

Rabbi David Wolpe's

Off The Pulpit

July 23, 2015

We Are Many

We are taught in the Torah that one is supposed to leave a corner of one's field unharvested for the poor ("peah"). The Rabbis in the Mishna ask the following question: What if a man who has fields at home is traveling and hungry; may he take from the peah (yes) and more interestingly, when he gets home, should he contribute to compensate for what he has taken?

Rabbi Eliezer says he must and the sages say he need not. As Rabbi Yosef Kanefsky pointed out when teaching this Mishna, this is an existential question. For Rabbi Eliezer sees the traveler as a wealthy man who was in temporary need, and therefore must pay. But the

Sages believe that he was at that moment a poor man, and therefore, though compensating later might be praiseworthy, it is not mandated because the poor don't have to replace the *tzedakah* they are given.

In other words, the sages are Whitmanesque — we all contain multitudes. No one is insulated from being suddenly in another position: the healthy will be sick, the joyous will be bereaved, the rich man may be brought low. The Mishna is reminding us that in an uncertain world, we will all need each other — we just never know when.