

Davar Torah Parashat Kedoshim – May 7, 2022

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A few weeks ago, Elon Musk decided to buy the social media platform Twitter for the princely sum of \$44B. From a distance, this seemed like a vanity project. Twitter is public and anyone can post on it who keeps to some very basic rules. At the same time, there are about 600,000 homeless people in the US. There are also 30 million Americans without healthcare coverage. There are approximately 320,000 households where at least one child is so food insecure, they do not get enough nutrition. I do not have to point out to this group that that money could have solved all of these problems and still left ample to solve world-wide food shortages.

Why do so many of us admire the wealth hoarder? How have we learned to unsee homelessness and blame the poor for their lack of access to food and healthcare? I guess it is easy for us to want to have the access to wealth and to be afraid of poverty. It is easy to forget for many of us that we have more than what we need, even if the grass sometimes looks greener on West Newton hill or in Wellesley.

In today's torah portion, we learn that we are supposed to leave some of our wealth for others. We are commanded to give new fruits and some fallen fruits to the poor and we are supposed to leave the corners of our fields for those less fortunate. We speak about the commandment of pe'ah every single day in the morning service: Elu hadevarim she eyn lahem shiur: peah, These are precepts for which no fixed measure is prescribed: [leaving] the corner [of a field unharvested], [the offering of] the first fruits, the appearance-offering, deeds of kindness, and the study of Torah.

Our sages are quick to put a minimum boundary on the commandment of pe'ah. In tractate pe'ah, we are taught that a minimum is 1/60th of the harvest and there are a variety of opinions about how small or large a plot has to be to be required to leave a corner. Although the commandment is without measure the sages makes it clear that three factors determine how much needs to be left: the size of the plot, the number of poor people in the community and the yield of the harvest.

There is also an active discussion about when access should be given. In general, it should be at least three times a day. And someone who does not honor this commandment is considered as one who steals from the poor.

Overall, the concern of the rabbis is related to the physical well-being of the poor, but also to provide them with dignity. How easy would it be to just harvest everything and have a poor person come and ask for food. Instead, times are determined where the poor can get their own food, without having to ask for it. The rabbis were concerned with people who took but did not need it. But the punishment for that is not in this world. In other words, they recognized that the system could be abused, but that it was necessary to have a way of supporting the poor. In the end that is more important than a potential issue with fraud.

It looks like we can translate these ideas into practical guidelines for us. First and foremost, you should provide for those who are less fortunate. And there is no limit as to how much to provide. Your giving should be dictated by your general wealth, (which equates to the size of your field), your income (the yield of the field) and the number of poor people in need in your community.

When you provide, it should be in a way where the receiver retains their basic dignity. The rabbinic idea is to make it easy to not be observed when the receiver takes something and to make sure that the person is involved in the process. Finally, the rabbis urge us not to focus on the potential for abuse of the system.

How different is this from the set of constraints we as a society put on the poor and food insecure. We provide food stamps, limit what people can buy and worry endlessly about the potential for abuse, to a degree where it often limits deserving people from having access to resources.

As I was thinking about this, the concept of the freedge started to stand out. A number of people in our extended minyan community, Miriam Newman and Marla Olsberg in particular, have spent a lot of time and effort putting a fridge outside on Watertown street in Nonantum. Many in our community stock up the freedge and there is no monitoring of who takes what. It allows people to glean from our corners in a way that is close in intention to the biblical commandment. I urge all of you to help and participate. Please let me know if you need any information or reach out to Miriam and Marla.

The pe'ah is mentioned once more in our parashah. A little later, we are told not to cut the corners of our face. In light of the above, we could see pe'ot as a physical reminder on our bodies of the importance of taking care of the less fortunate in our communities and as a Jewish obligation. On a side note, one other distinguishing Jewish feature of dress and another commandment is to make tzitzit on the corners of our garment. May they serve as a constant reminder of the need to create a society that takes care of the less fortunate in our midst.