

Bringing meaning to life

Parasha with Rabbi Benji Levy

DEVARIM

VAETCHANAN

EKEV

RE'EH

SHOFTIM

KI TEITZEI

KI TAVO

NITZAVIM

VAYELECH

HAAZINU

V'ZOT
HABRACHA

47

RE'EH

TELESCOPIC TZEDAKA

The creation of the Internet has changed the notion of interconnectedness for eternity. Today, every global issue has the potential to be transformed into a local one. There are, of course, many positive offshoots of these developments. Examples include networking prospects, crowdfunding sources and crowdsourcing avenues for an unparalleled flow of ideas and these extraordinary opportunities should be celebrated.

But the inherent dangers are easily overlooked. In large western cities we are seeing that small stores are rapidly being forced to fold and close down. They are neither able to compete with the digital retail market nor with the megastore chains.

While usually overlooked, this trend actually extends beyond the marketplace and into the world of charity.

Instagram and Facebook feeds are flooded with competing needs that require 'heroic'

attention. Who doesn't want to end widespread hunger, disease and war - these are all noble causes that deserve urgent help. But **often our priorities are confused such that the global replaces the local;** the more public, exciting and popular replaces the more anonymous, smaller-scale issues, which is where we are actually more likely to be able to make a real and lasting difference.

Take a typical example of a teenager who reads of a disease affecting an African tribe in a post on social media. The boy follows link after link to understand the problem and feels terrible about those lives being severely affected. He shares a photo and caption on his Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts. His charitable feelings have been successfully broadcasted to his sphere of influence, and he has therefore shown that he cares. And, as a result of his altruism, he can now enjoy the satisfaction of having done something to help save the world.

What has been achieved is indeed positive and must not be belittled. But unfortunately his thirst to do good has, at this point, been somewhat and sometimes entirely quenched. And when his mother now asks him to do any act of kindness - visit his grandmother, help with household chores, take a sick friend out for a fun activity, volunteer at a local aid organisation - he might not feel as compelled. He may feel he has already done his bit for society, so to speak.

This phenomenon may be compounded by the fact that often **those suffering in our closest circles do not appear to be as desperate for help as the sensationalised tragedies on the other side of the planet.** The fact that time is spent on the latter is not negative; however, the fact that this supersedes taking responsibility for the former is indeed negative.

The Torah states, 'if there shall be a destitute person with you,

from your brethren, in one of your cities, in the land that the Lord your God has given you, do not harden your heart and do not close your hand from your destitute brother. For you shall surely open your hand to him.¹ The Midrash deduces from this that one should prioritise one's charity, beginning with the destitute among you - your family, your own city, Israel and then the rest of the world.² Indeed, this prioritisation of charitable endeavours has been codified in Jewish law; one begins with one's immediate sphere and moves outward.³

That is not to say that one should not worry about what happens on the other side of the world - we should. However, if one has limited resources, one's duty is first to those who are within one's immediate sphere and only subsequently to those in the other wider spheres. To respond to any cause, near or far, is indeed a noble endeavour. Yet, we must ensure that this telescopic charity⁴ does not come at the expense of the tangible difference we can make to those who are nearby.

Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, ethicist and founder of the Musar movement, is often attributed with the following declaration:

When I was a young man, I wanted to change the world. I found it was difficult to change the world, so I tried to change my nation. When I found I couldn't change the nation, I began to focus on my town. I couldn't change the town and as an older man, I tried to change my family. Now, as an old man, I realise the only thing I can

change is myself, and suddenly I realise that if long ago I had changed myself, I could have made an impact on my family. My family and I could have made an impact on our town. Their impact could have changed the nation and I could indeed have changed the world.

We have a biblical command to give charity.⁵ Jewish law requires between ten and twenty percent of one's income to be distributed, such that the more we have, the more we give.⁶ This idea can be extended beyond the financial, to time and talents as well. For the average person, **the opportunity cost of pursuing the exciting global 'mega causes' involves compromising the simple for the sassy.** Rather than looking through the telescope of the digitally charitable, we should take out a microscope to focus on the needs of those nearest to us, at home.

Notes

¹ Deuteronomy 15:7-8.

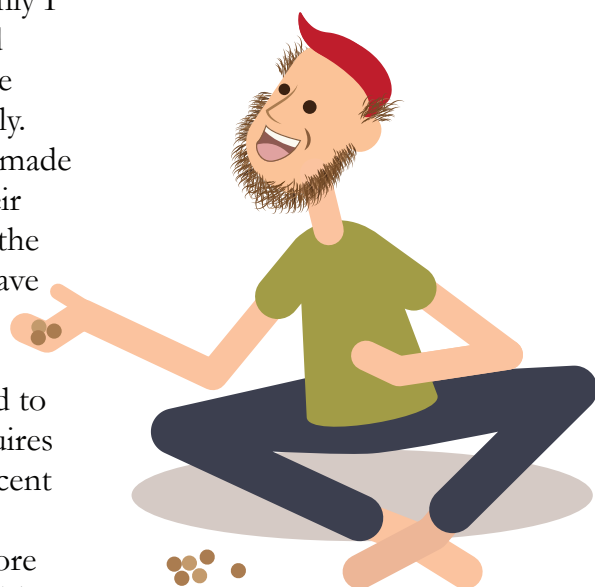
² Rashi ad loc., based on Sifrei 116.

³ Rema, Yoreh De'ab 251:3; Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 34:6.

⁴ This term was coined by Charles Dickens in Bleak House, 1852, to criticise Victorian support for far-off charitable projects whilst nearer to home millions of people were living in poverty.

⁵ See Leviticus 25:35-38; Deuteronomy 15:7-11; Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ab 247:1.

⁶ Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ab 249:1.



Parasha Fact:

The prohibition against eating an animal's 'life giving blood' is mentioned in this week's parasha.

Next week in Shoftim:

We have all experienced at some point or another this moment of paralyzing fear - physical or psychological - which absolutely consumes our mind and our being. Through delineating three categories of people who are exempt from battle, the Torah offers us a timeless lesson of how to stand up in the face of such fears, tackle them head on, and prevail.