

# Musaf Reader

Parshat Reeh

August 14-15, 2009

## Parshah

**Rabbi Pinchas Winston (torah.org)**

"If there will among you a needy person from one of your brothers within any of your gates, in the land which Hashem your G-d is giving you, you should not act obstinately, or close your hand to your needy brother. Rather, you should certainly open your hand to him, and lend to him on pledge sufficient for his need that he lacks." (Devarim 15:7-8)

This posuk seems relatively straightforward, addressing some of the most important issues of any civilized society. Even in the ideal days of the Torah back in the desert, when G-d directly took care of every Jew, the discrepancy between those who have and those who have not was dealt with head on. The solution was for the fortunate to help out the less fortunate, and Rashi explains just how far this social responsibility goes:

"If there will among you a needy person ... *The most needy have preference* from one of your brothers ... *a brother from your father has preference over a brother from your mother* ... within any of your gates, in the land ... *the poor of one's city has preference over the poor of another city* ... you should not act obstinately ... *There are people who painfully deliberate whether they should give or not, therefore it states "you should not act obstinately," and there are people who stretch out their hand [ready to give] but then close it, therefore it states* ...

or close your hand to your needy brother.

Rather, you should certainly open your hand to him ... *many times*, and lend to him on pledge ... *If he does not want a gift, then give it to him as a loan* ...

sufficient for his need (dei machsoro)...*You are not commanded to make him wealthy* ...

that he lacks (asher yechar lo) ... *even with a horse to ride on and a slave to run before him (if that is what he was previously accustomed to and now feels the lack of them)* ... *[You must] even [help him to get] a wife.*

It is hard to imagine an entire society functioning this way. An elaborate system of welfare is one thing, and a major thing at that. However, "even with a horse to ride on and a slave to run before him " because that is what he was used to before he fell from grace? The following is the language of the Shulchan Aruch, based upon this week's posuk:

How much should be given to the poor? Dei machsoro asher yechar lo ... How is that? If he is starving, feed him. If he needs clothing, clothe him. If he needs items for his house, buy him those items for his house. Even if he was used to riding on a horse with a slave running ahead of him while he was rich, and now he is poor, buy him the horse and the slave-each man according to his needs. If he was used to receiving bread, give him bread. If he was used to receiving dough, give him dough. If he was used to having a bed, give him a bed. One fitting to receive hot bread should continue to receive hot bread; cold bread, cold bread. If he was fed into his mouth, feed him in his mouth. If he

came to get married, rent a house for him, prepare a bed for him and house utensils, and find him a wife. (Yorah Dayah, 250:1)

The Rema, however, qualifies the above halachah:

"It seems that this is the responsibility of the Gabbai-Tzedakah (the ones appointed over the community-collected money to be dispensed to the poor), or the community as a whole; an individual is not obligated to give another "sufficient for his need," but rather, his responsibility is to make it known to the public that this person is suffering. If there isn't a public body to deal with the situation, then the individual should give according to whatever he can afford."

The Be'er Heitav adds as well:

"The Bach wrote that even an individual is obligated to give 'sufficient for his need' if he can afford it, like it said previously in 249:1, and the proof is from Hillel the Elder, who gave to a poor person a fine horse to ride on, etc. However, the Shach says that this is not a proof, since there may not have been a community there, or the community may not have been able to help the poor person."

It is amazing how much the actual halachah remains true to the intent of the original posuk, perhaps going beyond it as well. However, one can't help but wonder, "Does this not open the door to terrible corruption?" Ask any charitable wealthy person today, and he will tell you about the long line of "poor" people who have queued up outside his front door for a "handout" of some sort ... several times of year. And in Jerusalem,

they speak about "poor" people who make more money through tzedakah than many do who work eight-hour days! (Tax-free, too!)

Though the above is true, perhaps, the real truth is that there are many people who sincerely need the help-lots of it-many of whom are too proud to even ask for it. Unfortunately, as always, corrupt individuals have ruined it for those who authentically require the assistance, either in the form of a gift or a loan. Yet, because of financial stress, many families are falling apart, breaking up, and disappearing altogether.

Personally, I know of an organization that helps rebuild broken families, or helps them to avoid becoming one. However, it has such difficulty raising the necessary funds to help them; answering machines take the calls, and people never call back. Often, the situation seems hopeless. "And the amazing thing is," a woman in desperate need of help told me, "there is so much money out there in the Jewish world alone ..." doing exactly that-remaining out there! Perhaps this is why the Torah finishes off by saying:

... Lest he cries to Hashem against you, and it becomes a sin for you. You must certainly give to him, and your heart must not be grieved when you give to him, because for this, Hashem your G-d will bless you in all of your work, and in all that your hand accomplishes. For, the needy shall never cease from the land ... (Devarim 15:9-11)

It is a hard mitzvah to do, and an even harder mitzvah to do right. But it wasn't called "tzedakah" for nothing (from the

word "tzedek" which means righteousness), and, as the Talmud says:

Jerusalem will be redeemed only through tzedakah. (Shabbos 139a)

## **Haftarah** **David Nelson (clal.org)**

This prophecy contains a line much beloved by the rabbis: "All your children [banayich] shall be taught by the Eternal, and great shall be the peace of your children [banayich]" (Is. 54:13). The Midrash suggests, "Do not read [the second occurrence of [banayich] as your children, but rather as your builders [bonayich]" (Berakhot 64a), implying that the peoplehood of Israel is built up when children study sacred texts.

What kind of study makes children into "builders"? One answer lies in the Torah text to which this Haftarah is linked. Parshat Re'eh deals mainly with laws that create ethnicity, peoplehood, and high levels of group visibility, cohesion and loyalty. These include, among others, injunctions to destroy and shun all foreign religious cults, to eat only certain animals prepared only in particular ways, and, in the sabbatical year, to forgive the debts of fellow Israelites (although you may dun foreigners). Such practices help give a people a firm sense of its identity. They create boundaries making it abundantly clear who is "in" and who is "out." They build up the group.

In our age, however, these laws may make us feel intensely uncomfortable. They are ethnocentric, even discriminatory. They are not democratic, and we who cherish democracy have difficulty accepting them. But there they

are. The Torah and Haftarah texts, taken together, challenge us to feel comfortable with the need for some level of ethnocentric, non-multicultural pride in our group's identity, if our people is to survive. And survive we must, if only because our mandate to work for the universal betterment of life depends on our survival.

How do we make children into builders? Not, first of all, by teaching them the glorious universal moral principles of our tradition, but by instilling in them a clear sense of who they are, and to what people they belong. In the context of that awareness, the high moral ideals will be learned, acted upon, and passed on to the next generation.

## **Israeli Pioneers Method to Detect Alzheimer's, Track Memory** **by Baruch Gordon** **(israelnationalnews.com)**

When we absorb new information, the human brain reshapes itself to store this newfound knowledge. But where exactly is the new knowledge kept, and how does that capacity to adapt reflect our risk for Alzheimer's disease and other forms of senile dementia later in our lives?

Dr. Yaniv Assaf of Tel Aviv University's Department of Neurobiology is pioneering a new way to track the effect of memory on brain structure. "With a specific MRI methodology called 'Diffusion Imaging MRI,' we can investigate the microstructure of the tissue without actually cutting into it," he explains. "We can measure how much capacity our brain has to change structurally,

what our memory reserve is and where that happens.”

His study, presented at the Annual Meeting of the Human Brain Mapping Organization in San Francisco, has been pivotal to the way scientists view the effect of memory on the brain. Scientists used to believe that the brain took days or weeks to change its microstructure. Dr. Assaf’s new observations demonstrate that the microstructure can change in mere hours.

“It gives us a quantifiable measure of the plasticity of each individual brain,” he says. “It’s possible that before a person experiences any memory loss, the plasticity is affected — that is, the ability of one’s brain to adapt to change. A lack of ability for change in the brain could mean susceptibility to dementia. Now, we have the means to monitor this ability.”

According to Dr. Assaf, most of the research on Alzheimer’s disease and dementia focuses on its aftereffects. Diffusion Imaging MRI, he believes, could be used for early detection of the disorder.

“We can study the memory capacity of an individual at high risk for these disorders, and compare it to the morphological plasticity of people who are not at risk,” Dr. Assaf says. “Such an approach may allow us to develop an intervention at an early stage, possibly in the form of drugs, one that may not be appropriate at a later stage.” One parallel study, now being pursued in collaboration with Tel Aviv University’s Prof. Daniel M. Michaelson, involves working with MRI and animals with mutations of Alzheimer’s.

In order to track changes in the brain, Dr. Assaf developed a study that focused on spatial learning and memory.

“Usually, scientists distinguish between functional and structural plasticity,” he says. Functional plasticity refers to neuronal activity in the brain, while structural plasticity refers to the physical shape of the brain itself. “From animal studies we know that spatial memory tasks have consequences for both.”

First, study volunteers were scanned by Diffusion Imaging MRI. Then, they were asked to play two hours of a race-track video game, going over the same virtual race track 16 times. “This measured a special form of memory — spatial memory,” says Dr. Assaf. “Each time they circled the track, the time they took to complete it decreased. At the end of the two hours, we put them back into the MRI to see the difference.”

Dr. Assaf and his team saw a marked change measured by Diffusion Imaging MRI in the characteristics of brain microstructure. The memorization of the virtual race track affected the hippocampus, motor and visual areas of the brain. “The most striking thing about this study is that it shows structural plasticity happening in only two hours,” he says. “This changes what we think structural plasticity is. It shows that memory is rapidly changing the structure of the cells, and that may lead to a lasting effect on the brain.”

Dr. Assaf’s work was done in collaboration with his Ph.D. students Yaniv Sagi, Tamar Katzir, Efrat Sasson and Ido Tavor.