

The Seven-Year Fix

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The Problem

There is a charming, inspiring hubris in the concept of *tikkun olam*. It says that we, who are but dust and ashes, believe that we—individually and collectively—have the calling and the capacity to change the trajectory of the world. Knowing that your people, your faith, your God, believe deeply in what you do on a daily basis is a good enough reason to get out of bed every morning. But there is a darker side, too, to *tikkun olam*, for though we may be able to resist and deflect the calling part, we cannot deny our capacity part. We humans have now become a geo-physical force. Whereas before we were able to affect parts of this world, for good or ill, today we can affect the entire global universe of creation simply by our mass, our consumption, and our waste. We live; therefore, we affect the welfare of the world. That is a responsibility we must accept and pursue intentionally.

The plotline of the Torah captures that pursuit. It is a relentless dreaming of utopia here on earth. It is a story that teaches that paradise is not a place waiting to be inherited or stumbled upon, but rather a place that must be deliberately and assiduously fashioned and built through the work of our daily lives. The story of the Torah is about seeking and failing, and then trying yet again to make this world as good as it can humanly be. It pursues this quest in and through the shelter of community. Judaism is not primarily concerned with personal salvation, forbearance of suffering, forgiveness of sin, or eternal life. It is, rather, a visioning of what it would take to create

a world that is built upon the pillars of justice and peace, prosperity and sharing (*tzedek, shalom, osher, and hesed*). Judaism is concerned with how each of us should live in the presence of each other, and the systems that must be in place to bring forth such a society.

The Torah starts with a tough message: life is hard. That is what the Garden of Eden story is all about: things aren't easy. Adam and Eve were gardeners, not lord and lady of the manor. And while food and shelter were abundant, the human appetite is wired to always seek more. This is good when this drive leads to curiosity, discovery, engagement, creativity, and love in healthy amounts—which are all things we need to create utopia. But it is bad when it leads to greed, temptation, jealousy, covetousness, selfishness, and unrelenting dissatisfaction. The biblical story teaches that desire will propel us onward. And the questions then pour out: toward what end? with what intention do we reach for knowledge and beauty? and how much will it take to satisfy us? How do we measure enough?

Other founding stories of the Torah go on to remind us that in our everyday world, we have to work hard with no guarantee of success; sweat equity can still yield thistles and thorns. And even when we succeed (as Cain did with agriculture, and Abel with animals), rewards may not be equitably doled out. Bad things do happen to—and can even be caused by—good people.

And yet. The Torah tells us that the promised land is not a place of mists and myth. It is a land of fields of beauty and abundance, where plenty can exist for all—if we but manage both it and our appetites well. It is up to us to believe it and make it happen. Though suffering is real and only rarely redemptive, still we are not to succumb to quiet resignation, nor to deny the reality of pain. Life is not to be merely endured or conquered, but rather enjoyed and celebrated—on an individual, familial, tribal and global scale. Our task is to make that happen.

The Misplaced Role of Wealth

One critical component to realizing such a world is recognizing the proper role of wealth—more specifically, the equitable and sufficient possession of, access to, and use of those things society assesses as goods and services, both natural and cultural. There is no doubt that money is an essential asset, a source of much that is good. It enables us to eat well; to stay warm in the cold and cool in the heat; to be idle when we are sick and to tend to others when they are in need; to host others and be hosted by them; to offer gifts; to relax and refresh, dream and dare; and to invest in and trust the future. But it is also true that money—inappropriately managed and pursued—is the source of much that is wrong in society. The excess pursuit of (and acquisition of) wealth, accompanied by an insatiable desire to purchase, own, and consume ever more things (both tangible and not), is devastating for the marketplace, society, nature, and the human spirit.

The repercussions are felt in the economic disparity that increasingly characterizes America. For example, in the last thirty years—and particularly in the past five years—only the top 1% of Americans have seen their share of America's total income grow. The other 99% of American earners have *lost* a bit of their share of America's income.¹ As a recent Pew report concluded, "From the end of the recession in 2009 through 2011...the eight million households in the U.S. with a net worth above \$836,033 saw their aggregate wealth rise by an estimated \$5.6 trillion, while the 111 million households with a net worth at or below that level saw their aggregate wealth decline by an estimated \$0.6 trillion."² Practically, this means that a fast food worker in New York City (there are 55,000 of them) who made roughly \$8.90 an hour in 2013 (about minimum wage) would have to work for almost a century, in order to earn as much as the McDonald's CEO earned in the single year of 2011.³ Such inequity does not get us closer to our utopian world.

Neither does preferencing profits over people. On November 24, 2012, a fire raced through the Tazreen Fashions factory in Bangladesh, killing 112 people and putting thousands more not only in physical danger, but out of work. Major global companies, most prominently Wal-mart, source some of their products from there. And while the international community⁴ has called upon those companies to contribute to the medical needs and financial support of the victims and families of the fire, many companies (including Wal-mart and Sears) have declined to do so.⁵ Their answer is usually that Tazreen Fashions was an unauthorized merchant and their suppliers should not have been using them. Yet, the companies in question still sold those products and profited from them. Tazreen workers made as little as \$38 a month; Wal-mart makes \$34,880 in profit every minute.⁶ With \$16 billion in annual profit from the products it sells—whether sourced from authorized providers or not—Wal-mart has the means, but not the heart, to help those who make them profitable.

This is not a call for flattening salaries, denying professional rank, or otherwise blunting human drive and expression. Some disparity is not only inevitable but fair. This is a call however, for considering what the renowned former World Bank economist Herman Daly calls the eleventh commandment: “Thou shalt not allow unlimited inequality in the distribution of private property.”⁷ This is especially true when such economic inequality is built on and reinforces ethical inequities.⁸

Beyond its economic ramifications, the excessive pursuit and accumulation of wealth also takes a heavy toll on nature. Concentrated wealth leads to excess consumption, intentional or not, which in turn leads to the inequitable and unsustainable use of the earth’s natural resources. Consider, for instance, the United States. Americans make up only 5% of the earth’s population; yet, we consume 20% of the earth’s fossil fuels and create 40% of the earth’s waste.⁹ Globally, as a result of the habits of the developed and fast-developing economies, humans are consuming more of the earth’s resources every year

than the earth annually replenishes.¹⁰ And we are rapidly depleting some of the resources that are not renewable, like helium and those elements called rare earth metals¹¹ at a faster rate than ever before. Even more disconcerting, however, is the fact that both the benefits and the negative consequences of this global over-consumption are inequitably distributed, with the haves (i.e., you and me) enjoying our undue share of the benefits and the have-nots enduring their unfair share of the negative consequences.

As anyone who has a wallet or a refrigerator knows, we cannot indefinitely take from a system with finite resources without regularly and appropriately replenishing it. Failing to restock our supply while continuing to draw it down will sooner or later cause it to run dry. If we degrade the earth's soils, drain our aquifers, poison our waters, deplete the world's fishing stock, and strip all the minerals from the mines, we will be left empty. Our appetites, industry, and consumption, therefore, must match the pace in which the earth renews itself. Even the magic of the marketplace cannot make it rain, create exhausted minerals, manufacture more land, or bring extinct species back to life. We can bail out banks and countries that fail but, we cannot bail out Mother Nature. There is nowhere for us to go if she fails. There is no "there" there anymore, only "here."

The spiritual realm also suffers from the excesses of wealth, as an insatiable desire or cultural compulsion to earn ever more money and possess ever more things denies us the deep joy of satisfaction, of enoughness. A marketplace that measures personal worth in dollars and continually moves the goalposts of satisfaction is a marketplace that feeds on the discontent of its members. It fosters the cultivation of consumerist attitudes and behaviors, wherein society becomes subservient to the marketplace rather than the marketplace working to the benefit of its constituents. The French social commentator Jean Baudrillard expressed it as follows: "If a consumer forgets [his role of constant desire and does not continually exercise his consumer capacities], he will be gently and insistently reminded that he has no right not to be happy."

Yet, how can we find happiness if we are always pressed to pursue more? How can we be sated when the marketplace reminds us that we never have enough? Even more, economists tell us that economic growth (which is equated with economic health and society's overall well-being)¹³ is dependent on loans—that is, debt. The more we borrow, we are taught, the better off we are as a society. Still, we know the truth: more is not always more. The two greatest economic tragedies of the last one hundred years were caused by the misguided pursuit of economic excess. “The failure of additional wealth and consumption to help people have satisfying lives may be the most eloquent argument for reevaluating our current approach to consumption.”¹⁴ For those of us blessed with economic security, the key to happiness lies not in our next purchase, not with keeping up with the Joneses. It is found in knowing when we have enough, *that* we have enough.

The Redemptive Cycles of Seven

How, then, do we build a world that balances wealth and satisfaction, desire and satiety, curiosity and contentment, growth and “enoughness”...mine, yours, and ours?

The Torah speaks of all this: the human desire for consumption and wealth, the market's tendency to concentrate wealth, the attendant growing disparity between the haves and have-nots, the incessant spiritual unsettling that clamorous appetites bring, and the spiritual and economic pursuits that ravage the land. So the Torah offers a corrective, woven into the very fabric of time, and written into the opening chapters of Genesis: Shabbat, the Sabbath.

Fast on the heels of creating the world of production, consumption, and growth, immediately after fashioning man and woman and calling them to learn and master the world about them, God does something remarkable: God creates a pause. On Shabbat, God leaves

the world to its own celebration. The wonders of the world are left to unfold as designed.

Once every six days, for as long as time endures, the world of building and tearing down, buying and selling, turning nature into products and time into commodity, ceases. Taking its place is a world that is, in the words of the rabbis, a taste of the world to come.¹⁵ Every six days we put aside the rough and tumble of the work-a-day world. We put aside the measure of each other's worth in terms of dollars and cents. Instead, we live as if a bit of utopia has descended upon us. Like sunrise and sunset, winter and summer, the Sabbath was built into the rhythms of time.

But the Sabbath was not answer enough. It is not a transformation, but just a pause in the rough-and-tumble world; it is not a corrective, but a recurring place of refuge. It gives us a vision but not an on-ramp to that world we seek.

So the Torah stepped it up a bit. Every seven years we are asked to leave the world of the customary economy and live a bit in utopia. This is the world of *sh'mittah*, the Sabbatical or seventh year: "For six years you shall sow your fields and harvest its crops, but during the seventh year you are to release your hold on the land, letting it lie unplowed and fallow. Then the poor among your people may eat from it, and the wild animals may eat what is left over. Do the same with your vineyard and your olive grove." (Exodus 23:10–11)

While still in the throes of slavery—suffering from the worst excesses of wealth, consumption, and power laid against them in the land of Egypt; having no vision of an economy other than the abusive one they were raised in—the Jewish people were being taught to resist repeating the wrongs of Egypt. When you are free, Moses tells them, for six consecutive years you may work as your own masters, tending to the land according to your own desires and capacities. Those who benefit from luck and skill will prosper; those whose luck or skill fails them will not. Fates and status will rise and fall. But once every seven years, all that will be suspended. Everyone—landowner

and tenant, rich and poor, the high and the low—will live in the equity of shared human dignity. Landowners will tear down their fences, let their fields lie fallow, ignore their boundary stones. Instead, the fields roll on unbroken, and the produce that grows there of its own accord, both from field and from the tree, belong to all.¹⁶ The land with all its goodness returns to the commons.¹⁷ The commons is the cultural and natural resources that are the scaffolding of society. It is our language, our watershed, our libraries, our literature, the internet, Wikipedia, national myths and traditional songs. The very first commons was the Garden of Eden. The commons of the Jewish people is the Bible, the Hebrew language, and the Land of Israel.

Sh'mittah is a celebration of and a return to the commons—particularly seeing the Land of Israel as our great commons. It is not about charity or generosity or magnanimity, wherein the wealthy share a bit of their riches with the needy. Rather, it is about re-envisioning a world in which ownership of critical resources belongs to and is shared by all. It is a taste of Eden, wherein many boundaries are erased and the land and its resources are remembered for what they are: a gift from the Creator to all humanity.

But the Torah does not stop there. *Sh'mittah* is also a year of economic equality. Debts are to be either suspended or, as more standardly and radically understood, forgiven. The economic inequality that invariably builds up in a standard economy is undone here—as are some social barriers, as well. It is harder to maintain the prejudices of social classes when boundaries of exclusion and inclusion disappear and everyone has to gather their food in the same field, in the same way, in the same amounts, with the same frequency. Indeed: during *sh'mittah* it is not just that food is free for all; food ceases to be a commodity at all. It cannot be measured or sold in bulk, as it is in other years. There can be no hoarding, no classic commerce, and no profits based on scarcity. Land and food and debt are temporarily removed from the economic equation. Social networks cut cross economic lines. Neighbors meet every day gathering food,

on more equitable financial and social grounds, gathering what they need in plain sight of each other.

But it would be wrong to see *sh'mittah* as simply a zealous attempt to mandate social and economic equity only once every seven years. Behavior during the other six years is affected by the umbra of *sh'mittah* as well. Both debtor and lender are more conscious of (and the lender certainly more cautious about) their financial behavior, knowing the consequences looming during the *sh'mittah* year. And they also know that despite their inequitable relationship during the six secular years, both of them will meet on more equitable footing sometime in the not-too-distant *sh'mittah* year.

Even more important is the impact of knowing that for one-seventh of our life, we will not be judged by our money or land holdings, but by what kind of neighbor we are, what kind of friend we are, and what we do beyond our work and wealth. This informs our choices about how to live the other six-sevenths of our life... which leads us to explore the greater purpose of *sh'mittah*.

We know that *sh'mittah* was not an ethic ignored. It was at least occasionally observed in biblical and rabbinic times, even if only in the breach. It was accepted as part of the Jews' regular repertoire of commandments, so that when it chafed in more sophisticated economies, remedies had to be found to protect it. Hillel (first century B.C.E.) is credited with creating the *prozbol*, a legal remedy that skirted the remission of personal debts by allowing lenders to place their claims with a court.¹⁹ As a public institution, the court would be immune from the laws of *sh'mittah*. The lender's financial risk would thus be protected, as the loan was no longer subject to cancellation. This was seen as protecting both borrowers (since potential lenders would not refuse to lend them money as the seventh year approached) and lenders (since they would no longer suffer financial loss due to their largesse).

Seen more deeply, *sh'mittah* falls into the category of "gift"—an antidote to the necessary concept of capital and the reciprocally-

bound transactions that capital demands. In his widely-hailed book *The Gift*, Lewis Hyde teaches that societies are stitched together by gifts, something that “moves from one hand to another with no assurance of anything in return.”²⁰ Gifts move freely and engage the emotions, creating ties and evoking drama and value beyond the object itself, for they stir up an inherent imbalance into which all parties are drawn. The giver endures a true diminishing of assets, as opposed to the immediate and balanced exchange in commercial transactions. In a purchase, there are no loose ends and no expectation for ongoing relations between the buyer and seller (unless, of course, the item is faulty or if the contract of the exchange is otherwise violated). No emotion, no ties; all is settled and done at the end of the exchange.

But true gifts go on and on. *Sh'mittah* creates a large circle of gifting by involving and evoking community and nature, neighbors and God. Letting the land lie fallow with its produce accessible to neighbors and animals alike enlarges the gifting circle. The physical removal of field fences and boundaries mirrors the erasure of social, psychological, and existential boundaries of this world, and allows us to enter what Lewis calls “mystery.” It is in this world of circulating gifts, a world infinitely bigger than our small transactional lives—a world where there is enough for all—that *sh'mittah* allows us to live, and thrive, ever so briefly.

The idea of *sh'mittah*, then, is more than a way to provide a pause and a corrective to the economic order. It is a rehearsal of sorts for the utopia we seek. We must act as if the land has resorted to common ownership, as if our daily needs come readily to hand, as if our days and worth are not measured only by our commercial labor but by...what? The Torah does not tell us *how* we are to spend our time when we are not working or engaged in commerce. Perhaps in companionship, creativity, experiments and discovery, study and song, comforting and caring for the ill and aged. This is a part of the utopia that *sh'mittah* invites us to explore.²¹

Yet for most Jews, *sh'mittah* is an almost forgotten tradition.²² Those of us in the Diaspora are challenged today neither by its strictures nor by its freedoms. What would happen if we embraced both?

The question facing us, then, seems to be: given the depth of modernity's economic, environmental, and social challenges, how can we renew our understanding and observance of *sh'mittah*?²³ The *prozbol* was one such effort. It was not designed to do an end-run around *sh'mittah*, but was rather an effort to preserve *sh'mittah* in a way that allowed the community to honor the law while still accommodating it to contemporary times. That seems to be our challenge once again today: how can we take the lessons and values of *sh'mittah*—returning natural resources to the commons, more equitably managing our economy, and creating a society with limited social barriers—and apply them to our lives today?²⁴ Clearly, the biblical details of the laws of *sh'mittah* are not immediately applicable to a modern, capitalist, diaspora community. But its vision and values are.

What if lenders in the *sh'mittah* year permanently wrote off one-seventh of the interest owed them and deferred the payment of all remaining principal to the eighth year? What if, as consumers in the *sh'mittah* year, we did not purchase anything beyond our monthly capacity to pay it off?²⁵ What if, as possessors, we emptied our closets and storage units of all those choice items we no longer use, and gave them away to those in need? What “fields” in our businesses do we own and what fences have we erected that should be opened up and pulled down, so that equal access can be given to all? What commons has been walled off for the privileged that should be opened to all? What barriers have we erected between parent and child, brother and sister, friend and friend that should be torn down so that relationships can be restarted and past emotional debts forgiven?

Sh'mittah today calls us to devise ways to challenge the sacred structures of the modern economy and to pierce the fearsome social

boundaries that divide us, even for just a brief time, so that we too can re-vision the mystery that we are privileged to be a part of. While we may never actually achieve utopia, it is more than likely that the effort of the pursuit itself will bring us a little closer to it, and enrich us in ways we cannot otherwise imagine.

NOTES

¹ “Trends in the Distribution of Household Income Between 1979 and 2007” (October 25, 2011), online at the website of the Congressional Budget Office at www.cbo.gov.

² See “The 2008 Crisis and the Restructuring of Class Relations in America” (June 4, 2013), online at the website of the World Socialist Web Site at www.wsws.org/en/articles/2013/06/04/pers-j04.html.

³ Paul Krugman, “Better Pay Now,” in *New York Times* (December 1, 2013), p. A33.

⁴ Including the victims’ families, as well as groups such as IndustriALL Global Union, International Labor Rights Forum, UNI Global Union, and United Students Against Sweatshops.

⁵ See “Bangladesh: Companies Fail to Compensate Fire Victims” (December 16, 2013), available online at the website of the Human Rights Watch at www.hrw.org.

⁶ See “Wal-mart Company Statistics” (as of July 12, 2014), online at www.statisticbrain.com/wal-mart-company-statistics.

⁷ Herman E. Daly, “A Biblical Economic Principle” in *Beyond Growth: The Ethics of Sustainable Development* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), p. 206.

⁸ For an overview of the contemporary state and impact of income inequality, see the recent documentary film by Jacob Kornbluth, “Inequality for All: A Passionate Argument on Behalf of the Middle Class” (www.inequalityforall.com).

⁹ Waste is not a signature of progress but rather a design flaw. America would become even more of a world leader if Americans figured out how to turn waste into goods. See William McDonough and Michael Braungart’s *From Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things* (New York: North Point Press, 2002); and the material gathered at the Biomimicry website (www.biomimicry.net) for ways in which people are seeking to eliminate waste and maximize productivity.

¹⁰ See the information and analysis presented on the website of the Global Footprint Network at www.footprintnetwork.org/en/index.php/gfn/page/world_footprint: “Today humanity uses the equivalent of 1.5 planets to provide the resources we use and absorb our waste. This means it now takes the Earth one year and six months to regenerate what we use in a year.”

¹¹ Rare earth metal are “one of a set of seventeen chemical elements in the periodic table....New demand has recently strained supply, and there is growing concern that the world may soon face a shortage of the rare earths. ...worldwide demand for rare earth elements is expected to exceed supply...unless major new sources are developed.” (Information taken from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rare_earth_element.http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rare_earth_element.)

¹² Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society* (London: Sage, 1998), p. 80. According to Baudrillard, the marketplace tells us that happiness is found only, or at least best, at the end of a sale, and that we must continually buy so that we can

continually be happy. To not buy is to not be happy—or even worse, to seek happiness outside the marketplace and absent new purchases is downright anti-capitalist.

¹³ For an alternative to GDP as the measure of economic and social well-being, see, e.g., the Wikipedia article “Genuine Progress Indicator,” at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genuine_progress_indicator. And for a real-life example of GPI in practice, see “Wealth vs. Well-Being: How Do We Measure Progress?” online at the website of the Maryland Department of Natural Resources at www.dnr.maryland.gov/mdgpi.

¹⁴ From “The State of Consumption Today” (December 27, 2013), on the website of the Worldwatch Institute at www.worldwatch.org/node/810.

¹⁵ B. Berakhot 57b.

¹⁶ *Sh'mittah* literally means “release”; the word suggests a letting go, freeing up that which one had previously held on to. I imagine *sh'mittah* as the loosing and opening of a fist, both revealing and offering that which it had been holding fast inside.

¹⁷ For a fine definition of the commons, see the Wikipedia article at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Commons>. For examples of how groups are reclaiming and implementing this concept in modern times, see www.onthecommons.org.

¹⁸ See Nehemiah 10:32, 2 Chronicles 36:20–21, and 2 Kings 19:20–30.

¹⁹ See M. Gittin 4:3, where we read that “Hillel established the *prozbol* in order to repair the world”; cf. also M Sheviit 10.3. *Prozbol* is a Hebrew word of undetermined Greek origins that refers to the document that protected the repayment of loans over the course of the *sh'mittah* year.

²⁰ Although there is an air of expectation of return, at some point time and for somebody in the circle—for fundamentally, according to Hyde, the gift (or, at least: gifting) must move and circulate throughout society. A gift that does not translate into other gifts becomes capital, which is the very opposite of a gift. See Lewis Hyde, *The Gift* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), p. 9.

²¹ For an example of a modern company that went on sabbatical, see the video by Simon Cohen, “Global Tolerance on Sabbatical,” at www.globaltolerance.com/simoncohentalksaboutsabbatical.

²² I write here about diaspora Jewry’s modern efforts to observe *sh'mittah*. Israel has been struggling with this question since the late 1880s, when the Zionist dream slowly began to blossom into a reality. Treating the complicated issues of the economy, debt, and land use in the State of Israel goes beyond the confines of this paper.

²³ *Sh'mittah* occurs in 5775 (2014–2015) and every seven years subsequent to that.

²⁴ Looked at this way, *sh'mittah* can be seen as a biblical forerunner to the triple bottom line of sustainability: people, planet, and profit. For efforts to embrace an ethic that incorporates these three “p’s,” see <http://bteam.org/>, <http://urbanomnibus.net> (and particularly urbanomnibus.net/2013/09/the-five-thousand-pound-life), <https://bealocalist.org/> and others.

²⁵ As with all laws, exceptions would be made for undeferrable expenses: medical bills, college tuition, moving and new home expenses, essential new cars, etc. But what would bar or bat mitzvahs, weddings, and baby showers look like, influenced by *sh'mittah's* call for simpler consumption?