Leviticus 25:1-27:34: When Is Idealism Idolatry?

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Shortly after the surprising announcement of a new alliance in the Israeli Knesset — the result of quick and clandestine negotiations that produced a mega-coalition between Israel's major political parties — the murmurings of social protest began to emerge yet again. Stav Shaffir, one of the faces and voices of the massive protests in Israel last summer, ominously tweeted that "if this new government does not fall, we will take it down."

The 2011 protests, characterized by tent camps throughout the country, focused initially on issues of cost of living and especially housing. Inevitably, though, some of the animus in the protests was directed at the government itself, the political process and the general social order. The energy in the protests — together with their kin in the American "Occupy" movement — embodied a political pluralism ranging from activists genuinely alarmed by the rising price of food and rent all the way to anarchists for whom the fomenting rebellion signaled an opportunity to challenge basic societal norms.

I understand where the extremism comes from. The instinct to act on behalf of justice is often borne out of a sense of deep brokenness, and the belief that the prevailing structures of power and authority are fundamentally misguided. Accordingly, it is believed that to promote incremental policy change without redressing the basic infrastructure that underlies the fabric of our societies — even if it creates temporarily better conditions — will not lead to societal transformation.

But this political pluralism, in turn, makes the work of justice a tough sell across the political divide. The iconoclasm of extremism creates fear in the mainstream about the work of justice, even when its goals may accord with mainstream ethical sensibilities.

I believe that there is important work to be done in bringing about justice in this world, both on concrete issues and in more conceptual ways; I also recognize that there are still times when justice can only be pursued through systemic, revolutionary overhaul. But I am skeptical of the instincts in America and in Israel to do this urgent work of today against — rather than in concert with — the existing social and political infrastructure. This week's twin Torah portions of *Behar* and *Behukotai*, which together conclude the book of Leviticus, implicitly challenge the impulse to frame social activism over and against normative legal policies.

The two portions are held together by a unifying frame, with the opening and closing verses reminding us that these texts were a part of God's revelation to Moses at Mount Sinai. In between these verses,

however, is the stuff not of otherworldly spirituality, but the earthly rules by which a society is made just.

The Sabbatical laws both free the land from agrarian domination and institutionalize ethical work practices for those whose livelihoods are controlled by others. The Jubilee laws then go one step further in attempting to prevent the transmission of poverty across multiple generations. Even if inequity will inevitably emerge from the marketplace, the Jubilee creates a once-every-50-years assurance that the system cannot perpetuate it forever.

The theology of this call for justice has two key elements: First, it ties the mandate for justice to the Israelite experience as slaves in Egypt, thereby connecting altruism with communal experience, and giving value to the incremental pursuit of justice. As a result, there are measures built into the Israelite legal system designed to deal with change when it is needed. Interestingly, while the paradigm of Exodus as revolution is well known to us, here the Torah reminds us that this narrative must also inform how we live life *after* the revolution, by demanding that we create just laws for all members of our society.

Second, the Torah also reminds us that the work of justice comes not merely from the human ethical impulse but also from divine fiat. Rashi, the great medieval biblical commentator, invites us to notice the inherent connection between human justice and Divine revelation in the Torah by asking provocatively, “What does *Shemittah* (Sabbatical law) have anything to do with Sinai?” The Torah’s message is that our efforts at establishing just societies must reflect God’s vision of justice, and that God’s instruction to us involves concrete rules and regulations.

Moreover, unlike our tendency to differentiate between those laws that are between persons (which we associate with the work of justice) and those laws that are between people and God, the Torah demands that these are fundamentally intertwined. The ban on idolatry, which comes at the center of these portions after the rules of justice are enumerated, signals a failure to integrate justice and authority, or justice and revelation.

One inherent risk in justice work is that we become convinced that it is through the adoption of our ethical ideals alone that society can be improved, rather than seeing that we must work together with others to discern how best to implement God’s vision of justice through the norms we establish for our society.

I fear sometimes that in our efforts to create more just societies, we can become self-righteous, indulging in the idolatrous practice of worshipping our own ideals. Not only is this spiritually and ethically problematic, but it usually leads to a further breakdown between “activists” and the “establishment,” in which it becomes all the more difficult to create the change we seek. The Torah here connects justice to obedience, and not iconoclasm; the work of justice is inherently part of the social order, and not anathema to it.

When justice is part of our founding narrative, we must embrace not just the part of the story about our liberation from tyranny, but also the responsibility to use that memory to establish just societies. And when we view this mandate as issuing from God, we become partners in a larger process, and we belong to a larger order. Recognition of God's role in the work of justice demands of us great humility, as we cannot revel in our iconoclasm or stand on the periphery and hurl insults at others involved in shaping our societies. Rather, we must invest ourselves in the often slow and arduous process of improving our communities, listening carefully for the echo of the Exodus — and the whispers from Sinai — pulsating across space and time.

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