help nourish the lives of those who still live in the darkness of poverty and want.

We would do well to remember Rambam's magnificent peroration about the singular importance of the mitzva of supporting the indigent. He writes: "It is preferable for a person to spend more on gifts to the poor than to be lavish in his preparation of the Purim feast or in sending presents to his friends. For no joy is greater or more glorious than the joy of gladdening the hearts of the poor, the orphans, the widows, and the strangers. Indeed, he who brings happiness to the hearts of these destitute individuals emulates the Divine Presence, of whom Scripture says, (Yeshayahu 57:15) 'to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive those with broken hearts.'" (Hilchot Megila and Chanuka 2:17)

If to treat the poor with dignity and charity distinguishes us most as being in

HaShem's likeness, how can we not benefit from HaShem's charity to us!

And thus, if we can manage to pull this very lesson of generosity out of these past months of hardship, then we may merit - measure of measure - HaShem's gifting us with years and years of blessed life! 🙌