This week's Torah portion, Re'eh contains, in my opinion, one of the most breathtaking negotiations between an ideal and a reality that we encounter anywhere in Torah.

Chapter 15 of Deuteronomy opens with instructions about how, during the sabbatical year, we must forgive all loans owed to us by fellow Israelites. This is the third time that the *shmita* or sabbatical, is mentioned in Torah. This year, beginning with Rosh Hashana, will actually be a *shmita* year. I am fascinated by the *shmita,* and I invite any of you who are interested to explore what the *shmita* is and what its implications are for us today in a three part series with me, beginning next week.

In our parashah, the text goes on, in verses 4-11, with this mix of aspiration and instruction:

(4) 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 They 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 them sufficient for whatever they need. (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 them nothing. They will cry out to Hashem against you, and you will incur guilt. (10) Give 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.

Notice the opening promise: "there shall be no needy," amending three verses later to "if or when, however, there is a needy person among you," to finally, "For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land."

What are we to make of this seeming internal contradiction? Commentators debate about whether at any point in history, the Jewish people have ever collectively been righteous enough to fulfill the aspiration articulated in verse four; essentially, the eradication of poverty. What does it mean to be so sure that if we could do right, we would accomplish this, but also so sure that it is essentially impossible, that, as verse 11 states, there will never cease to be needy ones?

One of my favorite teachings about this verse is from Ramban, who says, "[Moshe] says that it is impossible for the poor to cease so that none should ever exist. [Moses] mentioned this because, having assured them that there would be no needy if they observe all the commandments he said: "But I know that not all generations forever will observe all the commandments in which case there would be no need to charge you concerning the poor, for perhaps, at some time, there will exist poor and so I command you about him if he will be found."

In Ramban's reading, the work of righteousness, and practically, of alleviating poverty, is an ongoing struggle. So Torah speaks both to the longing for and impossibility of what we might call, "total victory;" the idea that if we work hard enough at something we will achieve it so completely that we will never need to work for it again. Rather, if we work hard enough, we could, as a society, provide for all of those who might be needy; however, we should not ever feel secure that the work is done, that poverty has been eradicated for all times.

As Rabbi Jill Jacobs, CEO of the human rights organization, T*ruah* and author of a book titled, *There Shall Be No Needy,* has written: "Even if one generation succeeds in temporarily eradicating poverty, the possibility remains that poverty

will resurface in another generation. Thus, the Torah anticipates a perfected world, but it plans for an imperfect one."

Ramban seems to be very much in conversation with Rebecca Solnit, who wrote in in *The Guardian* in 2016: "The absolutists of the old left imagined that victory would, when it came, be total and permanent, which is practically the same as saying that victory was and is impossible and will never come.

It is, in fact, more than possible. It is something that has arrived in innumerable ways, small and large and often incremental, but not in that way that was widely described and expected. So victories slip by unheralded."

In this moment of COVID resurgence, this wisdom seems badly needed: the struggle matters, even though there is rarely an ultimate victory.

As we work towards our aspiration, there is success, and there are failures, there is recalibration. Even the radical cyclical debt annulment of *shmita* wound up having unintended consequences that needed to be addressed by the early Rabbis. As is taught in Masechet Gittin 36a:

Hillel the Elder **instituted a *prosbul,* a document that prevents the Sabbatical** Year **from annuling an outstanding debt. We learned there** (Shevi'it 10:3): If one writes **a prosbol,** the Sabbatical Year **does not annul** debt. **This is one of the matters that Hillel the Elder instituted because he saw that** the people of **the nation were refraining from lending to one another** around the time of the Sabbatical Year, as they were concerned that the debtor would not repay the loan, **and they violated that which is written in the Torah** [which I read earlier]: **"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 them nothing."

In other words, Hillel saw that rather than helping people who were poor, the *shmita* was in fact creating a disincentive for the wealthy to loan to the poor at

all. All kinds of people who wanted access to capital couldn't find it. And the sage Hillel – whose own personal poverty was legendary in the Talmud – figured that there was no way convince the wealthy to lend to the poor, except by creating a loophole that would allow them to collect their debts even during and after the *shmita*.

If you feel kind of bummed, that's real. But my takeaway is not just about how intractable a problem poverty is, but about how we should never assume that we've irrevocably fixed an intractable problem. As we begin this month of *Elul*, going deeper into the season of *teshuvah,* we should have the humility to acknowledge that what might seem like good ideas can have unintended consequences; that a fix that might work for some will not work for everyone. That we hold the aspiration of a perfected world, but do not confuse the aspiration for the reality that we inhabit, and which needs to be addressed.

The conversation never ends. And as I mentioned earlier, I hope some of you will join me online via Zoom for the coming Wednesday evenings, as we continue to explore *shmita* and the negotiations between aspiration, reality and what this means to us.

Shabbat shalom.