



the rabbinic call for human rights

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A NATIONAL CALL for MORAL REVIVAL

SOMEBODY'S HURTING OUR PEOPLE:
POVERTY OVERWHELMINGLY TARGETS THE MOST VULNERABLE—
CHILDREN, WOMEN, LGBTQIA+, AND PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Rabbi Ruhi Sophia Motzkin Rubenstein with thanks to Dr. Ana-Maurine Lara

Often read romantically, the book of Ruth is also the story of poverty-stricken widows and how a community responds to them. These texts offer a conversation about the nature of poverty and its causes and effects as a background and response to Ruth.

I. THE CORNERS OF THE FIELDS: STRUCTURAL POVERTY, STRUCTURAL CORRECTIVES

A. Deuteronomy 24:19

When you reap the harvest in your field and overlook a sheaf in the field, do not turn back to get it; it shall go to the foreign-born, the fatherless, and the widow—in order that Hashem your God may bless you in all your undertakings.

כִּי תִקְצֹר קִצִּירְךָ בְּשָׂדֶךָ וְשָׁכַחְתָּ עֹמֶר
בְּשָׂדֶךָ, לֹא תָשׁוּב לְקַחְתּוֹ—לְגֵר לִיתּוֹם
וְלְאִלְמָנָה יִהְיֶה, לְמַעַן יְבָרְכֶךָ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ
בְּכָל מַעֲשֵׂה יָדֶיךָ.

B. Chizkuni (13th-century, France) on Deuteronomy 27:19

[Explaining the protections for] “the foreign-born, fatherless, or widow;” they do not have influence or protectors who will protest their having been maltreated to the authorities.

”גֵר יתום ואלמנה” אין להם כח ועזר
לפרסם הדבר לערער על הדיין

The Bible frequently refers to the “foreign-born, fatherless and widow” together. If we follow Chizkuni’s interpretation, who are the most vulnerable people in our society today? What is the role of influence and influencers in shaping our economy today?

C. Vayikra Rabbah 27:1

When Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi went to Rome, he saw marble columns covered in tapestries, that they would not crack in the heat or freeze in the cold, and he saw a poor person with [only] a reed mat to lie on and a reed mat to cover himself...

רַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן לֵוִי כִּי סָלִיק לְרוֹמֵי רָאָה שָׁם
עַמּוּדִים שֶׁל שֵׁשׁ מְכַסִּים בְּטִיפְטִיאוֹת,
בְּשָׂרֵב שֶׁלֹּא יִפְקְעוּ וּבִצְנָה שֶׁלֹּא יִקְרָשׁוּ, רָאָה
שָׁם עֲנִי אֶחָד וּמְחַצְלֵת קִנִּים תַּחְתּוֹ
וּמְחַצְלֵת קִנִּים עַל גַּבּוֹ...

What does this anecdote tell us about poverty?

II. RUTH: A CASE STUDY

Ruth Chapter 2

⁸ Boaz said to Ruth, "Listen to me, daughter. Don't go to glean in another field. Don't go elsewhere, but stay here close to my girls. ⁹ Keep your eyes on the field they are reaping, and follow them. I have ordered the men not to molest you. And when you are thirsty, go to the jars and drink some of [the water] that the men have drawn."¹⁰ She prostrated herself with her face to the ground, and said to him, "Why are you so kind as to single me out, when I am a foreigner?"

¹¹ Boaz said in reply, "I have been told of all that you did for your mother-in-law after the death of your husband, how you left your father and mother and the land of your birth and came to a people you had not known before.

¹² May the ETERNAL reward your deeds. May you have a full recompense from the ETERNAL, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have sought refuge!"

(ח) וַיֹּאמֶר בְּעֹז אֶל רוּת הַלּוֹא שְׁמַעְתְּ בְּתִי אֶל תֵּלְכִי לְלֶקֶט בְּשָׂדֵה אַחֵר וְגַם לֹא תֵעָבְרִי מִזֶּה וְכֹה תִדְבְּקִין עִם נְעָרָתַי :

(ט) עֵינֶיךָ בְּשָׂדֵה אֲשֶׁר יִקְצְרוּן וְהִלַּכְתְּ אַחֲרֵיהֶן הַלּוֹא צֹוִיתִי אֶת הַנְּעָרִים לְבִלְתִּי נִגְעֶךָ וְצָמְתָּ וְהִלַּכְתְּ אֶל הַפְּלִים וְשָׁתִית מֵאֲשֶׁר יִשְׁאַבוּן הַנְּעָרִים :

(י) וַתִּפֹּל עַל פְּנֵיהָ וַתִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶה אֶרְצָה וַתֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהֵי מְדוּעָה מִצָּאִתִּי חַן בְּעֵינֶיךָ לְהַפְרִינִי וְאֵנְכִי נִכְרִיָּה : (יא) וַיַּעַן בְּעֹז וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ הֲגֵד לִי כָל אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂית אֶת חֲמוּתְךָ אַחֲרֵי מוֹת אִישֶׁךָ וַתַּעֲזָבִי אָבִיךָ וְאִמֶּךָ וְאֶרֶץ מוֹלְדְּתְךָ וַתֵּלְכִי אֶל עַם אֲשֶׁר לֹא יָדַעְתָּ תְּמוּל שְׁלֹשׁוֹם :

(יב) יְשָׁלֵם ה' פְּעֻלְךָ וַתְּהִי מְשֻׁכְּרֶתָּ שְׁלָמָה מֵעַם ה' אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר בָּאת לְחַסוֹת תַּחַת כְּנָפָיו :

Notice Ruth is a Moabite (foreigner), a woman, and poverty-stricken. How do those three characteristics intersect with regards to her vulnerability?

Boaz takes an interest in Ruth. What does her surprise indicate about the culture? What are the implied consequences had he not stepped in?

How does this text reflect the consequences of poverty for women and minorities in our own culture?

III. CONTEMPORARY VOICES

"Kitchenette building"

BY GWENDOLYN BROOKS

(June 7, 1917–December 3, 2000)

We are things of dry hours and the involuntary plan,
Grayed in, and gray. "Dream" makes a giddy sound,
not strong

Like "rent," "feeding a wife," "satisfying a man."

But could a dream send up through onion fumes
Its white and violet, fight with fried potatoes
And yesterday's garbage ripening in the hall,
Flutter, or sing an aria down these rooms

Even if we were willing to let it in,
Had time to warm it, keep it very clean,
Anticipate a message, let it begin?

We wonder. But not well! not for a minute!
Since Number Five is out of the bathroom now,
We think of lukewarm water, hope to get in it.

Brooks was the first African-American to receive the Pulitzer Prize.

"For the Record"

BY RABBI RUHI SM RUBENSTEIN

Your sages will say the story is all about my kindness. Perhaps it serves them to think that kindness is all it takes for an empty-handed Moabite woman to navigate Bethlehem. That your grief and weight were light enough for kindness alone to brace you and haul you on the long road. It was not kindness that straightened my back in that field, that moved one foot in front of the other to approach Boaz as he slept. Of course there was love but they forget how much was hunger and obligation and survival. I had promised to mother you, bereft mother (and myself) and what else is a mother to do

They'll name the lineage that will flow from me to the anointed king - the forever hope of a people. They'll call it a reward for my kindness. I'll steel my shoulders And find some room to settle that weight.

These two poems offer contemporary midrashim on the romance (and lack thereof) of poverty. In what ways is the experience of poverty made invisible or distorted by the popular discourse around poverty and the poor? How might we raise up the voices of those actually experiencing poverty?