

## **A Jewish Response to Globalization**

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Although history is full of surprises, my bet is that the globalization of the economy will be remembered in centuries to come as the most significant development of our era. The definition of economic globalization is the integration of all the economies of the world into a single international market. In today's model, this means the control and domination of the world's economy by giant, politically powerful multinational corporations. Increasingly, these corporations decide what we grow and eat, what information we encounter, and even which laws will govern our increasingly small world. The struggle to determine the shape that economic globalization will take is thus a sacred struggle for the human future.

As Jews, we belong to a tradition that has fought against a market-centered vision of social life. For us, globalization clearly presents a grave challenge and an unprecedented opportunity. The globalization of the economy is a process that began five hundred years ago with European colonialism, but the end of World War II, the concomitant expansion of American economic power, and more recently, the fall of Communism and the subsequent international trade and banking agreements imposed by the World Trade Organization mark astounding new phases in the totality of its scope. The process of globalization has gained exponentially in velocity at the very moment at which the majority of Jews are, for the first time, fully empowered citizens of democratic countries—first and foremost the United States and Israel—that are key participants in the global economy. We thus have the opportunity, the freedom—and the urgent responsibility—to influence the future face of humankind.

The predominant voices in the mainstream media claim that globalization creates economic growth that will eventually wipe out poverty and increase democracy. But what I have witnessed in fifteen years of reporting from Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and the Caribbean does not allow me the comfort of believing that globalization, in its present form, is good for the poor and oppressed. In country after country, I have seen how the viselike logic of profit maximization crushes the poor and destroys their culture and dignity.

From Thailand to Mexico, farmers living in semi-communal villages have been forced off their land by a combination of violence, trickery, and the degradation of their

environment and have been forced to sell their labor to factories, mining companies, or plantation owners. This process has been driven by governments, usually corrupt ones, that take huge “development” loans from Western powers and must now produce what can be sold for dollars in order to service these loans. Economists who judge economic success in terms of “growth” and Gross National Product have not devised ways to measure what it means to lose forever the chance to fish in a clean river, to raise children in a safe environment and transmit to them your ancient culture, or to grow food on your own land. Nor do their statistics account for the hundreds of billions of dollars’ worth of nonrenewable natural resources that have been extracted from developing countries over the past few decades, or the cost of the devastating pollution that is the byproduct of growth.

What does Judaism have to teach about all this? The notion that economic power must be diffused and democratized runs through the Torah like a spine, beginning with the Garden of Eden narrative. Whatever else the multilayered story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden is about, it can be read as a symbolic account of the emergence of humankind from prehistory, marked by innocence and nakedness, into the long era of “By the sweat of thy brow thou shall eat thy bread.”

### Food Is the Original Capital

Adam and Eve’s eating of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge is connected, on a compressed, symbolic level, to the end of the hunter-gatherer period and the beginnings of agriculture. One of the great differences between gaining one’s food supply through agriculture and acquiring it as a hunter-gatherer is that staple foods offer a diet that is less varied, but always safe, while hunter-gatherers, who typically utilize hundreds of kinds of plants and fruits, must always be aware of the possibility of poison. On the simplest level, God’s warning to Adam that if he eats from the fruit of a certain tree he will “surely die” might be read as an allusion to this constant presence of danger in a hunter-gatherer’s food supply.

Over the past century, archaeological anthropologists have traced the ways that the beginnings of agriculture often turned on the human ability to transform a specific species from a poisonous to an edible state through, for example, the chance discovery and the subsequent cultivation of a harmless mutation of a poisonous fruit or plant. Perhaps this transformation is encoded in the snake’s assurance: “No, you shall surely not die.” And if, as Kafka says, Adam and Eve’s punishment was not immediate death, but consciousness of mortality, would not this consciousness coincide with the kind of conception of time necessary for the long-term calculations of horticulture and the domestication of animal species?

Whatever the merit of these interpretive conjectures, one fact is clear: the emergence of agriculture created, for the first time, the possibility of surplus, of the storage of food. *Food is the original capital*. Storage prevents starvation during lean times, and also facilitates the possibility of permanent human settlements with populations far larger than that of the largest hunter-gatherer collectives, which never exceed 150 to 200 people. But

with the possibility of surplus and the resultant growth of the population came bureaucracy, social class, specialization, hierarchy, and oppression.

### The Economic Meaning of Egypt

The vector leading from the end of hunter-gatherer society to the hierarchical centralization of power and concomitant exploitation can be seen as defining the narrative arc of the Book of Genesis. Opening with the parable of Eden, the last third of Genesis is devoted to the Joseph story, which brings to denouement the book's thematic leitmotifs, such as jealousy between siblings, recognition, and mistaken identity. The artistic and emotional power of the Joseph story is so great, and its culmination so heartrending, that it is easy to lose sight of the fact that it ends with the enslavement of the Egyptian people to Pharaoh through the instrument of the storage of food. We are barely done wiping the tears from our eyes from Joseph's reunion with his brothers and father when the Torah tells us the following: And there was no bread in all the land, for the famine was sore.... And Joseph gathered up all the money that was found in the land of Egypt, and in the land of Canaan, for the corn which they bought and Joseph brought the money into Pharaoh's house. And when money failed in the land of Egypt, and in the land of Canaan, all the Egyptians came unto Joseph and said, Give us bread.... And Joseph said, Give your cattle.... When that year was ended, they came unto him the second year, and said unto him, We will not hide it from my lord, how that our money is spent; my lord also hath our herds of cattle; there is not ought left in the sight of my lord, but our bodies, and our lands: And Joseph bought all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh; for the Egyptians sold every man his field, because the famine prevailed over them: so the land became Pharaoh's. And as for the people, he made slaves of them from one end of Egypt to the other. (Gen. 47:13–16, 18–21) Could the subsequent enslavement of the Israelites have been accomplished without the prior centralization of power and resources in the hands of Pharaoh? In Jewish tradition, Joseph is known as Yosef ha-Tzaddik, "Joseph the righteous one," both for his feat of chastity in refusing the advances of Potiphar's wife, and for saving his family and the Egyptian people from starvation. But the Torah has complex undercurrents running through it. According to Jewish educator Joshua Lauffer, there are some striking affinities between the snake—in our reading, the catalyzing agent in the transformation of human society from hunter-gatherer to agricultural means of production—and Joseph, who utilizes the capacity for concentrating and storing the wealth that agriculture unlocks in order to create an unprecedented conjunction of wealth and political power. In its promise to Eve, the snake says, "You will be as God (*Elohim*), knowing good and evil." As Lauffer points out, unlike the heroes of previous stories in Genesis—Noah, Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob—Joseph never speaks to God or hears God's voice. Instead, he seems to function as a virtual stand-in for God, recalling the serpent's prediction, "You will be as God." "For doth not God (*Elohim*) have the answers," Joseph says to his fellow prisoners. "Tell [the dream] to me" (Gen. 40:8). Moreover, in describing his predictive powers (the same powers that enable him to store food and thus power for Pharaoh), Joseph uses the root N-Kh-Sh—the very same letters as those that form the word *snake*—doubling the word for emphasis. "Did you not know," he asks his brothers—"SheNakhesh YeNakhesh Ish asher Kamoni"—that a person like me would surely divine [what you have done]?" (Gen. 44:14). Here the narrative, through the voice of Joseph himself, conflates prediction and manipulation—Joseph here claims to have

foreseen a theft when actually he has presided over a frame-up. In the interpretation of Pharaoh's dream, Joseph takes the "knowledge of good and bad" that the snake predicts for Adam and Eve and realizes this knowledge within the realm of time—good and bad, fat and thin, become good years and bad years, fat years and thin years. Knowledge of good and evil is revealed as manipulation, calculation, planning, and strategy. The juxtaposition of slavery and accumulation—the concentration of capital that is a sign of an oppressive society—continues in the book of Exodus, in which the Children of Israel are forced to build "storage cities" for Pharaoh. In the description of Israelite slavery, the Torah uses some of the same vocabulary that will be used to describe the struggles of the poor within Israelite society. The suffering of the slaves is called *oni*—poverty. And their taskmasters, those assigned to extract their labor, are called *nogshim*, the same word as that used later in the Torah to describe a person attempting to squeeze money from the indebted poor. Thus, accumulation and the concentration of capital come to be associated with oppression and poverty.

### What Manna Means

Redemption, along with the giving of the Torah, is marked by a new means of sustenance. The Israelites are lifted out of the by now seemingly inevitable economy and culture of hoarding through the story of the manna. In the narrative arc we have begun to follow, the manna is a crucial watershed. The Sages rightly saw the manna as creating a preparatory, material basis for divine revelation. "The Torah was not given," says the Talmud, "but to the eaters of the manna." What is the essential quality of manna? It is a sustenance unmediated by a human economic system. It cannot be stored or hoarded. Left overnight, it spoils, corrupts, and crawls with worms. Each and every person is charged with gathering just enough manna to eat for one day. The Torah calls this "*d'var yom b'yomo*"—"each day's matter on that day" (Exod. 16:4). Pharaoh uses this very expression after imposing heavier burdens upon the Israelites after Moses's initial intervention on behalf of the beleaguered people. There, "each day's matter" refers to the arbitrary quota of bricks that each person was to produce—bricks for a giant storehouse (Exod. 5:13). In the story of the manna, to emphasize the revolutionary nature of the Exodus—in which Egyptian reality is stood on its head—the phrase is used again, but this time it refers not to the gross accumulation of resources, but to the modest amount of sustenance each person needs for that particular day.

Time, instead of becoming reified ("Time is money and money is time"), is renaturalized, measured according to the rhythm of the human body and its biological needs. The measure of manna required by each person is an omer, which we are told is "a tenth of an *ephah*." This is the only place in which the Torah gives us a key to its system of measurement—to teach us, it would seem, to keep actual human need at the basis of all our calculations. To emphasize the centrality of the manna principle in Judaism, God commands Moses, at the very end of the manna narrative, to place a jar with exactly one omer of manna in the Ark of the Covenant, alongside the tablets of the law, in the holy of holies. The story of the manna evokes the idealized essence of the hunter-gatherer era. In its immediacy, in the total economic equality it represents, and in its negation of accumulation and stockpiling, it repudiates those cultures in which economic and political power are centralized and conjoined through the storage of food and other forms

of capital. The presence of the manna, and thus of the trace memory of hunter-gatherer society, is felt in numerous ways in the Torah's legislation: in the injunction against the planting or storing of fruits of the Sabbatical year, in the commandment to allow the poor the right to "gather" for themselves the remnants of a harvest, even in the prohibition against delaying the wages of a laborer—"on the same day you shall pay him what he is due"—as if the money, left in the employer's hands, would rot like the manna.

Seen in the light of the narrative arc stretching from Eden to the giving of manna, the meaning and direction of the economic justice legislation of the Torah becomes more readily apparent. The Torah's purpose is to create an "anti-Egypt," in which exploitation is not allowed free reign because land, wealth, and the means of production have not been concentrated in the hands of the few. Rather than the consolidation of land in the hands of one person, the Torah commands that the land of Israel be divided, so that each family has its own plot of land, of a size appropriate to the needs of the family. As with the manna, the principle of land distribution is, "To each according to his needs." The land is meant to provide each family with its own independent source of wealth and blessing and can only be sold in time of need, if the family has become impoverished. As if to emphasize the nature of this society as opposite that of Egypt, the priests are the only group not allotted land; ironically, in Egypt the priests were the only group that was allowed to keep its land in the face of Joseph's feudalization of the Egyptian economy.

The Torah allows for the sale of land under special circumstances. But the laws of the Jubilee (*Yovel*) mean that every fifty years, the wealth of society and its primary mode of production are redistributed and equality reestablished—the land returns to its original owners. The Jubilee is called freedom, *dror*, the very opposite of slavery. The Jubilee law is an attempt to legislate against the development of wealthy classes and impoverished, landless classes. It also ensures that land will not become a reified commodity. Instead of a constant increase in land value, the Jubilee law makes certain that land is priced according to its use value, "for it is a quantity of crops that he is selling to you." In other words, land, the major source of wealth and means of production in Israelite society, can never become a source of financial speculation.

The Jubilee is not the only legislation designed to correct the tendency of agricultural (and certainly industrial) societies to concentrate wealth and thus power. In four different places, the Torah also emphasizes the prohibition against taking interest on loans of money or food, expressed as a continuation of the laws of the Jubilee: If your brother grows poor, and his means fail with you, then you should strengthen him, though he is a stranger or a sojourner, that he may live with you. Take no interest from him, nor take any increase, but fear God, so that your brother might live with you. I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan, and to be your God. (Gen. 25:35–38) The Torah repeats the phrase *live with you* three times, suggesting that the prohibition against taking interest is a strategy aimed at creating a society based on at least rough social equality, without divisions into separate social classes. As Rabbi Shimon Federbush, a rabbinic luminary writing just before the creation of the State of Israel, says:

At the foundation of the prohibition against taking interest is the Torah's desire to prevent the formation of a class of extremely wealthy people who have gained their riches at the expense of the economically weak. In doing this, the Torah legislates on the one hand against the possibility of the rich using interest to continuously enhance their wealth, and on the other hand, prevents the emergence of a class of people struggling under the weight of debts that continue to grow as the poison of interest causes economic collapse and finally even slavery.

### The Pharaoh of Globalization

How can we, as faithful Jews, fight against a form of globalization created to maximize the accumulation of wealth by multinational corporations? How can we raise up our brothers and sisters who are victims of this form of globalization, who are growing poorer, losing their ways of life, bearing the brunt of environmental destruction? Battling for a different kind of globalization will take clarity of purpose and strength of conviction. A clear and strong reading of the Torah's teachings on economic justice can serve as a crucial ethical and spiritual bulwark, a place to stand as we reach outward to make new alliances.

These teachings have far deeper and more complex psychological and economic implications than can be sketched in a single schematic essay. However, it is my contention that the overwhelming economic direction of the Torah, evidenced through the integration of its narrative and legal strands, is not only to insist on the equitable distribution of resources but also to stand against the kind of concentration of wealth that inevitably leads to abuses of power.

The entrance into the land of Israel, unfortunately, does not result in the establishment of the kind of society prescribed by the Torah. The prophets—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Micah, Hosea, and others—spend much of their energy in the remaining books of the Tanakh railing against the exploitation of the poor at the hands of the rich. In particular, the prophets expose the nexus of political and economic power that perverts justice in order to serve the greed of the wealthy. The prevailing Western ideology—that the free market is really free of political influence and will eventually uplift the poor—would have evoked the bitter ire of the prophets. Today, as modern Jews, it is our responsibility to bring Jewish ethical wisdom to bear on the analysis, exposure, and repair of the current international economic order. We will need to focus on the regulation of international corporations and the promotion of grassroots democracy, and on the nexus between the battle for a clean environment and the struggle for social justice. And we must not forget that the prophetic voice of justice emerges from a faith that human beings have within us the potential for something better, deeper, and ultimately more pleasurable—both as individuals and as a society. If we listen closely to the deepest layers of our tradition we will begin to realize this truth: none of us will be free until all of us are. When we gain awareness of how enmeshed we are with all of humanity, economically and thus ethically, we will begin the work, in partnership with other spiritual traditions, of creating a new ethic for the global age.