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DIGNITY AND CHARITY

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Devarim 15:7-8
כִּי־יִהְיֶה בְךָ אֶבְיוֹן
מֵאַחַד אַחֶיךָ בְּאַחַד שְׁעָרֶיךָ בְּאַרְצְךָ אֲשֶׁר־ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ נֹתֵן לָךְ
לֹא תְאַמֵּץ אֶת־לְבָבְךָ וְלֹא תִקְפֹּץ אֶת־יָדְךָ
מֵאָחִיךָ הָאֶבְיוֹן׃
כִּי־פָתֹחַ תִּפְתַּח אֶת־יָדְךָ לוֹ
וְהַעֲבֵט תַּעֲבִיטֶנּוּ
דֵּי מַחְסֹרוֹ אֲשֶׁר יֶחְסַר לוֹ׃
When there is among you an indigent
from one of your brothers in one of your gates in your land which Hashem your G-d is giving you
you must not fortify your heart and you must not close up your hand
from your brother the indigent
Rather you must surely open your hand to him
v'ha'aveit ta'avitenu (perhaps: "and you must surely consider his collateral sufficient to lend him")
sufficient for his lack which is lacking to him

In Rabbinic reading, the internally redundant phrase "*his lack which is lacking <u>to him</u>*" opens the door to subjective lacks, and concomitantly, to grave concerns about unfairness, inequality, and abuse. Does Judaism endorse "From each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs?" How do we authenticate subjective lacks? Can we justify allocating resources to enable one person's need for luxury while another remains lower middle class?

Obviously there are limits. Each human being, of whatever economic status, has unique physical needs and tastes, and no community can provide for them all. Responsible policymakers must take public perception into account. But the underlying point is that the halakhic obligation of halakhic charity is aimed at preserving dignified life. Enabling dignity sometimes requires treating everyone alike, which is the best-case argument for school uniforms; and sometimes involves making sure that everyone's individuality is recognized and accounted for, for example buying a homeless man on the street his preferred brand of deodorant rather than the cheapest generic.

Talmud Ketubot 67b presents an extended pointillist meditation on this issue. By 'pointillist,' I mean that it presents halakhic and aggadic snapshots in a single framework without telling us how they relate to each other. There is no *stam*/narrator telling us that this story contradicts or illustrates X exegetical claim or Y story. By 'meditation,' I mean that that the goal is an experience, not an outcome.

My goal in this devar Torah is to provide clues and leading questions that convey and facilitate that experience. I'll present each of the sugya's five independent elements independently, and leave it to you to put it all together.

Here is the first, a beraita in the form of *midrash halakhah*.
An orphan who comes to get married –
they rent him a house, prepare his bed and all his household goods, and afterward they marry a woman to him.
as Scripture says: *sufficient for his lack which is lacking for him*:
sufficient for his lack = house; *which is lacking*= bed and table; *for him*= wife.
Scripture similarly says: *I will make for him a helpmate equal to him*.

This orphan under discussion here is self-supporting, but nonetheless is considered indigent because he is not economically capable of sustaining (or perhaps of obtaining) married life. You can lack things that you haven't yet had, and whose lack you never previously felt. Yesterday you were a rock and an island, entire unto yourself; today others have to exercise their generosity to provide for you. Awareness of being single generates a new lack, even though nothing objective has changed. Because the newly lacking may not understand their own needs, proper generosity requires imagination

Here is the second beraita, also in the form of *midrash Halakahah*.

sufficient for his lack which is lacking to him –
you are commanded to sustain him, but you are not commanded to make him wealthy;
which is lacking to him –
even a horse to ride on and a servant to run before him.
They said about Hillel the Elder
that he acquired for a poor son of a good family a horse to ride on and a servant to run before him;
once – he did not find a servant to run before him, so he ran before him for three *mil*.

This text revels in paradox. Aren't horses and servants the accoutrements of wealth? The story about Hillel suggests that wealth is not only subjective, but also relative to class. Some characters in Jane Austen novels would starve before they gave up their horse, because having a horse, or a footman, maintains their social status. Hillel was impoverished when young, and apparently never felt the need to acquire class status along with wealth. He remained comfortable as a footman, maybe even more so than as a footman's employer. But he understood what having a footman meant to others who had experienced the reverse financial trajectory.

The third unit begins with a narrative beraita, which then generates Amoraic commentary.

A story about the people of the Upper Galilee
who acquired for a poor son of a good family from Tzippori a *litra* of meat daily.
The Talmud comments:
"a litra of meat" – what's special about that?
A *litra* of bird meat (Rashi: which was very expensive).
If you want I will say:
For a *litra* (Rashi: of coins), he purchased meat.
Rav Ashi said:
It was a small village, and every day, they would kill one of their animals for his sake (Rashi: even though the market was too small to handle selling the rest of the meat before it spoiled.)

The anonymous interpretations raise questions of fairness and justice; why should this pauper be fed at such high cost? But Rav Ashi raises the stakes even further. Supporting this one man meant wasting a communal resource, and possibly destroying the local market for meat by creating an artificial glut. Was this behavior obligatory, or even praiseworthy? Might there be behaviors that are praiseworthy done once, even though they would be ruinous if imitated?

A man came before Rabbi Nechmyah:
He said to him: What do you generally make a meal of?
He replied: Fat meat and aged wine.
Would you like to eat lentils with me?
He ate lentils with him, and died.
He said: Woe unto this one whom Nechemyah killed!
(The Talmud comments:)
Just the opposite: He should have said: Woe to Nechemyah who killed this one!
No, because he should not have made himself so finicky.

We are not told what Rabbi Nechemyah ordinarily ate, nor what he would have served had the man been habituated to lentils. For that matter, we don't even know that the man was poor, only that he seems to have been hungry. The story echoes that of Marta daughter of Boethius, who dies when the Destruction exposes her to aspects of life her wealth had sheltered her from. But does it also echo the meal Yaakov made for Esav? That might explain why the Talmud feels compelled to defend Rav Nechemyah, even though he appears to be blaming the victim.

A man came before Rava:
He said to him:
What do you generally make a meal of?
He replied:
Fatted chicken and aged wine.
He said to him:
Are you not concerned for the (economic) stress on the community?
He replied:
What, do I eat of theirs?! I eat of the Merciful's!
as we learned in a beraita:
The eyes of all look expectantly to You, and You give them their food in its time
It does not say 'their time' but rather "its time"
This teaches that the Holy Blessed One give each one its sustenance in its time.
Meanwhile, Rava's sister, whom he had not seen for thirteen years, came,
and she brought him fatted chicken and aged wine.
He said:
I concede to you. Arise and eat!

Is charity an act of altruism, X giving his/her stuff to Y? Or is it an act of redistribution, mitigating an unjustified inequality and ensuring that G-d's resources are properly used? Does Rava's interlocutor really know the *beraita* he seems to be presented as quoting? By juxtaposing these stories, is the Talmud suggesting that had R. Nechemyah waited to begin his meal, much fancier fare would have turned up? That the people of Upper Galilee were not really making an economic sacrifice?

Perhaps the unhappy death of Rabbi Nechemyah's companion, and the miraculously good food fortune of Rava's companion, together constitute an aggadic critique of the halakhic claim that "you are not commanded to make him wealthy." I prefer to suggest that the man (Eliyahu haNavi?) met Rava's sister on her way, and knew what she was bringing and when. The dialogue exposed Rava's unwillingness to share even when sharing would cost him nothing but the social distinction between them. That may be an underlying lesson – that we have the right to prioritize ourselves, and the formerly rich have a legitimate interest in preserving their social status, but we must never deny someone else **for the sake** of preserving our superiority over them.