

## On poverty in the Torah

Parashat Re'eh, Temple Micah 8/19/17. Virginia Spatz (songeveryday@gmail.com)

This week's Torah portion (*Re'eh*, Deut 11:26–16:17) alone offers a convoluted range of ideas:

- Chapter 15 begins with a reminder about *shmitah*, a time of debt release which was to take place every seventh year as a means of helping to equalize wealth;
- In verse 15:4, we are told: “**There shall be no** needy among you...”
- Verse 15:7 begins: “**If, however, there is** a needy person among you...”
- Verse 15:11 says: “For there **will never cease to be** needy ones in your land.”

There is a fair amount of commentary on the apparent paradox of “no needy” and “never ceasing to have needy.” Most of what I found suggests that “no needy” applies to an ideal situation, which would entail if everyone followed all the relevant commandments, while “never cease to be needy” applies to the more likely scenario...given human nature.

Samuel, one of the most prominent teachers in 3<sup>rd</sup> Century Babylon, taught that “never cease to be needy” applies even to the Messianic Era, showing how little will change in overall order at that time. Not all rabbis agreed with Samuel, but his position is widely cited:

There is no difference between this world and the days of the Messiah except [that in the latter there will be no] bondage of foreign powers, as it says:  
For the poor shall never cease out of the land. (B. Talmud Berakhot 34b)

This still doesn't tell us whether to expect – in the present world or in the Messianic Era – a varying group of people in temporarily straightened circumstances or one or more classes of perpetually poor.

To add yet more complexity, we have at least two terms for poverty: “needy – אֶבְיֹן” (already discussed) and “poor – עָנִי” – as in Lechom Oni at the Passover Seder.

My research did not yield clear answers on any difference between “poor” and “needy” or explain whether each condition is understood as temporary or permanent. What I did find, though, was frequent reference to the second part of verse 15:11 –

For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land, which is why I command you:  
**open your hand ( פָּתַח תִּפְתַּח אֶת־יָדְךָ )**  
to the poor and needy kinsman in your land ( לְאָחִיךָ לְעָנִיךָ וְלְאֶבְיֹנְךָ, בְּאֶרְצְךָ )

– and constant reminders of the commandment to “**open your hand – פּוֹתַח אֶת־יָדְךָ**,” in imitation of God (as expressed in Psalm 145:16):

The eyes of all wait for You, and You give them their food in due season  
You open Your hand, and satisfy every living thing with favor.

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West of Rock Creek, where Temple Micah is situated, less than 8% of children live in poverty. Child poverty east of the Anacostia is as high as 67% in Historic Anacostia, with the Air Force base an exception at 6% and the Hillcrest area at 28%; **most neighborhoods east of the river in the District suffer 30-55% child poverty.**  
– per DC Action for Children, based on 2011-15 ACS

# D R A F T: "Geography of Opportunity" Report

Created by 11th & 12th graders at Maret School for "Mapping Inequity in DC" elective

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Social Studies teacher Ayo Heinegg Maywood writes:

The premise of Ohio University Kirwan Institute's concept of the "geography of opportunity" is that segregation or where one lives (geography or place) goes a long way in determining one's access to education, credit, employment, and similar opportunities....

We downloaded the data from the US Census and joined it to shapefiles using an ArcGIS program to create our own GIS maps which visualize quantitative data....

The shading in the map below indicates greater (darker) or less (lighter) access to opportunity, with "opportunity" being an index of access to health, education, employment, transportation, housing, and wealth indicators. (Indicators that represent greater opportunity are entered as positive number while indicators representing less opportunity are entered as negative numbers.)

The circles indicate concentrations of African-Americans, with larger numbers indicating higher concentrations of African Americans and smaller circles indicating smaller concentrations.

**Student Analysis:** "In the late 1800s, Senator Francis Newlands built the suburb of Chevy Chase, which barred Blacks and Jews, and lobbied for creation of Rock Creek Park as a segregationist barrier... Newlands seems to have succeeded in his mission, because even today in 2107, DC remains firmly segregated by Rock Creek Park and Chevy Chase (in Ward 3) remains predominantly white."

Detail is lost in copying a color map in B/W, and what appears below is a DRAFT version.  
The basic overall information is clear, however.

