PARASHAS RE'EH

Give and Take

The deadline is rapidly approaching. In a few days, the Shemittah laws will cancel all outstanding loans. You intensify your efforts to collect all the money owed to you before it is too late. A poor knocks on your door. He needs a loan desperately. If you lend him the money you have virtually no chance of ever being repaid. What would you do?

In this week's portion, the Torah tells us that even under such circumstances we are forbidden to harden our hearts and turn away the needy. "Do not begrudge it when you give it to him," the Torah admonishes us. "Rather, do it warmly with an open hand, for this is why Hashem with the ability to give, for there will never cease to be destitute people on the face of the earth."

The questions leap out at us. When the poor man is standing in front of me seeking help, what difference does it make to me that there will always be poor people on the earth? Should the knowledge that there will never be a world without poverty somehow inspire me to be more charitable?

Furthermore, why indeed does Hashem assure us that we will never wipe out poverty? Why doesn't He give us the option of creating a truly equitable society where wealth is distributed fairly to all its members and no one must suffer privation?

The Talmud often relates sharp exchanges between the illustrious Jewish sage Rabbi and the Roman governor Turnus Rufus. On one occasion, Turnus Rufus asked him, "Why should you give charity to the poor? If the Creator wanted the poor to have money, why doesn't he provide for him?"

"It is for our own benefit," Rabbi Akiva replied. "Helping the poor elevates us."

This then is the rationale for the unceasing existence of poverty. The poor play an important role in society, and they must endure the challenge of poverty to fulfill it. For the rest of us, poverty challenges us to use our prosperity for the good of others.

Therefore, when a poor man appears on our doorstep, no matter the circumstances, we must help him. We must recall that there will always be poor people on the earth, that they are not only here because of their own privation but also to give us the opportunity to gain merit, to help us grow spiritually through acts of kindness.

A great sage was walking alongside a river. In the distance, he saw a poor man begging passersby for pennies. Presently, the poor man approached a very wealthy man, whom the sage knew well. The wealthy man reached into his pocket with a great show of magnanimity, pulled out a large wad of bills and handed it to the poor man. The poor man thanked him profusely and hurried off with a huge smile on his face.

The wealthy man continued on his way and saw the great sage coming toward him.

"Good morning," he called out in greeting.

"Good morning," the sage replied. "I saw what you just did. Very commendable. "But tell me, did you remember to thank him?"

The wealthy man was bewildered. "Surely, he meant to ask me if he thanked me?"

"No, I meant exactly what I said," the sage replied. "You have much more to be thankful for than he does. That poor fellow had to swallow his pride to ask you for a handout. Before you know it, all that money you gave him will be gone, and he'll be back to begging on the street. At least, he will manage to fill the hungry bellies of his family for a few days, and that is a good thing. You, however, have gotten yourself a wonderful deal, my friend. You have justified your wealth and shown yourself to be a fine gentleman. And the merit of your good deed will last you forever. Who got the better of this deal my friend? Who should thank whom?"

In our own lives, we are often approached by organizations and individuals seeking our assistance in various charitable endeavors. When these opportunities present themselves, let us remember that they have been sent to us as challenges, that we are being given a chance to attain spiritual growth and merit, that we are being tested. Let us remember that by giving to the poor we are the ones that are most enriched.