

A universal ethic for a globalized world
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As a Jewish believer, I draw my ethical inspiration and guidance from the Bible, expounded in the Talmud and commentaries of our Tradition. It might seem simplistic to look to the Bible for a guiding ethic for our modern globalized world, but in my opinion it is there that we find eternal moral values that are arguably even more critical for our times than ever before.

Fundamental to Biblical teaching is the affirmation that not only because we are temporary sojourners in this world, but because our world is created by God and accordingly in reality belongs to Him alone (Psalm 24: 1), human ownership of property can only be tenancy (Leviticus 25: 33) and to see it as anything more than that is both impious and ultimately immoral .

Furthermore, central to Biblical teaching is the idea that the human being is more than simply the summit of the eco-system. The human person is of a special Divinely endowed nature that makes all human life and dignity inalienable and of infinite value. Indeed not only is the wanton destruction of a human life the most terrible and condemnable of deeds, but our sages teach that any disrespect for another is an act of disrespect for God Himself , as we are all created in the Divine Image. Moreover our very humanity demands of us special duties, responsibility and purpose, to begin with in relation to Creation itself. Accordingly, the Bible describes the human person as placed in the world, in the Garden of Eden, “to work and preserve it.” (Genesis 2: 15). Indeed, Jewish tradition describes this task as a Divinely mandated “partnership” with God in the Divine Creation.

Moreover Genesis teaches that humanity’s principle task and purpose is obedience to God’s moral will and law, the observance of which ensures our well-being; and at the heart of this moral law are our responsibilities towards one another born out of the recognition of the abovementioned sanctity of human life and dignity.

The paradigm that integrates much of these values and more - central to Biblical teaching, appearing as it does in the Decalogue - is the concept of the Sabbath.

At the heart of the concept of the Sabbath is the idea that our blessed and ambitious human creativity and development must be disciplined. First and foremost in order to ensure our own sense of proportion and moral equilibrium so that we do not delude ourselves into thinking "my strength and the power of my hand had gotten me all this success" and behave without moral restraint .

In the words of the great nineteenth century rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch "The Sabbath was given so that we should not grow arrogant in our dominion in

God's Creation.... ..(to) refrain on this day from exercising our human sway over the things of the earth, and not lend our hands to any object for the purpose of human dominion. the borrowed world is, as it were, returned to its Divine owner in order to realize that it is but lent (to us). On the Sabbath you divest yourself of your glorious mastery over the matter of the world and lay yourself and your world in acknowledgement at the feet of the Eternal, your God."

Moreover in emphasizing the obligation to ensure the rest of all persons regardless of rank and even of the need for animal life to recuperate on the Sabbath, further moral limits are placed on our temporal power and the concept of the sanctity and dignity of life is reinforced.

However in addition to this weekly ethical paradigm, the Bible contains a septennial ethical paradigm which takes further the ideas contained in the weekly Sabbath.

This is the model of the Sabbatical year ,which Leviticus 26 describes as the means for guaranteeing lasting security for society. The teleology of the Sabbatical observance is rooted in the above mentioned recognition stated in Leviticus 25: 23 that "the earth is mine (says the Lord) and you are strangers and sojourners with me."

The Sabbatical year seeks to inculcate this consciousness through three central components. Firstly, during the seventh year the land is to lie fallow (Exodus 23: 10) recuperating its natural vitality. As a result, any illusion of exclusive ownership and utilization is removed as the land and its natural produce are available for all - especially for the poor - for the year. This not only affirms that we are all temporary sojourners in God's world, but that as far as the land is concerned – and in an agricultural society the land is the very source of status – the Sabbatical year emphasizes that poor and rich alike are the same before God.

This awareness that we are all sojourners and vulnerable, if you will, leads to the recognition that sustainable development is only possible where there is social responsibility, especially in relation to the most vulnerable in society. The Biblical bias in this regard is unequivocal and reflected not only in the abovementioned land remaining untilled and its natural fruits available to all; but also in the other precepts of the Sabbatical year, notably the cancellation of debts (Deuteronomy 15). Of course, this Scriptural requirement needs to be understood in the context of Biblical agrarian society. This was not a commercial society in which monies were commonly lent as part and parcel of normal economic life. Rather, loans were necessary when the farmer had fallen upon hard times and had a poor harvest, or even none at all; and lost the resources available to guarantee his continued harvest cycle. In such a case, he borrowed from another. Indeed, those who have resources are obliged to provide such loans for those in such hardship (Deuteronomy 15: 8), and when the disadvantaged farmer's harvest prospered, he could return the loan.

For this reason it was prohibited to take advantage of his situation, e.g. through taking interest. However, if the farmer were unable to overcome this setback, there was the danger of his being caught up in a poverty trap. The Bible recognizes that this would not only be his problem but that of society, and accordingly utilizes the Sabbatical year to free the individual from such a trap. The obligation concerning the release of debts is not an excuse for irresponsibility, but rather the obligation of responsibility for balanced and sustainable development, ensuring a socio-economic equilibrium between the more and the less advantaged in society – essential for the latter's positive development and security.

For similar purpose, the Sabbatical year also required the release of slaves (Exodus 21: 2-6). As opposed to the former precept, this may appear not only to be irrelevant but archaic. Yet within this idea are certain profound messages. In ancient Israel, a Hebrew would enter into slavery if he had no means of providing a livelihood for himself or for his family. In this manner, he in fact voluntarily sold his own employment to another. However, the requirements upon those who maintained such slaves were so demanding that the Talmud declares that "he who acquired a slave, (in fact), acquired a master over himself!" (TB Kiddushin 22a). As indicated in the Book of Exodus, an unmarried slave would be provided not only with all basic material needs, but even with a spouse. Understandably, in ancient Israel, there were not a few such Hebrew slaves who were very content to be in that situation. However, the Bible requires that in the Sabbatical year, all such slaves be set free. But as it states in Exodus 21, "if the slave plainly says 'I love my master, I will not go free,' then his master shall bring him to the doorpost ... and shall pierce his ear with an awl." (Exodus 21: 5-6). Our sages of old ask, "why should the ear be pierced and why against the doorpost?" They answer that the doorpost which God passed over in Egypt when He delivered the children of Israel from slavery and the ear which heard Him say at Sinai 'for unto me, the children of Israel are slaves' and not that they should be the slaves of slaves; let these testify that the man voluntarily relinquished his God-given freedom! Moreover according to Jewish law, the slave still had to go free in the Jubilee year, even if he still did not want to! The Bible also requires the erstwhile master to provide this man – who now has to enter the open market – with the material means to establish himself in it (Deuteronomy 15: 14). This obligation again reveals the understanding of the importance of the recognition of the dignity of the human individual and his/her freedom for the health of society - not only should no-one be subjugated, but all should be provided with the means for independent growth.

This biblical model is rooted in a moral vision that demands that we contend with the dangers posed by human arrogance. For it is arrogance that justifies greed, exploitation, irresponsibility and violence towards others. Fundamental then to the Scriptural message, is not only the special focus on the most vulnerable in society, but the insistence that we recognize that we are all vulnerable – we are all temporary sojourners in God's world. Such awareness may lead us to live more responsibly towards ourselves, our neighbors, our communities, our nations, our humanity, our ecology.

It may also instill in us an awareness of the fact that we are all potential links in a very long chain and of the enormous responsibility this places upon us. In tractate Ta'anit of the Talmud, we are told the story of how a righteous man known as Honi the Rainmaker saw someone planting a carob tree and asked him how long it would take before it bore fruit. The man told him it would take seventy years. "Do you think you will live another seventy years?" asked Honi. The man replied "As my forefathers planted for me, so I plant for my children.

Surely in these paradigms and their central values we find a universal ethic which is arguably even more critical for our modern globalized world than ever.

Interestingly, the most extensive passage in the Bible dealing with Sabbatical year, Leviticus Ch.25 is followed in the next Chapter by the promise of good rains and harvests and prolonging our days on the earth, as a consequence of observing the Divine commandments; and warning of the opposite, if the Divine word is ignored and desecrated. This of course is reiterated in the eleventh chapter of Deuteronomy (verses 13-21), the second paragraph of the *Shema*, - the central biblical reading in our daily liturgy, morning and evening.

Maimonides could only explain this imagery in metaphoric terms. It only made sense to him as a way of conveying the higher idea of spiritual consequences to our actions, in a manner that even the most simple might be able to grasp – "the *Torah* speaks in peoples' language" .

However it has been pointed out that today we can understand these texts more literally than ever before, because the consequences of human conduct on our environment are so strikingly evident . Human avarice, unbridled hubris, insensitivity and lack of responsibility towards our environment, have polluted and destroyed much of our natural resources, interfered with the climate as a whole jeopardising our rains and harvests and threatening the very future of sentient life on the planet (see the reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change <http://www.ipcc.ch/>) Moreover unrestrained irresponsible indulgence in modern society has not only led to far greater cruelty towards animal life exploited for human consumption, but also to a further exploitation of large sections of humanity to serve a much smaller sector. Indeed shocking numbers of human beings languish in hunger while others over self indulge. A recent study concluded that the average US citizen needs 100 acres of biologically productive space to support his or her annual consumption of food, water, energy and other

resources. Distributed evenly however there are only 15 acres of productive land for each of the 6.5 billion people on earth. That means that the average US citizen consumes over seven times his or her share of the earth's capacity. Multiply this by hundreds of millions of people and the human environmental toll comes into better perspective.

While these realities confront global governance as well as national authorities; we as communities, families and individuals are also challenged in terms of our own lifestyles and conduct. I think it noteworthy in this regard, that a vegetarian lifestyle is not only an important response to the problematic exploitation of sentient life, but a reduction in meat consumption is critically necessary in developed societies in order to reduce deplorable wastage at the expense of other parts of the world. For example, it takes 17 times the amount of water to produce a kilo of beef than it does to produce a kilo of grain. Wise and responsible reorientation and utilisation of resources could enable us to address most of the shameful hunger and poverty that afflict our planet.

Thus the Biblical link between natural conditions/productivity and our moral conduct is strikingly relevant for contemporary society, as is our very capacity to live in the land, the earth that the Creator has provided for us. Indeed herein we do not see only a universal ethic for our globalized world, but the ethical values that are critical to the very survival of our globalized universe.