

What Would G-d's Economy Look Like?

Samuel Hayim Brody – The University of Kansas

Valley Beit Midrash, March 25, 2019

1. Yeshayahu Leibowitz, “The Social Order as a Religious Problem” (1947):

The prophet describes the goal of “those who seek the nearness of God” in terms of social justice (Isa.48). But what is the sociological significance of this demand for social justice? Does it imply affirmation of a specific social order and the rejection of others? Again we remember the prophet who defined religious “good” and “God’s demand of man” as “doing justice and loving mercy” (Mic.5:8). However, “doing justice and loving mercy” have the same importance, the same value, and the same force in the case of relations between a master and his slave in a society based on slavery (“if I did despise the cause of my slave!” [Job 31:13]), relations between the employer and his worker in a capitalistic society, and between comrades at work and rights in a socialistic system. Hence this religious-moral teaching offers no ground for preference of any specific socio-political program.

...However, we are not concerned with the question of society as viewed from the perspective of an abstract religiosity, but rather with the question of its place in the Torah, in a religion encapsulated in a well-defined system of precepts and specific requirements of action. On the face of it, it would seem that the answer to our question is self-evident. After all, the Torah orders and determines a sociopolitical system, beginning with explicit Mitzvoth in the written Torah and concluding with the entire system of laws collection in the books *Possession, Litigations, and Judges* in Maimonides’ Code and in part of *Hoshen Mishpat* of the *Shulhan Arukh*. This answer, usually heard in Orthodox circles, merely evades the issue. On the contrary, the Torah, for all its explicit Mitzvoth, leaves us stranded with the problem of taking a definite political stand on concrete issues. We still do not know whether the Torah, for all its detailed and ramified social and political provisions, deals with society and the state as they ought to be or as they really are. Is it the intention of the Torah to create a specific sociopolitical system, defined by its Mitzvoth, or were the laws given to be applied within an existing system? . . . Today, the Jew who considers the Torah a life program—or pretends to do so—cannot evade the issue of Torah and society by claiming that the regime is forced upon him from outside. He must decide whether his religious stance includes an explicit and mandatory program for the sociopolitical order, or whether his religion is only a personal matter and “private affair,” in conformity with the principle governing the legal system of contemporary secular liberal regimes. If the Torah does prescribe a sociopolitical order, what is it?

2. Menasseh Ben Israel, “To His Highness the Lord Protector of the Commonwealth of England, Scotland, and Ireland” (1655):

It is a thing confirmed, that merchandising is, as it were, the proper profession of the Nation of the Jews. I attribute this in the first place, to the particular Providence and mercy of God towards his

people: for having banished them from their own Country, yet not from his Protection, he hath given them, as it were, a natural instinct, by which they might not only gain what is necessary for their need, but that they should also thrive in Riches and possessions . . . seeing it is no wisdom for them to endeavor the gaining of Lands and other immovable goods, and so to imprison their possessions here, where their persons are subject to so many casualties, banishments, and peregrinations; they are forced to use merchandising until that time, when they shall return to their own Country, that then as God hath promised by the Prophet Zachary, *There shall be found no more any merchant amongst them in the House of the Lord.*

3. Moses Hess, *Rome and Jerusalem* (1862):

No nation was ever so far from the egoistic principle as was the Jewish people. With the Jews, solidarity and social responsibility were always the fundamental principles of life and conduct . . . The acquisition of a common, ancestral soil, the organization of the work on a legal basis, the founding of Jewish societies of agriculture, industry, and commerce on the Mosaic, i.e., socialist principles, these are the foundations on which Oriental Jewry will rise again, and in its rise, will rekindle the glimmering fire of the old Jewish patriotism and light the way to a new life for the Jewry of the entire world.

4. Martin Buber, “Letter to Gandhi” (1939):

Decisive for us is not the promise of the Land—but the command, the fulfillment of which is bound up with the land, with the existence of a free Jewish community in this country. For the Bible tells us and our inmost knowledge testifies to it, that once, more than 3000 years ago, our entry into this land was in the consciousness of a mission from above to set up a just way of life through the generations of our people, such a way of life as can be realized not by individuals in the sphere of their private existence but only by a nation in the establishment of its society: communal ownership of the land (Lev. 25:23); regularly recurrent leveling of social distinctions (Lev. 25:13); guarantee of the independence of each individual (Ex. 21:2); mutual help (Ex. 23:4ff); a common Sabbath embracing serf and beast as beings with equal claim (Ex.23:12); a Sabbatical year whereby, letting the soil rest, everybody is admitted to the free enjoyment of its fruits (Lev.25:5-7). . . . No other nation has ever been faced at the beginning of its career with such a mission. Here is something which allows of no forgetting, and from which there is no release. At that time we did not carry out what was imposed upon us. We went into exile with our task unperformed; but the command remained with us and it has become more urgent than ever. We need our own soil in order to fulfill it. We need the freedom of ordering our own life. No attempt can be made on foreign soil and under foreign statute. It may not be that the soil and the freedom for fulfillment be denied us. We are not covetous, Mahatma; our one desire is that at last we may obey.

5. Meir Tamari, *With All Your Possessions: Jewish Ethics and Economic Life* (1987):

. . . there exists an ethical and moral framework for economic activity which is intrinsic to Judaism. This framework must not be confused with economic theory, nor must it be seen as promoting a capitalist or socialist economy. Rather, it is argued that it creates a special economy of its own. . . . We may summarize the limitations placed by Judaism on economic activity as follows: 1) There is a

limitation on the time permissibly allotted to economic activity, on account of the obligation to study Torah; 2) The production or sale of goods or services that are harmful to their consumers, either physically or morally, is forbidden; 3) One is responsible for damages caused by one's body or property; 4) Theft, or economic dishonesty in any form or guise, is forbidden; 5) One is required to limit one's appetite for material goods. One's disposable income is also automatically reduced by the demands of *tzedaka* and interest-free loans, and by taxation to finance welfare, education, and the physical well-being of the community.”

6. Jill Jacobs, *There Shall Be No Needy: Pursuing Social Justice through Jewish Law and Tradition* (2009):

If, as some have argued, the Torah were a fully socialist document, we might expect a biblical demand to divide the land equally among all residents. On the other hand, if, as others have suggested, the Torah advocated an unrestricted free-market economy, the periodic redistribution of land would be nonsensical. Rather, the Torah—as well as later Jewish law—favors a checked market system that permits the ethical acquisition of wealth, with measures aimed at ensuring that the market does not allow the poorest members of society to end up with close to nothing. . . .

Deuteronomy 15 lays out both a vision of economic justice and the beginnings of a program for achieving this vision. In the course of offering a vision of a perfected world and mandating human participation in achieving this vision, this passage also lays out a series of principles that will underlie virtually all Jewish economic law: 1) The world, and everything in it, belongs to God; human beings come upon wealth only by chance and do not necessarily “deserve” the wealth in their possession; 2) The fates of the wealthy and the poor are inextricably linked; 3) Corrective measures are necessary to prevent some people from becoming exceedingly rich at the expense of others; 4) Even the poorest member of society possesses inherent dignity; each member of the community is responsible for preserving the dignity of others; 5) The responsibility for poverty relief is an obligation, not a choice; 6) Strategies for poverty relief must balance short-term and long-term needs; 7) The eradication of poverty is an essential part of bringing about a perfected world, and each person has an obligation to work toward the creation of this world.

7. Joseph Isaac Lifshitz, *Judaism, Law & the Free Market: An Analysis* (2012):

Jewish law calls on man to do everything in his power to avoid becoming dependent on his community for his welfare . . . That is why Rabbi Akiva taught his son: ‘It is better to profane your Sabbath than to become dependent on others’ (BT Pesachim 112b). From his perspective, man is never excused from taking responsibility for himself and is never allowed to make himself a burden on others . . . Under no circumstances are the poor to be absolved of this responsibility [to work] through the redistribution of wealth. . . . Even in a society of significant income differences between the wealthy and the poor, the poor have no *legal* claim against the wealthy. . . . Even in a case of voluntary giving, Jewish law cautions against excessive generosity and forbids a person from donating more than one-fifth of his assets, so as not to become poor himself (BT Ketubot 50a). . . . The prohibition against giving too much to the poor is an expression of the Jewish view that there

never was, nor will there ever be, an ideal state of economic equality among all men. The Sages emphasized that each man is created differently from his fellow and that this difference is an expression of every individual's uniqueness—of every man having been created in the image of G-d. Indeed, according to the Jewish approach to property, economic equality is not just impossible—it is also undesirable: Such a condition negates the uniqueness of the individual and therefore negates the image of G-d within him. Thus, the Bible says, 'For the poor shall never cease out of the land' (Deut 15:11).

8. Sifre Zuta Deuteronomy 15:11 (c.250 CE):

“For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land.” For there will never cease to be needy ones—when Israel does not fulfill the Torah. “There shall be no needy among you” (Deut.15:4)—when Israel fulfills the Torah.

9. Nehemiah 5:1-13 (c.450 BCE):

Now there was a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish kin. For there were those who said, “With our sons and our daughters, we are many; we must get grain, so that we may eat and stay alive.” There were also those who said, “We are having to pledge our fields, our vineyards, and our houses in order to get grain during the famine.” And there were those who said, “We are having to borrow money on our fields and vineyards to pay the king's tax. Now our flesh is the same as that of our kindred; our children are the same as their children; and yet we are forcing our sons and daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have been ravished; we are powerless, and our fields and vineyards now belong to others.”

I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these complaints. After thinking it over, I brought charges against the nobles and the officials; I said to them, “You are all taking interest from your own people.” And I called a great assembly to deal with them, and said to them, “As far as we were able, we have bought back our Jewish kindred who had been sold to other nations; but now you are selling your own kin, who must then be bought back by us!” They were silent, and could not find a word to say. So I said, “The thing that you are doing is not good. Should you not walk in the fear of our God, to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies? Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us stop this taking of interest. Restore to them, this very day, their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their house, and the interest on money, grain, wine, and oil, that you have been exacting from them.” Then they said, “We will restore everything and demand nothing more from them. We will do as you say.” And I called the priests, and I made them take an oath to do as they had promised. I also shook out the fold of my garment and said, “So may God shake out everyone from house and from property who does not perform this promise. Thus may they be shaken out and emptied.” And all the assembly said, “Amen,” and praised the Lord. And the people did as they had promised.