

5 thoughts on charity

Central to the ethics of Judaism is the emphasis upon charity, from almsgiving to every sense of loving kindness. Likewise, the Jewish Jesus we read about in the Gospels is deeply concerned for the poor. Think of the Beatitudes, the story of the widow's mite, the parable of the sheep and the goats, of Lazarus and the rich man... Reflect on Gospel stories like these in light of the following sayings passed down in rabbinic teaching:



1.

He who places a basket under his vine when he is gathering the harvest [in order to catch the fruit that drops] is robbing the poor of their due gleanings. (*Sifra 88a*).



2.

Almsgiving weighs as much as all the other commandments. He who gives alms in secret is greater than Moses. (*Bab.B. 9b*)



3.

Why does God love widows and orphans? Because their eyes are turned upon Him... anyone who robs them is as if he robbed God, their Father in heaven. (*Exod. R., Mishpatim, xxx,8*)



4.

He who sustains God's creatures is as though he had created them. (*Tanh.B., Noah, 16a*)



5.

It is taught in the name of R. Joshua: the poor man does more for the rich man than the rich man for the poor man. (*Ruth R. v, 9*)



Why reflect on Torah?

The Church must never forget that "it draws nourishment from that good olive tree onto which the wild olive branches of the Gentiles have been grafted."

- Nostra Aetate, 4; Oct 28, 1965

With this statement, which is based on Scripture (Rom. 11:17-24), the Second Vatican Council unveiled a new era for Christians and Jews. After nearly 2,000 years of tragic division, we are now in a position to recognize and affirm the profoundly graced relationship between the two peoples of faith.

Christianity did not emerge out of the blue; it grew out of Judaism. Jesus himself was a devout Jew, as was Mary, the apostles and most of the early Church. Without the rich soil of the Jewish faith in which she is planted, the Christian Church simply cannot grow to full maturity.

Our roots in Judaism very definitely include the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament). Sometimes Christians tend to overlook the Old Testament, viewing it as less important than the Gospels, when in fact the Gospels depend on it for their very foundations.

For this reason, this leaflet series, *In the Light of Torah*, is designed to encourage Christians to read and reflect upon the Old Testament. Specifically, it invites us to read the Torah (the first five books of the bible) week by week, drawing on Jewish sources and traditions to help us gain insight into our own Christian faith.

In the Light of Torah

Ancient texts

through fresh eyes,
alive for today.

In the Light of Torah is a parish leaflet series designed to encourage Christians to be more attentive to the gift of Torah as part of their own sacred Scriptures, and to the gift of Judaism which gave us Jesus, the Living Torah. Text by Teresa Pirola. Illustrations by Francine Pirola. © The Story Source, 2009. Further reading: www.batkol.info. Reproduction of this leaflet permitted for non-commercial church use.





Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Deuteronomy 21:10-25:19

Care for the poor, those socially and economically vulnerable, is a recurrent theme in the Torah. A number of precepts make provision for their welfare: the release of debts, prohibition of usury, the poor man's tithe, etc. What absorbs our attention today, however, is a different kind of welfare practice. Described in Deut. 24:19-21, the forgotten sheaf and other leftovers of the harvest are to be available to 'the stranger, the fatherless, the widow'.

1. Hirsch: 19th C. German-Jewish rabbinical leader. See Leibowitz, 247.

Sources: Eskenazi & Weiss, *A Woman's Torah Commentary* (NY, 2008); Leibowitz, *Studies in Devarim* (NY, 1996); Montefiore & Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology* (NY, 1974); Tigay, *JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia, 1996). Scripture: New JPS.

Tasting Torah

Read aloud Deut. 24:19-21. Note the poetic flow, the threefold repetitions: 'do not...' and 'that shall go to the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow.' And the meaning? Is this simply a humanitarian plan to 'help the poor,' or is a more complex message at work? What do you notice?

Touching Torah

A sheaf left behind in the field is a small amount; hardly the way to satisfy the hunger of the poor. Similarly the forgetfulness: accident is hardly a sure basis for a welfare plan.

Equally as puzzling is the reason given for the practice: "in order that the Lord your God may bless you [i.e., the owner of the field]" (24:19). Is it really a virtue, deserving of blessing, to support the poor through one's forgetfulness? (Note: this is the only precept in the Torah which is to be observed *unconsciously* rather than consciously.) Really, how effectively can the poor be helped by a law that sanctions forgetfulness?

The Jewish sages noticed and pondered these questions and made sense of the precept in various ways. Here is a taste of three responses found in the tradition: (i) If a person is blessed by unintended good deeds, how much greater will be the reward for deliberate good deeds! (ii) The poor man finds dignity by completing the harvesting and by taking sustenance directly from the earth rather than from the hand of the rich. (iii) It is character-building for the owner of the field who 'acquires a generous nature.'

Deeper into Torah

How might this practice help the owner of the field to 'acquire a generous character'? On this question Hirsch (1) is convincing.

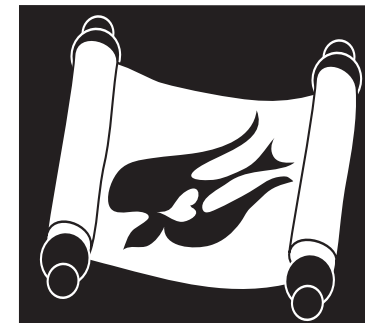
The gifts to the poor described in this Torah passage, says Hirsch, challenge the very concept of 'Mine'. The owner of the field and vineyard is taught to regard himself as a steward of God's blessing rather than trying to monopolize nature. The labor of his hands must not be expended for the purpose of squeezing out every last bit of produce for his own consumption. Even his thoughts about his labor must not be exclusively focused on his selfish good, including any forgetfulness during harvesting.

In other words, the main aim of the precept is to educate people (rich *and* poor, for the law applies to a poor man's field too) in a fundamental attitude of gratitude and giving, in a generous mindset, in what it means to make God central to their lives. Through such formation of minds and hearts, the common good will be served and the poor will be treated with dignity and respect.

Doing Torah

Describe a situation in your life that helped (or is helping) you to 'acquire a generous nature.'

Think of your own family/home/community life. Ask: What do I jealously guard as 'mine'? A piece of clothing? An appliance? A section of the house? A particular seat at table? Is it really 'yours'? Consider how you might share this gift/blessing with somebody else.



Faith & Life

"I love living in the suburb where I am now. People are not that well off, yet they share their lives more freely than the people in the 'richer' suburb where I lived previously. Residents around here will always stop and say 'hello'. I have a neighbour who drops in bread and donuts to me and to others in the street. Another lends me CDs. Still another is always offering to teach me some of his carpentry skills. This community may be poorer in some ways, but its residents are rich in goodness and generosity."