



DVAR TZEDEK

Parashat Re'eh 5772 *The Subtle Ethics of Seeing*

By Adina Roth
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South Africa has one of the largest gaps between the “haves” and the “have-nots” in the world.¹ When I leave my apartment each morning, I find homeless people begging at every traffic light. Sometimes I hand out food and coins in an attempt to help those in my vicinity, but the problem is so vast that these acts don’t even dent the surface. I am left wondering how we could ever hope to solve it.

It is for this reason that God’s promise in *Parashat Re’eh*, that ‘no pauper shall be found among you,’² grabbed my attention. How do we create a society and a world where disparities between the rich and the poor are truly abolished?

The promise of ending poverty is linked in the *parashah* to the practice of debt relief. We are told that in the seventh year, the *shemittah* year, we must release the poor from their debts.³ This powerful practice of economic justice seems to be an important biblical solution to poverty—but it is limited. It soon becomes clear that *shemittah* applies only to the Israelites. The very next verse reads, “*Et hanochri tigos*—the foreigner you may dun.”⁴ (To dun is to demand payment from a debtor.)

But before we write off *shemittah* as a particularist practice, let us explore the text more deeply. We are not *commanded* to dun the foreigner, but *permitted* to do so, and there are clues in the text that indicate an ambivalence concerning the dunning of any human being.

Robert Alter picks up the linguistic similarity between the word *tigos*, to dun, and the *nogsim*, or taskmasters, in Egypt.⁵ In dunning the foreigner, then, it seems to me that we become similar to the oppressor who makes the vulnerable suffer. Alter also points to other undercurrents in this text that link it to the Egyptian narrative: we are warned not to let our hearts harden (as Pharaoh did) and a poor person is described as one who calls out to God (as the Israelites did while they were slaves in Egypt). Thus, while one *may* dun the foreigner, doing so, the text hints, makes us similar to the taskmasters who oppressed our own people.

But despite this subtle deterrent, my discomfort with this law persists, in the fact that we are permitted to dun the foreigner at all. Looking closer, I wonder whether the phrase *et hanochri tigos* could be reinterpreted as a warning about the human inclination to oppress the other—rather than permission to do so. In this phrase, the noun *nochri*, “foreigner,” precedes the verb, *tigos*, “to dun.” Perhaps this order reflects human behavior: first we identify the

¹ “South Africa: Gap between haves and have-nots yawns wider,” *IRIN*, 7 November 2007. <http://www.irinnews.org/Report/75191/SOUTH-AFRICA-Gap-between-haves-and-have-nots-yawns-wider>

² Deuteronomy 15: 4.

³ Deuteronomy 15:1.

⁴ Deuteronomy 15:3.

⁵ Exodus 5:6.

person (in this case, as a foreigner), and it is this identification that determines our action—dunning. Later in the text, the Israelite is warned not to ‘look meanly at your brother the pauper.’⁶ The action of looking—of how we view the other—is emphasized in the text, establishing two ways of seeing. If we see someone as a neighbor and a brother, an ‘Israelite,’ his proximity and sense of sameness impels us to care for him. On the other hand, if we see someone as a ‘foreigner,’ we objectify the person as distant and different and may be led to relate with apathy, neglect or abuse.

In this way, our seeing informs the way we respond to people facing poverty: If a person is an ‘other’ in our eyes, her humanity is diminished and it becomes possible to dun her, to oppress her. But if she is a neighbor, a sister, she is one of us, and must be granted the full expression of the *shemita* law.

Thus, the ethical theme in the text is about examining our ways of seeing. We need to challenge the simple binary opposites handed to us and choose to see all human beings as close to us, as part of the in-group, as sharing the common ground of humanity. To address poverty comprehensively, we cannot afford to maintain cultural distinctions between the Israelite and the foreigner, between the in-group and the out-group. If we see people as ‘other,’ we diminish their humanity and so are able to give and withhold at our discretion, assuming the actions of the Egyptian taskmaster. In choosing to see a difference between the insider and the outsider, we inevitably perpetuate poverty. If, however, we could see all of humanity as our own, perhaps we would not tolerate poverty at all, not in our communities and not elsewhere in the world, either. We would approach helping others as an extension of helping ourselves.

The spiritual writer Ram Dass has commented that if we truly recognized the human being in the face of the homeless people on our streets, we would not allow their suffering to be perpetuated, so much so that we would literally take them into our homes. When we can move from identifying some people as *nochri*—foreigners—to seeing all human beings as neighbors and family, we will create a world of universal *shemita* practices, a place where no pauper is found.



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⁶ Deuteronomy, 15:9.

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