



Economy and Social Justice

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Speech given at the International Meeting "PATHS OF PEACE: Religions and cultures in dialogue" (September 10th to 12th 2017) in the German cities of Münster and Osnabrück.

Can we say that the Hebrew Bible identifies the most desirable economic system for humanity? Yes and no. The Bible does not offer us a comprehensive economic program, but it does provide us with guiding principles for a moral economy.

We might first note the affirmation of the principle of private ownership.

It has been said that the Hebrew Bible is not a book of rights, but a book of duties. There is of course much truth to this. However it is disingenuous to claim that rights are not part of these obligations. If we have an obligation not to steal, it obviously implies others' rights of ownership.

Nevertheless, the Bible sees the nature of ownership in a particular light, inextricably bound up with our responsibilities.

As the children of Abraham we are called to be just and righteous (Genesis 18:19) and indeed Judaism sees the maintenance of justice and equity as part of humanity's universal obligations (referred to in the Jewish Tradition as the Noahide Covenant.)

The Hebrew Bible's vision of social justice flows from its teaching regarding the sanctity of all human life and its inalienable dignity.

In the words of Rabbi Tanhuma, if you curse or despise any one "know who it is whom you despise or curse, 'for in the image of God, He created him'" (Genesis Rabbah 24:7)

Therefore the Mishnah in tractate Sanhedrin 4:5 declares that each person is a whole world and unique (and thus "he who destroys the life of one person it is as if he has destroyed the whole world and he who save the life of one person it is as if he has saved the whole world one.") For the same reason, the Mishnah states, none should consider him or herself to be superior to another!

Because God is Merciful, the Torah indicates, He is - as it were - "biased" for the vulnerable (See Exodus 22: 26 and 22); and precisely because we are called upon to affirm the dignity of all, we are required to pay special attention and concern to those whose dignity is vulnerable and are marginalized - the poor, the stranger, the widow and orphan.

The Torah is accordingly replete with commandments regarding our ethical responsibilities towards the vulnerable in society (The Talmud notes that the obligation to care for the stranger/sojourner is repeated thirty six times throughout the Pentateuch - more than any other commandment.)

Judaism accordingly requires its adherents to contribute at least a tenth of disposable income (and not more than a fifth, lest one become dependent on others oneself) to righteous charitable deeds (summed up in the Hebrew word "tzedakah")

In the context of the agrarian economy of the times, the Hebrew Bible requires all farmers (i.e. all members of the community) to refrain from reaping the corners of their fields, and also to leave their gleanings, for the poor, the orphan, widow and stranger.

Moreover compulsory Biblical tithes were not only for thanksgiving and for the Temple, but also to be provided for the needy.

However at the foundation of these precepts is not only the idea of our social responsibility towards others and especially the vulnerable, but a dramatic understanding of the nature of property ownership.

This is expressed in particular in relation to the Biblical Sabbatical year which itself may serve as a model or at least inspiration for collective social responsibility.

At its foundation is the declaration in Leviticus 25:23 “For the earth is Mine (says the Lord) and you are sojourners and tenants with Me.” Human beings are no more than tenants on God’s land. In fact, all material gifts are granted to us as custodians, to be used for the common good.

Furthermore, this sense of our transience and vulnerability is meant to animate our moral conduct; and regarding the Sabbatical year this meant three things.

Firstly, on the seventh year, the land is to lie fallow (Exodus 23: 10) recuperating its natural vitality. As a result, ownership of land in any sense of an exclusive utilization falls away for the year, affirming that we are all sojourners in God’s world (Leviticus 25 v.23), and the land and its natural produce are available for all – especially for the poor. Indeed, as far as the land is concerned – and in an agricultural society the land is the very source of status – the Sabbatical year emphasizes that poor and rich alike are the same before God.

Social responsibility is not only reflected in this practice of letting the land lie fallow with its natural fruits available to all, rich and poor; but also in the other precepts of the Sabbatical year, notably the cancellation of debts (Deuteronomy 15).

To understand this Scriptural requirement we need to appreciate the context of Biblical agrarian society. This was not a commercial society in which monies were commonly lent as part and parcel of normal economic life. Rather, loans were necessary when the farmer had fallen upon hard times and had a poor harvest, or even none at all; and lost the resources available to guarantee his continued harvest cycle. In such a case, he would borrow from another, and the Torah encourages the other members of the community to do so and provide such loans for those in such hardship (Deuteronomy 15: 8.) When the disadvantaged farmer’s harvest prospered, he could return the loan. Thus as a loan was in effect a charitable deed, the Bible prohibited taking advantage of his situation through taking interest. However, if the farmer was unable to overcome this setback, there was the danger of his being caught in a poverty trap. The Torah recognizes that this was not just his problem but that of society, and accordingly utilized the Sabbatical year to free the individual from this trap. The obligation concerning the release of debts is not an excuse for irresponsibility, but rather the obligation of responsibility to advance an equitable society ensuring a socio-economic equilibrium between the more and the less advantaged in society – essential for the latter’s positive development and security.

For similar purpose, the Sabbatical year also required the release of slaves (Exodus 21: 2-6). As opposed to the former precept, this may appear not only to be irrelevant but archaic. Yet within this idea are certain profound messages. In ancient Israel, a Hebrew would enter into slavery if he had no means of providing a livelihood for himself or for his family. In this manner, he in fact voluntarily sold his own employment to another.

However, the requirements upon those who maintained such slaves were so demanding that the Talmud declares that “he who acquires a slave, (in effect) acquires a master over himself!”

As indicated in the Book of Exodus, an unmarried slave would be provided not only with all basic

material needs, but even with a spouse. Understandably, in ancient Israel, there were not a few such Hebrew slaves who were very content to be in that situation and to have their basic livelihood guaranteed. However, the Bible requires that in the Sabbatical year, all such slaves be set free. But, as it states in Exodus 21, "if the slave plainly says 'I love my master, I will not go free,' then his master shall bring him to the doorpost ... and shall pierce his ear with an awl." (Exodus 21: 5-6). Our sages of old ask, "why should the ear be pierced and why against the doorpost?"

And they answer, "the doorpost which God passed over in Egypt when He delivered the children of Israel from slavery, and the ear which heard Him say at Sinai 'for unto me, the children of Israel are slaves' and not that they should be the slaves of slaves; let these testify that the man voluntarily relinquished his God-given freedom!"

Moreover according to Jewish law, the slave still had to go free in the Jubilee year, even if he did not want to!

The Bible also requires the erstwhile master/employer to provide this man - who now has to enter the open market - with the material means to establish himself in it (Deuteronomy 15:14.) This obligation not only affirms the value of the dignity of the human individual and the concomitant value of personal freedom, but also that the wellbeing of the collective depends on its ability to provide the individual with the means to maintain self and family.

The model of the Sabbatical year as a paradigm for the promotion of social justice demands that we contend with the dangers posed by human arrogance that justifies greed, exploitation, irresponsibility and violence towards others. The Torah seeks to combat these tendencies not only through the aforementioned special focus on the weakest elements of society, but above all through emphasizing that we are all vulnerable, all temporary sojourners in God's world (Leviticus 25 v.23). Such awareness may lead us to live more responsibly towards our neighbors, communities, nations, humanity and environment.

In modern times in order to encourage corporate philanthropy the slogan "do well by doing good" had become commonplace.

However the religious ethic as reflected in Biblical and Talmudic teaching would rather argue that we "do well in order to do good", for the economic and social welfare of society at large is our common good and our moral responsibility.

Editorial remarks

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Source: [Community of Sant Egidio](#).