

BEHAR

According to Winston Churchill:

“The inherent vice of capitalism is the unequal sharing of blessings. The inherent vice of socialism is the equal sharing of miseries.”

The sedra of Behar confirms that although the unequal sharing of blessings is permitted and to this extent the economic system envisaged by the Torah is capitalistic, some sharing is mandatory and is not left to the philanthropic discretion or whim of the giver.

More generally, the sedra presents a template for a society based on justice, freedom and human dignity, an entirely novel and indeed revolutionary idea at the time. Unthinkable, yet inspirational and aspirational through the ages – through time.

The word *time* is important and explains the ‘slavery paradox’ contained within the parsha. Slavery is not abolished. Indeed it is specifically permitted, subject to more humane conditions. Yet the template contemplates a free and just society and the dignity of all people. An answer is given by Maimonides.

According to Maimonides, the template, involving and requiring a radical social transformation was and remains aspirational and contemplates a gradual process – the passage of time. This is because of the condition and nature of people. G-D changes nature but never human nature. Changing human nature takes time –

“It is impossible to go suddenly from one extreme to the other. It is therefore, according to the nature of man, impossible for him suddenly to discontinue everything to which he has been accustomed ... I do not say this because I believe that it is difficult for G-D to change the nature of every individual person. On the contrary, it is possible, and it is in His power... but it has never been His will to do it, and it never will be. If it were part of His will to change the nature of any person, the mission of the prophets and the giving of the Torah would have been superfluous.”¹

The template therefore contemplates the abolition of slavery by the choice and realisation of the people, the very people, who through no accident were born as a nation under conditions of slavery. This was unthinkable at the time – slavery was an ontological condition – and would take time to be abolished. Indeed time would be required – much time – to achieve the justice, freedom and dignity envisioned.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks contrasts the successful English and American revolutions, inspired by the template (gradual growth of human rights, democracy and freedom) with the unsuccessful French and Russian revolutions inspired by philosophy (Rousseau and Marx – Karl not Groucho. Just teasing and testing to see if you are reading this) and ‘dreams of utopia’ (terror, bloodshed and the repression of human rights).

¹ Cited by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in *The Chronological Imagination - Covenant and Conversation*.

Last year I visited one of the great symbols of freedom – the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia. One of its clauses refers to the release of slaves:

“If your brother becomes impoverished and is sold to you, do not work him like a slave. He shall be with you like an employee or a resident. He shall serve you only until the jubilee year, and then he and his children shall be free to leave you and return to their family and to the hereditary land of their ancestors for they are My servants whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves. Do not subjugate them through hard labor –you shall fear your G-D ... For the children of Israel are servants to Me; they are My servants whom I brought out of the land of Egypt – I am the L-rd your G-D.”

Slavery is but one aspect of the template which envisages the development of a just society based on freedom and human dignity. Capitalism within a moral framework is another. The sedra addresses the consequences of unrestrained capitalism and the imbalance between rich and poor in effect by way of social legislation. There are numerous examples, Shemittah, tithes, unharvested corners of the field, debt, respite from pressures of work and periodic redistribution, amongst others.

We have made substantial progress through legislation, international treaties and covenants. However, there is still much to be done. The template and its aspirational character does not change. However there are always new and different situations that need to be addressed. Slavery has taken different forms and there is much to be done in restraining the excesses of capitalism.