

# Leviticus 25:1-27:34: When Is Idealism Idolatry?

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Shortly after the surprising announcement of a new alliance in the Israeli Knesset — the result of quick and clandestine negotiations that produced a mega-coalition between Israel’s major political parties — the murmurings of social protest began to emerge yet again. Stav Shaffir, one of the faces and voices of the massive protests in Israel last summer, ominously tweeted that “if this new government does not fall, we will take it down.”

The 2011 protests, characterized by tent camps throughout the country, focused initially on issues of cost of living and especially housing. Inevitably, though, some of the animus in the protests was directed at the government itself, the political process and the general social order. The energy in the protests — together with their kin in the American “Occupy” movement — embodied a political pluralism ranging from activists genuinely alarmed by the rising price of food and rent all the way to anarchists for whom the fomenting rebellion signaled an opportunity to challenge basic societal norms.

I understand where the extremism comes from. The instinct to act on behalf of justice is often borne out of a sense of deep brokenness, and the belief that the prevailing structures of power and authority are fundamentally misguided. Accordingly, it is believed that to promote incremental policy change without redressing the basic infrastructure that underlies the fabric of our societies — even if it creates temporarily better conditions — will not lead to societal transformation.

But this political pluralism, in turn, makes the work of justice a tough sell across the political divide. The iconoclasm of extremism creates fear in the mainstream about the work of justice, even when its goals may accord with mainstream ethical sensibilities.

I believe that there is important work to be done in bringing about justice in this world, both on concrete issues and in more conceptual ways; I also recognize that there are still times when justice can only be pursued through systemic, revolutionary overhaul. But I am skeptical of the instincts in America and in Israel to do this urgent work of today against — rather than in concert with — the existing social and political infrastructure. This week’s twin Torah portions of Behar and Behukotai, which together conclude the book of Leviticus, implicitly challenge the impulse to frame social activism over and against normative legal policies.

The two portions are held together by a unifying frame, with the opening and closing verses reminding us that these texts were a part of God’s revelation to Moses at Mount Sinai. In between these verses, however, is the stuff not of otherworldly spirituality, but the earthly rules by which a society is made just.

The Sabbatical laws both free the land from agrarian domination and institutionalize ethical work practices for those whose livelihoods are controlled by others. The Jubilee laws then go one step further in attempting to prevent the transmission of poverty across multiple generations. Even if inequity will inevitably emerge from the marketplace, the Jubilee creates a once-every-50-years assurance that the system cannot perpetuate it forever.

The theology of this call for justice has two key elements: First, it ties the mandate for justice to the Israelite experience as slaves in Egypt, thereby connecting altruism with communal experience, and giving value to the incremental pursuit of justice. As a result, there are measures built into the Israelite legal system designed to deal with change when it is needed. Interestingly, while the paradigm of Exodus as revolution is well known to us, here the Torah reminds us that this narrative must also inform how we live life after the revolution, by demanding that we create just laws for all members of our society.

Second, the Torah also reminds us that the work of justice comes not merely from the human ethical impulse but also from divine fiat. Rashi, the great medieval biblical commentator, invites us to notice the inherent connection between human justice and Divine revelation in the Torah by asking provocatively, “What does Shemittah (Sabbatical law) have anything to do with Sinai?” The Torah’s message is that our efforts at establishing just societies must reflect God’s vision of justice, and that God’s instruction to us involves concrete rules and regulations.

Moreover, unlike our tendency to differentiate between those laws that are between persons (which we associate with the work of justice) and those laws that are between people and God, the Torah demands that these are fundamentally intertwined. The ban on idolatry, which comes at the center of these portions after the rules of justice are enumerated, signals a failure to integrate justice and authority, or justice and revelation.

One inherent risk in justice work is that we become convinced that it is through the adoption of our ethical ideals alone that society can be improved, rather than seeing that we must work together with others to discern how best to implement God’s vision of justice through the norms we establish for our society.

I fear sometimes that in our efforts to create more just societies, we can become self-righteous, indulging in the idolatrous practice of worshipping our own ideals. Not only is this spiritually and ethically problematic, but it usually leads to a further breakdown between “activists” and the “establishment,” in which it becomes all the more difficult to create the change we seek. The Torah here connects justice to obedience, and not iconoclasm; the work of justice is inherently part of the social order, and not anathema to it.

When justice is part of our founding narrative, we must embrace not just the part of the story about our liberation from tyranny, but also the responsibility to use that memory to establish just societies. And when we view this mandate as issuing from God, we become partners in a larger process, and we belong to a larger order. Recognition of God’s role in the work of justice demands of us great humility, as we cannot revel in our iconoclasm or stand on the periphery and hurl insults at others involved in shaping our societies. Rather, we must invest ourselves in the

often slow and arduous process of improving our communities, listening carefully for the echo of the Exodus — and the whispers from Sinai — pulsating across space and time.

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# LEVITICUS

You Have No Idea

MAURICE D. HARRIS



whatever they please with their property or with all forms of their wealth. Where these limitations exist, their reason for existing is often to protect the health of the land and to assure the survival and dignity of the vulnerable and disadvantaged in society. In fact, landowners are not only prohibited from doing whatever they want with their farming practices, in Leviticus 25:23 they are told that the land doesn't belong to them anyway—it is God's.

We also read in this part of Leviticus that individual Israelites are free to buy land-holdings and amass wealth, but every fiftieth year all land reverts back to the ownership of the family clans to which it was originally assigned at the time of the first settlement of Canaan. Furthermore, in between these Jubilee Years, if an Israelite has to sell his or her land due to poverty, he or she maintains a number of legal options to reacquire the property at any time in the future, either via a family member with the means to buy it back or on their own once they have the money to do so.<sup>6</sup> (Apparently there wasn't a strong realtor's lobby influencing Moses at the time these property regulations were being drafted.) Many commentators have interpreted the purpose of these commandments to be to prevent the amassing of too much concentrated land ownership in the hands of a few, since the initial biblical land distribution in ancient Israel was understood to be fair-minded, ensuring that all of the tribes and family clans had enough to meet their needs. In summing up the rules and regulations of this part of Leviticus, Baruch Levine writes, "Chapter 25 presents a major statement on economic policy: A holy nation treats its members justly and humanely and does not tolerate widespread poverty or disenfranchisement."<sup>7</sup>

I'm aware that there's a growing religious movement in the U.S. among some in the conservative Christian community that makes the claim that the Bible is a pro-capitalist manifesto, and they argue that it objects to the use of the government to try to remedy problems like poverty. Many in this camp contend that the Bible's numerous commandments to help the poor don't describe government-run assistance programs, but rather private individuals giving charity, and therefore liberals like me are supposedly "anti-Bible" when we stand up for programs like WIC, Head Start, and Medicaid.

What I find frightening about this movement is that some of its leaders claim that Americans who advocate even a modest government role in maintaining a social safety net are actually advocating a form of evil that God has supposedly condemned in the Bible. In this way, these advocates

6. Lev 25:25–28.

7. Baruch Levine, *Leviticus*, xvi.

literally demonize their political opponents. In casting themselves in the role of defending God's will, they regard their fellow Americans who differ with them as enemies of God. We should worry when absolutist thinking twists sacred texts to try to put religious authority behind a modern political theory of economics. (See chapter 6 above on the dangers of the misuse of religion.)

Here's what I have to say in response to these beliefs. The writers of the Hebrew Bible could not have imagined modern industrial capitalism. The economic realities they dealt with were complex, and the people of their times shared many of our economic needs and desires. But they could not have imagined many of the features of the economic times we live in. To put this in some perspective: a single suburban supermarket in an affluent American neighborhood probably has a greater abundance of foods, foreign delicacies, and other riches than the palace storehouses of the greatest of ancient kings. A single clover-leaf highway interchange would have blown our biblical ancestors' minds, much less the entire Interstate highway system. (Might I mention that our taxes and our wise use of government made those highways possible?) Our capacity to create complex machines and to pollute on a massive scale was unknown to them. Our factory farms, our arguments over whether or not corporations should be legally regarded as people, and our computer-connected international financial markets are all components of an economic system that didn't exist in the worldview of the Bible.

What did exist were some of the same moral questions—questions of fairness and economic opportunity, of economic power and its abuse, of individual freedom and of duty to the poor, the sick, and the old among us. To claim that the Hebrew Bible's single message is that government regulations and social welfare programs are an affront to God is absurd for two reasons: one, that's just not what the texts really say; and two, the Hebrew Bible usually offers us a collection of different ideas and voices on its most important questions.

In other words, the Hebrew Bible is not an anti-welfare state manifesto. What would be more accurate to claim is that some of the Hebrew Bible's commandments restrain the ability of the central government to amass power. The Bible, for example, refuses to permit kings or queens to see themselves as above the law or to violate average citizens' rights and liberties. Also, all citizens, and even non-citizens, living in the land had major legal protections from the whims of government in the biblical system. For



## Leviticus

example, the prophet Amos cites the regime for over-taxing the poor and for failing to maintain unbiased courts of law, and he describes these actions as violations of the trust that God had placed in the country's rulers.<sup>8</sup>

Again, the biblical question isn't "is the government too big?" but "is the government *just*?" If the government is over-taxing and overreaching, then, perhaps to the delight of modern conservatives, the Torah (and the Hebrew Bible as a whole) demands that the government's powers be restrained. Indeed, over-taxation was one of the reasons the Bible states that ten of the twelve tribes of Israel ultimately broke away from the unified monarchy based in Jerusalem and formed their own nation.<sup>9</sup> The Hebrew Bible also provides numerous passages that tell the Israelites that the government should not be fully trusted and that it must not become an end in itself, but rather it should remain a vessel of service to the divine commandments and sacred ideals. If a government oversteps that function, the Hebrew Bible warns that disaster will result.

For example, 1 Samuel 8 describes a scene at the end of the semi-anarchic period just before the start of the Israelite monarchy in which the Israelite elders approach the prophet Samuel and tell him they want a king. Samuel relays this response from God to the elders:

Samuel told all the words of the Eternal to the people who were asking him for a king. He said, "This is what the king who will reign over you will claim as his rights: 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. He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. Your male and female servants and the best of your cattle and donkeys he will take for his own use. He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves. When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, but the Eternal will not answer you in that day."<sup>10</sup>

8. Amos 5:11–13.

9. See 1 Kgs 12.

10. 1 Sam 8:10–18 NIV (adapted).

## Let's Talk about the Government

This part of the Hebrew Bible treats national government as a kind of necessary evil, and it expresses the wish for a more idyllic society of decentralized authority and widespread faithfulness and righteous behavior.

But at the same time that parts of the Hebrew Bible express philosophical misgivings about the very existence of national government, other parts of the Bible describe God commanding the Israelites to establish and maintain its government. Furthermore, many biblical texts insist that the Israelites' government is responsible for being the guarantor of certain basic social standards that keep society decent, healthy, fair, and sustainable. The various kings of Judah and Israel are told more than once by God that their job is to enforce the rules and regulations found in the Torah, and those rules include the policies described at the beginning of this chapter that seek to ensure some basic standards for the poor, the disadvantaged, and the vulnerable.

For example, in addition to the Levitical agricultural and economic rules discussed above, Leviticus 19:9–10 tells landowners: "When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am the Eternal your God."<sup>11</sup> This isn't an urging of private landowners to give charity—no, it's a legally required redistribution of wealth from haves to have-nots; a tax, if you will, on the profits of each year's agricultural yield designated for the needs of the poor. A few verses later, we also find this bit of employment regulation: "Do not hold back the wages of a hired worker overnight."<sup>12</sup>

Other taxes were a part of the Levitical system too. Leviticus 27:30–33 imposes a 10 percent tax (tithing) on several kinds of farm production in order to sustain the institution of the priesthood, which was one wing of ancient Israel's government (their government was a theocratic monarchy). Other offerings that the Israelites were required to present also functioned in part as taxes to support the priesthood, and in several instances the Torah set the system of offerings up along a "graduated tax" model, allowing for people too poor to present the usual offering to make a more affordable, smaller offering.<sup>13</sup>

11. NIV (adapted).

12. Lev 19:13 NIV.

13. E.g., Lev 5:11 and 14:19–22.