



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

# Real Responsibilities

BEHAR · 5768

*"And ye shall hallow the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof: it shall be a jubilee unto you; and ye shall return every man unto his possession, and ye shall return every man unto his family" .*

*Lev. 25:10*

The italicized words, taken from this week's *sedra*, are inscribed on the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia. It was the chiming of this bell from the tower of Independence Hall on 8 July 1776, that summoned citizens to hear the first public reading of the American Declaration of Independence. Biblical freedom inspired American freedom.

They are also the words with which the [economist Noreena Hertz](#) begins her recent book, *I.O.U.* (published in America as *The Debt Threat*), on international debt relief. The verse inspired one of the major economic initiatives in recent years: Jubilee 2000, an international programme by

governments and monetary institutions, to reduce, or in some cases cancel, the burden of debt borne by many developing countries (\$34 billion dollars of debt repayment were cancelled, affecting 22 countries, 18 of them in Africa). Launching the initiative in Britain, the Treasury invited not just economists, but religious leaders also. Jubilee 2000 was explicitly based on the principle of the biblical Jubilee, the fiftieth year, during which slaves were freed, and land returned to its ancestral owners. Seldom has an ancient idea more effectively proved its relevance to the contemporary world. The social programme of Bihar with its concern for economic justice, debt relief, welfare and humane working conditions, speaks with undiminished power to the problems of a global economy.

To be sure, there is no direct inference to be made from the Torah to contemporary politics. Jews have identified with all shades of the political spectrum: from Trotsky to Milton Friedman, from socialism and communism to laissez faire capitalism. The Torah is not an economic theory or a party political programme. It is about eternity, whereas politics is about the here-and-now: the mediation of competing claims and the management of change. The Torah – especially Vayikra (Leviticus) chapter 25 – sets out the parameters of a society based on equality and liberty. These are eternal values. But they conflict. It is hard to pursue both fully at the same time. Communism favours equality at the cost of liberty. Free market capitalism favours liberty at the cost of equality. How we construct the balance varies from age to age and place to place. The State of Israel, for example, was heavily influenced in its early years by socialism (and in the case of the kibbutz, communism). More recently it has moved closer to Reaganomics and Thatcherism. The conditions are not yet in place for a restoration of the biblical Jubilee. According to some authorities, it requires the presence of all or most of the Jewish people – i.e. the absence of a Diaspora. According to others, it only applies when the original twelve tribes occupy the land allocated to them in the days of Moses and Joshua. Despite all these limitations, we can infer certain general parameters of a Torah approach to politics and economics.

Property rights are important to the Biblical vision. [Psalm 128](#) says, 'When you eat the fruit of your labour, you shall be happy and you shall prosper.' The prophet Micah foresaw the day when 'Every

man will sit under his own vine and his own fig tree and no-one will make them afraid' ([Micah 4:4](#)). The classic critique of 'big government' is contained in Samuel's warning against the dangers of corrupt power. Speaking about the risk of appointing a king, he says:

"This is what the king who will reign over you will do: He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. Some he will assign to be commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and others to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and still others to make weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants . . ."

[I Samuel 8](#)

And so on. This becomes high drama in the time of King Ahab, the Prophet Elijah, and the vineyard of Nevoth. The queen, Jezebel, arranges for Nevoth to be killed so that his land can be seized.

Governments tend to appropriate property. Sadly, there continue to be too many parts of the world today where corruption disfigures the exercise of power. Hence private property rights are an essential defence of personal liberty. Within limits, free trade and limited government (albeit with due provision for publicly funded education and welfare) are consistent with a biblical vision whose key concerns are freedom, justice and personal independence. In Judaism, the state exists to serve the individual, not the individual the state.

What [Vayikra chapter 25](#) addresses, however, are the long-term inequities of the market. Poverty creates the need for loans, and the burden of debt can become cumulative and crippling. It can lead people to sell their land and even their freedom: in ancient times this meant selling oneself into slavery. Today it means 'sweatshop' labour at less than subsistence wages. Hence the need for periodic redistribution: the cancellation of debts, the liberation of slaves, and the return of ancestral property (other than that within walled cities). That is the logic of the sabbatical and jubilee years.

It was a gloriously humane structure, the proof of which lies in the fact that even today it inspires politicians, economists and religious leaders far beyond the Jewish community. Its key insight is that the governance of society must be based on moral considerations, above all, the dignity of the individual. No one must suffer humiliating poverty. No member of the covenant community must be condemned to perennial slavery, or debt, or the burden of interest repayments. No one must lose his share in the land. Beyond the specific halachic parameters of these laws is the larger ethical vision of what a decent society should look like. This has not ceased to be compelling in an age of international corporations, instantaneous communications and the global economy.

Underlying the laws is something more fundamental than economics and politics. It is a still-revolutionary concept of property and ownership. Ultimately all things belong to God. This is a theological equivalent of the legal concept of 'eminent domain': the superior dominion of the sovereign power over all lands within its jurisdiction. In the case of Israel, eminent domain – both in relation to persons and to land – is vested in God. This is stated explicitly in our sedra:

In relation to land: "The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is Mine and you are but aliens and My tenants."

Lev. 25:23

In relation to persons: "Because the Israelites are My servants, whom I brought out of Egypt, they must not be sold as slaves. Do not rule over them ruthlessly, but fear your God."

Lev. 25:42-43

Precisely because ownership is vested in God, what we possess, we merely hold as God's trustees. One of the conditions of that trust is that we do not use wealth or power in ways incompatible with human dignity.

In an age of vast inequalities of income within and between societies - in which a billion people lack adequate food and shelter, clean water and medical facilities, and 30,000 children die each day from preventable diseases, the vision of Behar still challenges us with its ideals. Wealth and power are not privileges but responsibilities, and we are summoned to become God's partners in building a world less random and capricious, more equitable and humane.