Wealth, Poverty, Morality: Thoughts for Behar/Behukkotai

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Angel for Shabbat--Behar/Behukkotai

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Recent news programs featured stories that are stark reminders of problems facing humanity. One story described the abject poverty in south Sudan, where flooding has destroyed farmlands and where starvation is everywhere. Children with distended stomachs cry for sustenance. Another story spoke of athletes who were signing contracts for hundreds of millions of dollars…just to play baseball, basketball or football.

What kind of world tolerates horrific poverty, while rewarding athletes and entertainers with staggering amounts of money?

Another news item described New York City as the richest city in the world. Yet, when I walk the streets of New York I daily see homeless people and beggars. While some New Yorkers have millions and billions of dollars, others don't have a decent place to live and don't know where their next meal is coming from.

A society—and a world—which has such vast gaps between the wealthy and the poor has a deep moral problem along with the deep economic problem.

The Torah legislation on behalf of the poor and oppressed is highlighted in this week's Torah reading. Farmers are obligated to leave portions of their fields unharvested, allocating it for the poor. Lenders are not allowed to charge interest on their loans to fellow Israelites. Society has an obligation to protect widows and orphans and all others who are vulnerable and unprotected.

On each seventh year, debts are cancelled. On each fiftieth year, land was returned to the family which originally owned it. The result of these laws was to prevent chronic poverty within families. The younger generations did not inherit an overwhelming burden of debts from the older generations; and a family could look forward to a definite time when their property--which they may have had to sell in desperation--would be returned to them.

While inequalities in income will always exist, the gap between the rich and the poor must not be allowed to undercut moral responsibilities. Those who have more are obligated to help those who have less. The goal for a society is to ensure the wellbeing of all, not the enrichment of a privileged few while masses of people go hungry.

When we see the shocking inequalities in our world, we must recognize a fundamental moral/spiritual component. The Torah emphasizes social responsibility; when the religious/idealistic aspect is removed, people tend to focus only on themselves, on how they can amass more money, more entertainment, more personal pleasures.

When we see children dying of starvation while athletes are paid hundreds of millions of dollars, we are witnessing a serious social disease. When we ourselves pay more money for tickets to sports or entertainment events than we contribute to charity, we are part of the problem.

In his book, The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth (Vintage Paperback, 2006), Professor Benjamin Friedman of Harvard University points out that economic life and moral life are intertwined. When economies grow for general society, people tend to be more generous, tolerant, and considerate of the needs of others. But when large portions of the population feel that they are losing ground economically, the foundations of a stable, moral society are shaken.

The Torah teaches us that society is best served when all of us look out for each other; when the poor, the widow and orphan are not left behind; when we realize that we each have a role to play in creating a fairer, more moral and idealistic world.