

The Moral Impulse: Thoughts on Parashat Vaera, January 12, 2013

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The tired, the poor, the huddled masses, the homeless: they make us uncomfortable.

Compassion demands that we care for them and help relieve their sufferings. But pragmatism pushes us in a different direction. The beggars and the needy are nuisances, impinging on our quality of life. They cost us money, effort and time. And they never seem to go away.

The needy are a weight on our consciences as individuals and as a society.

During the 19th century, Thomas Malthus offered a suggestion on how to deal with the burgeoning population of poor and helpless. Malthus believed that social engineers should arrange for the poor to have a high rate of mortality. “In our towns we should make the streets narrower, crowd more people into houses, and count on the return of the plague. In the country, we should build our villages near stagnant pools, and particularly encourage settlement in all marshy and unwholesome situations.”

This drastic approach should strike us as being immoral and ruthless. Yet, in certain ways, our contemporary society does seem to follow the advice given by Malthus. Poor people are often concentrated in slums, out of our sight. In Malthusian terms, if the poor live in areas with a higher mortality rate, less health care, more crime—this is part of the solution rather than part of the problem. Indeed, many people seem quite content to let the poor suffer and die, as long as they do so in their own part of town and out of our line of vision.

But if we will all agree that this “solution” is no solution at all, then what, after all, can be done? We spend billions of dollars on welfare and social programs, and yet the problems do not get solved. Some say: The Government should deal with these problems! Social agencies and philanthropies should solve the problems! Others say: The poor and needy should help themselves. Yet others “solve” the problem by moving away to an expensive area where the poor cannot afford to follow.

All of these “solutions” don’t solve the problems, nor do they resolve the inner conflict of each moral person in our society.

Expecting someone else to eliminate the crisis does not work. Running away from the problem is only a short lived venture in escapism. The problem always follows.

For many years, our synagogue operated a shelter for homeless men. I had a conversation with one of our homeless guests, and lamented the seeming impossibility of solving the problem of homelessness. Our homeless shelter was merely a tiny bandage, it was not curing homelessness.

The homeless person to whom I was complaining looked perplexed. He gave me some good advice: “Don’t focus on the whole problem. Think of one person at a time. The shelter is keeping me warm and safe for this night. Perhaps tomorrow will be better.”

None of us can solve the overall problem. None of us can relieve all the suffering, poverty and illness in the world. But every one of us can do something. We can create a human connection with at least one person, maybe a few more. We can give contributions of money and time. We can think of the poor and downtrodden not as “them” but as part of “us.”

Will this process solve all the problems? Probably not. Will we still have a moral dilemma and a troubled conscience? Very likely. And perhaps this is a true sign of a moral individual and of a moral society. Moral people face the gap between the ideal world and the real world, and try to bring the two closer together. This process involves frustration, guilt, inner conflict. When we stop feeling the pain of this dilemma, we have lost a powerful moral impulse.

This week’s Torah reading focuses on the first stages of redemption of the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt. For generations, Egyptians felt no moral qualms about forcing the Israelites into servitude, or murdering the Israelites’ children, or seeing the daily sufferings of the Israelite slaves. When a society

loses its moral conscience, it tolerates—and promotes—dehumanization of its weakest and neediest members.

Moses and Aaron strove to stoke Pharaoh's moral conscience. God brought plagues on the Egyptians with the intention of making them see the wickedness of their immoral treatment of the Israelite slaves. It was a long, arduous and painful process before the Israelites were finally allowed to go free.

A moral conscience helps us sympathize with the poor and downtrodden; it helps us maintain sensitivity to the needs of others; it prods us to do something—however small—to alleviate the pain and suffering of our fellow human beings.

If each one of us does something to help someone in need, this is a reflection of a living moral impulse. Each gesture of kindness is a contribution not only to the human being whom we help, but to society at large—and to our own moral development.