

ONE TORAH FOR ALL

Zerubbabel ben Emunah
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Understanding Torah Society

Part 7 – Public Goods – Social Welfare

Matithyah (Matthew) 26:11

“For you have the poor with you always; but you will not have Me always.”

Once again, to refresh our memory, the six public goods as commonly seen by government today are 1) order; 2) defense; 3) public health; 4) infrastructure; 5) education; and 6) social welfare. So far we have examined order, defense, public health, infrastructure, and education. This study will examine the last of the public goods—social welfare. Social welfare are those programs in which a person or family who has fallen upon hard times can have their needs taken care of through the collective contributions of the masses.

The Torah has a lot to say about the poor and how the poor are to be treated as well as how the poor are not to be treated. To begin this study, we shall examine Devarim chapter 15, verse-by-verse, that is, verses one through eighteen.

Devarim (Deuteronomy) 15:1

“At the end of every seven years you shall make a release.”

YHWH commands that every person in Israel is to make a full and complete release of all debts; nothing can be carried over. The word release comes from the Hebrew word שמיטה *shimittah*, which means *to release*. These verses are dealing with the Shimittah year or land Shabbat. We will deal with the Shimittah more fully in a later study. In this study, we are interested only in the Shimittah as it pertains to the poor.

Devarim (Deuteronomy) 15:2

“And this is the manner of the release: every creditor shall release that which he has lent to his neighbor; he shall not exact it of his neighbor and his brother; because YHWH's release has been proclaimed.”

It is interesting to note that this release is only commanded for those who are neighbors and brothers.

Devarim (Deuteronomy) 15:3

“Of a foreigner you may exact it: but whatsoever of yours is with your brother, your hand shall release.”

The word *foreigner* in the passage above is from the Hebrew word הנכרי hanakri, which means strange, thus foreigner by extension. This is a different word than that of גר ger, which means *guest* and *sojourner*. Therefore, we can surmise the difference between these two words is significant. A גר ger is a person who has come in from the nations and who has decided to become a part of Israel by keeping and doing all of YHWH’s Torah. This is suggested to us by the meaning of *sojourner*. His children would thus be considered as native born, that is, there is only one Torah for the native born as well as the *sojourner-ger* (Shemot 12:49). However, a נכרי nakri would be a person from the nations who has not attached himself to Israel and who has not decided to keep and do all of YHWH’s Torah, but is living with Israel nonetheless.

The year of release would include a גר ger, but not a נכרי nakri. It is important to note that while the year of release does not include the נכרי nakri through commandment, it is not absolutely commanded that one cannot release him in the shmittah as well. For one may well make such a choice and still be well within the perimeters of the commandments without adding to or taking away from His Torah.

Devarim (Deuteronomy) 15:4

“Howbeit there shall be no poor with you (for YHWH will surely bless you in the land which YHWH your Elohim gives you for an inheritance to possess it),”

On the surface, this verse seems to present us with a contradiction with our opening passage which is the apparent recorded words of Yeshua. However, upon further examination, we find that both passages are conditional, that is, in order for either or both to be true, there are certain conditions which have to be met. In the above passage the blessing of not having any poor amongst our brothers is preconditioned upon the obedience of Israel: each and every member of Israel to each and every commandment of YHWH. If Israel does this, then YHWH shall bless her in such a way as there shall be no poor among us who are our brothers.

That is to say, there still could be poor who are foreigners (that is, נכרי nakri) living among Israel. Thus, we can see that both the passages in Devarim as well as the words of Yeshua are true.

Devarim (Deuteronomy) 15:5

“if only you diligently hear and obey the Voice of YHWH your Elohim, to observe to do all this commandment which I command you this day.”

This is the condition of not having any poor among us who are our brothers. Israel is admonished to hear and obey (shema) the Voice of YHWH.

Devarim (Deuteronomy) 15:6

“For YHWH your Elohim will bless you, as He promised you; and you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow; and you shall rule over many nations, but they shall not rule over you.”

One difficulty that some people have with the many promises which YHWH has given, they fail to see that most are conditional promises. If those to whom the promise is given fulfill the condition, then the promise will come to pass. In most every case that condition involves some form of obedience. If obedience is forthcoming, so shall the promise. However, if there is disobedience, then the promise is hindered and in some cases outright stopped from being manifest.

Devarim (Deuteronomy) 15:7

“If there be with you a poor man, one of your brethren, within any of your gates in your land which YHWH your Elohim give you, you shall not harden your heart, nor shut your hand from your poor brother;”

Just to make it clear, and knowing how people are, we are commanded that if (when) there happens to be a poor man who is our brother, we are not to be harsh in our judgment or treatment of him. Humans being what they are would tend to point the finger at the poor man who is a brother and believe that it was his own fault for getting himself in such a predicament. However, YHWH wants us to be careful of such a mindset and make sure that we do not harden our heart towards our brother who has fallen upon hard times. The truth is it may not be his fault at all.

Devarim (Deuteronomy) 15:8

“but you shall surely open your hand unto him, and shall surely lend him sufficient for his need in that which he has need.”

Whatever need that he has, we are to give it to him as a loan. Please understand that if his circumstances do not significantly change so that he can pay it back before the year of release, then it is no longer a loan, but a gift.

Devarim (Deuteronomy) 15:9

“Beware that there be not a base thought in your heart, saying, ‘The seventh year, the year of release, is at hand;’ and your eye be evil against your poor brother, and you give him nothing; and he cry unto YHWH against you, and it be sin unto you.”

Truly, our Creator knows His creation—man. YHWH knows the heart and mind of man. It would be just like a man to think such a thought as we are commanded not to think in the above verse. Just because it is getting near to the year of release is not sufficient reason not to loan to our brothers in need.

Devarim (Deuteronomy) 15:10

“You shall surely give him, and your heart shall not be grieved when you give unto him; because that for this thing YHWH your Elohim will bless you in all your work, and in all that you put your hand to.”

Not only does YHWH caution us about having such thoughts, but we are also not to have certain feelings in such a matter. Namely, we are not to be grieved that we are giving to our brother who has a need and the year of release is near because YHWH shall bless us in all that we do for helping our brother in need in his time of need.

Devarim (Deuteronomy) 15:11

“For the poor will never cease out of the land; therefore I command you, saying, ‘You shall surely open your hand to your brother, to your needy, and to your poor, in your land.’”

Why is it that back in verse four YHWH tells us that there shall be no poor among us (if we obey Him), but now in verse eleven He tells us that the poor shall never cease to be a part of the land? Please note that this is perfectly in line with what Yeshua stated as recorded in Matthew 26:11. Could it be, YHWH knew that Israel would have difficulty keeping and obeying His commandments—the condition of not having any poor among our brothers? Historically, Israel has never truly been successful in hearing and obeying His Voice.

Devarim (Deuteronomy) 15:12

“If your brother, a Hebrew man, or a Hebrew woman, be sold to you, and serve you six years; then in the seventh year you shall let him go free from you.”

In the context of this chapter, one could and even perhaps should take this to be a command from YHWH. That is, if we see a brother who is for sale, then we are commanded to buy him that he may be set free in the year of release. After all, in verse seven we are commanded not to harden our heart towards a brother who has fallen upon hard times, but we are to open our hand to him and give him what he needs. If a Hebrew man or Hebrew woman has fallen upon hard times to the point that he or she has come into bondage to a foreigner, then surely we should buy them and let them work for us until the year of release.

Devarim (Deuteronomy) 15:13

“And when you let him go free from you, you shall not let him go empty;”

Here is what one is supposed to do when one is released out of service to you. He is not to go away empty handed.

Devarim (Deuteronomy) 15:14

“you shall furnish him liberally out of your flock, and out of your threshing-floor, and out of your winepress; as YHWH your Elohim hath blessed you, you shall give to him.”

When released in the shmittah, the one going out is to be given from his former master, sheep, goats, grain, and wine in abundance. Now remember, this is the year of release, thus the land that was formerly his or belonged to his family as an eternal inheritance is his once again. Therefore, he has a place to go and this gift from his former master shall give him a fresh start.

Devarim (Deuteronomy) 15:15

“And you shall remember that you were a bondman in the land of Egypt, and YHWH your Elohim redeemed you; therefore I command you this thing today.”

Are you beginning to see that Torah does not call for a “government” to have certain programs in place to take care of the needy? Rather, YHWH charges each and every person to watch over and care for those in need. Not to do so is sin in the eyes of YHWH. (We will deal with this in more detail in the study on being our Brother’s Keeper.

Devarim (Deuteronomy) 15:16-17

16 “And it shall be, if he says to you, ‘I will not go out from you;’ because he loves you and your house, because he is well with you;

17 then you shall take an awl, and thrust it through his ear unto the door, and he shall be your servant forever. And also to your maid-servant you shall do likewise.”

When a master treats those in his service right and fair, actually like a son or daughter, then the one in service may decide in the year of release to not go away from his master. If such is the case, then his servitude becomes permanent and may never be revoked. I would think that it would be in the best interest of all concerned that the master would do everything he could to talk his servant out of having his ear pierced.

Devarim (Deuteronomy) 15:18

“It shall not seem hard to you, when you let him go free from you; for to double of the hire of a hireling has he served you six years; and YHWH your Elohim will bless you in all that you do.”

YHWH specifies how much the master is to give to his servant who goes out from him. If he was to hire a person to do what he did for six years of salary, then the master is to give him double that as he goes out. He is to go out with twelve years of salary, paid to him in animals and grain and wine.

There seems to be at least two classes of poor. One class which we dealt with above, are those who have sold themselves or the crops of their land to pay their debt. The other class are those who are in hard times but who have not sold themselves to pay their debt. They may have sold their crops, if they had crops to sell, but not themselves. We see this because of several passages which speak of poor going into the fields which do not belong to them to glean after the harvesters. If a person has sold himself, then he would have no need to do this because the person to whom he sold himself is responsible for feeding him and taking care of all his needs.

Vayyiqra (Leviticus) 19:10

“And you shall not glean your vineyard, neither shall you gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner; I am YHWH your Elohim.”

During harvest time, YHWH commands us that we are to leave some for the poor. We are not to take every bit of fruit or grain from the vineyard or field. Some may object to this, asking, “What if the poor don’t show up to harvest the corners of the field?” It does not really matter whether any poor show up to harvest the corners of the field or to glean the vines or trees, those things do not belong to the owner, but to the poor. To take it is to be guilty of stealing and breaking His commandments.

Shemot (Exodus) 23:11

“but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow; that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the beast of the field shall eat. In like manner you shall deal with your vineyard, and with your olive yard.

In the shmittah year, we are not to work the ground and plant seed. The land is to remain fallow. Naturally, some seed during harvest time from the previous year will fall to the ground and grow. This volunteer crop is for the poor so they may eat. Likewise, the vineyard and the olive yard are not to be harvested either, but the poor may come and eat from the vineyard and the olive yard.

Mishle (Proverbs) 29:7

***The righteous take knowledge of the cause of the poor;
The wicked has no understanding to know it.***

Do you see? The way of YHWH takes care of the poor, but not by a government. Rather, by the people of Israel through their obedience to His commandments.

Vayyiqra (Leviticus) 23:22

“And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not wholly reap the corners of your field, neither shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor, and for the sojourner [ger]; I am YHWH your Elohim.”

Even when we go out to harvest the crops of the field, we are to take care not to harvest the whole field, but rather we are commanded to leave some so that the poor can come and harvest for their own needs. YHWH does not want lazy people in His land. He wants people who work the land. Even the poor of the land are to come out and work for their needs. If a person is simply poor, they are not to simply receive a handout, but are to work at helping themselves. Obviously, if a person is severely handicapped where he could not do such a thing as go out into the fields to glean the corners, then he would need the generosity of his brothers. But that would not be the norm, rather the exception.

Vayyiqra (Leviticus) 25:25

“If your brother be waxed poor, and sell some of his possession, then shall his kinsman that is next unto him come, and shall redeem that which his brother hath sold.”

Here, YHWH commands each and every member of Israel: if we see a brother who has fallen upon hard times, then, we are to go and buy that which he has had to sell and give it back to him. That is the nature of redemption.

Mishle (Proverbs) 14:21

***He that despise his neighbor sins;
But he that hath pity on the poor, happy is he.***

My grandfather was a successful farmer during the depression. Many farmers around him were losing their farms. The bank would foreclose and then the sheriff would come and auction the farm off. Now my grandfather was a very large man. The banker would show up to the auction and they would always be able to run the bid up where only they could afford to buy the land. The going rate of land at a sheriff's auction in that area was seven to ten cents per acre. The bankers would often run it up to eleven or twelve cents per acre. Often, my grandfather would go to the auction and find the banker and make him understand that he was going to buy the land that was being auctioned that day, but that he was only going to pay nine cents an acre. After he bought the land, he would then deed it back to his neighbor who had lost it. This is exactly what this passage is teaching us to do to redeem our brother.

Vayyiqra (Leviticus) 25:39

“And if your brother be waxed poor with you, and sell himself unto you; you shall not make him to serve as a bond-servant.”

When a person redeems a brother and he becomes his servant until the next Shmittah year, he is not to make him serve harshly. Rather, he is to be treated in the same way that the master would want to be treated if the roles were reversed.

Matithyah (Matthew) 7:12

“However you would want men to do unto you, even so you do also unto them; for this is the Torah and the prophets.”

This is what Mashiach Yeshua taught us, Torah teaches us to treat each other with kindness and dignity, especially those who are poor and in need.

Devarim (Deuteronomy) 24:14-15

***14 “You shall not oppress a hired servant that is poor and needy, whether he be of your brethren, or of your sojourners that are in your land within your gates:
15 in his day you shall give him his hire, neither shall the sun go down upon it; for he is poor, and set his heart upon it; lest he cry against you unto YHWH, and it be sin unto you.”***

This passage is dealing with the poor who have not had to sell themselves into servitude. However, they are still very poor. The poor are to be paid on a daily basis. This is an indication of just how poor such a person is. In paying him at the end of each day, he has the means to feed himself and his family.

Mishle (Proverbs) 14:31

***He that oppresses the poor reproaches his Maker;
But he that has mercy on the needy honors Him.***

It seems that the poor have been given to us to test us to see if we will hear and obey the Voice of YHWH our Elohim. Will we honor our Creator by taking care of those who need our help? This is what He has commanded each and every one of us to do. To depend upon someone else to do it, whether that is looking to a government, some group, or another individual, is not facing up to one's responsibility as given by YHWH our Elohim.

Mishle (Proverbs) 28:27

***He that gives to the poor shall not lack;
But he that hides his eyes shall have many a curse.***

The bottom line of taking care of the poor is succinctly stated in the above proverb. If we do not want to have lack, then we need to give to the poor and take care of our brothers and neighbors in need. If a person does not, then such a person shall be cursed! Giving to a government or to some organization does not fulfill any of these commandments. Only when a person gives directly to a poor person are these commandments fulfilled.

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