

Dear Chavraya,

We live in the tension between the ideal and the real. Ever on the journey toward Messianic time, of swords turned to plowshares, it is a place and time of being that Jews are familiar with. Every Shabbos reminds us of the goal, to bring to be the dawning of the day that is all Shabbos, *Yom shekulo Shabbos*. It has been a week of contrasts, images flickering of ideal and real. It is the sixty-fifth anniversary today of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. The fearsome reminder of human ability to destroy all of Creation cries out for an end to the ultimate sin of nuclear weapons and to war itself. In California, the ideal of equality in love was underscored in a judge's wise ruling. In New York, an effort to build a mosque near to where the World Trade Center stood has brought out the best and the worst, the reality of bigotry and the ideal of harmony among peoples. Seeking to overcome the worst that is within us and among us, we come closer to the ideal of who we can be as human beings.

As issues ebb and flow in the intensity of their pull upon our hearts and minds, our time and resources, a constant insult to the ideal of a just society is the so easily ignored reality of poverty and economic disparity. The chasm between the ideal and the real in the realm of social justice is starkly expressed in the startling contrast between two verses in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Re'eh*. We are told in one verse, *there shall be no needy among you/ki lo yi'hiyeh b'cha evyon*. Just a few verses later we are told, *for the needy will not cease from the earth*. The contradiction is challenging, one that has always frustrated me. I have come to realize that it is a familiar frustration, a sense of unease that disquiets the soul. It reflects and reminds of the same tension that we live with every day between the ideal and the real in a world not yet perfected.

The classical commentators wrestle with the contradiction as we do, finding resolution through human responsibility. We are the means through which God's promise of no needy shall be fulfilled. The very next verse following the promise begins, *rak im shamo'a tishma b'kol Hashem/but only if you hearken earnestly to the voice of God, your God*. The voice of God is in the cry of human beings. To the degree that we listen and respond, so God's promise is fulfilled. In her book that draws its title from this parsha, "There Shall be no Needy," Rabbi Jill Jacobs draws on Ramban from 13<sup>th</sup> century Spain and explains, "Even if one generation succeeds in temporarily eradicating poverty, the possibility remains that poverty will resurface in another generation. Thus the Torah anticipates a perfected world, but it plans for an imperfect one."

That is the world that we live in, striving between the ideal and the real toward fulfillment of God's promise. In the meantime, we are told in the space of Torah that lies between the two verses of ideal and real, *you shall not make your heart unfeeling and not close up your hand to the needy*. As backdrop to the contrasting verses, the Torah offers an ideal economic model in which all debts are to be cancelled in the seventh year. Living in much later time, when there was a more advanced (presumably) economy, the sage Hillel noticed that people with means were no longer willing to make loans as the seventh year drew close. In order to insure the opportunity of those in need to borrow, Hillel sought to retain the ideal while responding to the needs of the real. He created an institution called

*prozbul*, whereby loans reverted to the courts in the seventh year, the lender then repaid by the court. The Mishna says that Hillel instituted *prozbul for the sake of tikkun ha'olam*. Somewhat different from our use of the term as "repair of the world," *Tikkun Olam* in the Talmud is used to refer to enactments made for the "benefit of society." As we respond to God's voice in the cry of those in need in our own society, justice will flow out as a mighty stream into the larger world. To the degree that we come to see the larger world and its peoples as one society, all that we do for the sake of society will indeed be for the repair of the world. Striving to bring the ideal ever closer to fulfillment in a new reality, so may we come to celebrate together the day that is all Shabbos.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor