

May 8, 2009

Shabbat Shalom!

As I looked back at some of the projects that emanated from Temple Israel this year, especially at this time that has been challenging for so many people, I thought about our collections of food and clothing that were donated to local agencies and institutions, and congregants who volunteer at the Dover Friendly Kitchen. These efforts are tied to a verse that was part of last week's Torah reading, KEDOSHIM, and this week's portion, EMOR.

In Leviticus Chapter 19, verses 9-10, close to the ethical declaration "love your neighbor as yourself," we read of this communal institution for assistance:

"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 not pick your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger. I the Eternal am your God."

In this week's portion, Leviticus Chapter 23, verse 22 falls in between the sections that describe the celebrations of Shavuot (the last spring harvest) and the "day of sounding the shofar" in the late summer or fall. It reads almost the same as the verse above: "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 the Eternal am your God."

One commentary asserts that these verses established the RIGHT of people in need to expect society to offer them help at a time when they had very little. This "system" of automatic giving offered a way for someone to give without even thinking (sometimes giving some of the best of their produce). Moreover, the fact that such giving was built into society's routine meant that the person in need did not have to ask for a "handout." There was no shame or humiliation involved. Even someone who was struggling to make ends meet (by ancient standards) knew that they could find ready assistance at harvest time. They could still feel good about themselves because they knew society felt obligated to support them. This custom of tzedakah must have also filled them with a feeling of hope, and a sense that they might even have something to give to someone else in need.

With the current situation in our country and around the world, there are many people in need like those individuals or families who went to edges of the fields in ancient times to find sustenance. Our projects of giving food, clothing and other assistance offer a sense of blessing and dignity to people who are temporarily in need of an extra helping hand. Let us continue to keep our hands and our hearts open to our fellow community members in the coming days.

-- L'shalom, Rabbi Larry K.