

We All Need Somebody To Lean On: ***Mitzvot Mutalot Al Hatzibbur***

Part 1

By Rabbi Erica Steelman for GJC Tikkun Leil 5780

Underlying questions:

1. What does our tradition have to say about individual and collective obligations to help people in need?
2. How might we today, as individuals and a collective, support, create, and improve social safety nets?

Warm-up.

Before studying with someone else, I encourage you to take some time to consider the following questions on community and mitzvot:

Community

- a. What does community mean to you?
- b. What communities are you a member of?
 - i. What if anything is expected and/or required of members?
 - ii. What is expected and/or required of the community as a whole?

Mitzvot

- c. What comes to mind when you hear the word *mitzvah* and/or *mitzvot*?
- d. What is your relationship, if any, with *mitzvot*? How, if at all, are *mitzvot* a part of your life? (*mitzvot* as you do define *mitzvot*).

Selected Texts.

1. DEUTERONOMY 15:7

כִּי־יְהִי־בְךָ אֶבְיֹן מֵאַחַד אֶחָיֶךָ בְּאַחַד שְׁעָרֶיךָ בְּאַרְצֶךָ אֲשֶׁר־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן
לְךָ לֹא תִאֲמָץ אֶת־לִבְּךָ וְלֹא תִקְפֹּץ אֶת־גִּידֶךָ מֵאַחֶיךָ הָאֶבְיֹן:

If there will be among you a needy person, from one of your brothers [kinsfolk], in one of your cities, in your land the Lord, your G-d, is giving you, you shall not harden your heart, and you shall not close your hand from your needy brother [kinsfolk].

Questions for Deut. 15:7

- How might describing the person in need as “your brother/kinsfolk” influence the meaning and understanding of this instruction?
- What effect does including “**from one of your brothers, in one of your cities, in your land...**” have, as opposed to just saying, “If there will be among you a needy person, you shall not harden your heart, and you shall not close your hand...”?

2. DEUTERONOMY 15:8

כִּי־פָתַחַתְּ תִפְתָּח אֶת־יָדְךָ לּוֹ וְהַעֲבַטְתָּ תַעֲבִיטָנּוּ דִּי מִחֲסָרוֹ אֲשֶׁר יִחְסֹר לּוֹ:

Rather, you shall open your hand to him, and you shall lend him sufficient for his needs, which he is lacking.

Questions for Deut. 15:8

- How might the command to **lend** instead of to give impact individuals and the community as a whole?
- What do you think of the instruction to lend the person enough to cover what they lack?

3. DEUTERONOMY 15:11

כִּי לֹא־יִחַדֵּל אֲבִיוֹן מִקְרֵב הָאָרֶץ עַל־כֵּן אֲנֹכִי מֵצִוְךָ לֵאמֹר פָּתַחַתְּ אֶת־יָדְךָ לְאֶחָיְךָ לַעֲנִיָּה וּלְאֶבְיֹנָה בְּאֶרֶץְךָ:

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.

Questions for Deut 15:11

- Who do you think is being commanded? Is this obligation resting on the individual and/or the community as a whole to fulfill?
- What do you think about the commandment to “open your hand”? What might this mean?

- Why might the text include both words poor and needy? How does including both, instead of using one or the other, impact the meaning and your understanding of this verse?

4. SANHEDRIN 17b:10¹

ותניא כל עיר שאין בה עשרה דברים הללו אין תלמיד חכם רשאי לדור בתוכה בית דין מכין ועונשין וקופה של צדקה נגבית בשנים ומתחלקת בשלשה ובית הכנסת ובית המרחץ וביהכ"ס רופא ואומן ולבלר (וטבח) ומלמד תינוקות משום ר' עקיבא אמרו אף מיני פירא מפני שמיני פירא מאירין את העינים:

And it is taught in a *baraita*: A Torah scholar is not permitted to reside in any city that does not have these ten things: A court that has the authority to flog and punish transgressors; and a charity fund for which monies are collected by two people and distributed by three, as required by *halakha*. This leads to a requirement for another three people in the city. And a synagogue; and a bathhouse; and a public bathroom; a doctor; and a bloodletter; and a scribe [*velavlar*] to write sacred scrolls and necessary documents; and a ritual slaughterer; and a teacher of young children. With these additional requirements there are a minimum of 120 men who must be residents of the city. **They said in the name of Rabbi Akiva: The city must also have varieties of fruit, because varieties of fruit illuminate the eyes.**

Questions for Sanhedrin 17b:10

- According to the text above, what social services, institutions, goods must a city have for a torah scholar [Jewish person] to live in it? What do you think of this list?
- What if anything might you add to or remove from this list?
- Now replace “a torah scholar”/a Jewish person with **a person**. Does your answer to the question above change? If yes, how?

¹ Hebrew and English text for Sanhedrin 17b:10 taken from Sefaria.org

5. BAVA BATRA 8a:7

אמר רב יהודה הכל לאגלי גפא אפילו מיתמי אבל רבנן לא צריכי נטירותא הכל לכריא
פתיא אפילו מרבנן ולא אמרן אלא דלא נפקי באכלוזא אבל נפקי באכלוזא רבנן לאו בני
מיפק באכלוזא נינהו:

Rav Yehuda says: All of the city's residents must contribute **to** the building and upkeep of **the city gates** and for this purpose money is collected **even from orphans**. **But the Sages do not require protection** and are therefore exempt from this payment. All of the city's residents must contribute **to the digging of cisterns**, and for this purpose money is collected **even from the Sages**, since they too need water. The Gemara comments: **And we said this only when** the people are **not** required to **go out en masse** and do the actual digging, but are obligated merely to contribute money for that purpose. **But if** the people are required to **go out en masse** and actually dig, **the Sages** are **not** expected to **go out** with them **en masse**, but rather they are exempt from such labor.

Questions for Bava Batra 8a:7

- What is meant by "the Sages do not require protection"?
- What do you think about a system that requires orphans to pay into the "building and upkeep of the city gates," while Sages are exempt?
- What might be a contemporary analogous situation to the Sages being exempt and the orphans required to contribute financially to the building and upkeep of the city gates?
- What reason is given for requiring everyone, including the Sages, to contribute money to the digging of the wells? What do you think of this reasoning?
- What do you think about exempting Sages from the actual digging of the wells?

I leave you with some RAMBAM for next time 😊.

6. Mishneh Torah, Gifts to the Poor 9:1-3²

Any city in which there is a Jewish community is obligated to raise up collectors of *tzedakah*, people who are well-known and trustworthy, to go door-to-door among the people from Sabbath eve to Sabbath eve and to take from each and every one what is appropriate for them to give. [The amount] should be a set and clear matter for each person. They also distribute the money from Sabbath eve to Sabbath eve and give to each and every poor person enough food to last them for seven days. This method is called the *kupah* [the "coffer" for the charity fund].

So also [the community] must enlist collectors to take [donations] on a day-to-day basis, from each and every yard, a main dish, other types of food, fruit, or money for anyone who would donate something at that time, and they distribute this collection in the evening among the poor and give to each poor person from it a day's sustenance. This method is called the *tamchui* [the "charity plate"].

Never have we seen or heard of a Jewish community that does not have a *kupah*, but as for a *tamchui*, there are places whose custom it is to have it and places that do not. The widespread custom today is that the collectors of the *kupah* make their rounds each day [to collect the *tzedakah*], and they distribute it on each Sabbath eve.

² English text for Mishneh Torah, Gifts to the Poor, 9:1-3 taken from Sefaria.org