

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Emor
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Emor – Testing Hashem with tzedaka

In this week's Parasha of Emor, amongst other topics, we learn about services performed in the Bet Hamikdash during the festivals of the Jewish calendar. In the middle of that discussion, the Torah includes a short passage which exhorts us to leave agricultural gifts for the poor:

When you reap the harvest of your Land you shall not completely remove the corner of your field during your harvesting, and you shall not gather up the gleanings of your harvest. Rather, you shall leave these for the poor person and for the stranger. I am Hashem, your G-d. (Vayikra 23:22).

When harvesting one's field, there are certain parts of the crop that one may not take, and they must be left behind for the poor to gather. The pasuk doesn't say that one should *give* these gifts to the poor, but rather one must *leave* them for the poor to take. Rashi explains¹ that the owner of the field must not help the poor to collect the crops. The poor must put in the effort to collect the crops themselves. This is somewhat surprising. Leaving gifts for the poor is certainly an act of kindness. One might think that helping the poor to collect those crops would be an even greater act of kindness! However, there are some deep psychological truths behind this halacha. By requiring the poor to put in the effort to collect the produce themselves, they feel less dependent on others and retain a feeling of greater self-worth. In addition, by leaving a portion of the crops behind, the owner is forced to realise that the crops are not really theirs to give. Rather, the crops belong to Hashem and He has allocated those portions to the less privileged members of society. In this way, the owner will be less inclined to feel haughty.

The paragraph finishes with the words “I am Hashem, your G-d”. These words seem to be extraneous. What is the meaning of these words, and why are they placed here? Rashi explains that these words are a reminder that Hashem is faithful to pay reward. He sees everything and will act justly. One need not fear that leaving gifts to the poor will impact one's bank balance. We can rest assured that Hashem will pay us back for fulfilling His mitzvot.

In fact, this is the only mitzvah where we are encouraged to test Hashem². In the Haftarah that we read on Shabbat Hagadol, just before Pesach, we read as follows:

Bring the entire tithe to the storehouse and let there be food in My House – and test Me now says Hashem, Lord of Hosts, if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour down for you blessing beyond your capacity. (Malachi 3:10)

This pasuk provides support for Rashi's explanation that if we give tithes, Hashem Himself guarantees that we will be repaid.³ This is an important reassurance for the week before Pesach when the poor need extra help to meet their holiday expenses. But if we withhold tithes, the opposite will occur. Tosefot⁴ explains that one's field only produces according to the tithes that were taken previously. He quotes a story from the Midrash:

¹ Based on the Midrash, Torat Kohanim 19:22.

² Taanit 9a, in the name of Rebbi Yochanan.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Taanit 9a.

There was once a rich man who had a field that produced 1,000 measures of produce each year and he gave 100 measures for tithes. Before he passed away, he instructed his son to be sure to continue separating a tithe every year. In the first year after his death, the field produced 1,000 measures like usual, and the son separated 100 measures. In the second year, the son decided that it was too hard to give away so much produce, so he did not separate. The following year the field only produced 100 measures. The son's relatives told him that he was to blame for his own disgrace. They explained that at the beginning, the son was the owner of the field and Hashem took the tithe and gave it to those who needed it. But since the son did not keep his end of the bargain, the roles were reversed. Hashem became the owner of the field, and the son was left with just the tithe.

These days, most of us do not live in an agricultural society. Many children might be excused for thinking that fruit and vegetables grow in boxes on supermarket shelves!⁵ But the Tosefot we quoted above explains that the obligation to tithe does not only apply to the produce of the field, but also to other income. There are different opinions as to the status of the obligation to tithe one's income, ranging from a fully-fledged Torah obligation, to a Rabbinic obligation, to a minhag. But even those authorities who hold that it is a minhag, would agree that it is a very strong minhag and we are strongly encouraged to do so.⁶

The lessons we learnt above in relation to tithing one's harvest apply equally to tithing one's income:

- We need to try our best to help the recipient retain their self-respect. For instance, by providing in a hidden way or by enabling the recipient to do some action to earn the money.
- We need to remember that the amount that we give away does not belong to us.
- We need to keep in mind that Hashem has told us to test Him in this area and He is faithful to pay reward to those who keep His mitzvot.

In Pirkai Avot, Rabban Gamliel⁷ instructs us not to separate tithes by estimation. If we do so, we might end up separating too little. It is human nature to overestimate the amount of charity that we give, and to underestimate what we spend (especially when we use a credit card and don't see the actual money leaving our possession). If one starts to keep a proper budget they may well be surprised! Even if we think that we will estimate generously and give more than we need to, if we get into the habit of estimating we may often end up giving less than we should.⁸ Rabban Gamliel therefore teaches us that we should be disciplined and get used to calculating our tithes accurately.

Let's try something this week:

1. Remember that whatever tzedakah we give does not belong to us, we are merely Hashem's conduit to get the money to its rightful owners.
2. When deciding how much to give, remember that Hashem told us to test Him in this area and He is faithful to pay reward.
3. Try to improve your record keeping so that you are aware of how much tzedakah you are giving.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁵ Living in a yishuv in Israel, we do witness agriculture up close. In the week after Pesach, we saw the beautiful sight of dozens of men in white shirts picking wheat by hand in the fields right outside the entrance to our yishuv. They were preparing for next year's Pesach! We know that if flour becomes wet it can become chametz and thus invalid for matza. This obviously doesn't apply while the wheat is still growing because otherwise all wheat would be chametz as wheat needs water to grow. However, there is an opinion that wheat can become chametz even while it is attached to the ground, once it has completely finished growing. Therefore, there is a stringency to pick wheat for matzot before the wheat has finished growing. The best time to do this is right after Pesach.

⁶ One should separate at least 10% and no more than 20% (unless they are extremely wealthy). There are many details to this mitzva, and one should consult with their Rabbi as to how to perform it correctly.

⁷ Pirkai Avot 1:16.

⁸ See the Meiri's commentary on this Mishnah.