

KOL MEVASSER

Good, Bad, or Both: Parashat Re'eh

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Are human beings basically animals who need to be tamed by the forces of civilization? Or are humans angelic beings who sometimes get dragged down by the external forces of nature?

Thomas Hobbes coined the proverb that homo homini lupus, "man is wolf to man." We can't trust each other—or ourselves!—to act in a non-wolf-like pattern; we need to be controlled by laws, to be forced to behave morally. The role of religion and civilization is to curb our innate tendency toward aggression and violence.

On the other hand, some argue that humans are innately kind and cooperative; we descend into violent behavior because of pressures from outside ourselves e.g. feeling threatened by others, living in an environment of poverty or drug addiction. If we could clean up the external negative features of society, we would all live nice, quiet, moral lives.

Proponents of the Hobbesian view draw on the notion of "survival of the fittest." According to this theory, humans (and indeed all animals) are engaged in an ongoing struggle for survival. There is a never-ending competition for resources; only the strongest prevail and reproduce. Weaker animals are killed or die out.

Thus, the best strategy for survival is to destroy the competition.

Yet, this theory has been seriously challenged by a growing number of contemporary researchers. In his important writings, Frans de Waal has provided evidence to demonstrate that animals—including human beings—actually enhance their prospects for survival by cooperative behavior. By working together with others, they are better able to maintain the safety and security of their groups. In his book, "The Age of Empathy," he points to nature's lessons for a kinder society.

Being nice is not only an abstract moral principle; it is a key ingredient for survival and happiness. In his book, "Beyond Revenge," Michael McCullough has described the evolution of the forgiveness instinct. Just as we have an urge to take revenge, we also have a strong streak within us that encourages us to forgive.

Jewish tradition has long understood that human beings are complex, that we have both positive and negative inclinations. Judaism does not view humanity as a group of individuals struggling for survival by engaging in wolf-like aggression against others; nor does it view humanity as an innately peace-loving, altruistic group.

We like to think that we are essentially good and that we have the power to overcome our evil inclinations. In this week's Torah portion, we find

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KJ Schedule Parasha Re'eh

Erev Shabbat & Erev Rosh Hodesh

Friday, August 14th

Shaharit / Morning Prayer ... 6:30 am
Minha / Arvit 6:30 pm
Candle Lighting 7:23 pm

Shabbat & Rosh Hodesh Elul

Saturday, August 15th

Shaharit / Morning Prayer ... 8:30 am
Women's Tehillim 6:30 pm
Minha & Arvit..... 6:30 pm
Havdallah 8:33 pm

Rosh Hodesh Elul

Sunday, August 16th

Selihot 6:45 am
Shaharit / Morning Prayer ... 7:30 am

Weekdays

Monday to Friday August 17th to 21st

Selihot 5:45 am
Shaharit / Morning Prayer .. 6:25 am

Erev Shabbat / Friday, August 21st

Selihot 5:45 am
Shaharit / Morning Prayer ... 6:25 am
Minha / Arvit 6:30 pm
Candle Lighting 7:23 pm

Torah & Haftara Readings

Parashat Re'eh in Devarim
Deuteronomy 799 to 818
Rosh Hodesh Reading
Numbers/ Bamidbar 695
Rosh Hodesh Haftara
Yeshayahu/Isaiah 944 to 947

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the instruction to share with the poor. "You shall not harden your heart nor clench your fist from your needy brother (Devarim 15:7)."

Rabbi Yitzhak Shemuel Reggio, a 19th century Italian Torah commentator, notes: "One who holds himself back from helping a poor and impoverished person needs to harden his heart, because compassion is part of human nature." In other words, we are essentially good, compassionate individuals who naturally want to help others. Only by hardening our hearts can we overcome our natural tendency to do good.

This optimistic assessment of human nature was alluded to in a comment attributed to Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. He noted that according to Freudian psychology, human beings at root are filled with animal instincts. If you scratch deeply enough into the human psyche, you will find aggressiveness, hostility, jealousy.

Rabbi Soloveitchik contrasted this viewpoint with the classic Jewish teaching. If you go as deeply as possible into the human psyche, you will find holiness, a profound crying out for God. As the Psalmist declared: *Mimaamakim keratikha Hashem*. Like him, from our very depths we call out to God.

This week's Torah portion reminds us of the obligation to do that which is upright and good, to live a morally responsible and respectable life. The optimistic Jewish view

suggests that these are goals to which we are naturally disposed. We only sin if we deviate from our basic desire to live generously and compassionately.

Yes, we do have negative inclinations, and yes, these inclinations can drag us down. But the hallmark of a truly religious person is the recognition that at root and in our depths we are endowed with a grand spirituality that is the key to an upright, good and happy life.

Shabbat Shalom

Shabbat-Table Talks: Perashat Re'eh

Rabbi Ralph Tawil, Judaic.org

Contributing money to the needy is a value that plays an important role in Judaism. The Hebrew word for such contributions is "sedaqa," which is often translated as "charity." This translation does not reflect the full meaning of the Hebrew word.

The Hebrew word "sedaqa" contains within it the idea of "sedeq" which is often coupled with the idea of justice. Helping out the needy financially and in other ways is not an act of "charity," but of "justice" and righteousness. The Torah view is that God gave us our possessions as the vehicles to best serve Him. Sometimes the way to serve Him is by contributing to those less fortunate who are in financial need. This way we become Hashem's agents to bring prosperity and sustenance to the world.

In this week's perasha Moshe tells Bnei Yisrael the laws that are to be enacted upon entry into the land of Israel. One of these laws is the law of cancellation of debts due to loans at the end of the shemittah (seventh) year. One of the negative consequences that the Torah foresaw was that some people might hesitate to give loans as the shemittah year approached. This is the concern of our section.

Text: Deuteronomy 15:7-11

If there will be a destitute person from one of your brothers in one of your cities in the land that Hashem your God gives you, do not harden your heart and do not close your hand from your destitute brother. Open, yes, open your hand to him and lend him yes lend him whatever he is lacking. Beware that there be not a thought in your wicked heart, saying, the seventh year, the year of release, is at hand; and your eye be evil against your poor brother, and you do not give him; and he cries to Hashem against you and it will be a sin for you. You will surely give him, and your heart shall not be sad when you give him: because for this thing Hashem your God shall bless you in all your works, and in all that you send your hand to do. For the poor shall never cease out of the land: therefore I command you, saying, You shall open your hand wide to your brother, to your poor, and to your needy in your land.

This text is dealing with the "obligation" to lend money to those who need it. How could Hashem command you to lend

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money? Isn't your money yours to do what you want? Actually, our money is not "our own" but given to us by Hashem to better achieve what He wants with it. If we have the opportunity to help someone by lending him money we must do it.

Rambam writes: *The highest degree [of sadaqa] that there is no higher than it is to hold the hand of a Jewish person who has fallen and to give him a gift or a loan or to make him a partner or to create a job for him in order to strengthen his hand until he no longer needs to ask people [for help]. About this it is said: Let him dwell and live with you," in other words support him so that he does not fall and does not become needy.* (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Gifts to the Poor, 10:7)

This is the highest form of Sedaqa because you help a person to be self-sufficient and to stop being needy. Often giving a loan and some advice to the person can turn him around.

The Torah repeatedly calls the needy person "your brother." The Torah is trying to teach us to treat all Jewish people, [and people in general], as brothers and sisters in this respect. Just as you would surely lend your brother so should you lend another person should he need a loan, especially for his or her livelihood.

The Torah says: "For the poor shall never cease out of the land?" There will always be needy people. We might use the excuse

that there are no needy people around us. Yet if we search we will find some truly needy people whom we can help. This verse is pushing us to search for those who could benefit from our contribution, even if they are not readily apparent. They exist and we should find them.

Giving sadaqa should be a normal part of our children's life. In addition to giving sadaqa in school, help them think of different charitable acts that they could do. Let them hear your discussion as you evaluate which organization to contribute to. Part of your children's allowance could be earmarked for Sedaqa.

This week's perasha also mentions the "Shalosh Regalim" or the three pilgrimage festivals [of Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot. By juxtaposing the festivals of] the "shalosh regalim" [with the discussion of sadaqa] the Torah commands us to consider the disadvantaged in our society and include them in our festivities. The Torah concludes the section by saying "and you shall only be happy" ("vehayita akh sameah"). Happiness that includes [others, especially those less fortunate than us] is true happiness. When we celebrate, we should strive to keep in mind those who are not celebrating and use our joy as a resource through which we may help others.

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