

Preventing the Wealth Gap: A Study of the Sabbatical and Jubilee¹

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The wealth gap, the differential between the rich and the poor, has increased dramatically since the 1970's. The disparity in wealth in this country is one of the great moral crises of our time. The data are stark. As of 2013, just over 400 Americans have more money than over 158 million of their fellow citizens. The gap between rich and poor has not always been this great is continuing to grow. This is evidenced by the fact that in 1980 the average American CEO earned 42 times as much as his or her average worker and in 2001 a CEO earned 531 times as much as the average worker.ⁱⁱ

The Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible, which repeatedly commands us to care for vulnerable, poor and powerless, also contains laws for preventing the gap between the rich and the poor to grow. These are the laws of the sabbatical and jubilee years. There is a debate about whether these laws were ever enacted and if they were it was for a limited period. We study these laws not to interrogate their historicity but rather to open a discussion about the inequality crisis in our country and to understand the moral call to address it in our day.

Sabbatical Year:

¹ The Lord spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai: ² Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: When you enter the land that I assign to you, the land shall observe a sabbath of the Lord. ³ Six years you may sow your field and six years you may prune your vineyard and gather in the yield. ⁴ But in the seventh year the land shall have a sabbath of complete rest, a sabbath of the Lord: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. ⁵ You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your untrimmed vines; it shall be a year of complete rest for the land. ⁶ But you may eat whatever the land during its sabbath will produce — you, your male and female slaves, the hired and bound laborers who live with you, ⁷ and your cattle and the beasts in your land may eat all its yield. (Leviticus 25:1-7)ⁱⁱⁱ

¹Every seventh year you shall practice remission of debts. ²This shall be the nature of the remission: every creditor shall remit the due that he claims from his fellow: he shall not demand payment from his fellow or kinsman, for the remission is proclaimed is of God. (Deuteronomy 15:1-2)

We learn in these two texts that every seven years no produce should be planted and all debts should be forgiven. The gap between the rich and the poor, the landowners and the landless, closes in the process of freeing the poor from their debts and preventing the landowner from producing more wealth. These laws are given at the time when the people are becoming landowners for the first time. The Israelites have been wandering in the desert, where they are nomads and only own what they can carry. It is striking that the Torah teaches these laws at the moment that the people will first become property owners and some will begin to acquire more wealth than others. The tradition acknowledges the natural human potential for greed and sets up a system to prevent wealth disparity from the outset of wealth accumulation.

The great medieval Jewish commentator of the Bible, Rashi, understands the sabbatical year as a time to re-establishing between people. He explains the meaning of Leviticus 25:6 which is telling the landowner, who has just been commanded not to sow or reap the fields, that he can eat of the produce of the land. Rashi explains the confusion this may cause by re-writing the verse,

“Although I [God] prohibited the produce [of the sabbatical year] to you, I did not prohibit you to eat it or to derive benefit from it, only that you should not treat it as if you were its owner. Rather, everyone is deemed equal [regarding the use of the sabbatical year's produce]-you, [your slaves,] and your hired worker and resident.” (Rashi on Leviticus 25:6)

Rashi explains directly that the sabbatical year is a time when the system is reset and everyone is equal. Everyone, free or slave, boss or worker, has the same access to the produce. This not only prevents a wealth gap in a material way but also in an experiential way. The experience of the rich and poor is narrowed in the fields during the sabbatical year. There is a glimpse of what a more equal distribution of wealth may look and feel like. The wealthy may gain experience that living with less and allowing the poor to have more will not end in catastrophe for them. The sabbatical year has the potential for changing people through lived experience.

Jubilee Year:

⁸ You shall count off seven weeks of years — seven times seven years — so that the period of seven weeks of years gives you a total of forty-nine years. ⁹ Then you shall sound the horn loud; in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month — the Day of Atonement — you shall have the horn sounded throughout your land ¹⁰ and you shall hallow the fiftieth year. You shall proclaim release throughout the land for all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: each of you shall return to his holding and each of you shall return to his family.¹¹ That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you: you shall not sow, neither shall you reap the after growth or harvest the untrimmed vines, ¹²for it is a jubilee. It shall be holy to you: you may only eat the growth direct from the field. ¹³ In this year of jubilee, each of you shall return to his holding. ¹⁴ When you sell property to your neighbor, or buy any from your neighbor, you shall not wrong one another. ¹⁵ In buying from your neighbor, you shall deduct only for the number of years since the jubilee; and in selling to you, he shall charge you only for the remaining crop years: ¹⁶ the more such years, the higher the price you pay; the fewer such years, the lower the price; for what he is selling you is a number of harvests. ¹⁷ Do not wrong one another, but fear your God; for I the Lord am your God. (Leviticus 25:8-17)

²³But the land must not be sold beyond reclaim, for the land is Mine; you are but strangers resident with Me.

²⁴Throughout the land that you hold, you must provide for the redemption of the land. (Leviticus 25: 23-24)

The Jubilee year is like an epic sabbatical year. It includes all the laws of the sabbatical year plus all slaves are freed and land is returned to its original owners. There are a few significant aspects to the laws of the Jubilee that should be highlighted. First, the Jubilee is not just an economic injunction but a time of holiness. The releasing of debts, of slaves and creating rest for the land is a sacred act. Secondly, the text not only mandates the laws of release but also addresses the pitfalls that may accompany the laws. There is a warning (verses 14-17) about how people will act prior to the Jubilee year. There is a warning that people should not take advantage of these laws when selling or buying property with the knowledge of the coming of the Jubilee. In other places in Torah there are similar warnings against not loaning money to the poor because you know the sabbatical is coming. Third, the land is not completely redistributed among all the inhabitants. It is returned to the original holders of the land. The Torah is advocating not a socialist system or an unrestricted free market. As Rabbi Jill Jacobs states, “[T]he 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.”^{iv} Lastly, in the end of the passage (vs.23-24) we see the reason for these laws is based on the notion that all the land belongs to God and that we are mere renters or stewards of the land. This theological notion that humans can never fully own the land is the foundation of these principles that prevent massive disparities of wealth.

It is important to understand that this redistribution of the land is not an act of charity but is a religious obligation. The *Mishnah*, the primary book of Jewish law published in the 2nd century of the Common Era, teaches:

One who does not allow the poor to glean or allows one and not another, or helps one of them [in the gathering], robs the poor. Concerning such a man it has been said, ‘Remove not the ancient landmark.’
(*Mishnah Peah* 5:6)

The ancient landmark referred to here is the Jubilee. This passage refers to the laws that allow the poor to glean from the produce left in a field at anytime not just in the sabbatical year. The *Mishnah* is teaching that when one does not allow all the poor to glean, as the Torah instructs, they are actually stealing from the poor because of the Jubilee. By the time the *Mishnah* was written the laws of Jubilee were not followed. However, the text here is asserting that if Jubilee were followed that the land from which the poor are gleaning may have been their land and they could have been harvesting their own grain instead of depending desperately on gleaning from another's field. Therefore, when one allows only some poor people to glean the fields, they are actually stealing from the others because it may be their land. The landowners are being reminded that goal of the Jubilee, of creating a just society that keeps inequality in check, is still applicable even if the laws are not. Charity can be governed by the whim or favoritism but we are taught here that such action is unacceptable. The obligation is to create a just society not to rule over the poor with acts of charity.^v

Synthesis

The laws of the sabbatical and jubilee years provide a number of important lessons for our current context and crisis of wealth inequality.

- Unlike charity these laws address the systemic, root causes of inequality in society. They are not a temporary fix but instead a regular practice to mediate human greed and the disparity that arises from it.
- These laws of sabbatical and jubilee and distribution of agricultural produce in general are the basis for Jewish laws of *tzedakah* (giving gifts to the poor). Therefore, even in our modern urban culture, where land and agricultural is not the basis of most people's wealth the principles here apply.
- These biblical laws are set up as obligations not as choices that are based on the good nature or willingness of the landowners or the wealthy.

Questions for Discussion

1. What surprised you about the text? What inspired you?
2. What, if anything, can we learn from these biblical injunctions to help fight against wealth inequality in our country today?
3. These texts acknowledge the human quality of greed and the propensity to take advantage of the system (Leviticus 25:14-17). Do agree with these as basic problems? If so how do our potential solutions address these issues?
4. These texts are part of the religious legal tradition of Judaism. How does it feel to engage with legalistic religious texts? Do they create different conversations than you are accustomed to in Bible study?

Blessing to Conclude our Study:

Blessed are you God, spirit of all the world, for giving us the opportunity to mend the world.

ⁱ Many of the ideas and analysis in this text study are based on the writing of Rabbi Jill Jacobs in her book [There Shall be No Needy: Pursuing Social Justice through Jewish Law and Tradition](#).

ⁱⁱ [8 Facts About American Inequality](#), January 24, 2014 www.nationofchange.org

ⁱⁱⁱ Translations of the Biblical texts are primarily taken from the Jewish Publication Society *Tanakh*

^{iv} Jacobs, Rabbi Jill, [There Shall be No Needy: Pursuing Social Justice through Jewish Law and Tradition](#), pg. 19-20.

^v [Poverty, Chesed, and Justice A Text Study for Shavuot in Honor of Hyatt Hotel Worke](#), at www.truah.org/images/stories/2013UNITEHERESHavuotStudy.pdf.