

Because we are in the midst of a festival, we interrupt our normal weekly order of Torah reading to read the portion for the second day of Shavuot, which overlaps with Parashat Re'eh, Deuteronomy 14:22-16:17.

This Torah portion opens with a reminder of the tithes that we are supposed to bring to Jerusalem, closes with a description of the holidays. But I think in the middle is the essence of Torah.

Deut. 15:4-11:

There shall be no needy among you—since Hashem your God will bless you in the land that Hashem your God is giving you as a hereditary portion— (5) if only you heed Hashem your God and take care to keep all this Instruction that I enjoin upon you this day. (6) For Hashem your God will bless you as s/he has promised you: you will extend loans to many nations, but require none yourself; you will dominate many nations, but they will not dominate you. (7) If, however, there is a needy person among you, one of your kinsmen in any of your settlements in the land that Hashem your God is giving you, do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kinsman. (8) Rather, you must open your hand and lend him sufficient for whatever he needs. (9) Beware lest you harbor the base thought, “The seventh year, the year of remission, is approaching,” so that you are mean to your needy kinsman and give him nothing. He will cry out to Hashem against you, and you will incur guilt. (10) Give to him readily and have no regrets when you do so, for in return Hashem your God will bless you in all your efforts and in all your undertakings. (11) For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land, which is why I command you: open your hand to the poor and needy kinsman in your land.

This opens with the promise that “there shall be no needy – if you only listen and keep the mitzvot.

But then it goes to conclude that the needy will not desist from the land. How can this be?

The most obvious solution, as we discuss in Torah study yesterday, is that Torah knows that we *won't* keep the mitzvot, and hence is already warning us that utopia will not be.

But at the Tur Ha'Arokh points out, this is a problematic interpretation. Torah usually says, "do this good thing, and this will be the outcome, but *if* you fail, that will be the outcome. Torah *doesn't* say, "do this good thing, and x will be the outcome, but I know you'll fail - so y will definitely be the outcome." Torah tends to have more faith in the moral possibility of the Jewish people.

So the Tur Ha'Arokh suggests a different interpretation, in the name of Nachmanides: "seeing that in spite of the blessings that accrue to you when you do observe the laws of the Torah, and the resultant affluence in the land it is practically impossible that sometime in the future there will be not be an instance of a destitute person, unable to repay his loan on time. . ."

Suggestion that there might be sufficient virtue and sufficient blessing, but that inequality is somehow still inherent to the human condition. That there might be enough blessing *collectively* for no one to be needy, but the needy will always persist, hence the mitzvah to take care of them. And indeed, this is not unlike reality- enough food to feed everyone in this country, if we only had the political will and an more humane economic system.

Chizkuni's interesting suggestion: "The promise in verse 4 had been linked to a condition. i.e. that the entire population observes the sh'mittah and yovel legislation."

Remember shmitta and yovel – the sabbatical year and jubilee. I discussed an aspect of them on parshat Behar. Let the land rest, release of debt, freedom of slaves. Yovel/Jubilee is when landholding revert to their original owner.

So Chizkuni's reading is more descriptive than pre-scriptive: not reward and punishment, but the recipe for an equitable society that encourages social mobility and refuses to allow the creation of a permanent underclass.

I think we read this on Shavuot because this may be the essence of Torah.

Two pieces of evidence: a midrash on Exodus 24:7, after the revelation, Moses writes down all of the commandment and "Then he took the record of the covenant and read it aloud to the people. And they said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will faithfully do!" " Mekhilta DeRabbi Yishmael: Rabbis ask, What part did he read from? R. Yishmael says: What is written at the beginning, viz.

[\(Leviticus 25:1-3\)](#) "And the Lord spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying ... then the

land shall rest a Sabbath to the L rd. Six years shall you sow your field, etc.", sabbatical years, Jubilee years, blessings and curses. What is written at the end? (Ibid. 26:46) "These are the statutes and the ordinances and the Torah that the L rd gave between Himself and the children of Israel on Mount Sinai by the hand of Moses." (At this,) they said: We take it upon ourselves. When Moses saw this, he took the blood and sprinkled it on the people, viz. ([Exodus 24:8](#)) "And Moses took the blood and sprinkled it upon the people," saying to them: You are (hereby) tied and bound and committed. Tomorrow come and take upon yourselves all of the mitzvot. R. Yossi b. R. Yehudah says: On that day all of the acts (of their induction into the covenant) were performed...."

Other piece of evidence is the book of Ruth, which we traditionally read on Day 2 of Shavuot. Story of a poor, foreign widow who is welcomed in Israelite society and is allowed to glean in the fields, one of the other agricultural mechanisms for protecting the poor. She becomes the great grandmother of King David.

So on this holiday of receiving Torah, I suggest that this year we consider all of the abundance that already exists – and how we might be inspired by Torah both raise up the visibility of those who need, and to work for a world in which there shall be no needy.