

## Parashah One Hundred Thirty–Seven

Deuteronomy 15:7–16:12; Isaiah 61:1–3; 1Corinthians 5:7–8

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notes by Tim Hegg

### *Faith—The Basis of Torah Living*

The “Law is concerned only with externals—the Spirit is concerned with the heart,” or so we often hear from those who believe the Torah has been abolished. But when we study the Torah itself, we see repeatedly that this perspective is entirely unfounded. In fact, just the opposite is true: in the Torah, God continually calls His people to live out their obedience to Him on the basis of their faith.

The present *parashah* is a case in point. Having given the laws regarding the release of debts at the Sabbatical year (15:1–6), Moses goes on to warn the Israelites about the natural tendency to withdraw one’s helping hand toward his impoverished neighbor as the *sh’mittah* year approaches. This, of course, would be the natural way of looking at things: if I loan money to my neighbor too near to the coming *sh’mittah* year, he won’t have time to repay the debt, and then the remainder of what he owes will be cancelled at the Sabbatical year. In other words, loaning money to my neighbor just before the *sh’mittah* year means that in essence I’m giving him a major portion of the loan.

This being the case, it would be the natural tendency to “harden” one’s heart (literally, “strengthen [צָמַח] your heart”) and to “close” one’s hand (לֹא תִקְפֹּץ אֶת־יָדְךָ) in regard to one’s neighbor. All sorts of rationalizations could take place: “I can’t afford to just give my money away!” “It’s not fair! Why should I loan money I know will never be repaid!” And what is the divine answer to these rationalizations? “You shall generously give to him, and your heart shall not be grieved when you give to him, because for this thing Adonai your God will bless you in all your work and in all your undertakings.” What, then, is the basis for obeying the command to give generously to the one in need? *It is a reliance upon the word of God that what He has said, He will do.* In other words, obedience flows out of faith in God, for in loaning money to the poor that one knows will not be returned (because the *sh’mittah* is soon approaching), one is cast upon God’s provision—His promise to bless in ways unthinkable by the natural mind.

Yet there appears to be an inconsistency regarding the poor. In 15:4 it is stated, “there will be no poor among you, since Adonai will surely bless you in the land which Adonai your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess,” while in vv. 7 and 11, the presence of the poor within the Israelite society is not only presumed, but even promised. How are we to reconcile this apparent contradiction? Several options have been suggested by scholars. Some modern scholars simply consider vv. 4–6 not to be part of the original but added erroneously by another hand. Some have suggested that what v. 4 states is the ideal (if Israel were to completely obey the Torah, all poverty would be eradicated), but Moses, knowing that Israel will in fact disobey, gives the laws pertaining to the poor who will, because of Israel’s disobedience, inevitably remain within the society. But neither of these options are satisfying. There is no reason to doubt the genuine character of any of these verses—all extant manuscripts contain them. Moreover, withholding one’s hand from the poor is stated to be a sin (v. 9) and giving generously to the poor brings God’s blessings. One can hardly argue that God’s blessings will come if the very presence of the poor is the result of disobedience! Furthermore, to think that providing for the poor would eventually eradicate all poverty does not take into account the foreigners who would constantly be joining Israel, and might themselves be

impoverished. Indeed, the class of disadvantaged people (usually described as the “orphan, widow, and foreigner”) often mentioned in the Torah are most often brought forward as the object of one’s charity.

More probable is the explanation that v. 4 deals with specific individual cases, while vv. 7 and 11 state a general truth relative to the nation as a whole. That is, when one is soft hearted and open handed to one’s impoverished neighbor, *in that specific case* poverty will be abolished. Yet since there will always be others who are poor, the need to obey God’s commandments in regard to them is on-going.

It should be noted how the matter of helping the poor from a Torah perspective is the responsibility of the individual, not that of Israel’s government. Nowhere in the Torah is there a basis for a national welfare program. In the community of Israel, individual helping individual is the means by which the poor are sustained. When poverty is relatively low, this signals a high level of obedience among God’s people. Where poverty runs high, however, this marks a neglect of God’s Torah principles. Once again, however, the primary focus is upon the community of Israel, not humankind in general. Or to put it more succinctly: Israel was not responsible to care for the poor of the pagan societies in which they existed, but to carefully maintain the poor within their own community. So strong was this reality among the Jewish communities of the rabbinic era, that some “proselytes” were considered false proselytes (גֵּרֵי שְׂקֵרָה) because they had converted only to gain the financial assistance so common within the Jewish community itself.

How are we to apply this commandment to be open hearted and opened handed to the poor? We are carefully to maintain those who are in need within our own community. One thing that will greatly diminish our testimony of God’s greatness is if there are those within our community who, in honest need, are left unaided. Conversely, when the watching world sees that we carefully and regularly help the needy within our community, they will see the reality of God’s having blessed as He said He would.

Our *parashah* goes on to specify how such soft hearted and open handed response to those in poverty is applied to the release of Hebrew slaves and servants (these laws do not apply to foreign slaves or servants, cf. Lev 25:39–55). In the *sh’mittah* year, household slaves or servants were to be released and given their freedom. Slavery in the Ancient Near East, and specifically in the Israelite community, may have occurred for a number of reasons. Most often, such slavery was the result of an inability to pay one’s debts. In such a case, one was forced into slavery in order to pay one’s debts. Indeed, this is the caution against borrowing: it always presumes upon the future. If one borrows money in order to obtain what one cannot himself afford, then one is presuming that he or she will be able to repay this debt in the coming months and years. Yet such a presumption is based upon the idea that one will be able to work in the future and maintain an income out of which the debt can be repaid. But who knows what the future holds? Only the Almighty has such knowledge. The one who borrows may fall ill, or incur an injury, and thus be unable to work and repay the debt. Wisdom teaches us: “The rich rules over the poor, and the borrower becomes the lender’s slave” (Prov 22:7). This does not mean that borrowing is forbidden, or that it constitutes a sin. What it does teach us is that borrowing may lead to enslavement, and this was surely a reality in ancient Israel. Even in more modern societies, “debtors’ prisons” were populated by those unable (or unwilling) to repay their debts. There was no automatic bankruptcy as is the case in our current society. If one were unable to pay a debt, he was obligated to enslave himself to the debtor until the *sh’mittah* arrived.

But in ancient Israel, when the *sh'mittah* did come, the household slave or servant was not only to be released, but was also to be supplied amply with those provisions needed for him or her to return to normal living. “When you set him free, you shall not send him away empty-handed. You shall furnish him liberally from your flock and from your threshing floor and from your wine vat; you shall give to him as Adonai your God has blessed you” (15:13–14). Such generosity is based upon two things: First, one is to remember the enslavement of Israel in Egypt, and how wonderful it is to be free as a result of God’s gracious redemption. Even as Israel was sustained by God Who brought them out and gave them the plunder of the Egyptians, so one is to supply the released slave or servant at the time of his or her redemption. “Freely you have received; freely give” (Matt 10:8). Secondly, one is to remember that a slave’s labor is worth double that of a hired hand (15:18). That is, he does the same work as a hired hand without receiving any wages, and a hired hand was most likely paid double what the cost of room and board was for the slave or servant. Moreover, the hired hand worked only limited hours each day, while the slave or servant was available for work the entire six days each week. Thus, at the time of remission, the owner is not to begrudge the necessity to provide ample provisions to the freed slave or servant. Instead, he should recognize the financial advantage that has been his for the past six years. Once again, the day-to-day life of Torah obedience is based upon faith in God—faith that He would provide and bless as He promised. Rather than diminishing his material wealth, the owner who was generous to his released slave or servant could count on God’s continuing blessing.

Of course, there were times when a slave or servant had become so much part of the family, or had come to appreciate the security of servitude as over against the risks of independence, that he or she did not want to leave at the *sh'mittah* year. In such a case, provision was made for that person to become the indentured slave of the owner. That such a notice is found in our text shows that the benign treatment of slaves and servants was the expected norm in Israel. The procedure involved the slave having his or her ear pierced against the door of the house (15:17). Once again, we see that the door (and perhaps particularly the door post) was symbolically viewed as a witness for all that took place in the household. The Exodus parallel (Ex 21:6) adds “before God,” indicating that an oath on the part of the slave was most likely included in the ceremony. Having entered into such an arrangement, the person becomes a “perpetual servant” (עֶבֶד עוֹלָם). This use of עוֹלָם (*'olam*) must be understood, however, within the general context of the Torah, in which provision for the remission of all slaves was given at the Yovel (Jubilee) year. Moreover, the Hebrew slave or servant who underwent this ritual did not by so doing become the property of the household, and could not be passed on as an inheritance to one’s children (cf. Lev 25; *Sifre* §122; *Mechilta*, *Nezikin*, 2 [Lauderbach 3:17–18]). He or she remained the indentured slave of the owner either until a Yovel occurred, or the owner died.

Here, in the Torah, we find the background for the biblical teaching for the redemption of slaves to sin and the willing servitude as slaves of righteousness (cp. Rom 6). For throughout our *parashah* the backdrop of the exodus itself is evident as the motivation for Israel’s obedience to God. Having been redeemed from the house of slavery in Egypt, Israel has become servants of the Almighty. Yet this servitude to God is not something imposed or forced. Rather, like the indentured slave who recognizes how good it is to have become part of his master’s household, so we have come to acknowledge the blessings of being members of the household of God (cf. 1Tim 3:15; 1Pet 4:17). We have willingly put our ear to the Door (cf. John 10:7, 9 where Yeshua says “I am the door”) and identified with His having been pierced. Indeed, it is our own impoverishment that

caused the piercing of the Door itself. In so identifying with Yeshua in His death, we have become His servants forever — “slaves of righteousness” as Paul puts it (Rom 6:18).

We may also note how meaningful it is that the ear was pierced. In the Hebrew (as well as the Greek), obedience is described as “hearing” — “Hear, O Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai alone! (Deut 6:4). And, “He who has an ear, let him hear” (Rev 2:7, 11, et al). The mark of our willing servitude to the Almighty is our obedience to His commandments.

Having noted the remission of slaves, our *parashah* goes on to speak of the firstborn males of the herd or flock. These belong to God, as do the firstborn sons (though our text does not mention the redemption of the firstborn son). Since the firstborn males of the herd or flock belong to God, one is not allowed to derive benefit from them. Thus, they cannot be used for ploughing, nor can the firstborn male lambs be sheared for their wool. Rather, they are to be sacrificed as a fellowship offering to Adonai. In the case where the firstborn male of the herd or flock has a defect, and thus unfit for a sacrifice, it was to be slaughtered and eaten like a fellowship offering (though not offered as a sacrifice) in one’s own city or village. The only prohibition was, of course, that the blood was not to be eaten. Once again, the giving of the firstborn male of the herd or flock required faith that God would continue to provide and replace the animal offered up to Him.

Chapter 16:1–12 outlines briefly the three pilgrimage festivals (Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot). The fact that these are attached immediately to the text describing the remission of slaves and the offering of the firstborn male of the herd or flock bears out the fact that such sacrifices were offered at the time of the pilgrimage festivals. While Ex 22:30 (Hebrew 22:29) prescribes that the offering of the firstborn of the herd or flock was to be on the eighth day of the animal’s life, our *parashah* simply indicates that it must be offered “annually” (15:20). The Exodus text presumes the moveable Tabernacle, and the close proximity of Israel to it. In Deuteronomy, the anticipation of the Temple in Jerusalem required that greater time be made for people to travel there to offer their sacrifices, and thus the requirement to offer the animal on the eighth day is extended to “within a year” of its birth.

The first month is here called the “month of Abib” or the “new moon of Abib” (חֹדֶשׁ הָאָבִיב). While the other books of the Torah regularly give us numerical titles for the months (e.g., “first month,” “third month,” etc.), Deuteronomy only uses a numerical identifier once, Deut 1:3, “In the fortieth year, on the first day of the eleventh month...” Here, Deuteronomy is content with describing the beginning of the festival cycle by describing the season: “in the month of the new ears of grain.” Abib (or Aviv) is the old name or epithet of the month that falls in March and April. The word itself describes the phase of growth when the grain is still green and the seeds are full of milky liquid (cf. Ex 9:31; Lev 2:14; m.*Killim* 5.7).

In ancient Israel, the determination of the first month of the year rested upon a number of factors. The Sages took our text (Deut 16:1) to indicate the need for intercalation of the year. Simply put, if the twelfth month was coming to a close, and the barley grain had not yet come to an early ripened condition (i.e., aviv), an additional month was added. Other factors that were also taken into account were: 1) whether lambing had occurred to provide the many Pesach lambs necessary for the festival, 2) whether the bridges, damaged or washed out by the winter rains, had been sufficiently repaired to allow the people to make pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and whether the rainy season had itself been completed (cf. t.*San* 2.12), 3) whether turtledoves or pigeons were sufficient in number for the many who would require them for purification rituals (cf. Lev 12:8; 14:22, 30; 15:14, 29; Num 6:10), 4) and whether the spring equinox had occurred. (The question of whether

the first month could only be declared after the spring equinox had occurred is, however, debated. See Roger T. Beckwith, *Calendar and Chronology, Jewish and Christian* [Brill, 2001], pp. 282ff). Thus, we read in t.*Sanhedrin* 2.5 an epistle from Rabban Gamliel, the head of the Sanhedrin:

To our brethren, residents of the Exile of Babylonia, and residents of the Exile of Media, and of all the Exiles of Israel, may your peace increase! We inform you that the pigeons are still tender, the lambs are thin, and the spring-tide has not yet come. So it is proper in my view and in the view of my colleagues, and we have added thirty days to this year.

Thus, from the perspective of the later rabbinic literature, the year was determined by observation, not by astronomical calculation alone. Such determination was in the hands of the Sanhedrin, and by all extant data, Yeshua and His talmidim followed their calendric intercalations. As our text demands, “you shall observe (שמור) the month (or new moon) of Abib,” by which is meant “you shall observe or keep all of the festivals prescribed for the month of Abib.” We may conclude that Yeshua and His talmidim considered the authority of the Sanhedrin in determining the beginning of the year as sufficient for their compliance with this Torah text (cf. Matt 23:1-3). As an aside, it is preposterous to think that one or two self-proclaimed Karaites in our time could usurp such authority to themselves to regulate the calendar for world-wide Torah communities!

As noted, the three pilgrimage festivals are briefly outlined in our text. The Pesach festival is a seven day event marked not only by the offering of the Pesach sacrifice, but also by abstaining from eating anything with leaven for seven days, with an assembly at the Temple on the seventh day. Moreover, the Pesach sacrifice, the meat of which is eaten at the opening Pesach seder, is not to be left over until morning (16:4). In order to put a fence around this commandment, the Sages ruled that none of the sacrificial meat could be eaten after midnight.

The counting of the omer, which links Pesach to Shavuot, is stated in our *parashah* to begin “from the time you begin to put the sickle to the standing grain” (16:9). This, like other time designations in the Torah (cp. Ex. 23:15–16, “at the end of the year”), is very general. The counting of the omer required that the barely be ready for harvest, so that its commencement must be generally at the time of the harvest. This necessitated the intercalation referred to above.

The counting of the omer (16:9) meant that the days between Pesach and Shavuot were to be counted in order that there should be seven complete weeks (cf. Lev 23:15) between the two Festivals. The controversies over when to begin counting the omer aside, the primary point is that Pesach and Shavuot encompass a mini-picture of the whole story—a microcosm of the Jubilee cycle, which entailed 49 years with the Yovel occurring on the 50th year. In short, the redemption of Israel from Egypt was for the purpose that Israel might worship (i.e., serve) Adonai. This highlights a most important point: the goal of redemption is worship. Redemption is, therefore, primarily Godward. It is for the praise of His glory that we have been redeemed (cf. Eph 1:3–6). Thus, our *parashah* begins and ends with the theme of the redemption of slaves. Or to put it another way, redemption’s goal is that we should “rejoice before Adonai.” God is most honored when we are most satisfied in Him.

Note carefully that the rejoicing before Adonai at Shavuot is specifically stated to encompass “you and your son and your daughter and your male and female servants and the Levite who is in your town, and the stranger and the orphan and the widow who are in your midst” (16:11). The plan of God is that Israel, His chosen nation, should embrace people from every walk of life, and

from every nation, so that together as one family, we would honor and glorify His great Name. This, likewise, flows from the foundation of faith, for it is by faith that we declare the goodness of God even in a fallen world. Thus, the conclusion of our *haftarah* portion is “that He may be glorified.” And, as our Apostolic portion reminds us, such a glorification entails the praise of our Messiah, Who is our Pesach Lamb, and by Whose work we have been brought into the family of God and given the happy responsibility of living lives of praise.