



5 thoughts on charity

Central to the ethics of Judaism is the emphasis upon charity, from almsgiving to every sense of loving kindness. Likewise, the Jewish Jesus we read about in the Gospels is deeply concerned for the poor. Think of the beatitudes, the story of the widow's mite, the parable of the sheep and the goats, of Lazarus and the rich man... Reflect on Gospel stories like these in view of the following sayings in rabbinic teaching:

1. Almsgiving weighs as much as all the other commandments. The person who gives alms in secret is greater than Moses. (*Bab.B. 9b*)

2. The one who places a basket under the vine when gathering the harvest [in order to catch the fruit that drops] is robbing the poor of their due gleanings. (*Sifra 88a*).

3. Why does God love widows and orphans? Because their eyes are turned upon God... anyone who robs them

is as if he robbed God, their Father in heaven. (*Exod. R., Mishpatim, 30.8*)

4. He who sustains God's creatures is as though he had created them. (*Tanh.B., Noah, 16a*)

5. It is taught in the name of R. Joshua: the poor person does more for the rich person than the rich person for the poor person. (*Ruth R. v, 9*)

See Montefiore & Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology* (NY, 1974).



Light of Torah
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Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Deuteronomy 21:10—25:19

Ki Tetze:
'when you go out'

Why reflect on Torah?

"Sounding the depths of the mystery which is the church, this sacred council remembers the spiritual ties which link the people of the new covenant to the stock of Abraham."

- Nostra Aetate, 4 (1965)

What is the central theme of both Testaments? It is a love story; a story of relationship, of the God who gathers a people and draws that people ever more closely. It is a story of divine-human partnership through which God is revealed in history and salvation is experienced.

A love for Torah is a love for one's faith family. The Torah draws us deeply into the story of our spiritual ancestors. It gives us a sense of their gifts and limitations, their opportunities and obstacles, their growth points and setbacks. It teaches us that their story is our story too. By journeying through the Torah we journey into the heart of God. Through the Jewish people, we learn what it means to live and worship as God's people.

In this spirit, our *Light of Torah* series invites Christians to read and reflect upon the first five books of the bible, week by week, drawing on the insights and wisdom of Jewish approaches to the sacred text.



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Deuteronomy 21:10—25:19

Care for the poor, those socially and economically vulnerable, is a recurrent theme in the Torah. A number of precepts make provision for their welfare: the release of debts, prohibition of usury, the poor man's tithe, etc. What absorbs our attention today, however, is a different kind of welfare practice. Described in Deut. 24:19-21, the forgotten sheaf and other leftovers of the harvest are to be available to 'the stranger, the fatherless, the widow'.

Tasting Torah

Read aloud Deut.24:19-21. Note the sound and flow of the text, the threefold repetitions: 'do not' and 'shall go to the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow.' And the meaning? Is this simply a humanitarian plan to 'help the poor,' or is a more complex message at work? What do you notice?

Touching Torah

A sheaf left behind in the field is a small amount; hardly the way to satisfy the hunger of the poor. Similarly the forgetfulness: accident is hardly a sure basis for a welfare plan.

Equally as puzzling is the reason given for the practice: "in order that the Lord your God may bless you [i.e., the owner of the field]" (24:19). Is it really a virtue, deserving of blessing, to support the poor through one's forgetfulness? (Note: this is the only precept in the Torah which is to be observed *unconsciously* rather than consciously.) Really, how effectively can the poor be helped by a law that sanctions forgetfulness?

The Jewish sages pondered these questions and interpreted the precept in various ways. Here is a taste of three responses found in the tradition: (i) If a person is blessed by unintended good deeds, how much greater will be the reward for deliberate good deeds! (ii) The poor man finds dignity by completing the harvesting and by taking sustenance directly from the earth rather than from the hand of the rich. (iii) It is character-building for the owner of the field who 'acquires a generous nature.'

Depthing Torah

How might this practice help the owner of the field to 'acquire a generous character'? On this question Hirsch¹ is convincing.

The gifts to the poor described in this Torah passage, says Hirsch, challenge the very concept of 'Mine'. The owner of the field and vineyard is taught to regard himself as a steward of God's blessing rather than trying to monopolize nature. The work of his hands must not be expended for the purpose of squeezing every last bit of produce for his own consumption. Even his thoughts about his labour must not be exclusively focused on his selfish good.

In other words, the main aim of the precept is to educate people (rich *and* poor, for the law applies to a poor man's field too) in a fundamental attitude of gratitude, in a generous mindset that places God at the centre of one's life. Through such formation of minds and hearts, the common good will be served and the poor will be treated with dignity and respect.

Doing Torah

Continue to reflect on this text with a friend.

Think of a situation in your life that helped (or is helping) you to 'acquire a generous nature.'

Think of your own family/home/community life. Ask: What do I jealously guard as 'mine'? A piece of clothing? An appliance? A section of the house? A particular seat at table? Is it really 'yours'? Consider how you might share this gift/ blessing with somebody else.



More from the tradition

The Lord wished his chosen people to be generous in spirit and blessed in soul... By leaving a portion of his produce so that the needy may enjoy it, a person's spirit will become more unselfish and he will enjoy divine grace. But the one who gathers in everything, leaving nothing for the needy, will do harm to his character, breeding selfishness, ill will and miserliness.

Sefer Ha-hinukh
(abridged; see Leibowitz, 245)

1. Hirsch: 19th c. German-Jewish rabbinical leader.
Bibliography: Eskenazi & Weiss, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (NY, 2008); Leibowitz, *Studies in Devarim* (NY: Lambda); *JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia, 1996).
Scripture: *NJPS*.