

## Parshat Re"ah

### SHEMITA

## Deuteronomy 15 :1-23

**1**At the end of seven years you will make a release.

אַמְקֹץ שִׁבְע־שָׁנִים  
תַּעֲשֶׂה שְׁמִטָּה:

**2**And this is the manner of the release; to release the hand of every creditor from what he lent his friend; he shall not exact from his friend or his brother, because time of the release for the Lord has arrived.

בְּזֹה דְבַר הַשְּׁמִטָּה  
שְׁמוּט כָּל־בַּעַל־מַשָּׂה  
יְדוֹ אֲשֶׁר יִשֶׂה בְרֵעֵהוּ  
לֹא־יִגֹּשׁ אֶת־רֵעֵהוּ  
וְאֶת־אָחִיו כִּי־קָרָא  
שְׁמִטָּה לַיהוָה:

**3**From the foreigner you may exact; but what is yours with your brother, your hand shall release.

גְּאֵת־הַנִּזְכָּרִי תִגֹּשׁ  
וְאֲשֶׁר יִהְיֶה לְךָ אֶת־  
אָחִיךָ תִשְׁמַט יָדְךָ:

**4**However, there will be no needy among you, for the Lord will surely bless you in the land the Lord, your God,

דַּאֲפֹס כִּי לֹא יִהְיֶה־  
בְּךָ אֶבְיוֹן כִּי־בֵרַךְךָ  
יְבָרְכֶךָ יְהוָה בְּאֶרֶץ  
אֲשֶׁר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ

is giving you for an inheritance to possess.

נִתַּן-לְךָ נַחֲלָה  
לְרִשְׁתָּהּ:

**5** However, if you hearken to the voice of the Lord, your God, to be careful to do all this commandment, which I am commanding you today.

בֵּרַק אִם-שָׁמוּעַ  
תִּשְׁמָע בְּקוֹל יְהוָה  
אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשָׁמֵר  
לְעֲשׂוֹת אֶת-כָּל-  
הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר  
אֲנִכִּי מְצַוֶּה הַיּוֹם:

**6** For the Lord, your God, has blessed you, as He spoke to you, and you will lend to many nations, but you will not borrow; and you will rule over many nations, but they will not rule over you.

וְכִי-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ  
בֵּרַכְךָ כְּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר-  
לְךָ וְהֶעֱבַטְתָּ גוֹיִם  
רַבִּים וְאֶתְהָ לֹא  
תַעֲבֹט וּמִשְׁלַתָּ בְּגוֹיִם  
רַבִּים וּבָרְךָ לֹא יִמְשְׁלוּ:

**7** If there will be among you a needy person, from one of your brothers in one of your cities, in your land the Lord, your God, is giving you, you shall not harden your heart, and you shall not close your hand from your needy brother.

זְכִי-יְהִיֶּה בְּךָ אֶבְיֹן  
מֵאֶחָד אֶחָיֶךָ בְּאֶחָד  
שְׁעָרֶיךָ בְּאַרְצְךָ  
אֲשֶׁר-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ  
נִתַּן לְךָ לֹא תִאֲמָץ  
אֶת-לִבְבְּךָ וְלֹא תִקְפֹּץ  
אֶת-יָדְךָ מֵאֶחָיֶךָ  
הָאֶבְיֹן:

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

חֲכִי-פָתַח תִּפְתָּח  
אֶת-יָדְךָ לּוֹ וְהֶעֱבַט  
תַּעֲבִיטְנוּ דְי מִחֹסְרוֹ  
אֲשֶׁר יִחְסַר לּוֹ:

**9** Beware, lest there be in your heart an unfaithful thought, saying, "The seventh year, the year of release has approached," and you will begrudge your needy brother and not give him, and he will cry out to the Lord against you, and it will be a sin to you.

ט הַשְּׁמַר לְךָ פֶּן-יְהִיֶה  
דְבַר עִם-לִבְּךָ  
בְּלִיעַל לֵאמֹר קִרְבָּה  
שְׁנַת-הַשְּׁבַע שְׁנַת  
הַשְּׁמִטָּה וְרַעַה עֵינֶיךָ  
בְּאַחִיךָ הָאֶבְיוֹן וְלֹא  
תִתֵּן לּוֹ וְקָרָא עֲלֶיךָ  
אֶל-יְהוָה וְהָיָה בָּךְ  
חַטָּא:

**10** You shall surely give him, and your heart shall not be grieved when you give to him; for because of this thing the Lord, your God, will bless you in all your work and in all your endeavors.

יִנְתֹּן תִּתֵּן לּוֹ וְלֹא-  
יִרַע לִבְּךָ בְּתִתֶנּוּ לּוֹ  
כִּי בִגְלַל | הַדָּבָר  
הַזֶּה יְבָרְכֶךָ יְהוָה  
אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל-מַעֲשֶׂיךָ  
וּבְכָל מִשְׁלַח יָדְךָ:

**11** For there will never cease to be needy within the land.

יא כִּי לֹא-יִחְדַּל אֶבְיוֹן  
מִקְרֹב הָאָרֶץ עַל-כֵּן

Therefore, I command you, saying, you shall surely open your hand to your brother, to your poor one, and to your needy one in your land.

אֲנֹכִי מְצַוְךָ לְאֹמֵר  
פֹּתַח תִּפְתַּח אֶת־  
יָדְךָ לְאֶחִיךָ לְעֲנִיךָ  
וּלְאֲבִינֶךָ בְּאַרְצְךָ:

**12**If your brother, a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you, he shall serve you for six years, and in the seventh year you shall send him forth free from you.

יִבְכִי־יִמְכַר לְךָ אֶחִיךָ  
הָעֶבְרָי אוֹ הָעֶבְרָיָה  
וְעָבַדְךָ שֵׁשׁ שָׁנִים  
וּבַשָּׁנָה הַשְּׁבִיעִת  
תִּשְׁלַחְנוּ חֲפָשִׁי  
מֵעִמָּךְ:

**13**And when you send him forth free from you, you shall not send him forth empty-handed.

יִגְוֹכִי־תִשְׁלַחְנוּ חֲפָשִׁי  
מֵעִמָּךְ לֹא תִשְׁלַחְנוּ  
רֵיקִים:

**14**You shall surely provide him from your flock, from your threshing floor, and from your vat, you shall give him from what the Lord, your God, has blessed you

יִדְמַצְאֲנֶךָ וּמִגֶּרְנֶךָ  
מִיִּקְבֶּךָ  
הָעֵנִיק תִּעְנִיק לּוֹ  
אֲשֶׁר בֵּרַכְךָ יְהוָה  
אֱלֹהֶיךָ תִתֶּן־לוֹ:

**15**And you shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord,

טוֹוֹזְכְרֹתְךָ כִּי עֶבֶד  
הָיִיתָ בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם  
וַיִּפְדֶּךָ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ

your God, redeemed you;  
therefore, I am commanding  
you this thing today.

על־כֵּן אֲנִי מְצַוְךָ  
אֶת־הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה  
הַיּוֹם:

**16**And it will be, if he says  
to you, "I will not leave you,"  
because he loves you and  
your household, for it is  
good for him with you,

טְזוּהִיָּה כִּי־יֹאמֶר  
אֵלֶיךָ לֹא אֲצָא מֵעִמָּךְ  
כִּי אֶהְבֶּךָ וְאֶת־בֵּיתְךָ  
כִּי־טוֹב לוֹ עִמָּךְ:

**17**Then you shall take an  
awl and put it through his  
ear and into the door, and  
he shall be a servant to you  
forever; and also to your  
maidservant you shall do  
likewise.

יִזְלַקְחֶתָּ אֶת־  
הַמַּרְצֵעַ וְנָתַתָּה  
בְּאָזְנוֹ וּבִדְלֶת וְהָיָה  
לְךָ עֶבֶד עוֹלָם וְאָף  
לְאִמָּתְךָ תַעֲשֶׂה־כֵּן:

**18**You shall not be troubled  
when you send him free  
from you, for twice as much  
as a hired servant, he has  
served you six years, and  
the Lord, your God, will

יִחְלֹא־יִקְשֶׁה בְּעֵינֶיךָ  
בְּשִׁלְחֶךָ אֹתוֹ חֲפָזִי  
מֵעִמָּךְ כִּי מִשְׁנָה  
שְׁכָר שְׁלִיר עֲבָדְךָ  
שֵׁשׁ שָׁנִים וּבֵרַכְךָ

bless you in all that you shall do.

יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכֹל  
אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲשֶׂה:

**19** Every firstborn male that is born of your cattle or of your flock you shall sanctify to the Lord, your God. You shall neither work with the firstborn of your ox, nor shear the firstborn of your flock.

יִטְכַּל-הַבְּכוֹר אֲשֶׁר  
יֵלֵד בַּבְּקָרָה וּבַצֹּאֲנָה  
הַזָּכָר תִּקְדָּשׁ לַיהוָה  
אֱלֹהֶיךָ לֹא תַעֲבֹד  
בַּבְּכֹר שׂוֹרָה וְלֹא תִגַּז  
בְּכֹר צֹאֲנָה:

**20** You shall eat it before the Lord, your God, year by year, in the place the Lord chooses-you and your household.

כֹּל־פְּנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ  
תֹאכְלֶנּוּ שָׁנָה בְּשָׁנָה  
בַּמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר-יִבְחַר  
יְהוָה אֶתְּךָ וּבֵיתְךָ:

**21** And if there be any blemish in it, whether it be lame, or blind, or any ill blemish, you shall not sacrifice it to the Lord, your God.

כַּאֲכִי-יְהִיָּה בּוֹ מוֹם  
פֶּסַח אֹו עוֹר כָּל מוֹם  
רָע לֹא תִזְבְּחֶנּוּ לַיהוָה  
אֱלֹהֶיךָ:

**22** You shall eat it within your cities, the unclean and the clean together, as

כַּבְּשִׂעֲרֶיךָ תֹאכְלֶנּוּ  
הַטָּמֵא וְהַטָּהוֹר יַחְדָּו  
כְּצִבֵי וְכֶאֱיִל:

the deer, and as the gazelle.

**23** However, you shall not eat its blood; you shall pour it on the ground, as water.

כַּגֵּרְקֵי אֶת־דָּמּוֹ לֹא  
תֹאכְלֵם עַל־הָאָרֶץ  
תִּשְׁפְּכֶנּוּ כַּמַּיִם:

During Shemita, the land is left to lie fallow and all agricultural activity, including plowing, planting, pruning and harvesting, is forbidden by halakha (Jewish law). Other cultivation techniques (such as watering, fertilizing, weeding, spraying, trimming and mowing) may be performed as a preventive measure only, not to improve the growth of trees or other plants. Additionally, any fruits or herbs which grow of their own accord and where no watch is kept over them are deemed hefker (ownerless) and may be picked by anyone. A variety of laws also apply to the sale, consumption and disposal of shmita produce. All debts, except those of foreigners, were to be remitted. Chapter 25 of the Book of Leviticus Promises bountiful harvests to those who observe the shmita, and describes its observance as a test of religious faith. There is little notice of the observance, and it appears to have been much neglected.



## **Opening Our Hearts and Our Hands: Deuteronomy and the Poor** Rabbi Shai Held

The focus of Chapter 15 is the remission of debt and the manumission of slaves.

“(this chapter is) the definitive chapter for discerning the centrality of Deuteronomy’s concern that **access to the blessing of God be available to all the members of the community, including those who, out of need, and position are least likely to enjoy the blessing.**”

**The purpose of these commandments is to:**

- a. Put forth concrete solutions to the predicaments faced by the poor.
- b. Strive to shape a social ethic, to transform Israel into a community of mutual care and concern

**Inherent in them are the duties both to act and to care.**

Though not mentioned specifically, Shemita, or God’s Sabbath for the land, has ecological benefits that enhance the soil and improve productivity.

The following are the socioeconomic problems that Shemita is designed to address in Israel’s communal social order.

**Problem 1:**           Inability to pay debt.

**Torah Solution:** Requirement that debts be remitted every seven years

**Problem 2:** Difficulty of poor to obtain loans

**Torah Solution:** Exhorting Israel not to refuse loans to those who need them.

**Problem 3:** Debt slavery

**Torah Solution:** Limit of six years on tenure of indentured servitude

The Israelite is enjoined to help newly freed slave to give a fresh start. “When you set him free, do not let him go empty handed. Furnish him out of the flock, threshing floor and vat with which the Lord your God has blessed you.” Israelite enjoined not to inflict the punishment of helplessness that would cause the freed slave to fall back into debt.”

The element of caring is intrinsic to the process with the goal of to instill in the Israelites the understanding they are one family with care and compassion, responsibility and obligation implied by family ties.

Rabbi Held points out the repeated use of the word "אח", ah, brother, or kinsman

“Repeatedly, as the Torah lays out the laws aimed at alleviating the suffering of the poor, the latter are referred to as brothers—and not just as brothers, but “your brothers”

(Deut. 15:2,3,7,9,11,12)

The use of this word distinguishes community members from outsiders and implies that they merit greater concern. Use of familial terms “indicates an emphasis on the relationship...

Those with whom one lives as brother and sister always have a proper claim on one’s compassion and care. Where the term –brother/sister or neighbor—is applicable...enmity, disdain, negligence and disregard are out of order.”

Deuteronomy intends “ to depict the relationship between members of the national community as if it were an extended family or clan... “Brothers, whatever their degree of blood relationship, should genuinely act as brothers, **with generosity, not hard-heartedness.**”

Torah says people should not be judged by their financial wealth, **economic realities are not definitional.** What is the common memory of the Exodus, the blessing of the land and allegiance to the God of Exodus and the Land

Laws in the Torah are designed to avoid the extreme economic advantages and disparities in personal power common in other Near Eastern societies at the time.

A **King** is defined by Deuteronomy as just another brother, and emphasizes that he should not view himself as better than them

A **Judge**, despite position, should not be tempted to grandiosity, and must remember that both litigants standing before him are his brothers.

“Deuteronomy regularly uses this term (ahim, brothers,) to emphasize the equality and fraternity of all Israelites, whether king or servant, prophet or king.” (Jeffrey Tigay). Mitzvot throughout the Bible , and especially in Devarim, suggest

The poor are more important to God than the wealthy, or at least, they have a more urgent claim on his attention.

If Israelite is “mean to needy kinsman and gives nothing, “He will cry out to the Lord against you, and you will incur guilt.”

(Exodus: Israelites must not oppress widows and orphans. God threatens if people mistreat them, “I will heed their outcry as soon as they cry out to Me and My anger shall blaze forth and I shall put you to the sword, and your own **wives** shall become widows and your children orphans.” (Exod 22:21-23)

In Deuteronomy, God adds being mean and refusal to be generous. **Refusing to grant a loan = oppression**. While the powerful might have socioeconomic advantage, the poor have the power to bring down God’s wrath on society that doesn’t reach out to help.

To create a viable social fabric in which all members have the means to participate effectively. The economy must yield to the viability of the community.

In manumission of slaves, Israelites are called upon to remember their experience as slaves and God's freeing them. The slaveholder now has the opportunity to restore ex-slave and kinsman's dignity.

The Israelites are summoned by God to help their slaves as he freed them and led them to the land he promised. Doing so, Held wrote, was "Imatio Dei", not just mitzvah, but walking in God's ways. The goal is to prevent emergence of a permanent underclass, and "rob debt of its tyrannical power" and, thus limit human misery.

Moses, in his speech states that the purpose of Shemita is not just to ameliorate suffering of poor, but, if they obey God's will, "There will be no needy among you."

Later, he speaks more realistically, saying, "If Israelites obey laws about treatment of poor, adhere to Deuteronomy's social and religious vision. "For there will never cease to needy ones in your land, which is why I command you: Open your hand to the poor and needy kinsman in your midst."

**There will be poor, but there need not be, and the plight of the poor is our responsibility.** A society where there are no second chances and a permanent underclass is intolerable to God.

Held points out that there is **no correspondence between Deuteronomy 15 and contemporary social policy.** These laws are specific to the Israelites in the land of Israel during the time all

tribes are present. He adds “But we must avoid the temptation to domesticate the Torah, to admire its dream even as we silence its message.”

## **Maimonides Eight Degrees of Tzedakah**

The Jewish ideals of Tzedakah were summarized and taught by Moses Maimonides (RaMBaM), a great teacher who lived in Spain and the Egypt. Maimonides believed that Tzedakah is like a ladder. It has eight rungs, from bottom to top. Each step you climb brings you closer to heaven.

1. The person who gives reluctantly and with regret.
2. The person who gives graciously, but less than one should.
3. The person who gives what one should, but only after being asked.
4. The person who gives before being asked.
5. The person who gives without knowing to whom he or she gives, although the recipient knows the identity of the donor.
6. The person who gives without making his or her identity known.
7. The person who gives without knowing to whom he or she gives. The recipient does not know from whom he or she receives.
8. The person who helps another to become self-supporting by a gift or a loan or by finding employment for the recipient.

## Questions for Consideration

How can we fulfill the Jewish imperative to address the root causes of poverty and social injustice in an attempt to prevent a permanent underclass?

Many Jews feel called to address the needs of non-Jews in their charitable giving and social or political activity. How can we justify this?

Given the modern realities of various financial assistance programs that provide for basic needs, however mismanaged, have what are our obligations as Jews to help the “poor”?

Congregation Beth El has been providing financial and volunteer assistance to a food pantry for over twenty years. Consider the Biblical and Rabbinic prescription for the psychological needs of “the poor” in this parshah, and other sources. How would you evaluate this service?

What does Rabbi Held mean by no correspondence between Deuteronomy 15 and contemporary social policy.

Of Maimonides’ Levels of Tzedakah, the seventh is this **The person who gives without knowing to whom he or she gives. The recipient does not know from whom he or she receives.** How is it that so many Jewish institutions are now named for their donors?