

Charity Starts at Home

"The Old Testament and the Jewish tradition must not be set against the New Testament in such a way that the former seems to constitute a religion of only justice, fear and legalism, with no appeal to the love of God and neighbour (cf. Dt. 6:5; Lv. 19:18; Mt. 22:34-40)." — Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, 1974

A regrettable tendency in the history of Christian catechesis (and still present) has been to contrast the so-called 'legalism; of Judaism with the love of Jesus. In fact, Jews have been no more guilty of legalism than Christians! Every religion is open to legalistic distortions, even as it seeks to be an instrument of God's love.

Fortunately, much work has been done by scholars and educators in recent decades to alert Christians to the fact that their faith finds its very roots in the beliefs, ethics and rituals of the Jewish people. Jesus was a Jew who lived and breathed the Jewish Scriptures (Torah).

Here, we explore one brief excerpt from an ancient legal text through the eyes of Jewish interpreters. It is from Exodus 22. Right after the Ten Commandments are uttered on Mt Sinai, a further code of conduct is given in the form of a list of judicial rulings. The rule within our focus deals with lending money to a person in need.

"If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor..."
(Exodus 22:25, NRSV)

See too Everett Fox's translation:

"If you lend money to my people, to the afflicted one (who lives) beside you..."

In Jewish tradition the sages of old puzzle over the curious wording of this verse. They wonder why not use a simpler, direct phrase: *If you lend money to the poor...?* Why the addition of 'my people' and 'among you/beside you'?

The sages detect in this wording three parallel objects: (i) My people; i.e. the people of Israel; (ii) the poor person, and (iii) the person who is

'among' you, near to you. From this analysis a great moral discussion is opened up: the problem of how to prioritize the giving of charity. When my finite resources can never reach everyone in need, how do I choose where to focus those resources? When I am confronted by suffering both near and far, among those in my intimate circle as well as those in the global human family, do relational factors affect my choices? Share something of your experience of this dilemma and your insights based on this Torah verse.

The sages are in no doubt that the Torah teaches the obligation of charity for the non-Jew, the stranger, the orphan. Yet they also interpret the Law as saying that the more intimate connections come first. As the Midrash puts it:

The poor man in the market and the one in your street—your street comes first. A poor kinsman and a poor fellow-townsmen, your kinsman comes first. 'The poor man with you'—that poor who is with you and of you.¹

According to the sages the vision held out by the Torah is not an impersonal mass distribution of charity, but an outreach based on an ever-widening of the familial circle. Thus the world is ultimately healed of poverty and suffering not by material aid alone but by ripples of intimacy emanating from our hearts and homes. We start with 'our own children' and from there reach out to include 'other children' as our own. This kind of loving will eventually embrace the whole human family, ensuring that we treat each person as a brother or sister, as one 'who is with you/beside you' and not simply the object of charity.

A single Torah verse contains a great storehouse of ethical principle. Continue to discuss the moral principle and dilemma raised by this text.

1. Tanhuma Yashan, Mishpatim

Sources: Herczeg, ed., *Rashi: Commentary on the Torah* (New York, 1999); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot* (New York, 1996).

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