

PARSHAT RE'E

Dvar Tora by Sam Cohen

Shabbat Shalom everyone.

This morning we celebrated the Bat Mitsva of Alexis Rabinowits.

Alexis, I am privileged today to give a Dvar Tora, and I want deliver it in your honor, and in the honor of your family.

There is a custom in Judaism that states "EN OMRIM SHEVACHO SHEL ADAM BEFANAV, ACH MIKTASAT SHAVACHO OMRIM. It means that one is not allowed to extol a person's virtues in front of him. However, one is allowed to mention a little bit of a person's virtues in front of him.

By saying that your parents are some of the most wonderful people I know, and constantly involved in acts of kindness, I would only be mentioning a little of their virtues, which I am allowed to.

Parshat Re'e is so replete with themes in Judaism including idol worship, worship in the Bet Hamikdash (the temple), laws of kashrut, false prophets, maaser sheni, shemita, tsedaka, eved ivri, pessach, shavuot and succot.

Given your family's virtues, It is only appropriate to cover a topic that relates to acts of kindness.

I therefore chose to cover some of the technical and spiritual aspects of ZEDAKA (giving and lending money).

The first 11 PESUKIM OF PEREK TET VAV (first 11 verses of chapter 15) talk about *shemita*. *Shemita* occurs every seventh year. One must release all debts owed to him by others.

In verses 8 thru 10, the tora commands us to 'open our hand', give or lend to the poor person, and accommodate his needs. The tora sternly warns us against refraining from lending money before shemita, for fear that we will need to release debts owed to us. As a reward for conquering our misgiving, g-d will bless us and our work

The gemara in masechet GITTIN DAF LAMED VAV AMUD ALEPH & BET (Talmud, tractate of Gittin page 36a, and 36b), relates that HILLEL HAZAKEN, instituted the concept of PRUZBUL. A PRUZBUL is a means by which people can transfer a debt owed to them, to be owed to the Bet Din (Jewish court of Law) instead. A debt to the Bet Din, does not get released during *shemita*. The Bet Din would then transfer the money back to the lender. This way people would not lose their money during shemita, due to debts owed to them.

There is a MACHLOKET HAPOSKIM (difference of

opinion among the Rabbis), if PRUZBUL applies today. The Rambam says it does not, since PRUZBUL depends on KDUSHAT HAARETZ (certain halachot that apply to the the land of Israel), and since land does not return to its previous owners during *Shemita*, relinquishing of debts does not apply either, and consequently PRUZBUL has no meaning. Some poskim say that PRUZBUL applies at all times, even today.

Regardless of the contemporary application of PRUZBUL, I find the attitudes that surround lending and giving, worthy of review.

Somehow, the Tora's promise that those who lend before shemita will be blessed, is insufficient, and Hillel knew it. That's why he instituted the PRUZBUL. He did this because people would not lend, out of fear of not seeing their money back.

So, what should the attitude of a lender be, anyway? It seems that the attitude of a lender before *shemita*, without a PRUZBUL, is really one of giving, and not lending, since the lender knows that he must relinquish his debt anyway. It's an attitude of letting go and surrendering, and simply trusting that everything will turn out just fine. This is one of toughest things to do, and whose applications extend far beyond the realm of charity alone. Perhaps the Tora is telling us to change our attitude from the the prevalent "I'll believe it when I see it" to a less popular one of "I'll see it when I believe it".

In fact, all Jewish lending, involves an attitude of giving, since no interest may be collected. That causes a potential lender to ask himself, why lend and make no money at all, when I can lend and receive interest on the money? I am actually losing money by lending.

There is a story about the famous Miser of Krakow that beautifully illustrates an attitude on the giver's part. He was the richest person in town. Each time a person would come to him, he would welcome him to his house, sit down with him and listen quietly and attentively to his needs. But the moment the person started to ask for money, the Miser of Krakow would ask him to leave. This happened to every poor person in town who came to the Miser of Krakow and ask for help. Consequently the Miser of Krakow gained his title ("the miser of Krakow"), and was not liked by anyone. One day, in the beginning of the week, the Miser of Krakow died. Noone wanted to bury him. Then towards the end of the week, a poor man came to the town Rabbi, and said to him, " Rabbi, for years now,

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I have been receiving an unmarked envelope with money every thursday. This money supported me and my family. This week for the very first time in years, the envelope did not come and tomorrow is Shabbat. What will I do? The Rabbi was intrigued by the story, and told the poor man that he would take care of him this shabbat, and not to worry. Then, another poor man came and knocked on the Rabbi's door, and related the same story. During that day, the same story was repeated many times. The Rabbi put two and two together, and soon everyone realized that the the so called "Miser" of Krakow, was in fact the greatest philanthropist in town. Of course he ended up getting a proper funeral and a grand eulogy.

From the story, we learn about the attitude of giving without the need to be recognized for it. That is not very easy, because people naturally like to be recognized, and talk about the good things they do. An even higher level of giving, is to give through someone else, so that the giver does not know who the receiver is, and vice versa. This is also known as MATAN BESETER.

For a detailed description of the various levels of TSEDAKA, refer to the SHULCHAN ARUCH, YORE DEA, SIMAN RESH MEM TET SEIF HEH thru YUD DALED.

There is another story which illustrates an attitude about giving. During the sixties, there was a Jewish woman who came to New York City from the communist Soviet Union. As we know, most people who left the USSR to come to America, left penniless, and had to completely rebuild their lives in this country.

One person in the Jewish community, always looking to do good things, decided he would help out this woman, and left her food and money on friday, so she could have a decent Shabbat.

After two weeks, the woman thanked her benefactor for what he'd done, but told him she could no longer accept charity. After asking her why she could no longer accept charity, she said to him "where I came from, each person had the same as everybody else. I simply feel uncomfortable to be somehow "less" than someone else. By accepting your gifts, I somehow feel less worthy".

After listening to her reasoning, he said to her, "Well you know, I do understand where you're coming from. However we have a Jewish system that's very similar to your social system. You see, some people get more money than others. But it does not make it *theirs*. They simply have the responsibility of distributing it rightfully among others who have less.

This is our social system. So what I am giving you, is not mine to begin with".

After that incident the woman accepted her weekly gifts gratefully.

The attitude we learn here, is that some of the things we "have", are not ours to keep. We have the responsibility to make sure that it gets to the the right person. We are only the conduits through which money and other items flow.

The SHULCHAN ARUCH, YORE DEA, SIMAN RESH MEM TET SEIF GIMEL AND DALET, mentions, that one is supposed to give Tsedaka with a friendly demeanor, for if one gives with a bad attitude and makes the poor person feel uncomfortable, one forfeits the ZECHUT (merit) of the mitsva. Also, if one is not able to give for whatever reason, he should not brush off the poor person, but rather empathize with him, and explain to him that if he had the means, he would certainly help. Again we see how important the attitude can be, to the point that one forfeits the entire mitsva. This is a perfect example of how one can obtain the 'NAVAL BIRSHUT HATORA' status; i.e one can technically fulfill all of the mitsvot, but with a wrong spirit or attitude, forfeit everything.

So far, I have mainly spoken about the attitudes of the giver. What attitude should the receiver adopt? One powerful attitude is the one I mentioned about *Shemita*. Surrendering and trusting that everything will turn out just fine, and then going about your business. Another one is the infamous "EZEHU ASHIR, HASAMEACH BEHELKO, mentioned in PIRKE AVOT. It means that a happy person is one who is happy with what he has (in lieu of "the grass is greener on the other side").

A few months ago, I saw a bumper sticker on the back fender of a car. It proclaimed that "Attitude is Everything". Perhaps that is indeed so. It certainly seems to be a major point in Judaism.

Dear Alexis, I congratulate you on your bat Mitsva, and hope that you will perpetuate the legacy of your parents and grandparents.

Shabbat Shalom.