

# “The Torah takes pity on the finances of Israel”

Parshat Bo  
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An essential legal interpretive principle is derived from a seemingly minor detail in our Torah portion. Describing the feast of Pesach, the Torah instructs the following: “But if the household is too small for a lamb, let him share one with a neighbor who dwells nearby, in proportion to the number of persons: you shall contribute for the lamb according to what each household will eat” (Exodus 12:4). Our sages point out that the command to share the paschal sacrifice with one’s neighbor as a means of ensuring that no portion of lamb would go wasted reflects the Torah’s concern for the financial welfare of the Jewish people. The Talmud plainly teaches, “The Torah takes pity on the finances of Israel” (BT Hullin 49b).

This very idea is also echoed in Leviticus 14:36: “The priest shall order the house cleared before the priest enters to examine the plague, so that nothing in the house may become unclean; after that the priest shall enter to examine the house.” It is understood that emptying out the house of specific items is meant to save them from a process of purification that might ruin them. Certainly, in the case of ceramics where breaking them would become required, and less so, in the case of laundering fabrics. Here too, the Torah displays a concern for the financial affairs of its adherents as they strive to uphold the *mitzvot*.

In his commentary on the Talmud, R. Menachem HaMeiri (1249-1310) states that this principle must guide every *Posek* (Halakhic authority) in adjudicating matters of Jewish law. The Meiri writes, “Whenever a sage is called upon to rule and it is possible for him to rule permissively without causing dissension, relying on a worthy authority, it would not be proper for him to adopt a hyper-pious stance and seek out excess stringencies. Rather, he should care for the financial welfare of Jews, for even the Torah cares for the property of Israel” (commentary on BT Hullin 49b).

Furthermore, for the purpose of halakhic adjudication, financial loss and/or wellbeing is defined subjectively, following the needs of each and every individual. In fact, in the foreword to *Torat Chatat*, R. Moses Isserles (1530-1573) warns his readers not to be confused by his contradictory rulings. R. Isserles explains that “sometimes I will write to be lenient for a serious monetary loss or a poor man concerning an important item, or for the honor of Shabbat.”

*Torah Shleimah* (vol. 9, p. 90, note 56) cites an interpretation by R. Avraham Menachem HaKohen Rappaport in *Minchah Belulah* which pushes this idea to an extreme. The *Mincha Belulah* notes that Pharaoh is warned to clear his fields from cattle and all that was in the field ahead of the plague of hail. The Torah explicitly explains that “for every man and beast that shall be found in the field, and shall not be brought home, the hail shall come down upon them, and they shall die” (Exodus 9:19). The *Mincha Belulah* takes this as a sign that the Torah is not only concerned for the financial welfare of Israel, but that the Torah also takes pity on the finances of the nations of the world. Here, we can certainly add that the Torah seems to even take pity on the very enemies of Israel.

The Torah’s concern for the financial welfare of Israel can serve to inspire our actions at these times of economic hardship. The *Mincha Belulah*’s surprising interpretation is an additional invitation to expand our circles of giving (from Jewish and local to universal and global). With the holiday of Purim less than a month away, let us seize the opportunity to give generously through *mishloach manot* and *matanot la’evyonim* (gifts to the poor) to help alleviate both the emotional as well as economic hardship encountered by so many in the Jewish community and society at large. And May the Holy One’s compassion be shown to us as we demonstrate care and concern with our own deeds and actions.