

# Behar-Bechukotai: Kindness for Others, Kindness for Ourselves

By Rabbi Uriel Romano - Broward Central Synagogue (5786)

Our Parashah begins with the laws of social restructuring known as *Shmitah* and *Yovel*. Every six years of working the land, the land itself must rest, have its own Shabbat, and all debts are canceled. And every fiftieth year, a great Jubilee is celebrated and an absolute societal reset takes place. All slaves are freed, and everyone returns to their ancestral land. Everything returns to the way it was at the beginning.

The rationale for these two laws begins to emerge later in the text, with the reasons why some people become slaves—or, in modern language, full-time laborers for others—and are forced to sell their fields: poverty. Poverty, a bad economic decision, a failed harvest, misfortune, or whatever the cause may have been, could force free people to sell their land in order to survive, and once that was gone, they would have to sell their own labor and bodies to support themselves and their families.

The Torah tells us: “If your brother becomes poor and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall support him as though he were a stranger and a sojourner, and he shall live with you.” (*Leviticus 25:35*) Many of the laws that today we would call *Tzedakah* or *Gemilut Chasadim*—redistributive justice or acts of lovingkindness—are learned from our Torah portion. The commandment to help our fallen brothers and sisters. The obligation to continue seeing them as “brothers.” The prohibition against charging them interest. The obligation to support them financially. To give them a second—or even third—chance. I believe there are, within Jewish tradition, three major “motivations” for helping those in need. Three reasons for giving *Tzedakah*. All three are equally important.

## The Poor Person

The first is the most obvious: we help the needy for the sake of the needy themselves. To restore their place in society. To help them bring food to the table, to have a roof over their heads, to restore not only their finances but also their human dignity through words of encouragement and compassion. We give *Tzedakah* to help the one who today does not have enough. This seems to be the Torah’s most basic idea: we help the other person for the other person’s own sake.

## For God

The second motivation is to do it for God. We help not only because the needy person requires assistance, but because God commands it. Because it is a mitzvah. Because it is His will. But not only that. In the Book of Proverbs we read: מְלִנְה יְהוָה תִּוְנֶה דָּל וְגָמְלוֹ יִשְׁלַם-לוֹ “Those who are generous to the poor make a loan to God—He will repay them in full.” (*Proverbs 19:17*) When you help someone in need, you become, metaphorically speaking, God’s lender and God becomes your

debtor. As we might say colloquially: “God owes you one.” When you give money to a person in need, ultimately it is not the poor person who repays the debt—it is God.

## For Yourself

And this brings us to the third idea: there are times when we fulfill mitzvot—and even the mitzvah of *Tzedakah*—not only for the person benefiting, and not only for God, but also for ourselves. Yes, it is possible—and perhaps even desirable—that there be a measure of self-interest in helping others. And it is this idea on which I want to focus today. It is written in the Book of Proverbs: גַּמְלָן בְּפִשּׁוֹ אִישׁ חֶסֶד וְעֵכָר שָׂאוֹ אֶכְזָרִי: “A kindly person benefits himself, but a cruel person brings trouble upon himself.” (*Proverbs 11:17*)

In other words: one who cares for himself is a person of kindness, generous and sensitive, because he is aware of his own needs and takes them seriously—and therefore will also recognize and care for the needs of others. But one who abuses his own flesh through harshness and neglect often becomes cruel toward others as well, alienated and inconsiderate (based on Steinsaltz commentary on the verse).

Very often we think that we are supposed to be generous—*gomlei chesed*—only toward others. But this verse suggests that in order to become generous toward others, we must first cultivate generosity toward ourselves. Not so that kindness ends with us, but so that it begins there. So that by recognizing what is good and healing for us, we can extend that same compassion outward to others.

And now we can connect this teaching back to our Parashah. In *Vayikra Rabbah* (34:3), the Sages connect the verse “A kindly person benefits himself” to the verse “If your brother becomes poor.” Giving *Tzedakah*, helping those in need, also brings benefit to the giver. We do not only give because of the needy person, nor only because of God—we also do it because kindness transforms us. As Proverbs teaches: being kind is itself good for the soul of the giver. Yet according to the Midrash, Hillel the Elder—the sage from two thousand years ago, one of the founding fathers of Rabbinic Judaism as we know it—takes this idea to another level.

## I - The Spa, the Bathhouse, and the Body

*“This is Hillel the elder, who, when he would take leave from his disciples, would walk with them. His disciples said to him: ‘Our teacher, where are you going?’ He said to them: ‘To perform a mitzva.’ They said to him: ‘What mitzva is this?’ He said to them: ‘To bathe in the bathhouse.’ They said to him: ‘Is that a mitzva?’ He said to them: ‘Yes. If the statues of kings that are placed in theaters and circuses, the one who is appointed over them scrubs them and washes them, and they provide him with sustenance, and moreover, he is exalted among the prominent leaders of the kingdom; I who was created in the likeness and image [of God], as it is written: ‘For in the image of God, He made man’ (Genesis 9:6), all the more so.”*

No one would place “going to a spa” or “taking a daily shower” on the list of the 613 commandments. But Hillel apparently did. His disciples were shocked that this great sage, instead of

spending every moment in the academy teaching and studying Torah, considered it a religious duty to go to one of the Roman bathhouses and saunas that existed throughout the Land of Israel. Why? Because caring for his body, treating it well, and allowing it moments of pleasure and restoration was also a divine commandment. If we are created in the image of God, then caring for that divine image is itself sacred work. Hillel teaches us that showing kindness to ourselves is not vanity. It is holiness.

In another version of this Midrash (*Avot DeRabbi Natan*, Recension B 30:9), Hillel is even more emphatic. When asked where he was going, he replied, as usual, “to perform a mitzvah.” “What mitzvah, Hillel?” “I am going to the bathroom.” “And that is a mitzvah?” He replied: “Certainly, so that one’s body should not be damaged.” For Hillel, caring for the body is a mitzvah. Even going to the bathroom becomes sacred. God gave us our bodies as a loan, and we are obligated to care for that loan responsibly.

We must show kindness to our bodies: keeping them healthy, active, rested, and strong. Treating our bodies with compassion instead of constant neglect. And perhaps this teaching speaks especially powerfully to our generation. We live in a culture of exhaustion. People wear burnout almost as a badge of honor. We are constantly connected, constantly working, constantly worrying. Many people know how to care for everyone else except themselves. Hillel reminds us that self-neglect is not righteousness. It is not holiness. Caring for ourselves is not a distraction from spiritual life—it is part of spiritual life.

## II Caring for the Soul, the Guest Within

*“Another matter, ‘The man of kindness does good for himself,’ this is Hillel the elder, who, when he would take leave from his disciples, would walk with them. His disciples said to him: ‘Our teacher, where are you going?’ He said to them: ‘To perform an act of kindness with the guest inside the house.’ They said to him: ‘Every day you have a guest?’ He said to them: ‘And is this wretched soul not a guest inside the body; one day it is here, the next day it is not here.’”*

There is a mitzvah known as *Hachnasat Orchim*—welcoming guests and ensuring that they feel cared for in our homes. Hillel uses this mitzvah metaphorically to teach his students. He says that every day after leaving the house of study he goes home “to care for the guest.” His students are surprised because they did not know he had visitors every day. And then, like the great teacher he was, he explains: he is talking about the soul dwelling within him. The body is the house; the soul is the guest. And we must show kindness to our souls as well. Elsewhere in the Talmud (*Berachot 43b*), the Sages ask: “What is something from which the soul benefits but the body does not benefit?” And they answer: “Fragrance.” Following this idea, even wearing perfume or filling our homes with pleasant aromas can become a mitzvah—an act of kindness toward the soul. To remember each day that we carry within us a guest—the soul—and that this guest also deserves joy, beauty, peace, music, rest, prayer, friendship, and inspiration: this too is a mitzvah.

## Why Connect Helping the Poor with Caring for Ourselves?

“He who cares for himself is a man of kindness,” teaches King Solomon in Proverbs. And the Midrash cites this verse in the context of one of the Torah portions most deeply concerned with social justice and helping the vulnerable. Why? Why connect helping the poor with kindness toward ourselves?

First, because people who are completely depleted emotionally and spiritually often lose the ability to truly care for others. Compassion requires inner strength. One who never rests, never heals, never nurtures their own soul, eventually becomes impatient, bitter, and emotionally unavailable. The Torah wants us to build a society of compassion, but compassion begins with recognizing that we ourselves are also human beings created *b'tzelem Elohim*.

Second, because when we learn to treat ourselves with dignity, we become more capable of seeing dignity in others. If I see my own body as sacred, then I can no longer ignore the suffering of another human being. If I believe my soul deserves care, then surely the soul of another person deserves care as well.

And third, because Judaism rejects both selfishness and self-erasure. The ideal is not to live only for oneself, but neither is it to destroy oneself in the service of others. The Torah dreams of balanced human beings—people capable of generosity because they themselves are spiritually grounded and emotionally alive.

The *Yafeh Toar*, commenting on this Midrash, writes: **כִּי הַמְטִיב לְנַפְשׁוֹ לְחֶסֶד יִחְשַׁב לוֹ כְּמוֹ הַעוֹשֶׂה חֶסֶד לְאַחֵרִים** “For one who does good for his own soul is considered as though he has done kindness for others.” This is a remarkable statement. How can caring for oneself be considered an act of kindness toward others without becoming selfish?

Because a healthier, calmer, kinder human being creates blessings for everyone around them. A parent who takes care of their emotional health becomes a more patient parent. A spouse who nourishes their own soul becomes more loving. A person who allows themselves moments of prayer, rest, learning, joy, and healing becomes more capable of generosity and empathy.

Self-care in Judaism is not narcissism. It is stewardship. It is recognizing that the body and soul entrusted to us by God are instruments through which we serve the world. And perhaps that is the deepest message of our Parashah. The Torah commands us to care for the vulnerable, cancel debts, free slaves, and restore dignity because God wants a society where no one is forgotten—not the poor, not the stranger, not the worker, and not even our own weary souls.

Maybe only through this Midrash we can truly understand the deep message of the most famous quote from Hillel:

אם אין אני לי, מי לי? וכשאני לעצמי, מה אני? ואם לא עכשיו, אימת?

“If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?”

(Pirkei Avot 1:14)