Simchat Torah Challenge

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Ki Teitzei

Commandments of Charity

Ki Teitzei contains more mitzvot [commandments] than any other Torah portion—74 of the Torah's 613 commandments. Although these laws cover a wide range of subjects, many concern our obligations to others and the work of building a community of compassion and human dignity. The verses below present two such mitzvot, both addressing how we should treat people living in poverty:

דברים כד:י-יג	**Deuteronomy 24:10-13**
(י) כִּי־תַשֶּׁה בְרֵעֲךָ מַשַּׁאת מְאוּמָה לֹא־תָבֹא אֶל־בֵּיתוֹ לַעֲבֹט עֲבֹטוֹ: (יא) בַּחוּץ תַּעֲמֹד וְהָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה נֹשֶׁה בּוֹ יוֹצִיא אֵלֶיךָ אֶת־הַעֲבוֹט הַחוּצָה: (יב) וְאִם־אִישׁ עָנִי הוּא לֹא תִשְׁכַּב בַּעֲבֹטוֹ: (יג) הָשֵׁב תָּשִׁיב לוֹ אֶת־הַעֲבוֹט כְּבוֹא הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ וְשָׁכַב בְּשַׂלְמָתוֹ וּבֵרְכֶךָּ וּלְךָ תִּהְיֶה צְדָקָה לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ:	(10) When you make a loan of any sort to your compatriot, you must not enter the house to seize the pledge. (11) You must remain outside, while the party to whom you made the loan brings the pledge out to you. (12) And if they are needy, you shall not go to sleep with their pledge; (13) you must return the pledge at sundown, that they may sleep in their cloth and bless you; and it will be to your merit before the Lord your God.

- **How might the commandments in these verses help create a society that respects every person's dignity?**
- **Why do you think the verses conclude by describing how fulfilling this commandment affects one's standing before God? What does this add beyond viewing it simply as an obligation between people?**

דברים כד:יב-טו	**Deuteronomy 24:14-15**
(יד) לֹא־תַעֲשֹׁק שָׂכִיר עָנִי וְאֶבְיוֹן מֵאַחֶיךָ אוֹ מִגֵּרְךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּאַרְצְךָ בִּשְׁעָרֶיךָ: (טו) בְּיוֹמוֹ תִתֵּן שְׂכָרוֹ וְלֹא־תָבוֹא עָלָיו הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ כִּי עָנִי הוּא וְאֵלָיו הוּא נֹשֵׂא אֶת־נַפְשׁוֹ וְלֹא־יִקְרָא עָלֶיךָ אֶל־יְהוָה וְהָיָה בְךָ חָטְא:	(14) You shall not abuse a needy and destitute laborer, whether a fellow Israelite or a stranger in one of the communities of your land. (15) You must pay out the wages due on the same day, before the sun sets, for they are needy and

	urgently depend on it; else a cry to God will be issued against you and you will incur guilt.

- **When extending the commandment to strangers, the verse uses two seemingly redundant phrases: “in your land” and “in your community” (literally, “in your gates”). What does each phrase add?**
- **Can you recall a time when you possessed something that another person deeply needed—whether a physical object or something less tangible? How did that situation make you feel?**

These mitzvot teach us to be sensitive to each person’s needs, especially those in vulnerable circumstances. The Talmud—the record of generations of rabbinic debate about law, philosophy, and biblical interpretation, compiled between the third and eighth centuries—adds a striking dimension to the first commandment by connecting it to another verse in Ki Teitzei. By considering the particular hardships a widow might face, the sages show what it means to protect each person’s dignity:

סנהדרין כ”א א נֶאֱמַר: ”לֹא תַחֲבֹל בֶּגֶד אַלְמָנָה” … רַבִּי שִׁמְעוֹן אוֹמֵר: עֲשִׁירָה – מְמַשְׁכְּנִין אוֹתָהּ, עֲנִיָּיה – אֵין מְמַשְׁכְּנִין אוֹתָהּ, וְאַתָּה חַיָּיב לְהַחְזִיר לָהּ, וְאַתָּה מַשִּׁיאָהּ שֵׁם רַע בִּשְׁכֵנוֹתֶיהָ. וְאָמְרִינַן: מַאי קָאָמַר? הָכִי קָאָמַר: מִתּוֹךְ שֶׁאַתָּה מְמַשְׁכְּנָהּ, אַתָּה חַיָּיב לְהַחֲזִיר לָהּ, וְאַתָּה מַשִּׁיאָהּ שֵׁם רַע בִּשְׁכֵנוֹתֶיהָ.	**Sanhedrin 21a** It is stated: “You may not take the garment of a widow for a pledge”...Rabbi Shimon says: In the case of a wealthy widow, one may take collateral from her. But in the case of a poor widow, one may not take collateral from her, because you are obligated to return it to her, and you will give her a bad name among her neighbors. Rabbi Shimon is saying: If you were to take collateral from her, you would be required to return it to her, as the verse states: “And if he is a poor person, you shall not sleep with his pledge; you shall restore the pledge to him when the sun goes down” (Deuteronomy 24:12–13), and you would thereby give her a bad name among her neighbors, who would suspect licentious behavior when they see a man come to her house every

	morning and evening.

- **In your own words, how would you explain Rabbi Shimon's interpretation? How does he use each verse to deepen our understanding of the other?**
- **Rabbi Shimon's reasoning reflects social conditions that may differ from our own. Can you think of a contemporary situation in which someone's particular circumstances call for the same kind of judgment and sensitivity?**

In his legal code, the great medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides emphasizes the importance of responding to each person's unique circumstances, even when doing so comes at a greater financial cost. He explains that the mitzvah of charity is fulfilled by meeting the recipient's individual needs—which may vary greatly from one person to another:

משנה תורה, הלכות מתנות עניים ז:ג לְפִי מַה שֶּׁחָסֵר הֶעָנִי אַתָּה מְצֻוֶּה לִתֵּן לוֹ. אִם אֵין לוֹ כְּסוּת מְכַסִּים אוֹתוֹ. אִם אֵין לוֹ כְּלֵי בַּיִת קוֹנִין לוֹ. אִם אֵין לוֹ אִשָּׁה מַשִּׂיאִין אוֹתוֹ. וְאִם הָיְתָה אִשָּׁה מַשִּׂיאִין אוֹתָהּ לְאִישׁ. אֲפִלּוּ הָיָה דַּרְכּוֹ שֶׁל זֶה הֶעָנִי לִרְכֹּב עַל הַסּוּס וְעֶבֶד רָץ לְפָנָיו וְהֶעֱנִי וְיָרַד מִנְכָסָיו קוֹנִין לוֹ סוּס לִרְכֹּב עָלָיו וְעֶבֶד לָרוּץ לְפָנָיו שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (דברים טו ח) "דֵּי מַחְסֹרוֹ אֲשֶׁר יֶחְסַר לוֹ". וּמְצֻוֶּה אַתָּה לְהַשְׁלִים חֶסְרוֹנוֹ וְאֵין אַתָּה מְצֻוֶּה לְעַשְׁרוֹ:	**Mishneh Torah, Laws of Gifts to the Poor 7:3** We are commanded to give a poor person according to what he lacks. If he lacks clothes, we should clothe him. If he lacks household utensils, we should purchase them for him. If he is unmarried, we should help him marry. And for an unmarried woman, we should find a husband for her. Even if the personal habit of this poor person was to ride on a horse and to have a servant run before him and then he became impoverished and lost his wealth, we should buy a horse for him to ride and a servant to run before him. [This is implied by Deuteronomy 15:8 which] speaks [of providing him with] "enough to [fill the] lack that he feels." You are commanded to fill his lack, but you are not obligated to enrich him.

- **Maimonides writes, "You are commanded to provide what he lacks, but you are not obligated to make him wealthy." Based on his examples, where do you think he draws the line between meeting someone's needs and enriching**

them? Where would you draw that line?
- **Can you recall a time when someone was especially attentive to your individual needs—whether emotional, practical, social, or otherwise?**

A few laws later, Maimonides writes that "even a poor person who derives his livelihood from charity is obligated to give charity to another person." In an essay written about the building of the Sanctuary, former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdoms Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks ties this law to the deep concern in Jewish law with maintaining every individual's human dignity:

> ***Essays in Ethics: A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible*, Parshat Teruma, "The Labour of Gratitude"**
> The construction of the Sanctuary was fundamentally important because it gave the Israelites the chance to give back to God. Later decisors of Jewish law recognised that giving is an integral part of human dignity when they made the remarkable ruling that even a poor person completely dependent on charity is still obliged to give charity. To be in a situation where you can only receive, not give, is to lack human dignity.

- **What might it look like in practice for someone who depends entirely on others' charity to give charity themselves?**
- **Can you recall a time when you gained more from giving to someone than you would have gained from receiving something from them?**

Further Questions for Discussion

1. Rabbi Sacks writes that the ability to give is a fundamental aspect of human dignity. Based on the sources above, what else does preserving human dignity require?
2. Both the first and second sources set sundown as the deadline for fulfilling an obligation. In the context of justice and social responsibility, what might this suggest about the different meanings of day and night?
3. Based on what you have learned from this portion, does the Torah view charity as inherently valuable, as a necessary response to an imperfect world, or as something in between?

Suggestions for Further Study
If you are interested in seeing further sources on Shoftim, visit the Simchat Torah Challenge Ki Keitzei page, which includes additional resources for continued learning. You can also find sources on Sefaria's Ki Teitzei topic page, which houses a wide variety

of sources. You may also be interested in looking at Sefaria's topic pages on Human Dignity, Tzedakah, and Justice.

The mitzvot explored in this sheet are not the only ones in this week's portion related to concepts of justice and human dignity. If you would like to learn about more, click these links to see the verses and commentary on the prohibition to return a runaway slave to their owner, the commandment to not turn away if you see someone who needs a helping hand, and even a law about the respect due to dead bodies.

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