

Behar-B'hukkotai & Economic Radicalism

by Rabbi Mordechai Liebling • May 11th, 2007

This week there is a double Torah portion Behar-B'hukkotai beginning with Leviticus 25. It contains the most economically radical practices in the Torah, the shemita –sabbatical year- and the yovel- the jubilee year. To briefly recap: the shemita year requires that in the land of Israel every seventh year the farmer is to leave the land fallow for one year and to share whatever produce grows wild with all others. The landowner and the poor have equal rights to the produce (in the book of Deuteronomy the shemita year is characterized by the forgiving of debt and this is not mentioned in Leviticus).

In verse 8 we are instructed “to count off seven weeks of years- seven times seven years- so that the period of years gives you a total of 49 years....” And in verse 10 to then “hallow the fiftieth year. You shall proclaim release throughout the land to all the inhabitants (the words that would later be inscribed on the Liberty Bell). It shall be a jubilee for you; each of you shall return to his holding and each if you shall return to his family”. All of the Hebrew slaves were to be freed. According to Biblical tradition when the Israelites settled the land the land was divided among the tribes and then equally divided among the families of the tribe. The yovel was to return the land to the original families.

There is a great deal of historical evidence that the shemita year was rigorously observed in Israel for hundreds of years, sometimes at significant cost to the inhabitants. However, there is no evidence that the yovel was ever observed. That is not surprising, since historical evidence does not support the Biblical account of the settling of land by the tribes. The purported original equal division of the land is unlikely to have occurred; therefore, it could not be repeated. The yovel was a social ideal held out by the Biblical authors and endorsed by the prophets.

Think about life in an agrarian society 2500 years ago, think about the centrality of farming the land and imagine the economic engine of the society coming to a crawl. An entire society slowing down, all of the crafts and businesses related to farming slowing down. Environmentally we know the value of leaving the land fallow. The soil regenerates and the future crops improve. We have no evidence that the Israelites knew this, but it is hard to imagine that the farmers did not notice the effect on the crops of leaving the land fallow. They did experience what it was like to radically slow down. Imagine what the effects on a society are of dramatically slowing down every seven years, a time that Arthur Waskow has called of “collectively catching our breath.” In a society that moved at a glacial pace compared to ours, they knew how important it was to slow down. How much more so do we need to develop ways of slowing down. Perhaps the shemita was so rigorously observed because the experience the benefits of deep rest.

The jubilee year is powerful warning against the concentration of wealth and a reminder the land does not ultimately belong to us, we are the stewards. The Torah recognizes that societies will become unequal in time and that we have to create laws to recreate that equality. It is, I'havdil, reminiscent of Thomas Jefferson saying, “The tree of liberty needs to be sprinkled with blood every fifty years,” hinting that revolutions are necessary to maintain freedom. The United States today is experiencing the greatest inequalities of wealth in its history and it is worsening daily.

Research shows that preceding the fall of an empire there are increasingly large inequalities of wealth. The graduated income tax was the American way to redistribute wealth. Most may not remember that not that long ago the top tax rate was close to 90%, it has fallen by two thirds. The authors of the Torah understood that the concentration of wealth harms a society. We need to remember that wisdom and begin to create mechanisms for wealth redistribution.