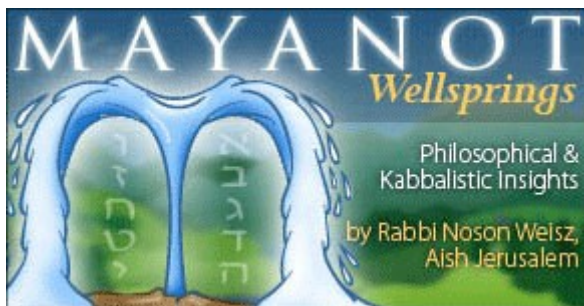


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Orienting to the Right Express

In this week's portion, the Torah sets forth the laws of *Shmita*, laws that basically ban all forms of productive agricultural activity every seventh year:

"God spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai saying: 'Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them: "When you come in to the land that I give you, the land shall observe a Sabbath day for God..."'" (Leviticus 25:1-4)

Rashi is puzzled by the fact that Mount Sinai is identified as the place where the commandment of *Shmita* was issued. *Shmita* is the only Mitzvah of the 613 whose command-instruction is related to a specific venue, be it Mt. Sinai or any other place. Rashi duly attempts to explain why *Shmita* was so honored. His answer is one of the best known of all Rashi's

commentaries on the Chumash:

What is the relationship between the law of *Shmita* and Mount Sinai? Surely, all of the laws of the Torah were given on Mount Sinai? To teach you that just as the *Shmita* laws were given on Sinai to the last detail, so were the details of the laws of all the commandments.

But other commentators point out (see Ohr Hachaim) that Rashi does not really address or answer the real question. He explained the need to select one of the 613 Mitzvot to inform us of the Sinaic origin of all Mitzvot, but one is still left to wonder why *Shmita*, of all the commandments was chosen for this task. Are we to assume that its selection is mere coincidence?

We shall attempt to explore the special relationship between *Shmita* and Sinai in this essay.

INCREDIBLE COMMANDMENTS

It is common to point out that *Shmita* is an incredibly powerful Mitzvah; it has the power to prove that the Torah must have originated in heaven almost single-handedly. No human being living in an agricultural society - as pretty much everyone did in Biblical times - could ever have dreamed up the *Shmita* laws. To forego an entire harvest once every seven years, and two in a row once every fifty years, at a period in history when survival was marginal, did not only constitute economic suicide, but carried with it a serious threat of starvation as well.

The only way such a commandment could possibly be implemented in the real world is under the conditions the Torah itself describes:

"If you will say, 'What will we eat in the seventh year? Behold! We will not sow and not gather in our crops!' I will ordain My blessing for you in the sixth year and it will yield a crop sufficient for a three year period. You will sow in the eighth year, but you will eat from the old crop; until the ninth year, until the arrival of its crop, you will eat the old." (Leviticus 25:20-22)

Only someone who actually had God's ear could possibly guarantee this. No rabbinic sect interested in creating a new religion would have presumed to invent such a commandment. As it requires the quoted guarantee in order to make it possible to observe – and no one can guarantee such a guarantee other than God Himself - it follows that only God Himself could possibly have issued it. Thus, in a way, the connection between *Shmita* and Mount Sinai is readily apparent. The very existence of the commandment of *Shmita* testifies to the reality of the meeting at Sinai.

While no doubt the key to the uniqueness of the commandment of *Shmita* is contained in this thought, we would like to examine the deeper ramifications that follow as a consequence.

TWO DIFFERENT UNIVERSES

We always read this Torah portion during the days of the counting of the Omer, the period of preparation for receiving the Torah on Shavuot. This is no mere coincidence; the acceptance of the duty of observing the laws of *Shmita* is a significant part of this preparation process.

It is easy to think that the life of a Jew who observes Torah commandments is basically the same as any other. Superficially the only visible difference between the observant Jew and other people is that he has more duties and responsibilities, and less leisure time. But the truth is far different than the superficial appearance; in fact, the Torah observant Jew lives in another world than a secular person. The two may inhabit the same planet, but their lives unfold in separate universes.

To appreciate the significance of this let us study the connection of the *Shmita* year with the concept of the Sabbath.

"But the seventh year shall be a complete rest for the land, a Sabbath for God." (Leviticus 25:4)

Nachmanides explains that there are really three Sabbaths:

1. There is the Sabbath that happens once every seven days; it represents the end of the work of physical creation; this is the Sabbath of weeks.
2. *Shmita* is the Sabbath that happens once every seven years; this is the Sabbath that is embedded in history;

it represents the end of time when God will be able to rest from the labor of moving human history to its destination just as the weekly Sabbath was the day of God's rest from the work of physical creation; the Sabbath of *Shmita* is reminiscent of the Messianic world.

3. The Jubilee year presents the Sabbath as the contact point of creation with God; it happens once every fifty years and represents the Sabbath of the higher world, the world referred to in the very first verse of Genesis. Strictly speaking it belongs to the realm of the 'eight', beyond the seven. [See essay on Emor]

Let us see if we can unravel the special relationship between *Shmita* and Sabbath a bit.

THE POST-FLOOD POLICY STATEMENT

Following the flood, God tells Noah:

"Continuously, all the days of the earth, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease." (Genesis 8:22)

The Talmud (Sanhedrin 58b) learns from this that a *Ben Noach* – literally a descendant of Noah, a non-Jew who is obligated to observe the seven Noahide commandments – is not allowed to stop on the Sabbath. He is prohibited from observing the Sabbath. In practice, potential converts who are still considered *Bnei Noach* according to Jewish law, and

who begin to observe the Sabbath laws as part of their preparations towards conversion are instructed to commit a minor act of desecration of the Sabbath laws deliberately so as not to violate the prohibition on a Noachide person to observe Sabbath.

This rule is not a mere technicality but goes to the very essence of Sabbath, as stated in the *Amidah* prayer we recite every Sabbath:

You did not give it ... (the Sabbath) to the nations of the earth, nor did You make it the inheritance ... of the worshippers of graven idols. And in its contentment the uncircumcised shall not abide. For to Israel, Your people have You given it with love, to the seed of Jacob whom You have chosen.

But why is this so? What possible harm could there be in a non-Jew – a *Ben Noach* - observing the Sabbath?

WHEN YOU CANNOT STOP

Let's return again to God's post-flood policy statement.

"Continuously, all the days of the earth, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease."

What are the implications of the fact that the world will never stop? We shall attempt to explain with the help of a metaphor.

These days there is more than one way to fly an airplane. You can fly it the old fashioned way, a human pilot doing the

driving from start to finish, or you can entrust the guidance of your craft to the competent hands of a computer managed automatic pilot system. The common practice today is to use a mixture of the two systems, but the more modern the plane, the more its systems are under computer control. Given the economics of the situation and the steady advances in computer technology the day cannot be very far off when we will all travel in planes that are totally managed by computers.

In many ways, the automatic pilot delivers a much smoother ride. It is capable of making adjustments to speed, course and altitude at the speed of light, whereas a human pilot can only react to changing weather conditions etc. with the speed of human reflexes. If we nevertheless feel safer with the human driver it is because the automatic pilot cannot think. It has no notion of why the plane is in flight in the first place, what its destination is, or what is at stake in the success of its mission. It cannot make any policy changes and rethink its objectives in midstream.

God created a universe that can also function in these two ways. Initially he piloted it Himself. But because He was personally involved with the passengers, their sins impacted on the bond between human beings and the pilot, and a point was reached where God decided to abort the trip. As long as He retained personal control of the Universal Spaceship there was no way God could guarantee that this would never happen again.

So God decided to withdraw from the controls and place the universe on automatic pilot. His post-flood policy statement amounts to an announcement to Noah that henceforth He would not be directly involved in the flow of the seasons etc. As such, human behavior would no longer be judged against the background of an intimate ongoing relationship with God. Human sins would therefore have no impact on the smooth functioning of the universe and God could guarantee there would never be a second flood.

But this change in policy also had a significant flip side. Whereas when God was in the pilot seat the universe was headed to a destination, now that it is under computer control it is spinning endlessly on under the control of an automated guidance system that is totally unaware and unconcerned about ideas such as purpose or destination. The journey has no built-in stop. It will terminate only when someone decides to throw the switch on the automatic pilot. Such a universe has no Sabbath.

THE COVENANTAL UNIVERSE

The essence of God's Covenant with Abraham was the promise that He would never be placed under the control of this universal computer. The very first communication to Abraham removes him from the automatic drive universe.

"God said to Abram, 'Go for yourself from your own land, from your relatives, and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation; I will

bless you, and make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you." (Genesis 12:1-3)

Abraham's universe has both the ups and the downs of the pre-flood world. His universe is personally piloted by God; it is relation-driven rather than program-oriented. That means it has a purpose and a destination. The hands-on driver is guiding it to reach its destiny and come to a stop. As the concept of stop is built into the universe, such a universe also contains a Sabbath.

On the other hand it is sensitive to sin. History shows that Jews are much more vulnerable to holocausts than other peoples. Our world has come to an end more than once. Our relationship with God, because it is so personal, has the ups and downs of all human relationships. We have the security of knowing that our Omnipotent and Omniscient pilot will get us to our destination somehow, but He often decides in His wisdom that in this case it is better to fly through the storm rather than avoid it.

THE PARALLEL UNIVERSE THEORY

We are living in an era when the idea of the existence of parallel universes is scientifically respectable. One of the suggestions put forward by eminent physicists as a solution to the Paradox of Schrodinger's cat in the box thought experiment is the theory that every quantum jump point generates at least one

other parallel universe. The theory that Noah's and Abraham's children live in separate but parallel universes is not a bizarre suggestion in today's intellectual environment.

We have often stated the obvious fact that a created universe has no inertia. It will not automatically be here tomorrow simply because it is here today. Creation is an act of will, God's will to be precise, and the will of any thinking being, even a creature on our level, has no inertia. Creation therefore needs constant renewal. Renewal of creation must come from the source, God's will. For people who live in parallel universes the route to renewal is not necessarily identical.

First let us glance at the route of Jewish renewal the subject that lies at the very heart of this essay.

"God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it because on it He abstained from all His work which God created to make."
(Genesis 2:3)

Rashi tells us:

He sanctified [the Sabbath] with the manna. All the days of the week a measure [of manna] fell for each person, but on Fridays a double portion came down ... on the Sabbath, the manna did not come down at all.

It should be obvious that the source of material blessing in the pilot controlled universe is the destination point; after all, the sole reason that God personally handles the controls is to make sure that it

reaches its destination. The destination is represented in today's world by the day on which the world stops, Sabbath.

To emphasize the fact that Sabbath is the source of whatever manna comes down during the rest of the week, on Sabbath no manna falls, while on Friday a double portion comes down. Sabbath is the vessel that contains the blessing. When blessing is poured out you can only detect the flow if you are outside the vessel from which it is being poured. If you are sitting within the pitcher itself swimming around in the blessing, the flow of blessing is invisible to you.

On Sabbath, we Jews who are riding around in the pilot controlled universe have reached a stop that is reminiscent of our final destination. We are sitting inside the pitcher of blessings immersed in the atmosphere of the world to come. We have no need of the blessing that is poured out on the material world because we aren't there. We have taken a temporary leave of absence into the world of Sabbath. The manna doesn't flow in there, it flows **out** of there; there is no manna on Sabbath.

For us manna eaters, who are personally involved with God and are sustained by His personal blessing, the source of material blessing is not the universe that God set into motion, the universe that He created to be ceaselessly active on automatic drive. Our journey has a destination. The purpose of sustaining us and renewing the creation for us is to make sure we are still alive and well at the end of the journey. The source of our renewal is Sabbath, a day reminiscent

of the destination point.

RENEWING THE PARALLEL UNIVERSE

We have arrived at the location where the parallel universes of the Bnei Noah and the Children of Abraham begin to diverge. The essence of the message of God's post flood declaration that the Noachide world would never stop spinning concerns this issue of renewal. God's guarantee of permanence can be translated to mean that the energy of renewal was programmed into the Noachide universe till the end of time. After all, the point of the Divine policy of disengagement was to ensure the world against destruction by making certain that it would never have to come up to God for renewal at all!

The origins of life are at opposite ends of history for the Torah observant Jew and for the non-Jew, the *Ben Noach*. The non-Jew draws the energy of being from the universe God created to be active; his sustenance comes from activity, from the ceaseless, ordered turmoil of nature. If his world were ever to stop, he would cease to be entirely. He cannot engineer the renewal of the material universe by being a Sabbath observer.

The Torah observant Jew derives his existence from the destination of the world, from the point when all humanity will once again become an inseparable part of God's own essence. His blessing comes from non-activity, from the full stop. He must, therefore, observe the Sabbath to retain his connection to the source of his being.

The answer to the problem we stated is startlingly clear. The security of the Noachide world is based on the built-in ability to function without the contact with Sabbath. The descendant of Abraham can only survive by never letting go of the lifeline of Sabbath. The renewal that comes from Sabbath spells the end of the Noachide's entire world. As soon as it makes contact with Sabbath the automatic drive that powers and pilots his world shuts down; his entire universe crashes and disappears in a second flood.

THE CROSSOVER POINT

But Sabbath is more than symbolic of the destination point. God designed the universe so that it would be obvious that Sabbath is the intersection point between the two parallel universes.

All material things are six-sided. Any substance that is not in the form of a cube is only imaginary in the world of solid things. Physical objects have a top and a bottom and some thickness, otherwise they cannot fit into three-dimensional space. Nevertheless, solids do have one metaphysical point, their center. All objects have a center from which they radiate. Aside from the fact that this is intuitively obvious, the center is perhaps the most important and useful point in an object in terms of calculations, as anyone knows who has attempted to figure out the center of gravity or taken any sort of course in geometry, trigonometry or physics.

Yet, as long as an object has some extension it will always be six sided. As you make it smaller and smaller it will narrow

and shrink towards a single indivisible point. But this point is the limit. Reaching it means to exit from the world of the material and to enter the realm of the spiritual. This point located at the physical limit of all things is the seventh dimension of physical objects. It is the imaginary point at the center of all things and it is the point represented by Sabbath.

The connection to holiness is located at this center of being. When you need to get somewhere you are in motion. When you arrive at your destination you come to rest. The center is holy because it is always at rest. From studying the universe we know that everything is constantly in motion, and almost all observed phenomena are in orbit, spinning about themselves, their suns, the center of their constellations, the center of the known universe.

As objects spin about their axis, the axis itself remains still, totally at rest in terms of the rest of the material world. The dynamic of forces that operate on the rest of the natural world do not affect the center point, the point around which all movement takes place but which is under the control of entirely different factors. The profound symbolism of Sabbath surrounds us everywhere.

GETTING OFF

We Jews, who are passengers on the universe piloted directly by God must always keep in mind that we are headed toward a destination, and that the eventual stop provides the justification for their entire trip. The pilot will not guide the plane for passengers who are not interested in

reaching the destination themselves. But someone who intends to stop must spend some time preparing for the end of his journey.

God has determined that the proper way to do this is to observe the Sabbath and the *Shmita*. Non-observance amounts to stowing away on the other universe, the one without a destination, driven by the automatic pilot, and the consequence is exile from one universe into the other.

As a punishment for the sins of sexual immorality, idolatry, and for the non-observance of the *Shmita* and the Jubilee year, Jews are liable to exile. The perpetrator is exiled and others come to settle in his place (Talmud, Shabbat 33a). But what happens to the land?

"... then the land will be appeased for its sabbaticals during all the years of its desolation, while you are in the land of your foes; then the land will rest and appease for its sabbaticals. All the years of its desolation it will rest, whatever it did not rest during your sabbaticals when you dwelled upon her. (Leviticus 26:34-35)

The first exile to Babylon, which lasted for a period of seventy years, was exactly as long as the number of *Shmitas* and Jubilee years from the first entry of the Jewish people into Israel. As they never observed the *Shmita* perfectly, they had to suffer a year of exile against each year of non-observance.

As a preparation to receiving the Torah once again, we must internalize this lesson.

JEWISH GLORY

There is great glory to be had in being a Torah observant Jew. The non-Jew can observe the *Shmita* with the greatest dedication, and there will be no blessing on the crop of his sixth year. His universe is on automatic pilot and gains nothing by stopping. When the Jew stops for *Shmita* and for Sabbath, his non-activity brings greater material well being than the greatest investment of sweat and toil. Obviously there is a great distinction in this. But there is also a tremendous downside.

Just as the non-Jew cannot hop onto the Jewish universe at will, there is no way off for the Jew. His ancestors, who stood on Mount Sinai and made the Covenant with God, placed him firmly in the universe of Sabbath. Whether he likes it or not, the source of his material well-being comes from the Sabbath, from the stop following the arrival at the destination, and not from the ceaseless activity of this world.

A Jew who fails to keep his connection to this universe alive and fresh through Torah observance does not thereby acquire the right to get off his universe and get to sit on the other universe as a ticketed passenger. The best he can do is stow away, ever at the mercy of the people who really belong there, as the last two thousand years of Jewish history amply attest.

The recurring tragedies of Jewish history all originate in the doomed attempts of large parts of the Jewish people to descend from

their own universe and join the rest of the world. It cannot be done without terrible consequences. And it is a shame we have suffered so much so needlessly, when staying in our own universe offers spiritual benefits and material comforts beyond description in return for simply learning to stop running.



Living and Loving

As the contours of life and law in Israel's new agricultural society emerge, it becomes clear that the economy outlined by the Torah is designed not only to support farmers and their clientele. Jewish law creates a structure through which even the poor and disenfranchised are provided for and protected.

Throughout this parasha, we find a great number of laws that not only mandate feeding the poor, but also laws designed to help those who have fallen on hard times get on their feet again: farmers who have lost their property and are struggling to reclaim it, as well as others in need of loans or financial support. In these cases, usury is prohibited in a verse that is punctuated by the more general exhortation, "Let your brother live alongside you." (Vayikra 25:3)

This verse is understood by the sages of the Talmud as an overarching principle of Jewish ethics, and is applied in various instances of law that may seem far-removed or only tenuously related to the original context in which it is found. Thus, in a Talmudic discussion of a highly-fraught moral dilemma, the principle "Let your brother live alongside you" is cited as the rationale for two opposing legal conclusions. The case in question is of two people in the desert; one has enough water to survive, but not enough to insure the survival of his travelling partner. If he shares his water, both travellers will surely die.

The Talmud quotes the opinion of a certain all-but anonymous man named Ben Petura (the son of Petura) that it is best to share the water, despite the certain fatal outcome, based on the verse "Let your brother live alongside you." The Talmud then recounts that the great Rabbi Akiva challenged this position on the basis of a different interpretation of this same verse. According to Rabbi Akiva, the verse "Let your brother live alongside you" teaches us that one's own life takes precedence to the life of another.

Prima facie, both of these applications of the verse "Let your brother live alongside you" are strange: If Ben Petura's opinion is followed to its logical conclusion, your brother is not living with you - he is dying with you. On the other hand, if the scenario plays out according to Rabbi Akiva's ruling, your brother is not living with you - he is dying while you live on. Furthermore, we might consider Rabbi Akiva's opinion in light

of his most famous ethical pronouncement: "Love your neighbor as yourself; this is the greatest principle of the Torah." Apparently, Rabbi Akiva understood that even loving one's neighbor has limitations, and there are cases in which that love cannot be expressed. Succinctly stated, Rabbi Akiva's reconciliation of these two seemingly opposing principles of Jewish ethics teaches us to love their neighbors as ourselves, but not more than ourselves.

We may gain further insight if we consider that the core and context of the principle "Let your brother live alongside you" is concerned with interest-free moneylending. Specifically, **this** is how your brother lives alongside you - by sharing your resources. However, this sharing of wealth is not intended to reach the point that it endangers your own financial stability. In no way does the verse call for a person to lend money and put himself into the position that he himself will be in need of financial assistance. With this in mind, Rabbi Akiva's ruling is more easily understood: Love your neighbor as **yourself**. Insure that your brother can live alongside you, and do not allow him to fall by the wayside - but insure your own wellbeing in order for this to be possible. Your brother must live alongside you, not instead of you or at the expense of your own life or livelihood. Torah law mandates your own wellbeing. Self-preservation is the first step in preserving others; if saving someone else endangers your own life, the Torah commands that your brother shall live **with** you.

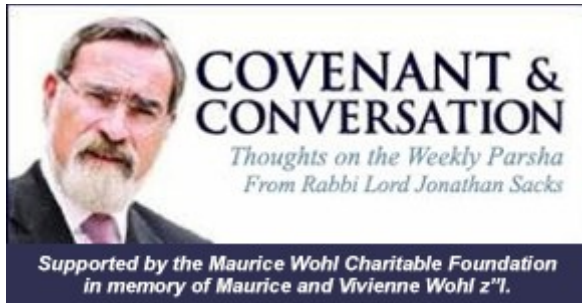
How did Rabbi Akiva's students understand their teacher's ruling? Did they understand

that the case of the two travellers with limited water was an extreme case, and not the norm? Did they understand that only when push comes to proverbial shove, in a zero-sum game situation of life and death, does Rabbi Akiva rule in favor of self-interest over love of one's neighbor? Is it possible that the students of Rabbi Akiva construed their teacher's ethical statement of self-preservation as an endorsement of self-interest at the expense of others? Could it be that Rabbi Akiva's own teaching served as an excuse for his students to act selfishly? Could his own ruling lie at the heart of their lack of respect for one another, each one of them believing that their own status takes precedence over others' dignity?

Even the greatest educator, even the loftiest values, may be misunderstood. Rabbi Akiva could spend a life teaching decency and love, and still have followers misapply his ideas. Rather than using his teachings to create a utopian society, they left death and mourning in their wake. Rather than creating a society based on love, mutual respect and sharing, they created one based on misanthropy and selfishness.

The lessons of social justice and mutual responsibility found in Parashat B'har are all the more poignant at this time of year, in the *sefira* period between Pesach and Shavuot. This, the Talmud tells us, is the time of year during which 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva perished. This was the time of year during which their failure to understand and internalize the Torah's moral imperatives brought about

unthinkable loss and destruction. Let us hope that the lessons are not lost on us.



The Limits of the Free Market

As I was writing this essay a newspaper headline caught my eye. It read, "The UK's richest people have defied the double-dip recession to become even richer over the past year." Despite the fact that most people have become poorer, or at least seen their real income stay static, since the financial crisis of 2008. As the saying goes, "There's nothing surer: the rich get rich and the poor get poorer." It is to this phenomenon that the social legislation of Behar is addressed.

Leviticus 25 sets out a number of laws whose aim is to correct the tendency toward radical and ever-increasing inequality that result from the unfettered play of free market economics. So we have the sabbatical year in which debts were released, Hebrew slaves set free, the land lay fallow and its produce, not to be harvested, belonged to everyone. There was the Jubilee year in which, with some exceptions, ancestral land returned to its original owners. There was the command to help the needy: "If any of your fellow Israelites become poor and are unable to

support themselves among you, help them as you would a foreigner and stranger, so they can continue to live among you." (Lev. 25:35). And there was the obligation to treat slaves not slavishly but as "hired workers or temporary residents" (Lev. 25:40).

As Heinrich Heine pointed out, "Moses did not want to abolish ownership of property; he wished, on the contrary, that everyone should possess something, so that no man might, because of poverty, be a slave with a slavish mind. Liberty was forever the ultimate thought of this great emancipator, and it still breathes and flames in all his laws which concern pauperism." ¹

Despite the sheer antiquity of these laws, time and again they have inspired those wrestling with issues of liberty, equity and justice. The verse about the Jubilee Year, "Proclaim Liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof" (Lev. 25:10) is inscribed on the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia. The international movement that began in the late 1990s and involved more than 40 nations, campaigning for cancellation of Third World debt was called Jubilee 2000 and was directly inspired by our parsha.

The approach of the Torah to economic policy is unusual. Clearly we can make no direct inference from laws given more than three thousand years ago, in an agricultural age and to a society consciously under the sovereignty of God, to the circumstances of the twenty-first century with its global economy and international corporations. Between ancient texts and contemporary application comes the whole careful

process of tradition and interpretation (*Torah shebe'al peh*).

Nonetheless, there do seem to be some important parameters. Work – making a living, earning your daily bread – has dignity. A Psalm (128:2) states: "When you eat of the labour of your hands, you are happy and it shall be well with you." We say this every Saturday night at the start of the working week. Unlike aristocratic cultures such as that of ancient Greece, Judaism was never dismissive of work or the productive economy. It did not favour the creation of a leisured class. "Torah study without an occupation will in the end fail and lead to sin" (Avot 2:2).

Next, unless there are compelling reasons otherwise, one has a right to the fruits of one's labours. Judaism distrusts large government as an infringement of liberty. That is the core of the prophet Samuel's warning about monarchy: A king, he says, "will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants ... He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves" (1 Sam. 8).

Judaism is the religion of a people born in slavery and longing for redemption; and the great assault of slavery against human dignity is that it deprives me of the ownership of the wealth I create. At the heart of the Hebrew Bible is the God who seeks the free worship of free human beings, and one of the most powerful defences of freedom is private property as the basis of economic independence. The ideal society envisaged by the prophets is

one in which each person is able to sit "underneath his own vine and fig tree" (Micah 4:4).

The free economy uses the fuel of competition to sustain the fire of invention. Long before Adam Smith, Judaism had accepted the proposition that the greatest advances are often brought about through quite unspiritual drives. "I saw," says the author of Ecclesiastes, "that all labour and all achievement spring from man's envy of his neighbour". Or as the talmudic sages put it, "Were it not for the evil inclination, no one would build a house, marry a wife, have children, or engage in business." The rabbis even favoured the free market in their own sphere of Jewish education. An established teacher, they said, could not object to a rival setting up in competition. The reason they gave was, simply: "Jealousy among scholars increases wisdom."

The market economy is the best system we know for alleviating poverty through economic growth. In a single generation in recent years it has lifted 100 million Indians and 400 million Chinese from poverty, and the sages saw poverty as an assault on human dignity. Poverty is not a blessed or divinely ordained condition. It is, the rabbis said, 'a kind of death' and 'worse than fifty plagues'. They said, 'Nothing is harder to bear than poverty, because he who is crushed by poverty is like one to whom all the troubles of the world cling and upon whom all the curses of Deuteronomy have descended. If all other troubles were placed one side and poverty on the other, poverty would outweigh them all.'

However, the market economy is better at producing wealth than at distributing it equitably. The concentration of wealth in a few hands gives disproportion power to some at the cost of others. Today in Britain it is not unusual for top CEOs to earn at least 400 times as much as their employees. This has not produced economic growth or financial stability but the opposite. As I write these words, one of Margaret Thatcher's advisors, Ferdinand Mount, has just published a critique of the financial deregulation she introduced: *The New Few*. Equally impressive is the recent book by the South Korean economist Ha-Joon Chang, *23 Things they don't tell you about Capitalism*. This is not a critique of market economics, which he believes is still the best system there is. But, in his words, "it needs careful regulation and steering."

That is what the legislation contained in Behar represents. It tells us that an economic system must exist within a moral framework. It need not aim at economic equality but it must respect human dignity. No one should become permanently imprisoned in the chains of debt. No one should be deprived of a stake in the commonwealth, which in biblical times meant a share in the land. No one should be a slave to his or her employer. Everyone has the right – one day in seven, one year in seven – to respite from the endless pressures of work. None of this means dismantling the market economy, but it may involve periodic redistribution.

At the heart of these laws is a profoundly humane vision of society. "No man is an island." We are responsible for one another

and implicated in one another's fate. Those who are blessed by God with more than they need should share some of that surfeit with those who have less than they need. This, in Judaism, is not a matter of charity but of justice – that is what the word *tzedakah* means. We need some of this spirit in advanced economies today if we are not to see human misery and social unrest.

No one said it better than Isaiah in the first chapter of the book that bears his name:

Seek justice, encourage the
oppressed,
Defend the cause of the
fatherless,
Plead the case of the widow ...

Mankind was not created to serve markets. Markets were made to serve the image of God that is mankind.

1. Israel Tabak, *Judaic Lore in Heine*, Johns Hopkins University Press reprints, 1979, 32.



The Benefits of Keeping Shemittah

The Torah portion outlines the mitzvah of Shemittah – refraining from working one's land. Most people are nowadays are not farmers so this aspect of the Mitzva is not

so applicable ¹, but that does not mean that Shemittah is irrelevant. There are numerous laws pertaining to fruit that grew on the Shemittah year itself – they are imbued with holiness and must be treated as such. For example, it is forbidden to throw Shemittah fruit away unless it rots, to use them in an unusual way, and to send them out of the Holy land. The main idea generally derived from Shemittah is trust that a person who refrains from working his land will not ultimately lose out, and God will help him. The following story indicates that this idea even applies to someone who is careful to observe the other aspects of Shemittah. This is in addition to the general concept that a person will not lose out from performing a Mitzva, as expressed in Kohelet: ‘One who keeps a Mitzva will not know anything bad’.²

Rabbi Yissachar Frand relates this story in the name of Rabbi Asher Anshel Eckstein, a Rabbinic Judge in the Belzer Community in Jerusalem, which he heard with his own ears from the family members involved in the story.

A woman who resided in the holy city of Jerusalem had a non-Jewish Thai housekeeper who was a foreign national. She had been working for this Jewish woman for some time. One day she told her employer that she was leaving Eretz Yisrael. The Jewish woman wanted to give her long time housekeeper a going away present as a token of appreciation for her many years of good service.

She searched her house high and low for some kind of appropriate gift but could not

find anything that seemed suitable. Finally, all she could find was a bag of apples to take with her back to her homeland. The lady’s husband came home a short time later and his wife told him “Our cleaning lady is going home to Thailand, so I gave her a bag of apples as a going away present.” He was horrified: “You gave her a bag of apples? It is *Shemittah*! Those apples have holiness, how can we give her the apples? She does not know how to handle fruit with *Shemittah* sanctity properly. Furthermore, *Shemittah* fruit may not be taken out of Israel. They must stay in Israel!”

The wife did not give up hope – instead she decided to immediately run after the worker as she knew what bus the woman would take. She hoped to run to the bus stop to catch her. She ran out of her house, ran to the bus stop just as the bus with her cleaning lady was pulling away from the stop. People told her that the bus took a circuitous route and that if she ran ahead to another stop, not far away she could expect the bus to be there in ten minutes.

Rabbi Frand relates:

“She ran huffing and puffing to that next bus stop and once again, as soon as she got there the bus started pulling away. She started waving frantically to the bus that she needed to get on. The Israelis on the bus saw her waving and yelled to the bus driver “*Atzor! Atzor!*” [Stop! Stop!]. Finally, the driver stopped the bus and the breathless housewife boarded the bus. She looked around and finally spotted

at the back of the bus her housekeeper from Thailand! She ran over to her and the housekeeper started crying! The housekeeper tearfully said, "I'm sorry! I am sorry! Here it is!" Apparently, the homemaker took her own going away present. She went into the woman's jewelry box and took her most expensive jewelry. She assumed that her employer was running after her to get her jewelry back. She said, "Here is the jewelry! Here are the apples! Just don't tell the police!" The Jewish woman said, "Okay. I won't tell the police."

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Because of being particular about the sanctity of *Shemittah* fruits – that they should not be abused and should be treated with *Shemittah* sanctity – God rewarded this woman on the spot, and she was able to get back the jewelry that she had not yet discovered was missing.

In a more general sense, this story reminds us that a person will ultimately never lose out from keeping Mitzvot even if it is sometimes difficult to understand certain occurrences. May we all merit to observe all Mitzvot in general and *Shemittah* in particular³, and to reap the benefits in both this world and the next.

1. Apart from people who own gardens or cultivate plants.
2. Kohelet, 8:5.
3. Even for people who do not reside in Israel, questions relating to *Shemittah* can arise, with regard to fruit from Israel that is sold in stores around the world. Another way that anyone can have a portion in the Mitzva of *Shemitta* is by helping to financially support the farmers who make great sacrifices to refrain from working their land for a full year.