

Sinai, Sympathy and Social Morality

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It is always a joy living in Israel and observing Judaism worming its way into mainstream culture. Listening to secular Jews, or even Arabs, conclude their sentence with "im yirtzeh Hashem" exemplifies how religion can silently whisper its way into the public domain.

When Israelis wonder at ideas which appear irrelevant to one another, they often cite the first Rashi of parshat Behar: "mah inyan shmita eitzel Har Sinai" (literally what is the relevance of shmita laws to Har Sinai). Strangely, the Torah tags Har Sinai as the source of the shmita guidelines. Obviously shmita isn't uniquely "sourced" at Sinai. The entire Torah was downloaded at this mountain. Acknowledging this anomaly, Rashi cites the midrash which articulates this celebrated phrase: "mah inyan shmita eitzel har Sinai."

Shmita and social equality

In truth, there is enormous significance in tagging shmitta to Sinai. A shmita year is a socio-economic experiment aimed at creating a fair and financially balanced society. Every seven years debts are cancelled, and slaves are released. During the shmita year itself, food can't be industrially harvested or hoarded. For an entire year, rich and poor are leveled into common experience. You learn a lot about someone when you walk a mile in their shoes.

By rebooting the economy, shmita checks against rampant greed and against the disproportionate allocation of wealth. It proposes a social model built upon ethics, compassion and fiscal moderation.

Moreover, cessation of agricultural labor invites a year-long spiritual retreat, enabling introspection and moral inventory. By sensitizing us the financial vulnerability of others, and stemming our avaricious desires, the 'sabbatical' year advances the noble agenda of creating a moral society.

Social Contracts

Humanity is forever in search of the recipe for a moral society. How can we fashion a kind and ethical society while still maintaining order and protecting ourselves against the internal and external dangers? How can we conjure a political system which can uphold common interest while still preserving human freedom and, more importantly, human dignity? Humanity hasn't always been successful in discovering that recipe.

Our modern democracies are daring experiments of "social contracts". Contemplated as far back as ancient Greece, the theory of a social contract became popularized in 17th and 18th century European political thought. The theory proposes that ultimate authority is vested in individuals, who willfully enter a common "social contract". Autonomous individuals mutually agree to waive some of their personal freedoms to elected governments in exchange for the advancement of public welfare and security. United by a common narrative, a society willfully binds itself to one another through government. These optimistic theories raised great hopes for the future of ethical societies.

Unfortunately, not all of those hopes materialized. Try as they may, imperfect human beings will never succeed in creating perfectly moral societies. At some point, the social contract frays, and the common narrative fades. Contracts always deteriorate and, sadly, we are witnessing some of this deterioration in the modern world. As noble as the human pursuit of moral societies may be, it is doomed to end in failure.

Religion as Moral Foundation

Moral societies must be founded on something more lasting and more absolute than a mutually agreed upon social contract. Moral behavior requires a system of absolute codes which aren't given to interpretation and can never be violated. Moral societies require religious scaffolding.

Morality conduct must be based on the *absolute* moral spirit of Hashem which will never fray and will always outlast human infirmity. Without religious foundations, moral codes possess no objective truths, only agreed upon moral consensus. That moral

consensus can change. Worse, the argument can be made that there are multiple “consensus” viewpoints. Welcome to the blinding swirl of moral relativism where every position – even criminal ones – become moral. For the shmita project to succeed it must modeled after truths of Sinai not the moral instincts of Man. Moral society must be patterned after the divine moral image, or it will slowly fade into an abyss of broken narratives and muddled morality. Said otherwise, shmita will never succeed unless it is designed as “shabbat LaHashem.”

Moral Society and Human Compassion

There is an additional condition to the shmita agenda of crafting moral behavior. The end of the parsha parsha shifts from shmita to our response to personal poverty. Pressed into economic hardship, people begin to sell off their possessions and their land, further imperiling long-term financial fitness. Often, this snowballs into more severe decisions such as willfully entering slavery. Financial stress can become so overwhelming that a person may even indenture themselves to a Gentile, falling off the grid of Jewish community. The Torah instructs us to support fiscally weak people and, if necessary, quickly liberate them from the horrors of slavery.

These concluding scenes of the parsha don't reflect grand social theories or large-scale theories of ethical communities. These scenes depict quiet and personal acts of kindness and individual acts of compassion.

Large-scale morality cannot substitute for interpersonal compassion. The project of crafting utopia can't substitute for simple acts of love and support. Without private chesed and personal kindness, social justice is hollow.

Substitutes for personal kindness

Our world has become very large and impersonal. We live in large groupings which, by definition, are less personalized. The virtual world has replaced the real world of people and mass media groups us into blocs rather than distinguishing us as individuals. In

our oversized large world, chesed faces the risk of depersonalization.

One risk to personal morality is “political” morality. Large global agendas sometimes masquerade as moral causes. Global conservation, world poverty, protection of species are not personal moral experiences but larger political agendas. They may carry great importance, but we should not confuse them with interpersonal morality. Sadly, we encounter leaders of these movements who are passionately dedicated to their pseudo-moral causes but who often don’t display high moral integrity.

A second example of depersonalized chesed is institutional philanthropy. As we inhabit larger groups, we must organize and institutionalize to better allocate funds and resources. Institutionalized chesed has a reach and an impact far beyond private charity. However, institutional philanthropy is cold and impersonal and is often detached from the crying heart of a person in need. Relieving personal distress and sensing the pain of another human being, humbles our spirit, and reinforces the dignity of the individual. Depersonalized and institutionalized chesed cannot convey what William Wordsworth coined “That best portion of a man's life, his little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and love.”

Shmita is bracketed by Sinai and by personal acts of grace. The moral society which shmita aspires toward must emanate from eternal divine morality and must be grounded by personal acts of compassion.