

Shabbat Parashat Emor

Kol Yisra'el Areivim zeh la'zeh – All of Israel Depends on One Another

In this week's *parasha*, there are a number of teachings related to the harvest season, particularly relevant given that this is the time of the spring harvest in the Land of Israel. One verse, however, serves as the foundation for a set of laws that instruct us regarding our obligations to the poor, even as we are engaged in the very act of harvesting our fields:

“And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger: I am the Lord your God.” (Lev. 23:22)

As the long planting and growing season comes to an end and a farmer is joyously celebrating the successful growth of his crops, he is commanded not to reap all that is there just for himself. The Torah is teaching here that each farm is a section of land belonging to the community of God. Each farmer is a member of the Jewish community, which demands care for others. Neither the land, its produce, nor the individual responsible for their care stands alone. There are responsibilities to greater forces that must be recalled and fulfilled. Had it not been for God's daily miracles, crops would not have grown. Therefore, out of gratitude and respect, each individual has the duty to care for those who are in need by giving from the fruit of his hard labor. Thus, as one is harvesting his field and collecting the produce, that which falls to the ground or is dropped (known as “the gleanings”) are not to be picked up. Furthermore, the corners of the fields must also be left uncut. They must remain for the poor or the stranger. From these instructions, we learn that we have an obligation always to take care of each other and to be mindful that we are members of a community.

The lesson of our obligation to care for others is one of the core values at the heart of the Tikkun Olam curriculum in Grades 6-7. Our students learn to speak the language of “Universe of Obligation,” when it comes to understanding their requirement to see beyond the immediate needs of themselves and those closest to them and to incorporate the wider Jewish and human communities into their understandings of “We” and “Us.” Our tradition teaches, in fact, that there really is no such thing as “us” and “them” among the community of human beings. We are all one, and should see the commonalities that unite us, not the differences that divide us.

The culminating experience of the Tikkun Olam curriculum is the Mitzvah of Valuing Philanthropy (MVP) project. As part of the project, each of our Grade 7 students chooses a mitzvah that is meaningful to them and then studies the needs in the world that are connected to that mitzvah. They research non-profit charitable organizations that meet these needs and fulfill their chosen mitzvah. Ultimately, they choose an agency to sponsor and represent to their classmates and make the case for its support from the pool of MVP funds which the grade has raised from its b'nei mitzvah gift money and other gifts solicited from family and friends. Learning how to be a philanthropist, to appreciate that there are needs and hardships close to home and far away that need our attention, and to be able to make a contribution of time and resources to meet some of those needs are experiences and life lessons that our Grade 7's take with them out into the world once they have completed the work of the MVP program.

From where does our obligation and ethic to care for others find its roots? From Torah verses like the one we find in this week's *parasha*. As God's partners on earth, we are obligated to pay attention to the needs in the world and to make the sacrifices necessary to heal them. Opportunities to do this work present themselves every day. We need only open our eyes and see them.

Shabbat Shalom!