Share Thy Bread with the Hungry

View PDF



Pinchas Landau is a Jerusalem-based independent economic and financial consultant. Born in London, he studied at Hebron Yeshiva and the London School of Economics prior to making aliya with his family in 1976. This article originally appeared in the Jerusalem Post (jpost.com).

The pattern is much the same everywhere – because the cause and effect is the same everywhere. It's probably true that the new communication technologies are catalyzing the process, but that process existed in ancient and medieval times too, so only the externals have changed, not the substance.

The process I'm referring to is the backlash on the part of the poor against the predatory rich. In medieval times, peasants' revolts were commonplace – not surprising, given the miserable lot of the serfs. But it is worth noting that then, as now and as ever, it was the participation and usually the leadership of the middle-class that was essential to give the peasant mob a fighting chance against the rich – then the nobility – who controlled all the resources.

The growth of the middle-class in the modern period was supposed to have made the idea of peasant revolts passé – and for a time it really seemed that way. Nowhere was this truer than in the United States, where the essence of the American dream was that the class and status you were born into did not determine your fate, lot and life-story. Even in class-bound Britain and Europe,

the rise of universal and largely free education drove a move away from aristocracy and towards meritocracy. The odds were still stacked in favor of the haves, but the chances of a have-not joining them were vastly improved.

This was not the case in the un- and less-developed world, and nowhere was this clearer than in the Arab countries. Thus, when the "Arab Spring" erupted almost a year ago, the reaction in much of the developed world was one of patronizing support for the demonstrators – who, for their part, followed the classic pattern of middle-class leadership of an urban mob, with the rural (and mostly conservative) population largely sidelined.

However, during the course of 2011, the pattern has extended not merely across the Arab world, but also into the developed world, from Europe's Mediterranean south across the continent – Britain providing an especially horrific example of mob violence. In Israel, of course, we have had a powerful dose of protest. Belatedly, the expression of open, widespread and so far largely peaceful protest, has spread to the US, where it began fittingly enough in Wall Street, but is now rapidly going nationwide.

The rationale for reviewing this now is not because it is finished. On the contrary, it is a safe bet that we will see much more of this pattern of protest in the coming year – and that it will be more intense, more bitter and encompass more countries. But now is the time for Jews, at least, to relate to the forces driving the protest/ backlash/ revolt that is taking place across the world and which, everywhere, is the result of a culture of greed and excess in which a tiny elite appropriated the bulk of a country's or a society's wealth, impoverishing the majority or, in more fortunate cases, leaving it a steadily shrinking share.

Why now? Because the main theme of our Holy Day season as a whole, is to ask what's it all about – at the individual and societal level. The passage from Isaiah read on Yom Kippur morning is rightly viewed as a seminal text for social justice, and the quotation in the title of this essay is one key component of that manifesto. But the second half of that verse – "and bring the desperate poor into thy house" – is interpreted in the Talmud not as a moral exhortation but as sound

advice: if you don’t share your bread with the hungry, don’t be surprised if the desperate poor come knocking – not necessarily very politely – on your door.

There are people, even in America, who understand this simple equation. Jeffery Hollender was here this week, talking about the social, moral and ethical issues that underlie the economic and financial crisis (Google him and read some of his stuff – it's worth it and it's not written in academese). But the moneyed class, which is now centered on the financial elite, and which has effectively bought control of the government and its agencies, is blind and deaf not merely to moral suasion, but to the common sense version of Isaiah's prophecy.

They, like all their predecessors and their contemporaries around the world, are doomed and they will be swept away in the rising tide of protest and revolt. But it is still possible for 'Main Street' America to wrest back control of the country and society from the Wall Street elite and its self-serving but ultimately destructive creed. Fortunately, Israel's society – as well as its economy and financial system – are in better shape or, more correctly, are less far gone in terms of the extent of the moral rot characterizing them. That's a good starting point for what is sure to be a tough year.