

Emulating God - Parasha R'ei

Rabbi Rebecca Yaël Schorr, Congregation B'nai Tzedek
Executive Committee, Board of Rabbis of Southern California

When I was a young girl, a trip into town always commenced with a detour to the dining room. There, on the hutch, sat the *pushke*. My father never failed to remove some coins and place them into his left pants' pocket. "It's for when someone asks for *tzedakah*," he would explain.

Not "if," but "when."

At first glance, this *modus operandi* is inconsistent with the teaching in this week's *parasha*, R'ei. "There shall be no needy among you (Deut.15:4)" promises God. All that is required is that we heed God's Commandments. The inconsistency, however, appears to be in the very text itself for just a few verses later we are commanded "if, however, there is a needy person among you...do not harden your heart and shut your hand... (Deut. 15:7)".

Taking these two statements together, we might better understand the initial verse not as a statement of fact but as an ideal. If we render 15:4 as "there *really should not be* any needy among you," the commandment in 15:7 follows up with a practical response should the ideal not come to pass.

And yet the text itself seems to doubt the possibility of a society free of poverty as evidenced by the reiteration of the commandment to reach out to the poor in Deuteronomy 15:11.

Ibn Ezra understood the text differently. Instead of understanding God's statement as a promise against scarcity, he saw it as an "if-then" statement. "Since there will come a time when Israel will not listen to God, there won't stop being an indigent in the land." In other words, any poverty would be a direct result of our failure to keep God's Commandments.

The Ramban saw great theological implications in this rendering. How can it be possible that the Jewish people are incapable of listening to God and following God's *mitzvot*?

In his **Commentary on the Torah** (p. 614), Richard Elliot Friedman takes a different view. Rather than rendering the text "there will never stop being indigent people," it might be understood as "there won't stop" meaning that poverty will *never* cease on its own. It requires action on our part. There will be no poverty if, and only if, **we** choose to end it.

R. Chama son of R. Chanina once asked: What does it mean *You shall walk after the Eternal your God?* (Deut. 13:5). ... R. Simlai taught, "The Torah begins with an act of loving-kindness and ends with an act of loving-kindness. It begins with an act of loving-kindness, for it is written, *And the Eternal God made for Adam and for his wife coats of skin, and clothed them* (Gen.3:21); and ends with an act of loving-kindness, for it is

written, *And He[God] buried him[Moses] in the valley (Deut. 36:6)."* (*Talmud Bavli, Sotah 14a*)

When we open our hands to the needy, we are not only heeding God's Call. We are emulating God. And there could be no better Role Model.