



## THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

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# What Do We Know About Poverty?

Young Jewish students who are just beginning to study world history are often surprised to learn that early theorists of socialism and communism were Jews. Having been raised in essentially capitalist countries, they cannot fathom the fact that a large percentage of early supporters of those movements, especially in Russia and in Eastern Europe, were Jews themselves.

During the many years I served as a pulpit rabbi, I would meet regularly with a group of teenagers from my synagogue. Our discussions ranged across a wide spectrum of topics, and more than once the question was posed to me, “Rabbi, what attracted so many members of our faith to socialism and communism?”

Like all such general questions, there is not one simple answer. I explained that to the teenagers. But I did assert that one component of that phenomenon was connected to our religion and its values.

Undoubtedly, many who were attracted to those movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were, to some extent, influenced by a desperate need to heal the rampant poverty that typified the human

condition throughout history, especially since the Industrial Revolution. That desperate need was consistent with the religious teachings that these individuals imbibed in their formative years.

Generally, by the time they became active members of these new movements they had long since rejected Jewish belief and Jewish observance. But the imprint of their family environment and *cheder* education remained alive and motivated the political direction they took as they approached adulthood.

The roots of the Jewish attitude toward poverty are to be found in this week’s Torah portion, *Re’eh* (Deuteronomy 12:1-16:17). Now, the number of Torah portions, *parshiyot*, matches the number of weeks there are in a year. There is a total of 613 *mitzvot*, or commandments. Not every *parsha* contains a commandment. Some contain only one or two.

But our *parsha* contains upwards of one hundred *mitzvot*. The exact number is debated by various authorities. How many of these commandments do you think relate to the themes of poverty and charity?

I count at least twenty. They include tithes to the Priests, Levites, and to the poor, especially widows and orphans; to walk in the paths of the gracious Lord; to fear the Lord and to cleave to Him and to His Torah sages; to protest against those who persecute others; that members of the Israelite nation display compassion toward each other; to forgive debts with the approach of the seventh year of the *shemittah* cycle; to avoid becoming

dependent on charity oneself; to conform to the priorities among charitable causes; not to be cold-hearted when distributing charity; not to be stingy; to free a Hebrew slave after six years of service, to reward him or her generously at the conclusion of their term of service, and to always remember that we were all once slaves in Egypt!

Quite a list, wouldn't you say? No wonder so many of our co-religionists were deluded by the new political and economic movements that vainly promised to defeat poverty once and for all!

The fact remains, however, that poverty exists, even in our own circles. Indeed, the gap between needy Jews and affluent ones has demonstrably increased in recent years. Dire poverty has been exacerbated by the current post-October 7, 2023 war. How apt are the words we read this Shabbat: "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." (Deuteronomy 15:11)

The above verse is severely disappointing. "Never cease!"? Ever? Yet it is reaffirmed by at least one Talmudic passage, in Tractate *Shabbat* 151b, which reads: "Samuel [an early Talmudic sage] said, 'There is no difference between this world and the Era of the Messiah, except that we will no longer be dominated by alien kingdoms, as it is written that there will never cease to be needy ones in your land.'" Even the Messiah himself will not eliminate poverty!

There are other texts, however, which are more reassuring and which clearly indicate that poverty will cease if we do our part in our own reaction to it. Thus, "There shall be no needy among you... If only you heed the

Lord your God and take care to keep all this instruction that I enjoin upon you this day" (Deuteronomy 15:4-5).

As Maimonides/Rambam comments near the conclusion of his *Hilchot Melachim* in describing the Era of the Messiah: "At that time there will be neither famine, nor war, nor envy or conflict, for all good things will be as plentiful and as readily available as the earth itself."

It is up to us, folks, and we need not resort to newly discovered economic strategies. We must simply cling to the values expressed in this week's *parsha*, act compassionately to all, avoid selfishness and self-aggrandizement, and open our hearts and hands to those in need.

I feel compelled to close with an insight into the minds of poor people. It is presented creatively in an interpretation of a Mishnah in Tractate *Bikkurim* 3:8.

The Mishnah elaborates upon the *mitzvah* of *bikkurim*, bringing the first fruits of one's field to the *Kohen* in the *Beit HaMikdash* in Jerusalem. The fruits are to be brought in a basket to the *Kohen*, as described in a *parsha* we will read in several weeks, *Ki Tavo*.

The *Mishnah* reads: "The wealthy would bring their first fruits in containers of silver and gold, while the poor would bring them in baskets of woven strands of peeled willow branches. The baskets and fruits were gifted to the *Kohanim*."

The Talmud (*Bava Kama* 92a) understands this to mean that the "baskets" of the poor were handed to the *Kohen* together with the fruits. But the "silver and gold containers" of the wealthy were returned to them. The Talmud there sees this as an example of the Aramaic adage, "Poverty pursues the poor",

or more bluntly, “the rich get richer and the poor get poorer”.

The commentaries on the Mishnah wonder why some adjustment was not made to avoid embarrassing the poor. After all, the Rabbis could have required the wealthy to bring modest baskets so that the poor would not feel humiliated.

Pinchas Kehati, in his outstanding explanation of the Mishnah, a work I prefer in my own Mishnah study, refers to an explanation offered by Malbim, the nineteenth century commentator on *Chumash*, in his remarks on *Devarim* 26:4.

The poor person, argues Malbim, wove the basket with his own hands. He could afford nothing but willow branches, and he painstakingly peeled off the bark and carefully wove the strands of wood into the form of a primitive basket. He was proud of his work and felt honored to donate the gift. The *Kohen* appreciated the arduous effort of the poor man. The poor man was by no means humiliated. Quite the contrary, he was gratified to have his puny basket ceremoniously received.

The wealthy man, however, put no effort into his golden or silver container. He ordered it at the local shopping mall. The *Kohen*, as a Temple stand-in, is not impressed by material trinkets. He gladly, with no fanfare, handed it back to the rich man without so much as a thank you.

The lesson is an important one. The poor man acting simply but sincerely and authentically stands higher than the wealthy man who merely spends a few dollars to grudgingly do his duty.

Let's assist the needy person, but let us not belittle him, nor, Heaven forbid, treat him condescendingly. ■



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