

A Muse: Re'eh

“At the ends of seven years you shall institute a remission. This is the matter of the remission: Every creditor shall remit his authority over what he has lent his fellow...If there shall be a destitute person among you, any of your brethren in any of your cities...you shall not harden your heart or close your hand against your destitute brother...” (Deuteronomy 15:1-11)

The issue of social justice which is dealt with in this week's portion has been addressed in previous chapters. In previous chapters the question of ownership of the land and the implications of it are referenced: “But the land must not be sold beyond reclaim, for the land is mine; you are but “strangers” resident with me”. (Leviticus 25:23). This principle can be understood either as a theological concept - that the land belongs to God and thus there is a social connotation; or it is in essence a social concept and the land has to be divided up, because none of us own the land; we are merely its stewards. Either way, if this principal is to be applied it has far reaching application regarding the social and economic landscape of the “land”.

Does this principal relate only to the real estate or does it also encompass property as well. This weeks portion deals with this question. The text speaks in the second person singular, which is unusual. For example it refers to “achicha”, “shearecha”, “arzecha”, “levavecha”, and “evyonecha”. What this seems to infer is not a general sociological description of the economic status of the community, but rather a description of “your” social issues. The text is referencing on a personal level the obligation of the individual. “You can't escape your responsibilities”. The destitute isn't in the abstract, but happens to be the destitute in “your” community.

Another observation regarding the unusual grammatical structure of the text are the multiple occurrences of the root and its conjugated verb being used together. “ha-avet ta-aveteinu”(verse 8), “patoach tiftach” (verse 8), and “natone teetein” (verse 10). The text is being forceful in its determination to set a tone of social concern and justice as well as the appropriate means of relating to ones neighbor as though he were your

brother. Support for the destitute is not only to be given by the largesse of your hand, but also from the largesse of your heart.

Many of us have difficulty with this text because of the economic chaos that would ensue if these principles were applied. In essence the text is setting up a blueprint for a society modeled on socialism which doesn't seem to work in 21st century industrial societies whether it is in Israel or anywhere else. There was a time when Israel set up kibbutzim on the model of socialism, but ultimately it failed as evident today of the growing capitalism on the very same kibbutzim which were founded on socialistic principals.

There are others who believe in the virtue of capitalism, not as a default system, but one which extols the productivity of man when in competition with others. The text presents a model by which it believes man is to live. Perhaps this was referring to an agrarian society, but wouldn't necessarily be applicable to other models? On the other hand there are those that would maintain that it matters not whether it was an agrarian community or an industrial one because the text is immutable and for all times!