



5 quotes

The term *'preferential option for the poor'* reflects the fact that the Church's social teaching has a special concern for those most vulnerable in society. Although the term itself is a recent invention, the idea has deep roots in the Hebrew Scriptures and resonates in Jewish commentary. For example, consider these rabbinic quotations:

1. *'If you lend money to my people...'* (Exod.22:25). The Israelites say to God: 'Who is your people?' God replies, 'The poor,' as it is said, *'For the Lord comforts his people and has mercy upon his poor'* (Isa. 49:13).
Exod. R., Mishpatim, 31.5
2. If a rich man has poor relations, he does not acknowledge them... but God is not so, for he cares only for the poor, as it is said, *'The poor of his people take refuge in him'* (Isa. 14:32).
Exod. R., Mishpatim, 31.5
3. Be heedful of the children of the poor, for from them Torah proceeds.
B.Ned. 81a
4. Almsgiving weighs as much as all the other commandments.
Bab.B. 9a
5. When Rabbi Yannai saw a certain man giving a coin to a poor man in front of everyone, he said: 'It would have been better not to have given it to him than to have given it and put him to shame.'
B.Hag 5b; Eccles. R. 12:14, §1.

Source: Montefiore & Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology* (NY: Schocken Books, 1974).



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Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Exodus 21:1—24:18

Mishpatim: 'rules'

Why reflect on Torah?

"The Old Testament and the Jewish tradition must not be set against the New Testament in such a way that the former seems to constitute a religion of only justice, fear and legalism, with no appeal to the love of God and neighbor (cf. Dt. 6:5; Lv. 19:18; Mt. 22:34-40)."

— Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, 1974

A regrettable tendency in the history of Christian catechesis (and still present today in many quarters) has been to contrast the so-called legalism of Judaism with the love of Jesus. In fact, Jews have been no more guilty of legalism than we Christians! Every religion is open to legalistic distortions, even as it seeks to be an instrument of God's love.

Fortunately, much work has been done by scholars and educators in recent decades to alert Christians to the fact that their faith finds its very roots in the beliefs, ethics and rituals of the Jewish people. Jesus was a Jew who lived and breathed the Jewish Scriptures (Torah). In today's *Light of Torah* leaflet, we explore an aspect of an ancient legal text through the eyes of Jewish interpreters.



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Exodus 21:1–24:18

This week's Torah portion continues the narrative of the Mount Sinai Covenant. A further code of conduct is introduced in the form of a list of judicial rulings. Here we focus on a rule which deals with lending money to a person in need.

Tasting Torah

"If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor..." (Exodus 22:25, NRSV)

See too Everett Fox's translation:

"If you lend money to my people, to the afflicted one (who lives) beside you..."

In the midst of a series of commandments calling for justice and compassion, the sages note the curious wording of this verse. They wonder why not use a simpler, direct phrase: *If you lend money to the poor...?* Why the addition of 'my people' and 'among you/ beside you'? With a friend ponder this verse and discuss the subtle implications.

Touching Torah

The Jewish sages detect in this wording three parallel objects: (i) My people; i.e. the people of Israel; (ii) the poor person, and (iii) the person who is 'among' you, near to you. From this analysis a great moral discussion is opened up: the problem of how to prioritize the giving of charity. When my finite resources can never reach everyone in need, how do I choose where to focus those resources? When I am confronted by suffering both near and from far, among those in my intimate circle as well as those in the global human family, do relational factors affect my choices? Share something of your own experience of this dilemma as you continue to reflect on this Torah verse.

Depthing Torah

The sages are in no doubt that the Torah teaches the obligation of charity for the non-Jew, the stranger, the orphan. Yet they also interpret the Law as saying that the more intimate connections come first. The midrash puts it succinctly:

*The poor man in the market and the one in your street—your street comes first. A poor kinsman and a poor fellow-townsmen, your kinsman comes first. The poor man with you—that poor who is with you and of you.*¹

According to the sages the vision held out by the Torah is not an impersonal mass distribution of charity but an outreach based on an ever-widening of the familial circle. Thus the world is ultimately healed of poverty and suffering not by material aid alone but by ripples of intimacy emanating from our hearts and homes. We start with 'our own children' and from there reach out to include 'other children' as our own. This kind of loving will eventually embrace the whole human family, ensuring that we treat each person as a brother or sister, as one 'who is with you/ beside you' and not simply the object of our charity.

Doing Torah

In a single verse of Torah the sages discover a great storehouse of ethical principle. Do you agree? Discuss the Torah vision described above. Continue to discuss the moral principle and dilemma raised by this text.



Says Rashi:²

'My people'...

'My people' teaches us that you should not treat him in a humiliating manner when lending to him, for he is a member of 'My people'.

'The poor among you'...

'Look at yourself as if you are the poor person.'

1. Tanhuma Yashan, Mishpatim
2. Rashi: Medieval scholar considered 'prince' of Torah commentators. Here in the second quote he draws on an earlier midrash from Tanhuma 15.

Bibliography: Herczeg, ed., *Rashi: Commentary on the Torah* (NY, 1995, 1999); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot* (NY, 1996).