YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***Bein Adam Le-chavero:* Ethics of Interpersonal Conduct**

**By Rav Binyamin Zimmerman**

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In memory of our parents, Jack Stone *z”l* and Helen and Benjamin Pearlman *z”l*
and in honor of my mother, Esther Stone, *Yibadel L’chayim Tovim*
by Gary and Ilene Stone

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**Shiur #17: The Jewish Ethic of a Redeemed Economy
in the Land of Israel, Part 1**

**The Two Economic Models of the Desert**

In last week’s lesson we saw Moshe Rabbeinu instruct the Jewish people to remember their sojourn in the desert when settling in the Land of Israel. Once there, he urged, they must not mimic the sort of economy they had known in the desert, which previously had brought destruction to Sodom. That city, characterized in the Torah by its similarity to the Garden of Eden and Egypt, was at first economically successful. Yet due to its residents’ abominable interpersonal behavior, it was obliterated

The journey through the desert and even the period of servitude to Egypt served to teach the need to build up the Land in a way that would not reek of the acquisitiveness of a Kayin, an Egypt, or a Sodom. Settlement of the Land of Israel would be characterized by farming, but it would not follow the lines of Egyptian agriculture, which was completely antithetical to the Jewish economic ethic. The Jews would have to make a decision not to be captivated by the Egyptian culture they had long known, and which years earlier had caused Avraham and Lot to part ways after exposure to it.

How is it, though, that the Land of Israel can give rise to an economy so different from that of Egypt? To answer this question, we shall look at two models of sustenance from the sojourn in the desert, based on which we can understand the Jewish economic ethic of a redeemed economy. Against this backdrop, we will see how the Land of Israel, and not Egypt, facilitates the construction of a redeemed economy.

**Sustenance in the Desert: Manna and Quail**

In a little-known 1943 essay (*Hapardes*, vol. 11, pp. 32ff.), Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik identifies two different economic models that the people experienced in the desert: that of the manna and that of the quail. The manna, as described by the Torah, epitomizes an economic idyll in which everyone receives what he needs and easily recognizes God’s hand in the process:

Gather of it, every man according to his consumption – an *omer* per person, for the number of souls for whom you are responsible: let every man take for those in his tent.

The children of Israel did so and gathered, some more and some less. When they measured with an *omer*, he who had gathered most had no more and he who had gathered least had no less: each had gathered according to his consumption. (*Shemot* 16:16–18)

Here there obviously was no need for cutthroat capitalism, as greater efforts failed to gather more manna. It is complemented by Shabbat, which is first presented in this passage. Together they represent an economy that sees God’s hand in its sustenance and can allow for a holy day, dedicated to spiritual pursuits, to sanctify all the physical efforts of the week.

In order to perpetuate this mindset in the Land of Israel, the Jewish people are commanded to remember the period when they ate divine manna and their clothes miraculously never wore out (*Devarim* 8:2–4). Indeed, many Jews recite the passage from *Shemot* every morning because it so succinctly encapsulates the Jewish economic ethic.[[1]](#footnote-1) In view of its underlying significance, we can well understand the Gemara’s statement (*Berakhot* 48b) that Moshe composed the first blessing of *Birkat Ha-mazon* when the manna first fell.

Rav Soloveitchik, remarking on the development of the Jews’ economic ethics, describes the period in the desert as

a transcendental revelational experience, with the exception of a few alienating events. The Israelites in the wilderness were free from daily cares and worries. They ate their bread, not by the seat of their brow, but in the knowledge that God was with them. There was no need to till, plant, watch, and reap. The curse imposed upon Adam was suspended.” (*Festival of Freedom*, p. 165)

On the other hand, when the people protested about the manna (*Bemidbar* 11), God brought them quail. Overcome by desire, they gathered as much as they could – and were struck by a plague. Hoarding, with the false security it offers, is clearly rejected by the Torah:

The people arose all that day and all that night and all the next day, and they gathered the quail. He who [gathered] least gathered ten stacks. (*Bemidbar* 11:32)

Rav Soloveitchik comments:

These verses beautifully describe the greed that manifested itself in a craze for hoarding and accumulating the quails .… this portrayal is typical not only of the Israelite tribes in the Sinai desert, but also of modern man, who overemphasizes his ability to safeguard himself, resulting in a form of self-idealization. (*Festival of Freedom*, p. 11)

The greedy gathering of the quail, says the Rav, is the gathering of an economy that plays by the rules of the sea: the big swallow the little, all is permitted in the name of acquisition. This destructive economic ethic is antithetical to the Jewish ethic.

**The Jewish Ethic of a Redeemed Economy**

In a number of essays in *Festival of Freedom*, the Rav develops this discussion of economic ethics with reference to the exodus from Egypt. He notes that the Jewish economy must be based on the principle that man is permitted to search for economic security, but must not be maddened by it:

Man is commended for his preoccupation with his economic needs and his endeavors to develop the means for their satisfaction. Yet he must never ascribe unlimited worth to economic goods and absolutize their significance for the enhancement of human happiness and welfare …

Human economic behavior fluctuates between two poles: economic activism (which the Bible sanctions) and trust in God. The latter is an important motif which should guide the *homo economicus* in his actions. There are two central themes in the prophets. First, God feeds and sustains all living creatures. Second, feeding is an act of grace on the part of God .… We all eat out of God’s hand. Eating means receiving alms-bread from the Almighty: “You open Your hand and satisfy every living thing with favor” (*Tehillim* 145:16) …

God, in His infinite mercy, allows man to work for his sustenance and to devise means of increasing the yield of his labors. He also permits him to strive for material comfort and riches. Yet man must never entertain the illusion that the bread he eats is his. This would result in the profanation of the bread and in man’s self-absolutization and self-deification. Man must know that he is not a creator in either the metaphysical or the economic sense. He cannot create matter, life, or economic goods. His world of material wealth was given to him gratuitously by the Creator of the universe. (pp. 9–10)

In the absence of this knowledge, man, driven by the search for wealth, knows no boundaries:

Economic man is determined to succeed at any price. If necessary, he is ready to destroy his competitor. The Darwinian struggle for survival is related mainly to economic survival. In economic life, the fittest and strongest survive; the weak perish. Marxism introduced the concept of the class struggle as shaping historical events. In a word, economy and sanctity, or economy and spirituality, are two mutually exclusive concepts …

Judaism disagrees with this entire philosophy .… Another economy can be organized, however, in which a spirit of cooperation and mutual understanding prevails. (*ibid.*, p. 168–169)

This ideal is reflected by the sacrifice of one *omer* of barley flour in the *Beit Ha-mikdash* on the second day of Pesach – the same amount as the manna allotted to every individual in the desert. The people’s needs were met, their desires were fulfilled, but they were not devoured by them.

What Judaism wants to achieve is that the economic urge be bounded, that man not turn into an economic demon, his acquisitiveness into an infinite drive. As long as the economic urge is associating with a limiting and controlling conscience, Judaism favors man’s aggressiveness and boldness. However, when the controlling factor is abandoned and *homo economicus* reaches out for the endless, Judaism begins to see danger. (*ibid.*, p. 169)

The first principle of a redeemed economy is that the human urge for acquisition is controlled by the intellect, is given boundaries. The people’s failure in the episode of the quail was a failure to implement this principle: their limitless greed drew the wrath of the Almighty and destroyed them, much as had occurred in Sodom.

**Shabbat: A Higher Purpose**

The second mark of a redeemed economy is subordination to a higher purpose, so that acquisition is not a goal in and of itself, but is hallowed by a higher purpose, symbolized by Shabbat.

Both when the manna begins to fall and in the mitzva to bring the *Omer* offering “on the day following the Sabbath” (*Vayikra* 23:11),[[2]](#footnote-2) the Torah implies that Shabbat is an essential component of the Jewish economic perspective:

Moshe said, “Eat it today, for today is God’s Sabbath. Today you will not find it in the field.” (*Shemot* 16:25)

Shabbat does not make economic sense, as a day off logically means working a day less than one’s competitors. However, it brings holiness to a person’s economic activity, so that the six days of creative activity are sanctified with their culmination, expressing the higher purpose of man’s endeavors. Through this sanctity, divine blessing comes to the activities of those who refrain from labor on Shabbat.

Finally, the third characteristic of a redeemed economy is generosity:

If man looks upon himself as the sole possessor, as the only proprietor of economic goods, then his economy is an ugly affair, then there is exploitation and unfair competition. However, if man is ready to surrender at any time the call comes through, to return whatever I possess to the rightful owner, to give up whenever the demand for return is made, then holiness is possible. (*Festival of Feedom*, p. 171)

**The Economy of the Land of Israel**

If these are the pillars of a redeemed economy, then they must be apparent in the Jewish people’s model economy in the Land of Israel. However, the economy in the Land is to be characterized not only by these three positive elements, but by others as well.

The Land of Israel features three complementary avenues of developing a redeemed economy, ensuring that, even while reaping the fruits of his work in the field, man retains a humbling connection with God and uses his wealth to further justice and righteousness.

The first avenue is the knowledge that physical building is a fulfillment of the mitzva of settling the Land of Israel, and therefore actually a spiritual pursuit (as explained in [Shiur #15](http://www.vbm-torah.org/archive/chavero3/15chavero.htm)). This idea is vividly expressed by the Chatam Sofer, whose writings evince great love of the Land, even though he was not a political Zionist.

In discussing the absence of secular studies from the European Jewish educational curriculum, he is bothered by a dispute cited by the Gemara (*Berakhot* 35a) regarding whether one ideally should spend all his time studying Torah and rely on external sources of sustenance, as is the opinion of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, or should also be involved in planting and gathering crops, as Rabbi Yishma’el argues. The Gemara’s conclusion appears to be in accordance with the view of Rabbi Yishma’el. The Chatam Sofer, then, wonders why the *chadarim* of his day did not provide their students with occupational training. His answer is fascinating:

It seems to me that even Rabbi Yishma’el stated his opinion that one should “gather one’s grain” only with regard to the Land of Israel, when a majority of Jews are settled there, as then the work of the field is a mitzva in its own right, viz. that of settling the Land of Israel and bringing forth its holy fruit. It is regarding this that the Torah said, “You shall gather your grain” … [and] it would be comparable to saying, “I will not wear *tefillin* because I am involved in other *mitzvot*,” if one were to say, “I will not gather my grain because I am studying Torah.” It is possible that the same holds true for any other occupation that has a role in settling the Land of Israel, as any such thing is included in the mitzva … (Chatam Sofer on *Sukka* 36a, s.v. *domeh*)

The Chatam Sofer concludes that the *chadarim* focus only on teaching their students Torah because one’s work in Europe has no spiritual aspect.

**The Land’s Topography**

In discussing the agricultural gifts that a field owner must give to the poor (commentary to *Vayikra* 19:9), Alsheikh notes that agricultural growth, more than success in other occupations, is clearly indicative of God’s role in the process. Not only are crops susceptible to natural disasters such as hurricanes and tornados, which can wash away an office building, but even abnormal winds, insufficient rainfall, and heat waves can completely destroy crops. It follows that God is entitled to all of the produce. With this, Alsheikh seems to indicate that the agricultural gifts are God’s way of taking a percentage: God loves the poor, and therefor gives to them instead of taking for Himself.

While this is true of agricultural work everywhere, the Land of Israel is ideally built for this dynamic, as Moshe points out:

For the land to which you are coming to take possession of it is not like the land of Egypt, from which you came out, where you sowed your seeds and watered with your foot, like a vegetable garden. The land to which you are passing over to inherit it is a land of mountains and valleys; it drinks water from the rain of heaven. It is a land for which the Lord, your God, cares: the eyes of the Lord, your God, are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year. (*Devarim* 11:8–12)

Moshe distinguishes between the two lands based upon means of irrigation: The Nile, barring severe drought, supplies all of Egypt with water. The Land of Israel, on the other hand, has no comparable source of river water and must rely on “the rain of heaven.”

At first glance, it might appear that Egypt surpasses the Land of Israel in this regard. However, Moshe tells the people, this is not true. First, while Egypt may have a source of water, transporting that water to the furthest reaches of Egypt entails a great amount of work. In the Land of Israel, when it does rain, man can simply sit back and watch the heavenly rainfall give life to all vegetation. The water supply is not constant, but when deserved, it allows man to reap its benefits with a minimum of work, as expressed in the Midrash:

In the Land of Egypt, if one does not work with spade and shovel, giving up his sleep for water, then he has nothing, but in the Land of Israel it is different: they sleep in their beds, and God makes the rain fall. (*Yalkut Shimoni*, *Eikev* 857)

Thus the special terrain of the Land also encourages the development of a redeemed economy within it.

**“God Shall Give You”: A Constant Gift from God**

Still, the most important difference between the two lands is in the personal relationship with God facilitated by the food that the Land of Israel brings forth.

We recall that the snake was cursed to “eat dust all the days of your life” (*Bereishit* 3:14): though food would be readily available, the snake would never ask God for food or maintain a relationship with Him. The Egyptians too were given a Godless economy. Man worked hard to irrigate the fields, building an economy without thinking of the heavens.

In the Land of Israel, though, the Jews enjoyed the blessing given to Yaakov: “God shall give you of the dew of heaven” (*Bereishit* 27:28) – an active *gift* from God, who continues to give it so long as the people are worthy.

We will conclude this theme in next week’s lesson, discussing at greater length how the terrain of the Land of Israel can be transformed into the foundation of an interpersonal redeemed economy.

1. The passage appears in most *siddurim* following *Shacharit* (morning prayers). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Torah sometimes refers to the holidays as Sabbaths (*Shabbatot*). Here, the words “on the day following the Sabbath” (*mi-machorat ha-Shabbat*) are used to require that the *Omer* be sacrificed on the second day of Pesach. The choice of this term serves to associate the symbolism of the *Omer* with that of Shabbat. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)