

AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps
Torah Portion – Mi-ketz

THE EMOTIONAL IMPACT OF POVERTY

וְהָרָעַב כָּבֵד בְּאֶרֶץ: וַיְהִי כִּפְאֶשֶׁר כָּלוּ לֵאכֹל אֶת-הַשֶּׁבֶר אֲשֶׁר הֵבִיאוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵיהֶם
אֲבִיהֶם שׁוּבוּ שְׁבְרוּ-לָנוּ מֵעֵט-אֶכֶל: וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵיהֶם יְהוּדָה לֵאמֹר הֲעַד הָעֵד בָּנוּ הָאִישׁ לֵאמֹר
לֹא-תֵרְאוּ פָנַי בְּלִתי אֲחֵיכֶם אִתְּכֶם:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵיהֶם יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲבִיהֶם אִם-כֵּן | אִפּוֹא זֹאת עֲשׂוּ קָרוֹ מִזְמַנְתְּ הָאֶרֶץ בְּכִלְיֶם וְהוֹרִידוּ
לָאִישׁ מִנְחָה מֵעֵט צָרִי וּמֵעֵט דְּבִשׁ נִכְאֹת וְלֵט בְּטָנִים וּשְׂקָדִים: יב וְכִסֹּף מִשְׁנֵה קַחוּ בְיַדְכֶם
וְאֶת-הַכֶּסֶף הַמּוֹשֵׁב בְּפִי אֲמִתְחַתִּיכֶם תִּשְׂיִבוּ בְיַדְכֶם אוֹלֵי מִשְׁנֵה הוּא: וְאֶת-אֲחֵיכֶם קַחוּ
וְקוּמוּ שׁוּבוּ אֶל-הָאִישׁ:

And the famine in the land was severe. When they had eaten up the rations they had brought from Egypt, their father said to them, “Go again and get some food for us.” But Judah said to him, “The man warned us, ‘Do not let me see your face unless your brother is with you.’”

...Then their father...said to them: “If it must be so, do this: take some of the choice products of the land in your sacks and carry them down as a gift to the man – some balm and some honey, gum, laudanum, pistachio nuts, and almonds. And take with you double the money...And take your brother, too, and go back at once to the man. (Genesis 43:1-3, 11-13)

BACKGROUND: Faced with a relentless famine in the land of Canaan. Jacob sent his sons to Egypt in search of food, which they received from the Egyptian viceroy, along with a warning that they could not return for more until they brought their younger brother Benjamin down to Egypt. The viceroy, of course was Joseph, Jacob’s favorite son, who was sold into slavery long ago by his brothers. Joseph hid his true identity from his brothers, but he did ask about his father and brother.

Joseph and Benjamin were both Rachel’s sons, and Rachel was Jacob’s favorite wife. Since Jacob believed that Joseph was dead, he dreaded the thought of sending Benjamin on a perilous journey to Egypt. Nevertheless, he had no choice. If he failed to send Benjamin, the entire family would starve. The following midrash imagines how Jacob must have felt:

[And Jacob said]: Take also your brother (Genesis 43:13). As story is told of two pious men who took a sea journey in order to perform a certain mitzvah. A huge wave threatened to sink their ship. One of them said, “This is the worst!” His friend replied, “It could still be much worse!” The first one said, “But we are at the gates of death! Can there be anything worse than this?” Said the other, “Yes, there could.” The first one replied, “And what might that be?” “It is the day your son says to you, ‘Give me some food to eat,’ and you haven’t got any to give to him.” [Midrash ha-Gadol, parshat Mikketz]

Questions: We often tend to think of solutions to poverty in material terms. But our tradition reminds us that poverty makes a strong emotional impact as well. In our search for solutions to poverty, how can work to understand and address the emotional damage caused by having to struggle with poverty?