Rich or Poor--Thoughts for Parashat Re'eh

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Re'eh

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

A member of our congregation had been a very wealthy man. He was kind, happy and charitable. His philanthropy reached many organizations and he was often honored at dinners and other communal events.

But then his business turned sour. The more he poured money into his company and investments, the more he lost. Within a short time, he was no longer a rich man but just managed to continue at a modest standard of living. He could not be a big donor to the organizations and charities that he had supported for so many years.

He grew sullen and embittered. He told me: "When I was rich, everyone loved me, honored me, smiled at me. Once I lost my money, they all forgot about me and looked for other philanthropists who could contribute. The only place where I continue to feel the same respect now as before is here at our synagogue."

This man passed away many years ago but his words to me continue to resonate. His tribute to our congregation was not merely an affirmation of the fine character of our community, but was a lesson about the nature of philanthropy and life. People should be valued for who they are, not merely for what they can donate.

The Shabbat morning prayers praise God Who delivers "the poor (*ani*) and needy (*evyon*) from one who would rob him." The *ani* is one who has been poor all along. The *evyon* is one who was once rich but has lost his wealth. Since both the *ani* and the *evyon* are poor, why would God have to deliver them from those who would rob them? There would be little point for anyone to want to rob poor people who do not have much to rob.

The passage is not speaking about robbing their money. It is about robbing their dignity. When they are ignored or disdained because of their poverty, they are being deprived of their honor and self-respect. We pray that God will look out for the honor of the *ani* and *evyon* because people often ignore or undervalue them. The message is: we too must be concerned for their dignity.

Jewish law and ethics stress the importance of charitable giving. Concern for the poor is highlighted in this week's Torah reading. "There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be open-handed toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land" (Devarim 15:11). Maimonides codified levels of charitable giving, with the highest being the providing employment to the needy so they will be able to be self-sufficient. Just below that level are those who give in ways that cause no embarrassment to the recipients (Rambam, Hilkhot Mattenot Ani'im 10:7-14).

Our tradition highlights the importance of charitable giving…and charitable behavior. Offering financial support is a great mitzvah. Providing moral support is equally important. Valuing people for who they are—not for what they can donate—is a lesson for all to learn.