John Galt Meets the Master of Prayer: Conflicting Visions of Utopia

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On this coming Rosh HaShana the Shmita (Sabbatical) year (5775 – 2014-15) will begin. According to its laws, routine agricultural activities are prohibited and its produce is ownerless, free to be taken by all. At the end of the year, Shmitat Kesafim (the remission of debts) also takes effect. If we look at this also in the context of the (currently inapplicable) Yovel (Jubilee) year, which in addition to the Shmita laws also frees the slaves and includes massive agrarian reform as all land that had been bought and sold in the previous fifty years reverts to its original owners, we witness a massive societal change with utopian overtones. Before returning to this topic I would like to present two inverse parallel stories of utopian redemption, Rebbe Nachman of Breslov's "The Master of Prayer" and Ayn Rand's "Atlas Shrugged" . Their tales are surprisingly similar in structure and yet opposites in the values that they promote and in their respective visions of society, redemption and utopia.

Rebbe Nachman (1772-1810) witnessed the beginnings of modernization, the industrial revolution, capitalism and the enlightenment. He saw these trends as posing a grave threat to people of religion and struggled to empower his followers and readers with tools to maintain their faith and values. He told the story "The Master of Prayer" to his followers on Saturday night, January 6, 1810, less than a year before his untimely death from tuberculosis. This story which is based upon

Kabbalistic motifs regarding the process of the future redemption, focuses primarily on the charismatic and revolutionary Master of Prayer (perhaps alluding to Rebbe Nachman himself), who leads a secret counter culture group that lives on the edge of a general society that is increasingly alienated from spiritual values. This group was dedicated to the worship of God and was based upon a clear set of values and goals: “He would explain that the only true goal was to serve God all the days of one’s life, spending one’s time praying to God and singing His praise” (280). This spiritual goal stands in stark contrast to the materialistic values of the rest of society, which are clearly seen as mistaken: “Wealth is not the goal of life at all…the only goal is the Creator, may His name be blessed” (297). In Rebbe Nachman’s tale, the society at large is that of extreme capitalism, whereas the revolutionary counter culture group is spiritual. It is not clear whether the group was run as a collectivist commune or not, but we shall shortly be exposed to their position regarding the accumulation of wealth.

The Master is not content to merely minister to his flock. He and his followers actively engage in recruiting members of the general society to run away and join their secret band. “It was the custom of [the Master of Prayer] to visit inhabited areas, convincing people to emulate him, serving God and constantly praying. Whenever people wanted to join him, he would take them to his place away from civilization, where their only activities would be praying, singing praise to God, confession, self-mortification, repentance, and similar occupations…Eventually his teachings began to make an impression, and his activities became well known. People would suddenly vanish without a trace; no one know where they were…people began to realize that all of this was due to the Master of Prayer, who was attracting people to serve God” (281-282). He is well-known and highly feared by the society at large, who could not succeed in capturing him due to his ability to cleverly disguise himself: “It was impossible to recognize or capture him, since he would always appear in a different disguise. He would appear to one person as a merchant, and to another as a pauper” (292).

What exactly was the nature of the society that the Master of Prayer was trying to overthrow? While there were actually several different lands that he was undermining, it is clear in the story that the most misguided and most difficult of all to fight against was “the Land of Wealth”. In this super capitalistic society men are judged solely upon the amount of wealth that they own and are assigned hierarchical status based upon their financial worth alone, with the richest individuals proclaimed as “gods” and the poorest as “animals”. The result is a never ending spiral of fierce competition for one’s life literally depended upon moving up the societal ladder. According to their religion there were even

“animal” (human) sacrifices to the “gods” and not surprisingly theft and murder abounded. Not only that, but “Charity was a very great sin. They believed that if a person gave charity, it would diminish the influx of wealth that God had given him…It was therefore forbidden in the strongest terms to give charity” (289-290). This society, which strongly reminds us of Sodom, the biblical town of horrors, is the greatest challenge for the Master of Prayer. Not only is the society rampant with violence and idolatry (including human sacrifice), but the belief in wealth also constituted the most difficult theological error to combat, for: “it was possible to get a person out of any desire except for the desire for wealth” (337). This topic of the desire for wealth and its inherent spiritual dangers was addressed by Rebbe Nachman in numerous places in his writings and he must have seen its rampant negative effects all around him. The rectification for this disorder was only possible if the person were to be brought to a special place (“the path of the sword”) where he would be miraculously cured from his desire for wealth: “In that place money is the greatest shame. If someone wants to insult another, he says that the other has money. Money is so great a shame, that the more money a person has, the greater his shame…Now it was revealed that wealth is the main thing of which to be ashamed” (349-350). In the end the Land of Wealth falls as its inhabitants repent their evil ways and spirituality replaces material values as the essential definition of human activity. The entire world is redeemed and the eschatological utopia is ushered in.

A century and a half after Rebbe Nachman told the tale of the Master of Prayer, a remarkably similar tale with the opposite message was published, “Atlas Shrugged”, the magnum opus of the American novelist and philosopher Ayn Rand (1905-1982). Born Alisa Zinov'yevna Rosenbaum to a fairly assimilated bourgeois Jewish family in St. Petersburg, Rand and her family suffered greatly during the Communist revolution and in its aftermath. Arriving in the United States in 1926 she developed an extreme capitalist and libertine philosophy that she called “objectivism” and used the heroes in her books as her ideology’s mouthpieces. She also promoted an atheistic and rationalistic world view portraying her socialist anti-heroes as “mystics”. She considered herself a writer of the “Romantic Realist” school.

Her self-identification with her positive characters was nearly total, as she wrote in “About the Author” at the end of "Atlas Shrugged": “I have always lived by the philosophy I present in my books – and it has worked for me, as it works for my characters”. Atlas Shrugged represented the pinnacle of her literary career. Simply stated, in a mere 1168 pages she had managed to state her philosophy in its most highly developed form and it would seem that from then on it was all

downhill in both her literary career and her personal life.

Like the Master of Prayer in Rebbe Nachman's tale, "Atlas Shrugged" is also about a mysterious revolutionary figure living on the edge of society. John Galt is a brilliant individualistic inventor who has disappeared from the oppressive socialistic society that America has become and he strikes fear into the hearts of that society, whose slang refrain to almost anything is "who is John Galt?". He too lures people from the general society to his secret utopian hideaway. However, the scenes are completely reversed, as the general society is an oppressive America ruled by socialist dictators who trample individual and economic rights. Galt steals away the leading minds of the country. Rugged individualists like himself, these elite "industrialists" join him in "going on strike" against a society that takes advantage of their brains and productivity in order to serve one of mediocrity and passivity. Galt and his friends know that eventually America will implode (and they also help it along the way here and there) and then they will take over, and their capitalist utopia will again rule America and the world, and people will once again have the ultimate freedom – to produce and to make money.

As stated above Rand's heroes are all great orators who expound her beliefs to her readers. We are thus treated to such gems as: "When I die I hope to go to heaven…I want to be able to afford the price of admission… to claim the greatest virtue of all – that I was a man who made money" (96). "To the glory of mankind, there was, for the first and only time in history, a country of money – and I have no higher, more reverent tribute to pay to America…If you ask me to name the proudest distinction of Americans, I would choose…the fact that they were the people to create the phrase 'to make money.'…The words 'to make money' hold the essence of human morality" (414). "I am rich and I am proud of every penny that I own…I refuse to apologize for my money" (480). (emphasis in original).

Moving on to Galt's secret utopian society we find that even the most rugged individualists must live by some rules. So when railroad magnate Miss Dagny Taggart accidently arrives on her first visit Galt explains: "We have no laws in this valley, no rules, no formal organization of any kind…But we have certain customs, which we all observe…So I'll warn you now that there is one word which is forbidden in this valley: the word 'give'" (714). Inscribed above the building that houses the revolutionary motor that Galt has invented to power the village is the following motto: "I swear by my life and my love for it that I will never live for the sake of another man, nor ask another man to live for mine" (731). While it is true that the group members work hard and live relatively modestly, their long-term

vision obviously extends way beyond their temporary mountain hideout.

What would be an appropriate symbol for such a society? Dagny receives the answer upon her arrival: “But close before her, rising on a slender granite column from a ledge below to the level of her eyes, blinding her by its glare, dimming the rest, stood a dollar sign three feet tall, made of solid gold. It hung in space above the town, as its coat-of-arms, its trademark, its beacon – and it caught the sunrays, like some transmitter of energy that sent them in shining blessing to stretch horizontally through the air above the roofs” (706). The dollar sign also appears upon their locally produced cigarettes and was used by Dagny when she finally leaves her railroad terminal for the last time: “she glanced at the statue of [her grandfather] Nathaniel Taggert…she took the lipstick from her bag and, smiling…drew a large sign of the dollar on the pedestal under his feet” (1138).

If in the "Master of Prayer" the redemption was signaled when the inhabitants of the Land of Wealth became disgusted by money, Atlas Shrugged ends with the following messianic vision: “’The road is cleared,’ said Galt. ‘We are going back to the world.’ He raised his hand and over the desolate earth he traced in space the sign of the dollar” (1168). We should not be surprised that at Rand’s funeral her friends placed a six foot high floral bouquet on her grave – in the shape of a dollar sign.

In summation, if we compare the utopian visions of our two authors, it is clear that for Rand state socialism (and spirituality that she rather strangely connects it with) undermine all that is good and noble in humanity, destroying human motivation, individuality and freedom, and ultimately, society itself. The solution is in absolute Laissez-faire capitalism and the freedom to invent, produce, trade and most importantly - to make money.

In Rebbe Nachman’s view it is faithless capitalism that leads to idolatry and violence. The solution is faith, and it would seem that ultimately the nature of the particular economic system is secondary as the emphasis is upon Divine service combined with a great deal of compassion. It suffices us to note again in Rand’s utopia even the use of the word “give” is prohibited, whereas one of the greatest signs of corruption in Rebbe Nachman’s despicable Sodom-like Land of Wealth is the prohibition on charity.

Did Ayn Rand model her hero John Galt (gelt?) upon the Master of Prayer? It is possible that she had read Martin Buber's 1906 German translation of the story, but it seems unlikely and at the end of the day, it isn't really so significant. The question that interests me is what does Judaism, via the mitzva of Shmita, have

to teach us about utopian beliefs?

Historically it can be argued that the modern state of Israel began with a heavy-handed socialist economic model which led to bureaucracy, inefficiency and corruption. We later moved to a capitalist free market model, based on individualism which led to both economic growth and a massive gap between the wealthiest and poorest members of our society. Some say it is the largest in the Western world. We also suffer from a situation in which a significant percentage of our population lives below the poverty line. It seems clear that there is a need for balance. Alexander Dub?ek said in the Prague Spring of 1968 that Czechoslovakia was in need of "socialism with a human face" and perhaps Israel in 2014 is in need of "capitalism with a human face". The social-economic model of Shmita, seen in its broader context including Shmitat Kesafim and Yovel can provide us with the proper model. Let us briefly examine some of the explanations given by the classic commentators to this mitzva and their relevance to our question. While it is clear from their words that Shmita contains multiple elements including personal and national spiritual growth and renewal (such as providing the opportunity for a year of Torah study) as well as addressing ecological and agricultural concerns, I will focus primarily on those perspectives which pertain to social and economic issues.

Maimonides, in the Guide for the Perplexed (3:39), writes as follows: "This [mitzva] expresses mercy and compassion for human beings as it says “and the poor of your people will eat”…and it also strengthens the land and increases the harvest by allowing the land to rest". We see here an emphasis on social justice as the poor now have equal access to food supplies. It may be that the agricultural aspect is not to be seen only in light of increasing future profits for the landowner, but as part of a plan to maximize food production in the Land of Israel for the ultimate benefit of all of the inhabitants.

In addition to additional “religious” messages the Sefer HaChinuch (Mishpatim, mitzva 84) teaches: "There is an advantage to this, for us to acquire the trait of forgoing. One should also remember that the land which gives him fruit…doesn’t produce through its own power, but there is a Master over it and over its masters”. Here it is apparent that one cannot clearly distinguish between the ritual and the interpersonal aspects of Shmita. For if it comes to instill within us the character trait of forgoing one’s property and financial rights for the good of society, this must be coupled with an increase in ones faith that ultimately it is God Himself who rules over the land and provides for our needs. One who internalizes this spiritual message will find it easier to share his wealth with

others while learning to take his own losses in stride.

Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Kalisher (Sefer HaBrit, Behar s.v. Derech HaSheni, U'Sefarta Lecha) explains that "the wealthy man will learn not to look down upon the poor man, for the Torah said that in the seventh year everyone is equal, both rich and poor have permission to enter gardens and fields and eat". An additional reason is "so that he will not always be burdened with physical pursuits…and when he throws off the yoke of labor he will engage in [the study of] Torah and wisdom. And those who don't know how to study will build houses and buildings so that the Land of Israel will not be lacking them either…for the need and perfection of the world". Rabbi Kalisher, the great 19th century proto-Zionist, openly stresses the equality of rich and poor during the Sabbatical year, both in terms of economic opportunity and in terms of consciousness. While he stresses that the rich will cease to look down on the poor there will no doubt be an additional benefit – that for a change the poor will be endowed with dignity and self-respect. This new consciousness, especially when combined with the reforms of the remittance of debts and the freeing of the slaves and returning of property in the Jubilee year will serve to level the socio-economic playing field as we shall discuss shortly. Even his caveat that those farmers not suited to a year of Torah study will engage in construction work for the good of society is part of a harmonious and utopian vision of a righteous society predicated upon spiritual values, physical labor and equality. It is of little wonder that elsewhere in his commentary he quotes an opinion to the effect that the Shmita year is meant to recreate the reality of the Garden of Eden before Adam and Eve sinned. This is of course, a well-known vision in Jewish eschatology.

Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook, writing in the introduction to his classic exposition on the laws of Shmita (Shabbat HaAretz), explains that "The individual shakes off his profane existence often, on every Shabbat…the same effect that Shabbat has on the individual, Shmita has on the entire nation…whose inner Divine light is occasionally revealed in its entire splendor, which cannot be annulled by ongoing social life…by rage and competition". What is of interest to us here is not Rabbi Kook's beautiful description of the well-known comparison between Shmita and Shabbat, but rather his characterization of the atmosphere that characterizes the workweek and non-Shmita reality as one of "rage and competition". The endless fight to get ahead financially at the expense of one's "competitors" must occasionally give way to the atmosphere of compassion and equality that we have seen above.

Rabbi Yaacov Ariel, the chief rabbi of the Israeli city of Ramat-Gan explains as follows (Zeh Dvar HaShmita): "The mitzva of Shmita is built upon two foundations: the public and the private…the mitzva's central idea is to remove one from his egocentric perspective and develop his feelings for his fellow man, public responsibility and a "majestic" perspective". While the end of Rabbi Ariel's words here hint at certain aspects of Halachic debate and public policy regarding the proper observance of Shmita's legal aspects, his first comment is crucial. We are dealing with a law which is to have a very specific moral and psychological impact on us. If Rabbi Kalisher spoke of the cessation of the superiority complex of the wealthy, Rabbi Ariel broadens it to include a general cleansing from our usual egocentricity in favor of a much broader perspective that centers upon our concern for the individual other and for society as a whole. I recall that during the previous Shmita year of 2007-8 I heard him quip that whereas in general the Torah leans towards capitalism, during the Shmita year it is decidedly communistic!

In the fall of 2001, just as the Shmita year was ending and the remission of debts was about to take effect, I was privileged to study the topic of Shmita Kesafim with my late teacher Rav Shagar (Rabbi Shimon Gershon Rosenberg zt"l). He too stressed that with the overall package of Shmita, Shmitat Kesafim and Yovel the Torah was presenting us with clear socio-economic imperatives. In his view what we see here is a periodic attempt to reset economic reality and level the playing field. Debts are cancelled, land is returned and slaves are emancipated. He pointed out that in ancient time one of the main reasons why a person would become a "Hebrew slave" (what we would call an "indentured servant"), was his inability to pay off his debts. Thus the combination of the economic measures listed above together with the availability of free produce during an entire year would be sufficient to return society, at least temporarily, to a harmonious balance. This, when combined with a heightened consciousness of faith in God's providence as the true provider, the cessation of the usual competitiveness and the arrogance built into the economic system, would provide us with a taste of the revolutionary changes in store for the world when the true messianic utopia comes to pass. I can only hope that our proper observance of the Shmita year in all of its aspects will hasten that great day.

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