

JUDAISM AND ECONOMIC REFORM

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ABSTRACT

The present economic order is marred by social and economic injustice among and within nations and the overexploitation and destruction of natural resources. Scripture is not concerned with designing an economic "system," but rather with how to implement justice and compassion within any given system. While Judaism does not identify progress with the increased provision of material goods and services, it does teach us to look after the poor, to heal the sick, to provide food and shelter for those in need, to educate, and to pursue justice. All these injunctions demand material as well as personal resources.

Is it possible to engage in the pursuit of wealth without succumbing to greed and selfishness? Can wealth be distributed equitably? Are citizens of poor countries poor *because* of the present system, or *in spite* of the system?

Implementing Jubilee and Sabbatical years provides a means to address the four major issues which confront us now in dealing with Third-World debt: social injustice in the distribution of wealth, work opportunities, environmental issues, and the stability of population as reflected in the sustained relationship between people and land.

Judaism advocates education toward integrity, honesty, and a work ethic based on responsibility to family, employer, employee, society, and the environment. Wealth is held in trust from God; we are responsible for ensuring its fair distribution.

ON JUDAISM AND ECONOMICS

The principal sources of Judaism are the Hebrew Scriptures (called the "Old Testament" by Christians) and the Talmud. The Talmud, completed around 600 C.E.,¹ centers on the Mishna, a law code compiled in Palestine c. 210 C.E. The Talmud interprets and supplements the Scriptures, and a large body of literature known as "rabbinic literature" has grown up around both the Bible and the Talmud as they have been interpreted and put into practice in different ages and societies.

¹ C.E., for "current era," is used by Jews in preference to the specifically Christian A.D., which is an abbreviation of the Latin *Anno Domini*, "the year of our Lord."

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Since the classical sources of Judaism were compiled many centuries ago, they do not directly address issues of global economics in terms of twenty-first century economic analysis. Nevertheless, they contain much material that can help us formulate a perspective on these issues. How those sources are used, and how their values can be implemented in our global society, are matters of debate; it is important to distinguish which matters can be decided on the basis of the religious sources and which matters depend on a more technical economic analysis for their resolution.

Even on the broadest level it is dangerous to equate biblical provisions with modern economic theories. For instance, in Judaism as in other religions, Scripture has been cited in support of both centrally controlled socialist economies and free-market principles, just as in earlier times it was cited both for and against the institution of slavery. The truth seems to be that Scripture is not concerned with designing an economic "system," but rather with how to implement justice and compassion within any given system.

The sources of Judeo-Christian religious tradition address both ends and means. "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18) and "Justice, justice shall you pursue" (Deut. 16:20) define the ends or values that ought to guide economic activity; economic activity should be conducted in a manner that (a) shows concern for the well-being of the other and (b) is equitable.²

These broad statements of principle are supplemented, in Scripture and the rabbinic tradition, with detailed guidance to just and compassionate personal behavior, together with some indications of the means by which social justice might be implemented in society. This guidance, expressed through the *mitzvot* ("commandments") in the system of *halakha* ("law"), offers a path to attain the objective of creating a just and compassionate society. "Love your neighbor" is supplemented by numerous *mitzvot* and exhortations relating to almsgiving and other forms of indi-

² All translations are the author's own except where otherwise indicated. Depending on which version of the Bible you consult, there may be slight variations in the English translations.

vidual and collective benevolence; "pursue justice" is supplemented by a full commercial and criminal code.

Aims and objectives can be formulated at a universal level, and at this level it is easy to see that the biblical objective of creating a just and compassionate society is still relevant. Laws, however, can only be formulated with a specific society in mind. We must ask whether and to what extent it is possible to build on the laws formulated by the Bible and the rabbis in our undertaking to achieve justice and compassion at a global level in the technologically sophisticated, international, and multicultural society of today.

THE PRESENT ECONOMIC ORDER

Religious people do not identify progress with the increased provision of material goods and services. Nevertheless, most religions teach us to look after the poor, to heal the sick, to provide food and shelter for those in need, to educate, and to pursue justice. All of these counsels demand material and personal resources. Even from a religious point of view, therefore, we are justified in regarding the growth of wealth and material resources as a major element in human progress toward the kind of world we believe God wants us to strive for.

Based on this idea that material wealth serves God, the creation of wealth becomes not only acceptable but desirable. However, the desirability of the creation of wealth raises two major issues for religious people. At the individual, personal level, is it possible to engage in the pursuit of wealth without succumbing to greed and selfishness? Second, at all levels of society, right up to the global level, there is the vexing problem of distribution: can wealth be distributed equitably?

For reasons that will become clear, we begin with the second issue. The most obvious success of the present global economic system is its efficiency in the provision of services, the processing of resources, and the production of goods. Only large, transnational enterprises can achieve the levels of investment and economies of scale to do this; only a technology-driven global economy can create a climate for profitable transnational corporations. Even governments, when they fund major defense, edu-

cation, and welfare projects, are dependent on revenues raised by direct or indirect taxation of such enterprises.

While the global economy maximizes resources and production, the most obvious deficiency of the system is the uneven distribution of wealth. It is, of course, extremely difficult to measure wealth, and even more difficult to measure human happiness. In 1996³ the United States per capita income was \$28,495, and Burkina Faso's was \$230. The world average was \$5,170. Furthermore, the U.S. figure was increasing, and Burkina Faso's was declining.⁴ Citizens of the U.S. may, on average, receive incomes 124 times higher than those of citizens of Burkina Faso, but no one would claim that citizens of the U.S. are, on average, 124 times *happier* than those of Burkina Faso. Moreover, the statistical average conceals unevenness within each country; some citizens of the U.S. are poorer than some citizens of Burkina Faso. Nevertheless, from a religious standpoint, it is grossly unjust that such discrepancies exist.

Are citizens of poor countries poor *because* of the present system, or *in spite* of the system? Were the people of Burkina Faso ever significantly wealthier than they are now? If not, is the cause of their present poverty "the international system" or perhaps local corruption, political instability, or uncontrolled population increase which outstrips productivity? (On the last point, note that the 1996 birthrate/1000 was U.S. 14.9 and Burkina Faso 47, against a world average of 25.)⁵

Whatever the causes of the vast disparities we see, the result of these disparities is social and economic injustice among and within nations and the overexploitation and destruction of natural resources. Third-World debt is one of the most worrying consequences of the economic imbalance that exists, and environmental degradation is another.

³ Statistics in this section have been taken from the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, DVD edition, 2001.

⁴ Statistics compiled about five years previously were U.S. \$24,700, Burkina Faso \$326, a discrepancy of a mere 76:1.

⁵ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, DVD edition, 2001.

TOWARD A JEWISH "ECONOMIC THEORY"

Judaism does not provide a ready-made, comprehensive economic theory, but it does offer guidance on paradigms to those with the technical expertise to construct economic theories. We will first consider attitudes toward wealth, justice, equity, and benevolence. After that, we will inquire what specific biblical legislation can tell us about economic principles, using as our examples the prohibition of charging interest on loans (Exod. 22:24; Lev. 25:36, 37; Deut. 23:20, 21) and the regulations governing the Sabbatical and Jubilee years. Every Sabbatical, or seventh year, land lay fallow and debts were cancelled (Lev. 25:1-7); every Jubilee, or fiftieth year, slaves were given their freedom and land returned to its owner (Lev. 25:8-55).

Attitudes Toward Wealth and the Pursuit of Wealth

Psalms 24 opens with the words, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." In other words, all that we are and all we possess belong absolutely to God. Poverty, the rabbis taught, "is a wheel that rolls around the world."⁶ Rags or riches can be anyone's lot, for ownership of material goods is a temporary trusteeship granted by God. It follows from this that ownership is a God-given privilege and carries with it the responsibility of right use.

At Usha in Galilee in the second century the rabbis decreed that no one should give away more than one-fifth of his assets at one time and thus become dependent on others.⁷ As Maimonides a thousand years later expressed it, one who brings poverty on himself by dissipating his resources and becoming dependent on others is a fool (Maimonides 8:13).⁸ Real poverty is an affliction, not a virtue.

⁶ Babylonian Talmud *Shabbat* 151b, attributed to the school of Rabbi Ishmael. See also *Tur:Yore Deah* 247.

⁷ Babylonian Talmud *Kerubot* 50a. It is clear from the codes (for instance, *Shulchan Arukh:Yoreh Deah* 249) that this limit does not apply where the need is great or where one is making a will.

⁸ Maimonides, Moses, *Mishneh Torah: Arakhin Vaharamin* 8:13. Significantly, Maimonides codified this rule in the section of his work dealing with temple gifts rather than in the section on charity.

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Both riches and poverty challenge a person's moral commitment. The biblical sage Agur bin Jakeh prayed, "... give me neither poverty nor riches, provide me only with my daily bread, for if I have plenty I may deny thee and say, 'Who is the Lord?' And if I am reduced to poverty, I may steal and take in vain the name of my God" (Prov. 30:8).⁹ Nevertheless, the rabbis condemned the pursuit of wealth for its own sake as a major evil, responsible through envy and greed for human conflict and for turning people away from God.

Jewish moralistic literature discourages individuals from engaging more than absolutely necessary in commerce; one should seek one's basic needs, that is all (*histaḥkut*). Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto (1707-46) wrote eloquently on this concept:

For there is no worldly pleasure upon whose heels some sin does not follow. For example, food and drink when free from all dietary prohibitions are permitted, but filling oneself brings in its wake the putting off of the yoke of Heaven, and drinking of wine brings in its wake licentiousness and other varieties of evil. . . . If he is once made to lack his usual fare he will be painfully aware of the fact and will thrust himself into the heat of the race for possessions and property so that his table will be spread in accordance with his desires. He will thence be drawn on to wrongdoing and theft, and thence to taking oaths and to all the other sins that follow in its wake; and he will depart from the Divine service, from Torah and from prayer. . . . (Luzzatto 1987, 183)

A strong tradition, however, endorses the dignity of labor:

Happy are all who fear the Lord and walk in his ways. When you eat the fruit of your own labor, you shall be happy and it will be good for you. (Ps. 128)

The Bible here portrays the contentment that comes to those who are blessed with self-sufficiency and are free from depen-

⁹ This concept is elaborated by the thirteenth-century Spanish Jewish philosopher and exegete Bachya ben Asher in his *Kad Hakemach*. For a translation of the relevant section, see Chavel 1980, 484.

dence on the "gifts of flesh and blood."¹⁰ Ben Zoma, a rabbi of the second century, asked, "Who is rich? He who rejoices in his portion."¹¹ Ben Zoma knew that one had to have a portion in which to rejoice, and he would have understood well the malaise of the unemployed even where they were not actually suffering extreme deprivation.

Justice and Benevolence

Much *halakha*, or Jewish "religious law," as expressed in codes and in the responsa (written replies to specific questions addressed to rabbis), is devoted to the regulation of commerce, including matters such as just price, competition, and employment. Edward Zipperstein's summary of the twelfth-century *Sefer Hasidim* on employer/employee relations conveys the importance of this matter:

An employer must not impose superfluous hardship on employees, nor may he demand that the workers exceed their capabilities or strength . . . local custom is a prime consideration in many instances.

Workers must be enabled to come home prior to sunset on the Sabbath and holidays. The pregnant maidservant is to be extended special consideration. . . .

An employer is not permitted to embarrass, insult, belittle or degrade an employee. An employer is not permitted to withhold a worker's pay in order to recover a debt. . . . Promptness of (wage) payment is stressed by Biblical edict (Leviticus 19:13).

Providing employment is a most significant form of benevolence. Placing a person's job in jeopardy is considered an evil act. In hiring an employee, preference is to be granted to the applicant less capable of performing the task, since the more capable person will no doubt be able to obtain employment, but the employment possibilities of the less capable may be questionable.

¹⁰ "Let us not be in need of the gifts of flesh and blood" (fourth paragraph of the Orthodox Jewish grace after meals).

¹¹ Mishna *Avot* 4:1.

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For compensation (sc. payment) received, the worker is expected to render proper, capable and efficient service to the employer. The employee is not permitted to waste time, slack off in his performance, interrupt his work, leave his work, or engage in unnecessary time-consuming conversations. . . . Jewish law does not favour the protection of any particular group, employer, or employee, rich or poor. Equal rights and justice is demanded from all parties. (Zipperstein 1983, 115)¹²

How can we move from the medieval source summarized by Zipperstein to the realities of contemporary life? For instance, within the framework of the medieval Jewish community it was feasible, when hiring an employee, to grant preference to the less capable applicant. Is this still possible—or even desirable—with today's large, impersonal firms, skill-based efficiency, and widespread unemployment? We might perhaps regard the rule mentioned as a prototype of affirmative action, or of the sort of requirement now mandated in many states that businesses over a certain size must employ a minimum quota of disabled people. Clearly, the application of these early sources in our own society demands careful judgement; the questions remain valid, but the solutions can be controversial.

Public welfare provision is another area for which precedent may be found in *halakha*. But even when we have agreed, in principle, that workers and others should benefit from improved health care and the like, we have to decide whether this should be paid for out of public money (national or local taxes) or private sources (insurance plans paid for by employer, employee, or a combination). There is ample precedent in the responsa and in the *taqqanot* ("local directives") of medieval communities to sup-

¹² Zipperstein is dependent on Abraham Cronbach's article, "Social Thinking in the Sefer Hasidim," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 22 (1949): 1-147. He has, perhaps, misunderstood Cronbach's citation on p. 6 of this article; *Sefer Hasidim* recommends (Parma edition #1020) that preference be given to an applicant who lacks other skills and, hence, has less opportunity for employment, not that preference be given to an applicant "less capable of performing the task" in question.

port the notion that people might be communally taxed for "charity," under which heading most of the money that now goes for welfare would be classified (Frechhof 1959, 121-24).

Love and Benevolence

Almsgiving features prominently in Jewish teaching and practice, and the rabbis constantly impressed on their followers the need for compassion and charity. The Hebrew word *zedaka* ("almsgiving") derives from a root meaning to be "right, fair, or correct." Almsgiving is not so much piety as fairness, ensuring correct distribution of the wealth God has entrusted to us. As we shall see in the following tale, almsgiving is part of *hesed*, which in biblical Hebrew means "love" or "compassion" and is frequently translated "lovingkindness."

The Talmud¹³ attributes a discussion on benevolence to the sage Rabbi Akiva and Tanneius Rufus, Roman governor of Judea at the outbreak of the Bar Kokhba War in 132 C.E. The general taunted Akiva, "If your God loves the poor, why does He not support them?" The rabbi replied, "So that through [caring for] them¹⁴ we may be saved from the judgment of hell." The general persisted, "Suppose an earthly king was angry with his servant and put him in prison and ordered that he should be given no food or drink, and a man went and gave him food and drink. If the king heard, would he not be angry with him? And you are called 'servants,' as it is written, *For the children of Israel are my servants*" (Lev. 25:55). Akiva responded, "Suppose an earthly king was angry with one of his children, and put him in prison and ordered that no food or drink should be given to him, and someone went and gave him food and drink. If the king heard of it, would he not send him a present? And we are called 'children,' as it is written, *You are children of the Lord your God*" (Deut. 14:1).

The late-twentieth-century American rabbi and scholar Isadore Twersky formulated a theory of benevolence on the basis of this story (Twersky 1982, 137). The five points he derives from it are as follows:

¹³ Babylonian Talmud *Bava Bara* 10a.

¹⁴ That is, through the virtue of charity.

1. God has, in a manner of speaking, abdicated to His people part of His own function in order to enable them to transcend mere biological existence. When we practice benevolence we share directly in His work.
2. We are all equal, all "children of God"; even our sin and temporary disgrace do not abrogate this relationship.
3. The fact that God's judgment has condemned an individual to poverty does not allow us to sit in judgment on that person or to desist from giving help; his situation challenges us to vigorous ethical response.
4. We cannot "dismiss a destitute person with a counterfeit expression of faith: 'Rely on God . . . ! He will help you.' We are the ones who must help.

5. *Halakha* (Jewish law, which regulates benevolence) is the system of rules by which a principle of faith is anchored into a detailed ethical code. It encourages spontaneous giving yet provides a discipline which does not leave the poor dependent on the moods and whims of the rich.

The Talmud, like most traditional religious writings, addresses its counsel to the individual, or at most to the community. In modern states, much that in earlier times depended entirely on private benevolence is funded in part or in whole by state taxation. This does not relieve the individual of all responsibility; it enlarges and complicates it. How, for instance, should international aid be channelled? The private individual has a minor role to play in direct assistance, but a more significant role in lobbying governments and large corporations or charities to give appropriate aid.

Interest

The Bible forbids Israelites to charge for lending money or food to fellow Israelites. "If you lend money to any of my people . . . do not be like a creditor, do not impose interest on him" (Exod. 22:24). "If your brother gets poor . . . you shall help him . . . take no interest nor increase from him . . ." (Lev. 25:35-37). "Do not lend on interest to your brother, interest on money or on food . . ." (Deut. 23:20). However, "Lend on interest to a foreigner . . ." (Deut. 23:21).

Psalms 15 and a large part of Ezekiel 18 are lavish in their praise of him "who does not put out his money on usury"; the Talmud glosses, "even to a non-Jew."¹⁵ Economic circumstances, not least the role of Jews as court and church financiers and their exclusion from many "normal" occupations, led Jews in the Middle Ages to revert to the biblical norm of lending on interest to non-Jews.

Moses Maimonides (1138-1204) classified lending, including *ribit* ("interest") among the laws intended to teach compassion (Maimonides 1963, 3:39).¹⁶ Joseph Karo (1475-1588) likewise incorporated the laws of *ribit*, not in the civil and criminal law division of his great law code, the *Shulhan 'Arukh*, but among "religious" laws in the division that contains also the laws of charity.¹⁷ The underlying thought seems to be that the charging of interest, unlike for instance theft, is not an intrinsic moral wrong; the forgoing of interest is more akin to an act of personal benevolence, though unlike a charitable gift it is not optional, at least within the community. The Christian scholastic Albertus Magnus (1200-1280), a teacher of Thomas Aquinas, likewise founded the doctrines of just price and usury on the duty of love.

Modern commerce relies even more heavily than medieval commerce on credit. Jewish law permits borrowing on the basis of a document, the *hetter 'isqa* (analogous to the Islamic *Qirad* and medieval Christian *commendite*), that converts the loan into a business participation in which the lender may suffer loss as well as profit. Since in practice the lender is unlikely to suffer loss, some people view the arrangement as something of a legal fiction, that dresses up one form of transaction as another. But those who defend it argue that the underlying principle that interest may not be taken on a loan, though profit may be made through an investment where there is also risk of loss, has been preserved.

Sabbatical and Jubilee Years

The Jubilee and Sabbatical year regulations in the Code of Holiness (Lev. 25) directly address the issue of the unfair distrib-

¹⁵ Babylonian Talmud *Makkot* 24a. Compare Kimhi's commentary on Psalm 22:23.

¹⁶ See also Babylonian Talmud *Makkot* 24a.

¹⁷ *Shulhan 'Arukh Yore De'ah* 159-77.

ution of wealth. In the seventh year the land "rests" and recovers from its exploitation and debts are remitted; in the fiftieth year, land returns to its hereditary smallholders who, themselves, hold it only on trust from God, and slaves go free. These regulations aim to ensure that wealth is not concentrated in the hands of the few, that families are not uprooted from their patrimony, and that no Israelite is permanently enslaved.

We do not know whether the Levitical regulations were ever fully implemented; perhaps they represent an ideal as yet unfilled. It would, in any case, be naïve to apply to the contemporary global situation rules addressed to a particular society in the first millennium B.C.E.; the rules are only fully relevant within the idealized society of Israel as envisaged in Leviticus. Yet with careful, contextual reading, it is possible to infer basic principles on which we can build an approach to modern problems.

Leviticus assumes that population remains stable. If population increases, or even if population increases in some tribal areas and declines in others, the system of land distribution breaks down. On a grand scale, the decline of the Carolingian Empire can be attributed to the simple fact that its founder Charlemagne (742-814) had too many descendants, each of whom claimed an inheritance. Leviticus's idealized picture of parcels of land allotted in the days of Joshua being enjoyed in perpetuity by the families to whom they had been granted depends on each of those families remaining very much the same size in perpetuity—not a likely scenario.

Another assumption is that things will go wrong if left alone. This may be the most important single lesson we can derive from Leviticus. We should always assume that even if we set up the best system of rules we can devise, things *will* go wrong. People will learn to beat the system. They will start to exploit one another, and some will seize the others' territory and amass wealth while others will become poor. So we must frame additional laws to put everything right every now and then, say every seven years, with a major clean-up once in fifty years, like the Sabbatical and Jubilee years.

A third assumption is that slavery will continue to exist, both the enslavement of one Israelite by another and the enslavement

of the heathen from the surrounding—or displaced—nations. In this respect at least we have made progress. Pockets of slavery do persist in the world, and we must not close our eyes to them. However, we trivialize the evil of slavery if, like Marx, we refer to underpaid employees as “wage slaves.”

Leviticus, in instituting the cancellation of debt at the end of each seven-year period, clearly has in mind accumulated private debt, in an agrarian, pre-industrial society. Is this concept equally applicable to commercial borrowing in a highly developed industrial society or to the international financing of state economies? And if it is not equally applicable, is there perhaps some analogous form of debt remission which could be implemented in certain circumstances? The greatest difficulty to be faced here is not the actual cost of writing off Third-World debt, but the effect this might have on the future availability of credit. Who would lend if they thought the debt might be cancelled? In the too few instances in which an international debt has been written off this problem has been overcome, but only because the special circumstances have been clearly defined.

In sum, the Jubilee and Sabbatical years address the four major issues which confront us now in dealing with Third-World debt: social injustice in the distribution of wealth, work opportunities, environmental issues, and the stability of population as reflected in the sustained relationship between people and land.

CRITIQUE OF THE RELIGIOUS TRADITION

There are three main areas in which the Jewish tradition presents difficulties when we turn to it for guidance in contemporary global economic issues. They are as follows:

- the paradox of self-interest
- the problem of extrapolation
- the need to differentiate between moral and technical issues

The Paradox of Self-Interest

Is it possible to engage in the pursuit of wealth without succumbing to greed and selfishness? In 1776 Adam Smith, in *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, argued

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that the pursuit of self-interest, far from undermining the moral fabric of society, as all the religions seem to have taught, actually resulted in the maximization of social well-being. Smith, the classical advocate of laissez-faire economics, also formulated the classical expression (greatly elaborated by later economists) of the need for appropriate government intervention:

According to the system of natural liberty, the sovereign has only three duties to attend to . . . first, the duty of protecting the society from the violence and invasion of independent societies; secondly, the duty of protecting, as far as possible, every member of the society from the injustice or oppression of every other member of it, or the duty of establishing an exact administration of justice; and, thirdly, the duty of erecting and maintaining certain public works and certain institutions, which it can never be for the interest of any individual, or small number of individuals, to erect and maintain, because the profit could never repay the expense to any individual or small number of individuals, though it may frequently do much more than repay it to a great society. (Smith 1950, II: 184-85)

Smith endorses “the pursuit of self-interest” rather than personal greed, but it is not easy to distinguish between the two, except perhaps with regard to the degree of personal restraint involved. Many of the most successful entrepreneurs, who at some stage in their lives have generously endowed hospitals, schools, improved working conditions, and spearheaded other virtuous projects, were undoubtedly motivated by personal greed and ambition to become rich and famous. This creates what can be called either a paradox or a dilemma: The benefit of the many is secured by the greed of the few.

Perhaps the rabbis were thinking along these lines when they declared that “If not for the evil inclination no one would build a house, marry a wife, beget children or engage in commerce.”¹⁸ Likewise, they report that the men of the Great Synod prayed successfully that the temptation of idolatry be abolished. They then prayed for the abolition of lust, and this was granted. But when

¹⁸ Midrash *Genesis Rabbah* 9.

they saw, after three days, that "not an egg was laid in the whole land of Israel" they relented just to the extent that was necessary to ensure human survival.¹⁹

We must not lightly conclude that because the creation of wealth enhances our ability to do better things for our fellow humans and it is, in itself, a desirable activity, that it does not matter how it is pursued. The end does not justify any and every means by which it may be attained. The religions are in a position to call for ethical standards in commerce. It can be very difficult, however, for an individual in a competitive situation to maintain those standards unless they are sustained by public law. At the global level, such laws have to be secured by international agreements. This is not an easy task since different nations and cultures have different concepts of what constitutes corrupt practice.

The Extrapolation Problem

We have already illustrated the difficulty of applying laws, for instance those on employer/employee relations, in societies vastly different from the one in which the laws were formulated. Even so, the value system on which those laws appear to be based may be refined and developed beyond its original area of application; we illustrated this in the section above on the Sabbatical and Jubilee years.

A further difficulty arises specifically in extrapolating contemporary meaning from the rabbinic sources. Most rabbinic wisdom is couched in terms of "Israel," that is, the Jewish people. Rabbinic hermeneutics restricted the application of some biblical rules to the faithful among the people of Israel. This restrictive interpretation leaves the rabbis with the problem of how to apply such basic ideas as respect for property rights and regard for human dignity to all people, including those outside the Jewish community.

Their solution was to step beyond the system of rules and to formulate a series of broad principles which they used *inter alia* to govern the relationships of Jews to those outside the bond of faith or peoplehood.²⁰ These principles include the following:

¹⁹ Babylonian Talmud *Yoma* 69b, commenting on Nehemiah 9.

²⁰ See Ernst Simon's essay "The Neighbour We Shall Love" (Fox 1975, 29-).

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- *tiqqun olam*, "establishing the world aright"
- *darkei shalom*, "the ways of peace"
- *darkei noam*, "the ways of pleasantness"
- *qiddush Hashem*, "sanctifying God's name," that is, behaving in such a manner as to bring credit to God
- *mishum eiva*, "on account of hatred." This was invoked to justify departure from the standard law in situations where to follow it might stir up enmity between Jews and non-Jews²¹

These aims (fairness, peace, pleasantness, godliness, avoidance of provocation) are vital in setting the agenda for a peaceful world; they convey an overriding moral imperative to seek peace.

However, the simplest approach would seem to be to understand "Israel" in the Bible and rabbinic sources as a paradigm. True, the values of Torah are worked out in terms of Israel, that is Jews, and with a particular society in mind. But this should be understood as an example, to be applied *mutatis mutandis* to other nations and ultimately to global society. Some *halakha*, such as ritual legislation, is clearly oriented to Israel, though it will have parallels in other cultures. Much is of broader relevance and can be transposed with appropriate changes to other societies. At its heart are truly universal values, and it is these which we must find ways to implement at a global level.

Technical Matters

People would not go to the sources of their religion to discover how to repair their automobile, though they might invoke religion to help them decide whether to drive it to the hospital to

²¹ 56) for an attempt to define the application of the "golden rule" within Judaism. Simon has not clearly grasped the fact that the rabbis used general ethical principles rather than specific scriptural "rules" to regulate behavior toward those "outside the covenant."

²¹ *Tiqqun olam* is, strictly speaking, an "extra-legal" measure introduced within the community to avoid impossible situations arising; cf. Babylonian Talmud *Gittin* 34b, 36a. The *locus classicus* for *darkei shalom* is Mishna *Gittin* 5:8-9. *Qiddush Hashem* often bears the meaning of "martyrdom"; for its use in setting standards of moral behavior in dealings with non-Jews, see Babylonian Talmud *Yevamot* 79a; *Bava Qama* 113a.

visit a sick friend or to the casino to gamble. Much the same applies to the global economy. Whether to spend time making money or meditating is a problem somebody might decide by reference to religious values. But how to generate or distribute wealth most efficiently is a technical problem, vastly more complex than how to build an automobile.

Even if you decide to make money you have to make ethical decisions—how to treat your employees, co-directors, and shareholders; what constitutes fair competition or just price; how your activities affect the environment. These decisions will be affected by your religious outlook. But the determination of the most efficient method to manufacture your product, of its potential effects on the environment, of the most effective way to market it, are not primarily determined by ethics, even though ethics may determine whether or not the most efficient method should be used.

This is why so much religious antagonism to multinational companies, or whatever the “bogy” of the moment may be, is injudicious. Multinational corporations as such are not necessarily evil. Perhaps they are the most efficient and environmentally sound means we have to produce and distribute goods and services, or perhaps not, or more likely some are and some are not. But all this must be evaluated in economic, not religious, terms, and only when the economic evaluation has been done can we formulate the ethical questions to which religious considerations may be relevant.

The ethical questions themselves often have to be decided in a political context. International commerce has outdistanced international political cooperation. Multinational corporations are forced to operate under multiple jurisdictions, often without coordinated international regulation. Governments, not companies, carry the ultimate responsibility for protection of the environment and the welfare of their citizens. In this there is hope, for democratic governments are answerable to the people; citizens, religious and otherwise, are able and therefore morally obliged to influence global ethics by lobbying their governments and international institutions.

CONCLUSION—A JEWISH CONTRIBUTION TO THE CURRENT DEBATE

Education

Appropriate education is a priority for any nation to create and sustain the economic base necessary to support what the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights acknowledges as the legitimate rights of all people, including the rights to life, liberty, and security of person; to freedom from arbitrary arrest; to a fair trial; to be presumed innocent until proved guilty; to freedom from interference with the privacy of one's home and correspondence; to freedom of movement and residence; to asylum, nationality, and ownership of property; to freedom of thought, conscience, religion, opinion, and expression; to association, peaceful assembly, and participation in government; to social security, work, rest, and a standard of living adequate for health and well-being; to education; and to participation in the social life of one's community.²²

Consideration of this list demonstrates that human rights are expensive; adequate social security, for instance, is problematic even in a wealthy nation like the United Kingdom. Yet much of the money intended by the international community to help less developed nations has in the past served merely to enrich and aggrandize governments, administrators, and middlemen. Corruption may well be the greatest single cause of international funds being locally diverted to ends other than those for which they were loaned. Religion surely has an important part to play in molding public culture to abhor corruption.

Even where there is no corruption, a government has to decide how to allocate its resources. What comes first? How does any government decide how much of its budget to allocate to education, to welfare, or to defense? If such decisions are difficult for rich nations, they are agonizing for poor ones. Poor nations are

²² Summary of articles 3-27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted as resolution 217 A (III) by the General Assembly of the United Nations on December 10, 1948.

often tempted to cut education since the damage is not immediately apparent; few are physically injured or hungry as a direct effect of lack of education. The damage is indirect and long-term, since the basis for the future success of the individual and the society is eroded.

Two sorts of education are vital for economic success, the technical and the moral/cultural. Technical education includes training in skills appropriate to the technological development and economic resources of the country, as well as management techniques to ensure that the skills are efficiently used in service or manufacture and that the end products are effectively marketed. Moral and cultural education, in which religion plays a part, must cultivate honesty and a work ethic based on a sense of responsibility to family, work associates (employer and employee), society, and the environment.

Religions regard greed, envy, and ambition as vices. However, means must be found to harness these natural tendencies to productivity while moderating their harmful aspects; education, legislation, and leisure pursuits all contribute to the constructive channelling of energy.

Significance of the Jubilee

No permanent remedy is readily available to heal the sickness of poverty and the maldistribution of wealth—"for the poor shall not cease out of the land" (Deut. 15:11). To believe in such a remedy is a utopian fallacy. Much, however, can be and should be done to alleviate hardship both internationally and locally, even if the solutions are partial and impermanent. On this limited basis, "there shall be no poor among you" (Deut. 15:4).

When we enter into the dialogue of Israel with God about people and land, wealth, and poverty, we discover the universal values (justice, love, human equality, and harmony with the land and with God) for which the Torah of ancient Israel is a paradigm that can be applied to our contemporary world. An ongoing dialectic with Scripture as a base—in particular the Sabbatical and Jubilee passages—will provide a fruitful beginning. We must engage in dialogue with economists, sociologists, educators, and experts in natural sciences including environmental studies. This dialogue

will help reveal the particular ways in which the "eternal" values can be most effectively pursued in our time. Our approach must never be doctrinaire, but pragmatic, heuristic, with constant feedback and monitoring of the system. We must commit to a readiness to start again if things go wrong, as they certainly will from time to time.

Below is a synopsis of the laws on economic matters in Leviticus. First comes a restatement of each law or group of laws; each restatement is followed by a suggestion of how the law can be extended to become relevant to the needs of contemporary global society.

- Aim at the fair distribution of wealth, work, and credit (numerous laws on care of those in need, and the "marginalized").

Global extension—let the rich nations assist the poor.

- Provide credit for those who need it, but not in such a way that they cannot discharge their debts (no interest).

Global extension—international finance, favorable terms.

- Provide opportunity for remission of excessive debt (sabbatical release).

Global extension—rescheduling and remission of debt.

- Do not overexploit the land (let it "rest" every seven years).

Global extension—conserve the environment.

- Preserve the bond between people and land (land reverts to original owner in fifty years).

Global extension—traditional land rights should be respected as far as compatible with economic realities; as fewer people work on the land, our ultimate dependence on its resources and our love for it must find fresh ways of expression.

- The land is held as a trust from God ("... for the land is mine, and you are strangers and sojourners with me"—Lev. 25:23).

Global extension—the planet is held as a trust from God.

- Periodically when things go wrong, as they inevitably will in the course of time, joyfully "overhaul" the system (Jubilee "year of freedom").

Global extension—some will enrich themselves at the expense of

others, some will be placed under the domination of others. Be ready from time to time to make the necessary adjustments to bring freedom to all, in joy, peace, and common humanity.

All this implies a full and active program for the improvement of the world economic order. In sum: The planet is held as a trust from God. Development is subject to the constraints needed to conserve the environment; it must be sustainable over the long term. Our common humanity under God demands that the rich nations assist the poor. International finance must be provided under favorable terms, without the imposition of conditions and structures that hamper development. Periodically, debts may need rescheduling or even remission; this must be done judiciously, so that future credit is not inhibited. Traditional land rights should be respected as far as compatible with economic realities; as fewer people work on the land and mobility increases, our ultimate dependence on its resources and our love for it must find fresh ways of expression. No system is perfect, and inevitably some will enrich themselves at the expense of others; some will be placed under the domination of others; from time to time we must be ready to make the necessary adjustments to bring freedom to all, in joy, peace, and common humanity.

The contribution offered by Judaism, in the company of other religious traditions, is to call for the implementation of justice and compassion within the present order, to stimulate the "technicians" to devise means for the creation and distribution of wealth that are morally superior and more efficient than those we now have, and to act as a constant witness to the universal values that attest God's presence in His world.

CLASSICAL SOURCES OF JUDAISM

Bible (Hebrew Scriptures). The best recent Jewish translation is that of the Jewish Publication Society (2nd ed.; Philadelphia, 1999). It is a collaborative venture of scholars and rabbis from the main branches of Judaism, and parts of it appeared as early as 1962.

JUDAISM

Mishna. This has the form of a law code and was compiled around 215 C.E. in Palestine. It is elaborated further in the Tosefta and in the two Talmudim (plural of Talmud), that of the Land of Israel, completed around 450 C.E., and the more influential Babylonian Talmud, completed around 550 C.E.

The term *Midrash*, or "interpretation," is used for various works of biblical interpretation, both *halakhic* ("to do with law") and *aggadic* ("homiletic").

English translations of most of these works are widely available.

After the "classical" period the development of the law was expressed in *responsa* (replies to questions addressed to rabbis and religious judges), and from time to time full codifications were compiled, the best known being those of Maimonides and Karo referred to in the essay.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Some nations have a per capita income more than a hundred times higher than other nations. To what extent does the responsibility for adjusting this inequity devolve upon (a) individuals, (b) governments, (c) multinational corporations, (d) religious bodies?
2. Is it feasible or desirable to abolish the payment of interest on money loans? Are the Jewish system of *heter 'iska* and the Islamic *Qirad* genuine alternatives to "the system" or merely legal fictions to disguise interest payments?
3. Leviticus 19:18 says, "Love your neighbor as yourself." This is great ethical teaching, but how does it help solve the practical issues of the fair distribution of wealth?
4. The Hebrew Scriptures constantly stress the relationship of people and land. What are the consequences for this relationship when we consider growing populations and changing patterns of land utilization?
5. Can we conclude from the biblical laws of the Jubilee (Leviticus 25) that we ought periodically to cancel all Third-World debts?

SUGGESTED FURTHER READINGS

Large tracts of the Bible, especially the writings of the prophets, are devoted to social justice. Samples: Leviticus 25; Deuteronomy 16:18-20; 1 Kings 21; Psalm 1; Psalm 94; Isaiah 5:8; Isaiah 32; Amos 2. For an understanding of the prophetic concept of justice, see chapter 11 of A. J. Heschel's The Prophets, listed below.

Heschel, Abraham Joshua, *The Prophets*. New York: Harper & Row, 1962. Chapter 11 is an excellent introduction to the prophetic concept of justice.

Siegel, Seymour, "A Jewish View of Economic Justice." In *Contemporary Jewish Ethics and Morality: A Reader*, ed. Elliot N. Dorff and Louis E. Newman. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995, pp. 336-443.

Solomon, Norman, *Judaism and World Religion*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991. Chapters 2-4.

Chapter 6

GOD'S HOUSEHOLD: CHRISTIANITY, ECONOMICS, AND PLANETARY LIVING

By Sallie McFague

ABSTRACT

Religions help us form the basic assumptions about who we are and how we should act in the world. Presently, two worldviews with accompanying economic rules for planetary living vie for our loyalty. One is the neoclassical market model with its ideology of greed and its goal of growth: the consumer society. The other is the ecological economic model with its creed of interdependence and its goal of planetary sustainability: the just society. Many Christians, particularly middle-class North Americans, are presently captive to the first model. Christianity should, however, advocate the second model—the one that sees the good of all beings, including human beings, as dependent on a sustainable planet where resources are justly distributed. The ecological economic model is not Christian economics; rather, it is an economic model that faintly resembles the radical inclusiveness and open table of Jesus' Kingdom of God. It is better than the market model for human beings and the planet. It is also a more appropriate one for Christians to support.

RELIGION AND ECONOMICS

None of the world's major religions has as its maxim: "Blessed are the greedy." Given the many differences among religions on doctrines and practice, it is remarkable to find widespread agreement at the level of economics. Often, however, religion is not considered to be *about* economics; in fact, many in most societies do not want religion to intrude into economics. It is preferable, they say, for religion to attend to "religious matters" and leave economics to the economists.

But most religions know better. They know that economics is about human well-being, about who eats and who does not, who has clothes and shelter and who does not, who has the basics for a decent life and who does not. Economics is about life and death, as well as the quality of life. Economics is not just about money, but about sharing scarce resources among all who need them.