



# Torah Economics

by Tim Kelley

For the past 5 to 6 years our country has been facing an economic crisis that, according to most economists, was birthed in mid 1990's decision to promote home ownership to those who could not afford to own a home. If we were to look past the politics of the problem, we would find the problem goes even further back to the 1960's 'War on Poverty', and possibly further back to the Great Depression and the establishment of well-intentioned social programs designed to provide a government 'safety net' for those who fall into short term financial problems or who have not been able to amass a sufficient retirement income.

If you've been following the Republican debates these past few months, you've probably noticed that the major concern of the voting public is that of the economy. Normal election-cycle issues such as abortion, homosexual rights, and even foreign policy get relatively little air time compared to the question of how this or that politician will solve our economic mess, much of which was caused by the runaway costs of social programs.

Putting aside the fact that our country's constitution does not allow the government to involve itself in social programs, how is it that we have fallen into such a financial quagmire. The most obvious reason is that politicians are unwilling to make the difficult decisions that would help lift our nation up. They refuse to apply common sense principles of economics that most of us were taught by our parents, namely –

- You cannot spend more than you make
- If you don't work, you don't eat

It has come to the point where nearly half the adults in America receive money from the government instead of contributing income to the government, thus for almost every person who works in the private sector (does not work for government) and is paying taxes, there is someone who is receiving a check from the government. This is not the system our founding fathers had envisioned nearly 235 years ago.

America was founded on Biblical principles, some of which pertain to economics. The founding fathers and subsequent law-makers have tried to apply some of YHWH's laws when writing the economic laws for our nation, but because we are so far removed from His system, these 'man-made' laws do not yield the same result as was intended by the original Biblical laws.

In this series of studies we'll investigate Israel's economic system. We'll see that one of the fundamental attributes of His economy was the concept of personal responsibility – you are where you are because of what you've done and therefore you have to help yourself out of your situation. By having the people work their way out of their problems, the people maintained their dignity. Those who were more fortunate were required to help the less fortunate – the poor - in various ways, and the more fortunate were also required to help maintain the dignity of the poor.

YHWH's economic system is really quite simple. He owns the land, but we can use the land as long as we give Him 10% of the increase and see to it that the poor are taken care of. He promised that if we use the land correctly, take care of His less fortunate ones, and follow His instructions, the land would produce more than we could ever use.

<sup>ESV</sup> Deuteronomy 28:1 "And if you faithfully obey the voice of the LORD your God, being careful to do all his commandments that I command you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. <sup>2</sup> And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the LORD your God. <sup>3</sup> Blessed

shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field. <sup>4</sup> Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground and the fruit of your cattle, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock.

Of course, this promise was made to Israel just before they entered the land, but the principles are the same for us today. YHVH is not a respecter of persons –

<sup>ESV</sup> Acts 10:34-35 So Peter opened his mouth and said: "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, <sup>35</sup> but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.

- so He would deal with us as a nation the same way as ancient Israel if we would only follow His ways.

YHVH intended Israel to be a theocracy<sup>1</sup>. Within the governmental system there were two 'branches' – the *shoftim* (judges) and the *cohanim* (priests). These two branches had differing roles, though at times they overlapped. Because of the nature of their roles, the *cohanim* were unable to provide for themselves in the same manner as the average Israelite. Thus the *cohanim* had to be provided for by the people. In addition to the priests, the entire tribe of Levi was given the role of assisting the *cohanim* in their duties; therefore, they too had to be provided for by the people. Their provision consisted of the tithes and sacrificial offerings as well as the firstfruit offerings of the flocks and fields.

Other than the tithes and offerings, the only other 'taxation' was a half-shekel redemption tax that was paid one time when a male turned 20 years old<sup>2</sup>. This 'tax' was used for the maintenance of the Tabernacle and later the Temple, thus it came to be known as the *Temple Tax*.

Even though the tithes were paid to the Levites and the priests, they were under no obligation to return any of the tithes back to the people - they were not required to be benevolent to any of the unfortunate within society. Instead, the responsibility of benevolence was left to the people. This may sound harsh, but this was the way it was here in America until the late 1930's.

YHVH never intended for there to be poor within the nation of Israel. He intended for them to carry out His Torah instructions and prosper as is made clear by Moses' words in Deuteronomy 15:4. Though the King James version seems to indicate that there would be occasions when there would be no poor, Bullinger indicates that the phrase "save when" is not in any of the ancient texts<sup>3</sup> and thus the text should indicate that there will not be any poor in the land. The JPS Tnakh and the Septuagint both give this indication.

<sup>TNK</sup> Deuteronomy 15:4 There shall be no needy among you -- since the LORD your God will bless you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you as a hereditary portion --

<sup>LXE</sup> Deuteronomy 15:4 For thus there shall not be a poor person in the midst of thee, for the Lord thy God will surely bless thee in the land which the Lord thy God gives thee by inheritance, that thou shouldst inherit it.

Never-the-less, YHVH is a realist and realized that unfortunate things happen and people need help from time to time. He also knew that not everyone would work hard and be diligent with what they had been given. Thus –

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<sup>1</sup> Theocracy is a form of government where the leader is a divine being or the leaders are bound by laws that are based on divine revelation.

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 30:11 - 16

<sup>3</sup> The Companion Bible, ISBN 0-8254-2177-2, pg. 259

<sup>ESV</sup> Deuteronomy 15:11 . . . there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, 'You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.'

So he set up laws by which a poor person could find relief and eventually be able to climb out of his unfortunate situation. What sets YHVH's way of helping the poor apart from our modern socialist way is that YHVH's ways preserved the dignity of the poor by requiring them to work for their assistance.

As mentioned earlier, Israel was an agrarian society - the economy was tied to the land. Each family was 'given' an inheritance in the land depending on which of the twelve tribes he was born into<sup>4</sup>. Though the family was given the portion of land, it didn't really belong to them. YHVH claimed the land as His, and each family was actually sharecropping their parcel with YHVH as their partner.

<sup>NKJ</sup> Leviticus 25:23 The land shall not be sold permanently, for the land is Mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with Me.

YHVH's claim to the land served at least four purposes:

- It created a sharecropping relationship between YHVH and the 'landowner' and thus provided a means by which YHVH could claim a tithe of the increase from the land.
- It provided a way by which YHVH could bring all things back into balance every 50 years – the Yovel or Jubilee year.
- It kept Israel constantly aware that they could lose their land through disobedience.
- It enabled YHVH to stipulate how the land could be used.

This final point brings us to the most fundamental of ways by which the people were to provide for the poor – allowing the poor to glean the fields.

Leviticus 19:9-10 <sup>9</sup> 'When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not wholly reap the corners of your field, nor shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest. <sup>10</sup> 'And you shall not glean your vineyard, nor shall you gather every grape of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger: I am the LORD your God.

This passage begins a series of admonitions against dealing unjustly with their neighbor. These injustices include stealing, lying, cheating, cursing the deaf, failure to pay your employee in a timely manner, and a litany of other injustices. Thus, failing to leave the corners for the poor could be considered a crime equal to stealing from the poor or any of the other mentioned injustices. So, how big is a corner?

The Hebrew word used for corner in this and the other passages that pertain to gleaning is *pe'ah* ( **פֶּאֵה** – Strong's 6285). It simply means edge, quarter<sup>5</sup>, side, or extremity. Thus, we get no indication as to the amount of the field that must be left for the poor. Yet, because it would be considered a crime to not leave enough to satisfy the needs of the poor, the farmer would have to make that determination.

It's interesting to note that the Hebrew word for *gleanings* in verse 9 (*leqet* [ **לֶקֶט** – Strong's 3951]) is nowhere near the same word as *glean* in verse 10. *Leqet* comes from the root word *leqat* which means *to gather*, but the word for glean in verse 10 is *alal* ( **עָלַל** – Strong's 5953) which means to *act severely* or *make a fool of someone*. Since in this case, the person

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<sup>4</sup> Levi was not given an inheritance, but was provided for by the tithes of the people. In addition, there were Levitical cities whereby the Levites could have minimal farms.

<sup>5</sup> In the four places *pe'ah* is translated *quarter*, it never indicated a certain percentage, rather it pertains to an area of a city or the border of a city / nation.

gleaning is the farmer, it indicates that if the farmer gathers all the grapes from his vines, leaving none for the poor, he is in effect acting harshly to his poor neighbor and worse – making a fool of him, and as we'll see in a later study, YHVH does not take kindly to someone humiliating the poor.

Though YHVH required the farmer to leave enough produce in the corner to satisfy the needs of the poor, He didn't expect the farmer to gather, winnow, package, and deliver it to the poor. Unlike today where the poor are sent a check and never have to lift their finger to help themselves, YHVH expected the poor to do their part in providing for themselves and their families. Thus, they had to go out to the field and gather for themselves.

The most notable example of gleaning is that of Ruth the Moabitess. Ruth and Naomi, Ruth's mother-in-law relocated from Moab to Bethlehem after their husbands had died. Upon returning they were both very poor. Naomi's late husband had a very wealthy relative whose name was Boaz. Boaz also lived in Bethlehem, but it apparently never crossed Naomi's mind to ask him for a handout, even though being a widow, she would have been entitled to some sort of sustenance. Instead, she and Ruth agreed that Ruth should go to Boaz's field and glean for their food.

Reading from chapter 2, verse 7 down through verse 17 you'll find that even after Boaz took note of Ruth, and even after he made sure she was able to glean from the best part of the field, and even after Boaz allowed her to gather from some of the previously gathered sheaves, she still had to glean from morning to evening in order to gather enough for herself and Naomi. This would indicate that gleaning was not an easy way to make a living. I would think the reapers who worked for Boaz went home every day with more to show for their labors than did the person who gleaned, but this is what would be expected. Gleaning was never intended to be an occupation, just a temporary and dignified means of providing for yourself until you're able to get back on your feet.

Though I see no specific place in the Torah that states such, the example of gleaning shows that in the Hebrew culture work was the minimum requirement if you wanted to eat. Paul seems to indicate this when in his letter to the Thessalonians he shows that he and his associates never freeloaded off the people he visited, even though he was a guest.

<sup>ESV</sup> 2 Thessalonians 3:7-8 For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, <sup>8</sup> nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you.

Paul goes on to say –

<sup>ESV</sup> 2 Thessalonians 3:10 For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.

One last thing pertaining to this basic Hebrew form of benevolence –

The gleanings were not left only for the poor; they were also left for the *ger*, the stranger, as can be seen in Leviticus 23:22. Because Egypt took care of Israel when they relocated there during the days of Jacob, YHVH always reminded Israel that they should likewise take care of the stranger that comes into their land.<sup>6</sup>

In review we saw that in God's economy, benevolence was the responsibility of the people, not the *government*. Being that most of the people were farmers of some sort, they were the first line of defense (you might say) toward avoiding hunger, but their responsibility ended when they

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<sup>6</sup> Lev. 19:33-34

left enough grain or produce in their fields to feed those who were willing to gather it. The poor were expected to do the gathering, and by so doing, gained and maintained their dignity.

Thus we can see that everyone was expected to work if they were going to eat. In YHVH's economy, there are no welfare checks, no soup kitchens, no free lunches.

Next time we'll look at some of the laws pertaining to servitude, another way of helping the poor.

Shalom Aleichem