

Jubilee for Today?

The Lessons of the Sabbath and the Crisis of Our Society

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We generally think of Sabbath in religious terms as the chief day of worship or in individual terms as the day of special rest. In an academic or otherwise professional context, a “sabbatical” is also for an individual professor. Leviticus 25 radically extends the sabbatical principle of rest and relief to the human environment, economy, and society. We find an earlier inkling of this approach in Exodus 23:10-12, where the seventh year fallow benefits both the poor and wild animals in addition to the land, and the seventh day cessation from work benefits not only Israelites, but also beasts of burden and marginalized persons—slaves and aliens—whom Jesus could have called “the least of these brothers (or sisters) of mine” (Matt. 25:40).

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Leviticus 25 carries the sabbatical year over and builds on it. A “Jubilee” 50th year following a sabbatical of sabbaticals, i.e. $7 \times 7 = 49$ years is what amounts to a “super-sabbatical.” Not only does the land rest; it returns to its original owner. Not only do agricultural workers rest by not planting or harvesting; they return to their own clans and land. Not only does the economy rest; debts that have kept people under obligation claim them no more. This legislation stresses the desirability of economic self-sufficiency and the need to treat people undergoing economic hardship with kindness and respect.

At the time of Jubilee, accumulation of economic and social imbalance tending toward feudalism was to be restored to a decentralized, egalitarian

equilibrium. This was to avoid the kind of class struggle between rich and poor that plagued the monarchies of Israel and Judah and much later incited Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels to advocate abolition of private property. Every Israelite who lived a normal lifespan was supposed to have at least one opportunity to erase the oppression of circumstances and make a new start. All this without government bailouts, taxes, or even insurance companies!

Before we decide to run for public office on a platform of Leviticus 25, we should be aware that implementation would be challenging. Obviously individual farmers are free to observe a seventh year fallow. However, although only a minority of our population makes an agrarian living, shutting down even a small percentage of our agricultural sector every seven years would be a monumental upheaval and, at least in the case of a two year fallow at the end of a “Jubilee” period, would require religious faith in divine blessing.

Also difficult for a “Jubilee” release of land would be the historical question: who is the “original” owner, to whom ownership should revert even after “sale”? Does Manhattan go back to the Indians? According to the Pentateuch, God gave the Jubilee legislation even before ancestral land was divvied out, so people would know from the outset what a real estate “sale” meant. But attempting to impose a theoretical ideal on an already functioning system of land tenure, as the communists attempted to do during much of the twentieth century, can have catastrophic results.

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Some kind of debt amnesty would indeed be helpful. Individuals are crushed under accumulating loads of debt, from which they are unable to extricate themselves. In fact, many credit card debts are set up in such a way that they are self-perpetuating: Making regular payments of the stipulated amount will never pay off the debt because they are not enough to overcome the accumulation of interest.

“Developing” nations are also strapped with colossal debts, some of which amount to billions of dollars and drag down the lives of millions of people as they struggle to make ends meet and improve their standard of living. Banks, businesses, governments, and the International Monetary Fund provide bailouts, but always with big “strings” attached. Undoubtedly some of these strings are necessary to ensure that help goes where it is needed rather than into “black holes” of poor management and corruption. But there is a widespread craving for some kind of “Jubilee” relief.

J. Milgrom describes an international “Jewish-Christian Symposium on the Jubilee,” sponsored by the World Council of Churches and held at the Ecumenical Institute in Bossey, Switzerland in 1996. This conference highlighted the plight of economically shackled Third World countries, which are suffering declining per capita incomes while the global market economy booms, and the environments of which are being polluted and irreversibly depleted by large business interests.² A particularly serious

tragedy has flourished in democratic India, where in 1992 it was estimated that five million adults and ten million children were held in bonded labor. Almost all of them are untouchables (the lowest caste). Working without wages to pay off real or imaginary debts, they have almost no hope of escape.

Debtor countries have demanded of creditor nations that their debts be cancelled, land and resources be restored to their original owners, pilfering and pollution of natural resources be stopped, and economic slavery be terminated by mandating minimum wages on which people can survive.

Implementation of such measures in favor of the oppressed would undoubtedly be opposed by the rich and powerful, who would stand to lose, as in ancient Judah (compare Jer. 34:8-11). Nevertheless, in modern times there is evidence in Tonga and South Korea that restoring and maintaining individual ownership of land is highly effective in promoting general prosperity, which ends up benefiting everyone. This practicality, possibly reinforced by allusions to Jubilee years in biblical Judah (e.g. Jer. 34), suggests that the legislation of Leviticus 25 is not simply utopian. In the narrative of Numbers 36, the Gileadite chieftains certainly did not understand the Jubilee release to be utopian, or they would not have factored it into their practical concern that the daughters of Zelophehad could remove property from their clan by marriage (v. 4).

With debt release the big question is: Who picks

up the tab? Unlike ancient Israelites, who owed individual creditors, our debts are primarily to organizations, such as banks, credit unions, credit card companies, or government organizations such as the FHA. How do you get an organization to exercise compassion? If debt release is enforced, why would lenders want to extend credit again in the future? Of course creditors already lose at least part of many loan amounts through a modern form of remission: bankruptcy.

While it would not be fair or feasible to require modern lending organizations to give up the principal amounts of loans or to abstain from charging some interest under normal conditions,

our society would do well to ponder the practical implications of Leviticus 25:35-37: "If one of your countrymen becomes poor and is unable to support himself among you... Do not take interest of any kind from him... You must not lend him money at interest or sell him food at a profit."

Many of the fiscal woes that we face on all levels, from the individual up to the international, are due to debts with interest. Most of these are not incurred for survival. Many of them are for worthy causes, such as education and development of resources, but many are simply because we want things before we have the money to pay for them. If we would base our spending more on earnings and savings and less on loans, some things would happen a bit slower, but we would ultimately pay a lot less and be better off.

In the 1960's, President Lyndon Johnson waged war on poverty with his "Great Society" initiative. After getting entire generations addicted to

state welfare and spending billions of dollars on all kinds of projects, poverty is alive and flourishing. This is no surprise. Deuteronomy 15:11 says: "There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land" (compare Matt. 26:11). The question is not how to eradicate poverty, but how to maintain intelligent compassion as we seek to alleviate its worst effects.

While it is important that the church not try to take over functions of the state, the church is not exempt from addressing social problems, e.g. poverty and equality, or ecological concerns just because the state is working on the same problems in its own way. Leviticus 25 teaches us that for those who believe in God, faith and ethics impact the larger context of our lives.

Another biblical passage that powerfully integrates social and sabbatical themes for the community of God's people is Isaiah 58. Here social kindness and cessation from work are linked to self-denial (v. 3) and therefore to the Day of Purgation, which was a sabbath (compare vv. 13-14) and the only regular fast day prescribed in the Hebrew Bible (Lev. 16:29, 31; 23:27-32). It was also the time of humanitarian celebration when the Jubilee year began (25:9). On the Day of Purgation, when the sins of the Israelites were purged out of the sanctuary so that they could be morally pure (chap. 16), it was more inappropriate and hypocritical than ever to commit more rebellious faults and sins of social unkindness (Isa. 58:1-5).

Self-denial, social kindness, and sabbath/Sabbath coordinate to reveal important priorities involved in our relationships with God and with

each other:

1. Holiness: We can emulate God, who rested at Creation (Gen. 2:2-3) and does not need human food (Ps. 50:12-13), and Christ, whose self-sacrificing kindness involved humbling himself to death on a cross (Philipp. 2:8).

2. Humility: Those who fast and keep sabbath become weaker, stop seeking their own welfare, and remember the Creator who sustains them. This voluntary observance prepares them to recognize the needs of poor people, who involuntarily go hungry and whose work is insufficient to sustain them.

3. Equality: The diet and work of those who fast and keep sabbath is alike whether they are rich or poor. Abraham Heschel describes the Sabbath:

A reminder of every man's royalty; an abolition of the distinction of master and slave, rich and poor, success and failure. To celebrate the Sabbath is to experience one's ultimate independence of civilization and society, of achievement and anxiety. The Sabbath is an embodiment of the belief that all men are equal and that equality of men means the nobility of men. The greatest sin of man is to forget that he is a prince.^b

(Endnotes)

a Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 23-27: a new translation with introduction and commentary*, (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 2270-71.

b A. J. Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Noonday Press, 1955), 417.