

Finding redemption in radical gestures

Discovering social justice in Hebrew Scripture

Lincoln Z. Shlensky / Times Colonist

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As we approach Canada's 150th anniversary on July 1, our pride is necessarily accompanied by awareness of our collective responsibility for the past. Now that Canada has acknowledged, in a quest for truth and reconciliation begun in 2008, the grievous harm done to indigenous peoples during the building of our nation, we must seek more comprehensive ways of remedying injustice.

It may be instructive, therefore, to examine early examples of redressive social justice in the Book of Leviticus, which Jews recently completed reading in our annual cycle of biblical portions. Leviticus, primarily a book of laws rather than narrative, surprisingly contains the seeds of some of the most radical thinking in Jewish liturgy.

Raymond Williams, the influential Welsh critic, novelist and adult educator, offered a helpful definition of radicalism: "to be truly radical is to make hope possible, rather than despair convincing." Williams's suggestion is that radicalism, in its most ethical form, imagines ways of being not yet realized but still possible in the future, if we start to enact them now.

Where can we look for these imaginative new ways to reconsider our world? Walter Benjamin, the visionary Jewish philosopher of art and culture, paradoxically proposed that we look to the past. In 1940, not long before he died in flight from the Nazis, Benjamin mused in an essay on history that "like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power."

Benjamin meant that the present must make good on—redeem—the promises and potential of the past. We have the power to interpret the past in ways that restore the transformative power of our predecessors' ideals, even as we ourselves struggle with the frailty we seek to redeem in our ancestors.

Leviticus is an example of a historical text that invites "radical" rethinking of the present. Consider the commandment in Leviticus 19 not to harvest the corners of one's fields nor the crops that fall to the ground. These gleanings, according to Leviticus, must be left for the poor and landless. How remarkable to see universal protections for the poor legislated so long ago.

Another instance of radical ethics in Leviticus is its concern for sabbatical years. Just as humans are to rest on the Sabbath, the God of Leviticus 25 mandates a pause every seven years during which crops are neither planted nor harvested. The land is thus granted the consideration an equitable society otherwise reserves for the rights of individuals. During Canada's

sesquicentennial, as we advance new ways groups can work together to manage land and resources, let us remember Leviticus's claim that the land must be treated as a full partner in our deliberations. Now that's a radical idea!

Even more extraordinary is the Levitical idea of the jubilee year. In the Israelite jubilee, all possessions must be returned to their original owners after a cycle of fifty years. The fact that the sabbatical year is observed by Jews even today in Israel, while the jubilee is not, should signal to us how radical a concept this is.

Why isn't the jubilee observed today? The very notion of a jubilee contradicts the foundations of our modern economic system. Can you picture returning all land to its former owners after fifty years? Imagine Canadians following such a law vis-à-vis First Nations. Yet on our 150th birthday, an ancient Israelite observing the jubilee every fifty years might say we are triply responsible to address injustices visited on Canadian First Nations. Radical!

Is it merely our frailty, Benjamin might ask, that keeps us from imagining the redemptive potential of such an idea?

Lincoln Z. Shlensky, PhD, is an Associate Professor in the Department of English at the University of Victoria. He is, as of this year, the director of the Victoria International Jewish Film Festival (vijff.ca (<http://vijff.ca>)), which takes place November 18-20.

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