

## **Three Approaches to Economic Inequality**

### *Parashat Behar/Behukkotai*

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Imagine that you are one of the Israelites leaving Egypt. You, along with your family, did exactly what Moses ordered: you slaughtered a lamb and smeared its blood on the doorposts and girded your loins, and then, when the order came, you moved out, together with all the Israelites.

And then you crossed the Red Sea and entered into the wilderness and, in the safety of that wilderness you finally, finally tasted your first taste of freedom. You were **free!** Pharaoh and his army were gone. All that was around you was desert and sun and other families who had similarly fled Egypt with you.

Everything must have looked really, really rosy. After all, your bare necessities were taken care of. Every morning, there was food on the ground, and every day there was water to drink. Fat City!

But then, one day, your child got ill, and you realized that you needed some herbs to treat his fever, and you didn't have any. Your neighbor did, but he wanted more from you than you had. Or maybe you or your wife gave birth to twins, and suddenly there were more mouths to feed than you'd expected and prepared for. So what did you do? Well, you borrowed money. You went into debt. And maybe over time you were able to repay your debt, and maybe you weren't.

Imagine that happening to you and to other people around you. Before you know it, some members of the so-called "Children of Israel" are in bad financial shape; even though others are doing much, much better.

We have to imagine a scenario like this; otherwise, the Torah portion we read today just doesn't make any sense. The Children of Israel are at Mount Sinai, and



Moses is telling them: one day, when your fellow Israelites become poor, this is how you're supposed to treat them and this is how you're not supposed to treat them.

The Israelites must have been thinking to themselves: Would that these days of manna on the ground and water from the well could continue forever! But they couldn't and they didn't. And even if they had, we all know that that wouldn't have prevented further economic inequality.

The Torah seems to be recognizing that one of the prices of freedom -- economic freedom, that is -- is inequality. It seems to be inevitable.

So what's the Torah's response to this? And what are we, as the descendants of the Israelites, supposed to do in the face of seemingly inevitable disparities of income and assets?

Maybe nothing. After all, perhaps we should just let the market determine how much people make and how much people take home and how much people eat and how much people have, and who gets medical care, and who doesn't.

**Well, that's not the Jewish approach, and it is clearly expressed in this week's *parasha*.** The reason, according to a recent essay on our *parasha* by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, is that the Jewish tradition is wary of economic inequality.

**“Economic inequality,”** he writes, **“leads to inequality of power, and the result is often the abuse of the weak by the strong.”**

Throughout the prophetic period, the Prophets inveigh against those who “covet fields and seize them.” They decry those who oppress the poor. Economic oppression is made possible by the market economy; but that doesn't make it right.

According to Rabbi Sacks, the Torah doesn't take a one-dimensional response to this problem. Equality is a value, but so too is freedom. Somehow, we have to address both needs. The question is how?

As Rabbi Sacks points out, the Torah gives three responses to this challenge: one is **political**; one is **psychological**; and one is **theological**.

The **political** is simple: every seven years, there's a reset button. And there's a really big reset button every fifty years. Through a combination of debt remission, the liberation of slaves and the return of ancestral land to its original owners, accumulated inequalities are addressed without constant intervention in the economy.

The **psychological** dimension is **fraternity**, and you see this so clearly in the Hebrew text of the Torah. Take the words of the first aliyah that we read today. They could have been, "*When your **fellow Israelite** becomes poor, so poor that he becomes an indentured servant to you, don't mistreat him.*"

But the text doesn't say that.

Instead, it says, "*When your **brother** becomes poor, so poor that he becomes an indentured servant to you, don't mistreat him.*"

There's all the difference in the world between a "**fellow Israelite**" and a "**brother.**" That word "**brother**" gets repeated again and again and again in this week's parasha. We don't always get along with our brothers, but we know that, when push comes to shove, our bonds of kinship are fundamental.

Indeed, scientific studies have shown that "we make sacrifices most readily for those most closely related to us." (See the work of W.D. Hamilton and others on kin selection: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kin\\_selection](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kin_selection) .) So calling the poor person down the street "your **brother**" makes it more likely that you will help him, and will do so without complaining.

In our tradition, when we describe our ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, we call them "our parents." In addition to -- or perhaps essential to -- society's acceptance of the laws of *shmittah* and *yovel*, the sabbatical and the jubilee years -- is framing a society in such a way as to "make people feel bound together in an unbreakable bond of shared responsibility." Because we're

one big family, “we must help when one of our brothers or sisters becomes destitute.” This is, Sacks points out, “ethnicity in the service of morality.”

There’s a **third** element in addressing this challenge, and that is **philosophical** or **theological**.

*“Don’t mistreat your brother -- there’s that word “brother” again -- when he becomes poor, for [your brother and the other Israelites] are My servants whom I brought out of the Land of Egypt.”* In other words, it isn’t just that your fellow Israelites are brothers and sisters; it’s that God is our parent. And the same goes for property: *“The land is Mine,”* God says. In the Jewish tradition, “there is no such thing as absolute ownership.” We may think we possess wealth, but actually, we’re only holding it in trust.

So it’s not enough, as Rabbi Sacks points out, for there to be laws that reset the basic equality among people; we also need that sense that we’re all brothers and sisters, and the sense that ultimately, our money -- or what we call our money -- isn’t our money at all.

This beautiful thesis helps us feel good about our Jewish tradition, and how it has helped us maintain solidarity and to take care of one another, even in difficult times. And because of these three elements, I’m really not worried about the ability and the commitment of the Jewish people to take care of itself.

But it raises all sorts of questions for me regarding our broader society.

After all, in our society, we have laws that redistribute wealth to the poor. We have welfare programs; we have Medicare and Medicaid, and we have the Affordable Care Act. We have housing loans providing favorable rates to some who are economically disadvantaged, etc.

But we no longer have a sense -- if we ever did -- that we’re all brothers and sisters. Identity politics seems to rule supreme. We now have Blue Staters and Red Staters; we have the coasts and the heartland; we have white neighborhoods and African-American neighborhoods. We have the “one percenters” and we have

everybody else. There is a lot of attitudinal and actual segregation and stratification in our society.

And if that is true of American citizens, it is certainly true for the immigrants among us. If it's now acceptable to describe those seeking to come to this country as a bunch of "rapists;" if it is now acceptable to put down someone in our society -- *even a judge* -- because his or her parents are immigrants; then clearly foreigners are not considered part of our kinship circle.

The poor don't make out much better. If it is now acceptable to describe the poor collectively as a bunch of freeloaders who would rather be taken care of than to assume responsibility for themselves; then it's hard to generate the kind of "fraternity" -- that feeling of family -- that the Torah considers essential to addressing economic inequality.

And if instead of a sense of shared humility before God, a sense that we are all the children of God -- and therefore, though we may have the *legal* right, we don't have the *moral* right to oppress other people -- then we're far from the utopian society described in our parasha.

As I said, I'm not so worried about the Jewish community. We'll continue, I believe, to take care of ourselves. (Unfortunately, there's enough invidious discrimination against Jews and enough reflexive hatred of Israel in the world today to assure that, whether we like it or not, we'll probably always feel as though we are a family that has to take care of itself.)

But what about our nation? What about the USA? Will we remain united? Or will we tear each other apart?

I hope that we as a nation can work on improving not only our laws, but also our **attitudes** toward one another. I hope that we will try to relate to one another as **brothers** and **sisters**, and come to see ourselves as bound by moral principles far larger and loftier than what our laws require. Only in these ways, it seems to me, will we be able to match the Torah's balance between economic freedom and equality -- and thereby promote them both.

Shabbat shalom!