+shammai0529+

Shavuot, the Torah, and a stolen bike:

A lesson especially for this trying time

Shammai Engelmayer

We are celebrating Shavuot today (Friday, May 29) and tomorrow, the “time of the giving of our Torah,” according to tradition. In the Torah, Shavuot is referred to as the Harvest Festivals and the Festival of First Fruits. By any name, this Shavuot—a festival which way too many Jews ignore—may be the most important in many long years.

First, though, some background is needed.

Nearly 40 million people throughout the United States have lost their jobs in the last nine weeks, and the unemployment rate is near 15 percent—and is likely to climb as high as 20 percent in the coming months. In New Jersey, the rate is 15.3 percent, and in New York in April it is 14.5 percent.

People without jobs find it difficult to buy life’s basic necessities. Hardest hit are those people with household incomes of $40,000 or less, the overwhelming majority of whom are likely not to have “rainy day” funds of any kind to keep them going until things take a turn for the better. According to Federal Reserve statistics, nearly 40 percent of such workers lost their jobs through the beginning of April, compared with 13 percent of people in households earning $100,000 or more.

The Fed also estimates that many people in households earning over $40,000 will run out of money in the next month or so. At the end of 2019, when the U.S. economy was considered robust and unemployment was at a near-record low, the Fed’s annual Report on the Economic Well-Being of U.S. Households found that overall, 30 percent of adults “said they could not cover three months of expenses using their savings or borrowing in the case of a job loss.” As the Fed noted earlier this month. “they were not prepared for the current financial challenges.”

Simply stated, there are a lot more poor people in our immediate area and throughout the country than there were just a few months ago. Everything Shavuot stands for speaks to the obligation this imposes on us—an obligation that is perhaps best illustrated by an incident the comedian and actor Ben Stiller recalled involving his recently deceased father, the comedian and actor Jerry Stiller.

“I had my bike stolen when I was about 11 or 12 years old,” Ben Stiller recounted on The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon. The theft occurred in Riverside Park on Manhattan’s Upper West Side. Another young boy unknown to Stiller asked if he could ride the bike. Stiller said yes. The boy never returned.

When Ben told his father what had happened, Jerry Stiller immediately took his son to a bike store on Amsterdam Avenue to buy him a new one. While in the store, though, the young thief flew by on the stolen bike.

The two Stillers ran several blocks after the boy and the bike, a chase that ended in the lower level of a walkup on West 86th Street. Stiller told Ben to “wait here,” while he went down to the lower level to confront the boy and retrieve the bike.

“Ten minutes go by, and he comes out and he doesn’t have the bike,” Ben Stiller said. “I said, ‘What’s going on?’ [My dad] goes, ‘We’re going to let him keep the bike. He needs it. I’ll go get you another one.’

“He let the kid keep the bike because he felt bad.”

Some people may think that was a stupid thing to do, but it actually was a very Jewish thing to do. No one other than Ben’s late father and the boy who took Ben’s bike knows what went on between them, but the words “he needs it” provide a poignant clue. For whatever reason, Stiller realized the boy needed the bike more than his son did, and so he gave it to him as a present. In the words of the Psalmist, “Let not the downtrodden turn away disappointed; let the poor and needy praise Your name.” (See Psalms 74:21.) Stiller made certain the young boy did not go away disappointed. In the words of Maimonides, the Rambam, “No joy is greater and more glorious than the joy of gladdening the hearts of the poor….” (See his Mishneh Torah, Scroll of Esther and Hanukkah 2:17.)

The Torah is filled with concern for the poor and our obligation to help those in need, as discussed here in a column last December, but it is even more relevant now. The Torah’s concern is especially emphasized when fields are harvested and first fruits are gathered, meaning around Shavuot and also at the end of the harvest year on Sukkot. Because the best way to commemorate the giving of the Law is to study that law, let us do some studying.

First up is Leviticus 19:16: “Do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor.” This has wide ramifications, as often mentioned here. In essence, it requires us to be proactive when someone else is in trouble of any kind, including if someone needs life’s basic necessities.

Then we have two verses in Leviticus chapter 19: We are told in verse 18 “to love your neighbor as yourself,” and in verse 34 we’re told to “love the stranger as if he [or she] was yourself.” It follows that one way to show that love is to see that no one suffers.

When it comes specifically to the needs of the poor, we have these verses in Deuteronomy 15:

“There shall be no needy among you…if only you heed the Lord your God and take care to keep all this Instruction that I enjoin upon you this day [put simply, if you do what I am about to tell you to do]….Do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kinsman. Rather, you must open your hand and lend him sufficient for whatever he needs….Give to him readily and have no regrets when you do so, for…there will never cease to be needy ones in your land, which is why I command you: open your hand to the poor and needy kinsman in your land.”

Beyond the Torah, there are the words of the prophets and later of the Sages of Blessed Memory, so many of whom emphasized our responsibility to those in need. The sages, in fact, warned that dire consequences can result from ignoring the hungry. For example, the Babylonian Talmud tractate Taanit 21a offers an insightful, albeit graphic, discussion between Rabbi Nachum of Gimzo, a sage who was famed for his righteousness, and his students. He was bedridden, having become blind and lame, and his body was covered in boils. His students could not understand why so righteous a person would be forced to suffer so. “I brought it upon myself,” he said to them, explaining that on one occasion he was not fast enough to offer food to someone needing it. Each of his afflictions, he explained, corresponded to his unhurried actions at that time.

The Sages also made it clear that when the Torah tells us to walk in God’s ways, then, “Just as He is compassionate and merciful, so too should you be compassionate and merciful.” It follows that just as God clothes the naked and feeds the poor, so must we clothe the naked and feed the poor.

Then we get to the various versions of the law codes, which all say the same thing.

Today and tomorrow, study what the Torah—written and oral—has to say about our obligations to the poor, and when the festival is over, plan ways to help the growing poor in our area and elsewhere—Jew or non-Jew, it does not matter (see BT Gittin 61a)—to meet their needs until they too can stand on their own feet.

“One is commanded to give to a poor person according to what he lacks,” states the Rambam. “If he has no clothes, they clothe him. If he has no utensils for a house, they buy [them] for him…, as it is said [in Deuteronomy 15:8] ‘Sufficient for whatever he needs.’ You are commanded to fill whatever he lacks…. (See his MT Gifts for the Poor 7:3)

We may not be able to supply all their needs, especially if we ourselves are hurting, and we do not have to. To again quote Rambam, “If a poor person comes and asks for what is sufficient to fill his needs and one does not have the means to provide it for him, one gives according to his means.”

Think of an appropriate charity, even one to which you have already given, and give again—and honor Shavuot and the Torah on which it was given.

Chag Sameach and Shabbat Shalom.