

What We Leave for the Poor
Shabbat Acharei Mot-Kedoshim 5778

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Those who worship with us on Shabbat morning will be familiar with these words, which many Jews utter daily:

These are things that are limitless,
of which a person enjoys the fruit of the world,
while the principal remains in the world to come.
They are: honoring one's father and mother,
engaging in deeds of compassion,
arriving early for study, morning and evening,
dealing graciously with guests,
visiting the sick,
providing for the wedding couple,
accompanying the dead for burial,
being devoted in prayer,
and making peace among people.
But the study of Torah encompasses them all.ⁱ

A note at the bottom of the page in *Mishkan T'filah* indicates that this liturgy is "based on Peah 1:1,"ⁱⁱ a reference that may be unfamiliar. "Peah" is a book of the Mishnah, the code of Jewish law committed to writing around the year 200. Specifically, "Peah" refers to the law we heard tonight from Torah's Holiness Code, requiring that Israelites leave the corners of their fields for the poor and the stranger.

Our prayer book does not include the corner of the field among the list of acts which are "limitless." However, in the Mishnah, that *mitzvah* is listed first. Specifically, though the rabbis insist that the corner left for the poor must be no less than one-sixtieth of the field,ⁱⁱⁱ they pointedly do not set a maximum.

A 13th Century commentator, Rabbi Jacob ben Asher, notes that the commandment to leave the corner of the field is immediately followed in our Torah portion by the words, *lo tignov*, a direct quotation from the Ten Commandments, "You shall not steal." Rabbi Jacob suggests that the proximity of two seemingly-unrelated passages is "to warn the owner not to steal from what

belongs to the poor.”^{iv} In other words, the corner of the field is already the property of the poor, not of the land owner. A 16th Century rabbi, Moses Alshikh, goes even further: “You shouldn’t think that you are giving to the poor person from your own property, or that I have despised [the poor] by not giving bread to [them] as I have given to you. For [the poor are] also my child[ren], just as you are, but [their] portion is in your produce.”^v

In ancient Israel, providing for the poor was not optional. In a society which measured all wealth in agricultural produce, all property owners were required to leave a corner of their fields unharvested, and to consider a portion of their crop as if it were not their own. Contemporary commentator Jeffrey Spitzer emphasizes that the farmer did not give anonymously, writing: “While we tend to think of an ideal of anonymous giving, this [*mitzvah*] points out the importance of transparent, public giving. Knowing that other people are giving is crucial in order to maintain widespread support for any system of [*tzedakah*].”^{vi}

One additional aspect of the *mitzvah* merits our attention: “The owner of the field does not distribute the *peah*; rather, the poor come and take it for themselves.”^{vii} The poor retain their dignity in the process, earning the produce by harvesting it.

Most of us are not farmers. Technically, most commandments regarding the land in Israel aren’t in force today, and won’t be until the messianic era arrives. However, as Orthodox Rebbetzin Chana Bracha Siegelbaum teaches, “The Rabbis ruled that we must keep these mitzvot today ... to ingrain within the corners of our being the limitation of ownership ... through the mitzvot of allowing the poor to take what is rightfully theirs.”^{viii}

Paying taxes is one way we fulfill the commandment today. Just over a third of our federal tax dollars are directed toward programs that benefit the poor and needy. About three-quarters of that is for health care, including Medicare for Americans age 65 and over, poor or not.^{ix} As in ancient Israel, part of Americans’ income belongs to the poor as a matter of law.

Many Americans oppose the requirement of providing for the poor. Libertarian Bryan Caplan states the case: “Consider the best-case-scenario for forced charity. Somebody is absolutely poor through no fault of [their] own. ... Even here, the moral case for forced charity is much less plausible than it looks. Patriotic brainwashing notwithstanding, our ‘fellow citizens’ are strangers – and the moral intuition that helping strangers is [beyond the call of duty] is hard to

escape. And even if you think the opposite, can you honestly deny that it's debatable? If so, how can you in good conscience coerce dissenters?"^x

Judaism would answer: The obligation to care for the poor is not debatable. No less authority than God commands it. Moreover, Judaism agrees that those whom we may be helping include strangers. Caplan may be correct: an obligation to assist strangers isn't necessarily intuitive. That's precisely the reason the Torah requires it explicitly.

Judaism does not deny that providing for the poor may cost us. After all, the farmer would profit by harvesting the corners of the field and bringing all of the land's produce to market.

In fact, the *mitzvah* is not fulfilled when charity does not cost us anything. We all engage in that kind of giving, and there's nothing wrong with doing so. We bring carloads to Goodwill, giving away clothing and other items we can no longer use. When a food drive comes around, at least some of the canned goods we prune from our pantries may be items we would never consume. That kind of giving is a *mitzvah*, namely *bal taschit*, the obligation not to waste. It also helps the poor. When we perform that good deed, though, we are not giving up a portion of what we have.

When we pay for public education, especially if we do not have children in public school or are taxed an amount more than the state pays to educate our own offspring, we are giving the corner of our field to the poor and the stranger. It's a *mitzvah*.

When we pay for SNAP, the food stamp program that provides subsistence nutritional assistance, mostly for the working poor, we are leaving the corner of our field to the poor and the stranger. It's a *mitzvah*.

When we provide health insurance for our fellow citizens who can't afford basic medical care, we are leaving a corner of our field to the poor and the stranger. It's a *mitzvah*.

When we support college acceptance or hiring preferences for those who don't enjoy the benefits we and our children do, we are leaving a corner of our field for the poor and the stranger. It's a *mitzvah*.

Recently, I have joined the Arkansas poor People's Campaign, Arkansas' expression of what is called "A National Call for Moral Revival ... uniting ... people

across the country to challenge the evils of systemic racism, poverty, ... ecological devastation, and the nation's distorted morality."^{xi}

America's "distorted morality" includes so-called "prosperity gospel," teaching that "'health and wealth' are the automatic divine right of all Bible-believing Christians Since the Atonement of Christ includes not just the removal of sin, but also the removal of sickness and poverty."^{xii} Many Christians find this theology repulsive. Judaism utterly rejects it. Remember, Rabbi Moses Alshikh taught that *pe'ah* reminds us that God has provided for the poor, quite the opposite of rejecting them.^{xiii}

What should we leave for the poor? Like ancient Israelite farmers before us, we are enjoined to provide the poor a portion of what we hold most precious, reserving a meaningful percentage of what we have. It's already theirs, having been provided by God. Let its reward, like the *mitzvah* itself, be limitless.

Amen.

ⁱ *Mishkan T'filah*, New York: CCAR Press, 2007, p. 44.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ Mishnah Peah 1:2

^{iv} *Baal haTurim*, quoted in Jeffrey Spitzer, "Pe'ah: The Corners of Our Fields," *My Jewish Learning*, accessed on April 27, 2018 at <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/peah-the-corners-of-our-fields/>.

^v *Torat Moshe*, quoted in Jeffrey Spitzer, "Pe'ah: The Corners of Our Fields," *My Jewish Learning*, accessed on April 27, 2018 at <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/peah-the-corners-of-our-fields/>.

^{vi} Jeffrey Spitzer, "Pe'ah: The Corners of Our Fields," *My Jewish Learning*, accessed on April 27, 2018 at <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/peah-the-corners-of-our-fields/>.

^{vii} Rabbi Jack Abramowitz, "216. Peah I: The obligation to leave a corner of the field for the needy," *OU Torah*, accessed on April 27, 2018 at <https://www.ou.org/torah/mitzvot/taryag/mitzvah216/>.

^{viii} Rebbetzin Chana Bracha Siegelbaum, "Ingrained Giving," *Nature in the Parasha*, accessed on April 27, 2018 at www.berotbatayin.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/NatureAchareiKedoshimGiving.pdf

^{ix} "Policy Basics: Where Do Our Federal Tax Dollars Go?," *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*, updated October 4, 2017, accessed on April 27, 2018 at <https://www.cbpp.org/research/federal-budget/policy-basics-where-do-our-federal-tax-dollars-go>.

^x Bryan Caplan, "12 Reasons to Oppose the Welfare State," *Foundation for Economic Education*, accessed April 27, 2018 at <https://fee.org/articles/12-reasons-to-oppose-the-welfare-state/>

^{xi} <https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org>.

^{xii} Joe Carter, "What You Should Know About the Prosperity Gospel," *The Gospel Coalition*, May 3, 2017, accessed April 27, 2018 at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/what-you-should-know-about-the-prosperity-gospel/>.

^{xiii} See note v.