



Judaism's Utopian Vision of Universal Equality

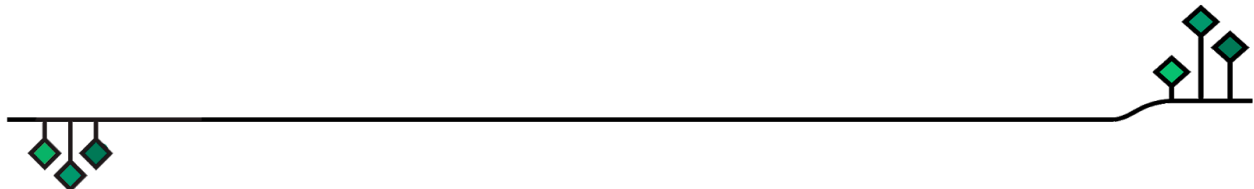
R. Yitz Greenberg – ygreenberg@hadar.org

Parashat BeHar-BeHukotai 5781

Despite the biblical prophets' outspoken calls for social justice and to end the exploitation of the poor, Jewish traditional religion in contemporary Israel and America has become mostly identified with conservative or even reactionary political and economic views. Plain and simple, this current stance contradicts an important part of the tradition. As shown in our *parashah*, the Torah actually encapsulates a strong Utopian vision of a world of equality, justice, and universal dignity.

True, it marries this vision with a method of world improvement—i.e. covenant—which is realistic, gradualist, seeking incremental change, particularist, and personal rather than universalist and ideological.¹ By stressing certain aspects of this method, Judaism can be presented as a ritualistic religion, focused on upholding the stability of the social order. But this does not do justice to the world transformation that the prophetic-messianic stream in Judaism seeks to achieve.

¹ See, for example, my essay “Book of the Covenant” on Parashat Mishpatim, available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/book-covenant>.



I believe the marriage of utopian values with hard-headed actions and concrete steps is intended to enable Judaism to make dialectical moves and use the best policies from both general political approaches. This “hybrid” approach also has positioned Judaism to avoid the pathological, runaway revolutionary movements that have raised humanity’s hopes—and dashed them—for the past two centuries. Here, I want to focus on the Utopian vision. This will help readers grasp the fullness of the Jewish hope for world repair.

The Torah recognizes private property and upholds it by prohibiting stealing, unfair exchanges, or seizing others’ possessions by cheating, or moving boundaries without payment.² But private property and marketplace economics inevitably lead to inequality and the creation of a class of permanently poor. The Torah fights this by prohibiting taking interest on loans and by calling on family to help individuals avoid falling into poverty.³ When individuals are driven by economic pressures to sell their land, the Torah instructs family and redeemers⁴ to help them regain their land and capacity to produce income (Leviticus 25:26-27; 48-51).

Most of all, the Torah reveals its commitment to equality by shaping the seventh year as a sabbatical year. The number seven represents the Torah’s ideal of the perfect, the whole, the complete. The seventh day every week is Shabbat. Six days a week we tolerate and participate in the flawed daily regimen where there is equality and inequality, rich and poor, justice and injustice, satiety and deprivation. On the seventh day, the Shabbat, we put aside

² See e.g. the focus of the laws of Parashat Mishpatim (in Exodus 21-23) and Parashat Ki Teitzei (Deuteronomy 25). Moving boundaries: Deuteronomy 19:14.

³ See Leviticus 25:36-37. On the family’s role, see vv. 25-26.

⁴ In Hebrew the *go’el* is a redeemer, a near kinsman or an individual who has a covenantal responsibility to this person. See Leviticus 25:25



all the compromises and injustice. All people—be they free or slaves—are released from work. All competition and striving to get ahead is suspended. People live the day as a foretaste of the Messianic era when all people will have all that they need, without war or conflict. People live in harmony with God, with Nature, and with each other.⁵

In parallel fashion, the Torah creates a different economic paradigm for the seventh, sabbatical year that breaks from the model that governs the first six years of the cycle. In this year, we put aside all the inequalities, all the economic competition and the exploiting of labor. Private ownership, as it were, is suspended. The land is **not** cultivated but its produce is thrown open to all to come and take as they need (or as their animals need). It is as if the Torah is proclaiming a Socialist common ownership of the land by all for the duration of the year (Leviticus 25:2-7).

Our *parashah* also describes the fiftieth year, Yovel, the Jubilee year. Yovel upholds and restores the Torah's ideal vision of full economic equality for all. Equality and economic dignity start with the division of the land when the people, Israel, entered Canaan. Each family was given an equal portion of land, adjusted for the number of people in the family and the productive quality of the land.⁶ Then the Torah prescribes interest-free loans, and instructs family to help to prevent people from having to sell their land and lose their source of income. The Torah also rules that land can not be permanently sold but only for a limited number of harvest years (Leviticus 25:23-24; 25-28). When poor farmers sell the land for these

⁵ For a fuller articulation of Shabbat in this mode, see my book, *The Jewish Way*, pp. 124-133, 136-139, and especially 149-153.

⁶ See Numbers 33:54ff.



limited years, the Torah instructs the family and redeemers to help them buy it back and regain their earning power.

Despite all these special efforts, inevitably some land will be lost to some families and a permanent landless class mired in poverty will emerge. Therefore in this fiftieth year, the Jubilee year, all the land is redistributed back to the original families.⁷ Thus every family can start over again with a guaranteed source of income. Permanent poverty is prevented.

In the Jubilee year, every Hebrew in servitude goes free. The Torah is saying that in the ideal world, no one will be a master; everyone will be free; everyone will be equal economically. Everyone will be restored to an ancestral heritage. To sum it up, the Torah says: “You shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants” (25:10).⁸

Historians are not sure that these ideal laws were ever actually carried out. We know that far less economically transformational laws—such as the Torah’s limit of a six year term limit for Hebrew slaves—were resisted and violated by large landowners and wealthy nobles.⁹

Nevertheless the prophets insist that these laws are operative and that this ideal will be realized in the Messianic era. The exploitation of the poor and the privileging of the rich and powerful will be stopped. That is why the book of Isaiah predicts that, to have full dignity and equality for all, we must overcome poverty altogether. The poor are not only economically

⁷ I should note that the fiftieth year represents 7 cycles of 7 years (i.e. sabbatical year squared) **plus one**. The additional one is a covenantal number ($7 + 1 = 8$, $7 \times 7 + 1 = 50$) in which the human partner adds their efforts so that the covenant is fully realized.

⁸ Need I add that these were the words the founders of the United States of America were inspired to realize. They put these words on the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia, the then capital.

⁹ See Jeremiah’s description of the violation of the six year limit and the resistance to give up the privileges of ownership of people for unlimited periods (Jeremiah 34:8-22). It is difficult to believe that wealthy landowners would not resist equalizing land transfers even more vigorously.



deprived. They are degraded in status and, more often than not, denied the opportunities or resources to move up on the socio-economic ladder. Therefore, Isaiah insists that in the messianic era, prosperity will “flood as a mighty stream” (Isaiah 66:12), and the phenomenon of the poor will disappear.¹⁰ Similarly, illnesses and disabilities that reduce people’s status and earning power will be cured. This will pave the way for full equality and standing in society for those held back by such disabilities.¹¹

Furthermore, according to the prophet Hosea, when the world is fully repaired and God renews the covenant, then the woman will call her husband *ishi* (“my man”) and not *ba’ali* (“my husband,” literally: “my master”). The implication is that the curse of male domination (see Genesis 3:16) will be undone and women will also achieve full equality (Hosea 2:18).¹² In that time, there will be full equality before the law and the poor will get equal justice with the rich. This, in fact, will be the hallmark of the Messianic age.¹³

The prophets have described this era as a realization of what the Rabbis called the Kingdom of God. This grows out of the belief that only when all injustice and inequality is ended, will humanity come to know God truly.¹⁴ Then the whole earth will be holy—full of life, dignity, and equality for all.¹⁵

¹⁰ See also Isaiah 54:11-12. On ending hunger, see Isaiah 49:8-10 and Ezekiel 34:23-24.

¹¹ On overcoming sickness, see Isaiah 35:5-6.

¹² See also Jeremiah 31:21.

¹³ On overcoming oppression and gaining equality before the law, see Isaiah 11:4.

¹⁴ How, then, do I explain the emergence of an Orthodox Judaism that is politically conservative and focused on observance of certain ritual commandments almost to the neglect of social justice issues? This is the outcome of the Haredi alliances with conservative (even reactionary) regimes in Eastern Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries in the hope of jointly holding back the advance of modernity. The rightist tendency has been accentuated by Israeli orthodoxy seeking to maintain its monopoly on static religion and American Orthodoxy’s ongoing embrace of Donald Trump.

¹⁵ Isaiah 11, especially v. 9.

