

May 16, 1976

Jews Racists ?

Aid given equally to Jews and non-Jews

On Law Day several weeks ago, one writer expressed the thought that our American legal system is protective of the rich but not adequately protective of the poor. On that very day in all the synagogues of the world the nineteenth chapter of Leviticus was read. It is, indeed, one of the Bible's greatest. And I could not help but reflect how unusual was the legislation it promulgated, especially for the benefit of the under-privileged.

The owners of fields during the harvest were ordered to leave the grain in one corner uncut so that the poor might come and take it. This became known as the law of "Pe-ah" — the law of the corner. In a slightly different form it was also applicable to orchards. And while the Bible did not specify how much was to be left for the poor, the rabbis established a standard of about two per cent.

Certainly this is a law for the benefit of the poor. And students of the Bible have admired it for thousands of years. However, there is much more to the verse than a first glance reveals.

Owners of fields are expected to make other gifts — to the priests, to the Levites, to the Temple. Yet there is a fundamental difference between these gifts and the gift to the poor which is involved in the law of "Pe-ah," the law described in the magnificent nineteenth chapter. All the other gifts were to be *given*. The owner could select those priests or Levites whom he wanted to favor. And he could have the satisfaction of being their generous benefactor.

If his ego required that gratification, it was available to him. Not so, however, with "Pe-ah." The grain in the corner was to be *left* there — uncut. It was available to whichever poor man came along, on a first-come, first-serve basis. And the owner was not the donor. It was taken by the poor as their own. The owner was

not a benefactor. Indeed, he was prohibited from harvesting the grain in the corner for the benefit of any of his own cherished poor friends or relatives.

The rabbis sensed that this was the divine intention and they enacted safeguards to insure that this intention was fulfilled. They ruled that the "leaving" for the poor must be at the end of the field instead of permitting the owner in his own discretion to decide where in the field he wanted to make something available for the indigent. If the choice were left to the owner of the field he might wait for an opportune moment when no poor persons were around, and then within the hearing of only his poor relatives declare a specific area as "Pe-ah" and his own poor relatives would have an advantage over others similarly disadvantaged.

If, on the other hand, the owner was limited to one specific spot, all the poor would know when this part of the field was likely to be reached by the harvesters and they would be there in time to take their due. By thus restricting the owner another benign result was achieved. The time of the poor would not be wasted. They would not have to sit around and wait for the moment when the owner would designate "Pe-ah." They could themselves calculate approximately when the end of the field would be reached and be around in time for the take.

The owner too profited from the rule. Passers-by would not suspect him of having failed to leave "Pe-ah." If he left "Pe-ah" any place other than at the end of the field, they would find it difficult to see what he did in remote parts of the field and would have no way of knowing whether he fulfilled his obligation. However, if "Pe-ah" were always left at the end they would see it, as would the poor who were assembled near it. They would bless the owner, rather than curse him. Cheats too would not be able to claim that they left "Pe-ah" in other parts of the field. Since the law mandated uniformity, everybody leaves it at the end; the poor know when and where to expect it; and outsiders too will draw no false conclusions.

Such a fuss, one might say, about a little bit of grain! Needless to say, for the poor a slice of bread may be as important as a loaf to the rich man. But what counts here are the interests to be conserved — the dignity of the poor and the fair name of the owner.

The owner will not be suspect that he did wrong. And when he leaves the gift for the poor in its proper place for the poor to come and fetch it, the poor are spared the indignity of face to face confrontation with the benefactor.

Of course, there are even higher forms of charity about which the Bible, the Talmud, and the Codes, do speak. The highest form is to provide employment to the needy or a free loan that will save their enterprise and prevent their economic failure. (*Rambam HUCHOT Matnot Ani' m 10:7*) Yet when there must be charity - the simple giveaway — then there must be concern for the self-image of the recipients. And this the Torah mandates. Don't give it to them. Leave it for them and let them come and get it themselves. You will not identify them and they will be spared facing you.

Another point in the verse that is worthy of attention is the fact that its beneficiaries include the “Ger” — the convert who is the equal of the Jew in every respect. And the rabbis extended the rule to all men — Jew and non-Jew alike! That is how “racist” our tradition is! Can our enemies match it?