

Gleaning *is* The Way We Worship God

Parashat Emor

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In this week's Torah portion, Parashat Emor, in the Book of Vayikra (Leviticus), we get the list of all of our major Jewish festivals. We learn about Pesach, Shavuot, Rosh HaShanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot and Shemini Atzeret. It is always fun to read this Torah portion because it also gives us the commandment to count the omer – right while we are in the middle of counting the omer.

Surprisingly, in the middle of this listing of celebrations, we get a mitzvah about tzedakah. It is surprising, because it has seemingly nothing to do with what came before it or after it in the Torah reading.

Also, as we know, tzedakah is not linked to any specific time. We can give tzedakah any time we want to, any day, any hour. Yet, it is situated in these verses that talk about the calendar. Not only that, it seems to be a near exact replication of this teaching from last week's Torah portion.

The puzzling verse reads as follows:

[ויקרא כ"ג:כ"ב](#)

וּבְקִצְרְכֶם אֶת־קִצִּיר אֲרָצְכֶם לֹא־תִכְלֶה פָּאת שְׂדֵךְ בְּקִצְרְךָ וְלִקַּט קִצִּירְךָ לֹא תִלְקַט
לְעַנְי וְלִגֵּר תַּעֲזֹב אֹתָם אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

Leviticus 23:22

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 LORD am your God.

Why is this here? We know that the *mitzvah* of Peah (not reaping the corner of the field), or the *mitzvah* of *leket* (the collecting of stalks of grain that had fallen), are important. It is simply confusing as to why in this Torah portion and why nestled in between the holidays.

Our ancient rabbis in a very early midrash called the Sifra teaches us the following:

ספרא, אמור, פרק יג י"א

[אמר ר' אוורדימס ברבי יוסי, וכי מה ראה הכתוב ליתנה באמצע הרגלים -- פסח ועצרת מכאן, וראש השנה ויום הכפורים מכאן? אלא ללמד שכל מי שהוא מוציא לקט שכחה ופאה ומעשר עני, מעלים עליו כאילו בית המקדש קיים והוא מקריב קרבנותיו לתוכו. וכל מי שאינו מוציא לקט שכחה ופאה ומעשר עני, מעלים עליו כאילו בית המקדש קיים ואינו מקריב קרבנותיו לתוכו.]

Sifra, Emor, Chapter 13 11

R. Avardimos b. R. Yossi said: Why did Scripture see fit to insert this (these mitzvot concerning “peah” and “leket”) in the midst of

the festivals — Pesach and Shavuoth on one side, and Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur on the other? To teach that one who gives leket, shikchah, peah, (three forms of forgotten grain) and the poor tithe — it is accounted to him as if the Temple existed and he offered up his sacrifices therein. And one who does not give it — it is accounted to him as if the Temple existed and he did not offer up his sacrifices therein.

I had always been taught that since the great Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed nearly 2,000 years ago, the way that we replicate its service is through prayer or through shabbat and festival meals.

This Midrash teaches something else. These mitzvot of peah and leket are more than just good things to do – these simple acts are as if we had personally brought a gift to the Temple in Jerusalem. If we fail to, it is as if we had the opportunity to offer gifts in the Temple but did not.

What I find interesting, though, is the type of tzedakah this verse is talking about. It is not the type of intentional tzedakah of planning a charitable gift, seeing what funds you might want to designate, and choosing an organization to support. This is talking about *leket* – “gleaning.” Gleaning is going back and picking up the stalks of grain that had inadvertently fallen out of

our own arms as we carried the harvest's bounty back home. In other words: *leket* is grain we wouldn't have even missed in the first place. Going back for it is considered exceedingly miserly. To the point where the Torah is telling us, the field-owner, that the grains that have fallen over were not even yours to begin with. They actually already belong to the poor.

This is a time when many of us have the ability to actually give *leket* – donate money that we won't miss. I didn't pay for a haircut before Passover, and I won't likely be paying for one on Lag B'Omer when I usually get the next one. I haven't gone out to a coffee shop for a fancy coffee in nearly nine weeks. My gas tank seems to last forever before needing to be filled. Yes, our family is spending more on groceries and utilities, but there are dollars here and there that are the modern equivalent of forgotten sheaves of wheat.

By giving those forgotten dollars to someone who needs food this month, it will be as if you and I brought forth the holiest gift possible to worship God. One of the mistakes that we make when we live Jewishly is to slice and dice and separate our mitzvot. We think that prayer and tzedakah live in separate universes. We mistakenly think that there are ritual mitzvot to worship God, and ethical mitzvot to repair our broken world.

This midrash from Sifra teaches us: don't think that giving tzedakah is something different than worshipping God through prayer. Giving your dropped sheaves of wheat to a person who needs that wheat more than you do is, in fact, the way that we worship God... whether you pray in a synagogue, pray at home, or aren't such a praying sort of person at anytime.