



FROM THE SOURCES: TEXTS ON JEWISH SOCIAL JUSTICE

Shavuot: From Charity and Dependency to Dignity and Sustainability

How to Use this Publication

From the Sources is designed to facilitate holiday text study around issues of social justice. We invite you to engage in the texts and use them in your community to teach and take action. Use *From the Sources* to:

- **Learn with others.** Read through this text study together with a friend or a group of friends and discuss the issues it raises.
- **Enrich your own learning.** This resource aims to inspire thought-provoking and challenging perspectives on the holiday texts.
- **Teach.** Invite others to share in this learning. Use it as the basis for a *dvar Torah* or to motivate action in support of advocacy or *zedakah* initiatives in your school, synagogue or Hillel.

Introduction

The Torah situates Shavuot in the agricultural calendar, 50 days after the first sheaf of grain is harvested. The fiftieth day, Shavuot, is a day of celebration, a “sacred occasion” (Leviticus 23:21). In describing this celebration of the harvest, the Torah reminds the reader:

וּבְקַצְרְכֶם אֶת קְצִיר אֲרָצְכֶם לֹא תִכְלֶה פְּאֵת שְׂדֶךְ בְּקַצְרְךָ וְלֶקֶט קְצִירְךָ לֹא תִלְקֹט לְעַנִּי וְלִגֵּר
תַּעֲזֹב אֹתָם אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger (Leviticus 23:22).

Just a few chapters earlier, in Leviticus 19, the Torah lays out this same set of laws, designating specific agricultural products that must be left for the poor: *pe'ah*, the corners of the field; *leket*, the fallen stalks; and *shich'chah*, the forgotten stalks. That the Torah repeats these laws here establishes a connection, unique among the holidays, between Shavuot and our obligation to feed the poor and the hungry.

The biblical reading assigned to Shavuot, the Book of Ruth, further solidifies this connection: The story of Ruth is the only instance in the Bible in which the commandment of *leket* is practiced. Boaz, a wealthy Israelite landowner, allows Ruth, a landless foreigner, to follow his farmhands as they harvest his fields so she can gather the stalks that they drop. Boaz's generosity saves Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi from starvation. Beneath this surface meaning of the text, however, there is a more ambiguous dimension to Ruth and Boaz's interaction—her survival is predicated on his generosity; she becomes dependent on his charity.

In many parts of the world, Ruth's story is uncomfortably familiar; many rural people lack access to arable land and remain vulnerable to hunger because they are unable to participate directly in the harvest. In response, governments and international institutions have developed systems of food aid that echo the mandates of *pe'ah*, *leket* and *shich'chah*. But

food aid can undercut the well-being of the very people it is intended to help. Shavuot and its relationship to the Book of Ruth provide a timely opportunity to examine the complex relationships among hunger, hunger alleviation and dependence.



<p>Ruth 2:2 Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, “I would like to go to the fields and glean among the ears of grain, behind someone who may show me kindness.”</p>	<p>רות ב:ב וַתֹּאמֶר רוּת הַמּוֹאֲבִיָּה אֶל נְעֻמִי אֵלֶיךָ נָא הַשָּׂדֶה וְאֶלְקָטָה בַשִּׁבֻלִים אַחַר אִשָּׁר אֶמְצָא חַן בְּעֵינָיו וַתֹּאמֶר לָהּ לְכִי בְתִי:</p>
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- Who are the players in this text—seen and unseen? What power dynamics are at play among them?
- Why would Ruth require “someone who may show [her] kindness”?
- Mapping this story onto the contemporary landscape of hunger, who might the characters in the Book of Ruth represent today?

<p>Ruth 3:1 Naomi, her mother-in-law, said to her, “Daughter, I must seek a home for you, where you may be happy.”</p>	<p>רות ג:א וַתֹּאמֶר לָהּ נְעֻמִי חֲמוּתָהּ בְּתִי הֲלֹא אֶבְקֹשׁ לָךְ מְנוּחַ אִשָּׁר יִיטֵב לָךְ:</p>
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- Why do you think that Naomi sought a home for Ruth? What does this suggest about Ruth’s position?
- How does this link to the harvest and the systems of *pe’ah*, *leket* and *shich’chah*?



<p>Sforno on Leviticus 19:9-10 (the first source of the laws of <i>pe’ah</i>, <i>leket</i> and <i>shich’chah</i>) ... After having accepted God, it is appropriate for us to walk in God’s ways, to practice righteousness and justice. Among the types of righteousness are <i>leket</i>, <i>shich’chah</i> and <i>pe’ah</i> that are discussed here. And this is what is meant by, “I, Adonai, am your God.” As if to say, “And since I am your God, and all of My ways are kind and true, it is appropriate for you to observe these types of righteousness that are pleasing before Me.”</p>	<p>ספורנו ויקרא יט:ט-י ביאר שאחר שקבלנו אותנו לאלהים ראוי לנו ללכת בדרכיו, לעשות צדקה ומשפט, וממיני הצדקה הם לקט שכחה ופאה האמורים בענין, וזה ביאר באמרו אני ה' אלהיכם, כלומר: ומכיוון שאני אלהיכם, וכל ארחותי חסד ואמת, ראוי לכם לשמור מיני הצדקה אלה הרצויים לפני.</p>
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- How might *pe’ah* be a way to practice “righteousness and justice”? What might be its limitations?

The Torah established the laws of *pe’ah*, *leket* and *shich’chah* to require those with access to food resources to share them with those who are poor and hungry. Elements of these laws and their motivation are mirrored in today’s food aid system. As part of its foreign assistance program, the U.S. government gives food to scores of countries in the Global South. U.S. food aid programs have sent over 106 million metric tons of food to over 100 countries over the past 50 years. In 2003, the U.S.’s Food for Peace program donated food produced in the U.S. to over 133 million people.¹ These programs involve collecting surplus U.S. agricultural products, shipping them overseas in U.S. ships and either using the food to feed people or, more often, selling it to raise funds for development programs.

<p>Jonathan Dworken, Acting Director, USAID’s Office of Food for Peace, USDA and USAID International Food Aid Conference VIII, 2006, http://www.fsa.usda.gov/Internet/FSA_File/jonathan_dworken.pdf. [F]ood aid can be very effective when provided early in a crisis. In southern Africa this year, early delivery of large amounts of food aid prevented people from becoming severely malnourished, which makes them more likely to die. It also enabled families to survive the crisis without having to resort to desperate measures of selling animals and farm tools, or eating the</p>
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¹ Statistics available at http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/humanitarian_assistance/ffp/history.html.

seeds they would plant. These things drive families into destitution, and make them more vulnerable next time there are poor rains. Food aid can save livelihoods, as well as lives... What is great about food aid is that when you go abroad and actually see the food being given to hungry people you witness a tangible link between Americans who grow, process, and transport the food, and the people who need it to survive and prosper.

Colin Powell, former Secretary of State, *Food for Peace, 1954-2004, Bringing Hope to the Hungry*, United States Agency for International Development, http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/humanitarian_assistance/ffp/50th/.

U.S. food has made a huge difference to so many people, assisting in times of crisis and showing that America's generosity goes beyond all political boundaries. Hunger knows no nationality, and we Americans continue to send our wheat, corn, and other foods wherever they are needed to save lives.

Despite these clear declarations of the importance and effectiveness of U.S. food aid, some organizations have strongly criticized the U.S. system. Food aid that is shipped to countries in the Global South and then distributed freely or sold cheaply on local markets can push local prices down, impacting the livelihoods of local farmers. In 2007, the humanitarian aid organization CARE refused \$45 million in U.S. funding due to its objections to the current food aid system. CARE argued that current U.S. food policies make it "difficult to maximize the cost-effectiveness and minimize the unintended harmful consequences of food aid."² U.S. food aid programs seek to feed people while also expanding markets for U.S. agricultural surpluses and supporting shipping contractors, objectives that often run counter to the fundamental goal of addressing global hunger.

White Paper on Food Aid Policy, CARE, 2006,

http://www.care.org/newsroom/publications/whitepapers/food_aid_whitepaper.pdf.

Recent analysis has shown that under some circumstances food aid can harm local production and markets, undermining long-term food security. Studies have shown that food aid is often not the most efficient use of resources for alleviating poverty... CARE's central focus is on helping poor and vulnerable people overcome food insecurity and vulnerability. Our objectives are to save lives, protect livelihoods, reduce vulnerability and address underlying causes of poverty.

U.S. Food Aid: Time to Get It Right, *Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy*, 2005,

<http://www.tradeobservatory.org/library.cfm?RefID=73512>.

In the name of the poor overseas, very large sums of money are now paid to prop up U.S. shipping firms and to buy food at higher than market prices from U.S. based food processors and other agribusinesses. Meanwhile, U.S. private voluntary organizations (PVOs) generate millions of dollars of revenue for their operating costs and for development aid by selling U.S. commodities in local markets in developing countries... A food aid program that makes a real contribution to development must have a two-fold objective: to meet emergency needs, preventing deaths today, and to help build sustainable and self reliant food systems across the world for tomorrow.

- Who are the stakeholders in U.S. food aid policy? What are some of the benefits and costs of the current food aid system for each of these stakeholders?
- What might be some changes to the current system that would both meet emergency needs today and build sustainable food systems for the future? What are some difficulties in implementing these changes?
- How do the story of Ruth and the system of *pe'ah*, *leket* and *shich'chah* inform this discussion?



Leviticus 25:35

And if your kinsman becomes poor and falters with you, you should strengthen him; whether he is a stranger or a settler he should live with you.

ויקרא כה:לה

וכי ימוך אחיך ומטה ידו עמך והחזקת בו גר ותושב וחי עמך :

² CARE, White Paper on Food Aid Policy, 2006.

<p>Rashi on Leviticus 25:35</p> <p>You should strengthen him: Don't allow him to descend and to fall because it will be difficult to lift him up. Rather, strengthen him from the moment that he falters. To what is this similar? To a load on a donkey. While it is still on the donkey, one person can grab it and hold it up, but once it falls to the ground even five people won't be able to raise it up.</p>	<p>רש"י ויקרא כה:לה והחזקת בו</p> <p>אל תניחהו שירד ויפול ויהיה קשה להקימו, אלא חזקהו משעת מוטת היד. למה זה דומה, למשאוי שעל החמור, עודהו על החמור אחד תופס בו ומעמידו, נפל לארץ, חמשה אין מעמידין אותו:</p>
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- What is the approach to hunger and poverty advocated by these texts?
- How does this approach compare to the system of *pe'ah*, *leket* and *shich'chah* as practiced in the Book of Ruth?
- How would you reconcile the differences?
- In what ways are these tensions reflected in U.S. food aid policy?

Conclusion

The systems of *pe'ah*, *leket* and *shich'chah* described in Leviticus and put into practice in the Book of Ruth offer a way to redistribute resources from those with land to those without it. Today's U.S. food aid system mirrors such an approach, with both advantages and disadvantages for those who face hunger. Shipping leftover agricultural surpluses overseas can alleviate hunger in the short term, but it may do so at the expense of undermining people's capacity to provide for their own sustenance over the long term. The complexities of the food aid system reflect and magnify some of the problems depicted in the Book of Ruth.

Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator who helped develop liberation theology, stated that:

True generosity consists precisely in fighting to destroy the causes which nourish false charity. False charity constrains the fearful and subdued, the "rejects of life," to extend their trembling hands. True generosity lies in striving so these hands—whether of individuals or entire people—need be extended less and less in supplication, so that more and more they become human hands which work and, working, transform the world (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 1970, p. 45).

We encourage you to use Shavuot as a time to think about the distribution of resources and strive toward a world in which true generosity empowers people to create long-term and sustainable solutions to hunger.

To access a supplementary resource which provides in-depth analysis on the U.S. food aid system, please visit www.ajws.org/fts. To get involved with AJWS's efforts to reform U.S. food aid policy, please visit www.ajws.org/foodaidaction.

For more information on this and other educational resources from AJWS, please contact us at education@ajws.org. To subscribe to this resource, visit www.ajws.org/fts.

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