

Behar

Gifts, Wealth, Children, and Sharing

There is much talk today about the best way to help the poor. Many people have made statements to the effect that it is futile to help the poor, that the poor are poor because they want to be poor, that G-d had made them poor so who are we to interfere with G-d's plans? Besides, we are just feeding an addiction. The poor are addicted to being poor. If we do not help them, then they will be forced to do something about their condition, and they will stop being poor.

All these statements seem to be based upon the idea that my money is my money. I worked hard for it or my parents or grandparents worked hard for it and, therefore, nobody has any right to take away any of my hard earned money, and even if I achieved the money only through luck, like winning a lottery, it must have been G-d's plan that I have this money; otherwise, I would not have won.

All these types of ideas are antithetical to Judaism's basic beliefs. Judaism believes that everything belongs to G-d and that G-d for His own purposes gives each of us gifts and that it is His desire that we share our gifts with others. We understand this fully when it comes to musical gifts or athletic gifts. What's the use of having a great musical gift if you do not want to share it with people, if you do not want people to come to hear you play? What's the use of having great oratorical gifts if you do not want people to hear you speak? What's the use of having great financial skills if you do not want people to give you the opportunity to use them? Wealth, too, is a gift and G-d tells us that we must share it with others. We do not say, as Tineius Rufus, the Roman governor of Judea said to Rabbi Akiba, "If your G-d loves the poor, why doesn't He support them?," to which Rabbi Akiba replied, "Didn't G-d tell us to deal our bread to the hungry?" G-d wants us to help Him perfect this world, and we do it by correcting all the ills of the world. If Tineius Rufus was right, then there would be no need for doctors. G-d made the sick; let Him cure them. There would be no need for old age homes. If G-d made them old, let G-d take care of them. Tineius Rufus' attitude is reminiscent of the attitude of many people today and is anathema to Judaism. None of us gains our wealth unaided. We all have a secret partner and that partner is G-d. We can work hard and do

everything right and still fail. Farmers know this especially. They can get up early, plant their crop, remove weeds, put down insecticide, and yet still fail because the rains fail to come or too much rain comes or hordes of locusts come, etc. We can do everything right and still fail. G-d tells us that he does not want His share; He just wants us to give at least ten percent to the poor, etc. In ancient Israel they gave away more than 25% of their crop to the *Kohen*, the Levites, the poor, etc., even before they paid their taxes to the king. According to Judaism, we only own what we own after we have fulfilled our charitable donations. In ancient Israel nobody else was permitted even to buy our crop until our charitable obligations were first taken care of. We do not say, as some wag said, "G-d must love the poor; that's why He made so many of them." G-d wants us to make sure that we create a society in which there are hardly any poor. There will always be the disabled and the sick and the elderly and the mentally ill and the orphans and widows among us so there will always be some poor, but our *Torah* commands us that we must do everything possible to eliminate poverty. We can do this by making sure that our children are given five things so that they will not have to become dependent but will be able to go out and make a living.

We, first of all, are commanded to circumcise our boys and name our daughters. This is to teach us all that we must instruct every one of our children that the first duty of every human being is to work on himself, that the first duty of every human being is to learn how to be a *mentsch*. We must consciously try to improve ourselves physically and spiritually. We cannot neglect our bodies or minds or our character if we are to succeed in life. We must give our children the idea that they can improve themselves, that they are worthwhile, that their efforts count, and that we all need their contribution.

The second thing a parent must do, if applicable, is to perform a *pidyon haben*, a redemption of the first born son of a mother who is not the daughter of either a *Kohen* or a Levite and whose father is not a *Kohen* or Levite. This is to teach us that everyone is important, that every child must be given a chance in life. In pagan cultures the first born son was sacrificed so that the family could be blessed. His little bones were placed in the walls of the home. Judaism does not believe that any child should be

sacrificed for the good of the group. Every child deserves a chance to develop his abilities and make his mark in the world. There are many today who feel that the children of the poor really do not deserve a chance. Many of them feel that these children cannot contribute anything to the world anyway, either because of physical handicaps or low IQs. This attitude Judaism rails against.

The third thing a parent must do for his child is to teach him *Torah*. We must make sure our children have the right values. Today our public schools teach only skills, not values. We do not believe that people are born good. We also do not believe that people are born bad. We believe that people will take the least line of resistance unless they are taught always to strive for the good. Without character training, juvenile delinquency will continue to rise astronomically and our youngsters will be easy prey to drug and alcohol purveyors.

The fourth thing we must teach our children is a trade. We have to teach them how to make a living. Unfortunately, even here our school systems have fallen down, and there are many in our society who do not want to pay for job training programs so that people can get the skills they need. This country also does not now provide jobs which pay enough for a many to support his family. According to the latest statistics, only one in five jobs in America pays enough for a father to support his family. This means that mothers have to work which means, too, that neither parent has enough time to spend with their children and, without adequate supervision, our teenage children are running wild in the streets. They are looking for love in gangs and other nefarious peer activity instead of receiving it at home.

Finally, a parent is required to teach his children how to swim. What the rabbis mean by that is that we have to prepare our children for the inevitable risks of life. There are dangers that lurk out there, and children must be trained how to cope with these dangers. Unfortunately, today there are many people who feel that since the dangers are not readily apparent in their communities, everything is okay and they do not have to prepare anybody's children for the dangers that lurk in the world.

One of the secrets of Jewish survival throughout the ages has been that the Jewish education given to our children has always emphasized

that it is a *mitsvah* to give but a shame to have to take. We are G-d's partners and have to do our share. Nobody should want to take. People, unless they are really down and out completely, should want to stand on their own two feet. However, the community always has to be prepared to help. As we learn in the *Torah* portion *Behar*, "If your brother will become poor and his means fail him, you shall strengthen him." The rabbis explain this to mean that every society must have a safety net below which nobody can fall. Above that safety net everybody should be able and willing to compete but, if you see your brother is not making it, before he hits rock bottom, strengthen him with a loan, give him an opportunity to earn a living in a dignified and respected way. That's why in every Jewish community there were and are free loan societies which enable every Jew to get a loan interest free to sustain him until he can get over the rough spots. We cannot adopt a dog eat dog philosophy. It is imperative that our society in America not end up as almost all societies have in the past with a few people owning all the wealth and the rest being confined to grinding poverty. Not only is this against the ways of the *Torah*, but it is counter productive. If wealth is spread around, then people will use their initiative and energy in order to create more wealth.

That's why also we learn in the *Torah* portion *Behar* that all property had to be redistributed every fifty years. The Jubilee Year was instituted so that wealth should never be concentrated in just a few hands. All the land every fifty years had to go back to the original families. The reason that America has been the great land that it has been during the past one hundred years is because wealth has been scattered among many, many people. If ever wealth should be concentrated in the hands of just a few in America, all our freedoms will die, too. Our freedoms can only exist if there are many competing sources of economic power. That's why we have laws against monopolies in this country and that's why the government has to be stronger than any one interest; otherwise, that interest will take over the whole country. It is not true that since we have worked hard, all our wealth is ours and we have no responsibility to share it. We can work hard and attain no wealth. G-d is our silent partner and G-d wants us to share part of our wealth with the poor. It is also not true that the poor deserve to be poor. G-d doesn't want it this way. He wants us, as Rabbi Akiba said, quoting

Isaiah, "to deal our bread to the hungry." It is our responsibility to make sure that parents have enough money so that they can give their children a good education in both moral values and skills so they can earn a living. If we fail to provide adequate education for our children and to provide jobs which will allow mothers to stay home if they want to, we will end up by having a society which can only deteriorate and end in bloodshed. We need to take care of our children. There must be a safety net below which nobody can fall. The sick, the disabled, the mentally ill, the elderly, the orphan, and the widow must be taken care of, and there must be programs to help people obtain the proper skills and training and business acumen so that they can earn a living and not fall below this safety net. Wealth must never be allowed to concentrate in a few hands. These are the lessons that we learn from the *Torah* portion *Behar*. Let us hope and pray that they will be applied in this country so that America will continue to be the land of opportunity and continue to be a land of strength and freedom.