

Radical Redemption: The Hopefulness of Leviticus 25–27  
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Shabbat drash: May 20, 2017

Vayikra, or Leviticus, stands out among the five books of the Torah in that it is primarily a book of laws, moral instruction, and ritual prescriptions. It is concerned very little with belief or historical narrative, as the other books are. Although scholars of biblical anthropology and philology thus may find the book fascinating, for the rest of us, its focus on prescription can make the book seem mighty dry. For this reason, Leviticus might be the book that has generated the largest number of personal-reflection *drashot* in synagogues worldwide. When your material is dry, as good stand-up comedians know (I am not one of them, but their ranks and stature certainly have grown since Donald Trump was elected), it's important to find personal anecdotes to engage your audience.

What I want to do today is to argue against such a strictly anecdotal approach to the last three chapters of Leviticus. As it turns out, Leviticus is a remarkably interesting, and even radical, text, if we think anew about how to read it. Why do I say “radical”? First, let me tell you what I mean by “radical.”

Raymond Williams, the brilliant Welsh philosopher, literary critic, novelist and, importantly, committed adult educator, offered a meaningful definition of radicalism when he wrote: “to be truly radical is to make hope possible, rather than despair convincing.” This very much encapsulates my own view that radicalism, in its most ethical form, imagines ways of living and being that do not yet exist, but that might exist in the future. Like utopianism, radicalism offers possibility, potential, and powerful optimism. Unlike utopianism, however, radicalism does not ask us to wait until some hazy time in the future, but urges us to act and actualize new ideas now.

Many elements of Judaism imply such a radical outlook. For example, the mystical tradition that concerns itself with *tikkun olam*, the project of healing or repair of the world, can be described as a *radical* Jewish philosophy of potential and possibility. *Tikkun olam* calls upon us to believe in the possibility and even the necessity of global transformation without specifying exactly how a repaired world is to be achieved. That a very old ideal like *tikkun olam* can also be a *radical* ideal suggests something else about the notion of radicalism. Rather than only directing us to the future, radicalism in the sense I am describing it often looks to the past to excavate potentials that may have been forgotten, overlooked, denied or lost. When historians and Mizrahi/Sephardi activists and scholars look back, for example, to the period of what is sometimes called the Jewish-Muslim-Christian *Convivencia*, or co-existence, in Spain from the eighth to the fifteenth centuries, in which Jewish scholarship and culture flourished in contact with that of other cultures, they are seeking to excavate elements of the past that have been forgotten or ignored but that might offer us enormous cultural and intellectual resources were they remembered and given due consideration today. Such evocations of the past carry the radical potential of offering us, as Raymond Williams suggested, hope and *not* despair, possibility and *not* foreclosure or forgetting.

Walter Benjamin, the great Jewish philosopher of art and culture, proposed just such a theory of the importance of excavating the past for its radical potential in his aphoristic essay, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” which he wrote in 1940, shortly before he died in flight from the Nazis. In his essay, Benjamin argues that history cannot be understood in terms of a long smooth arc of progress but rather only in the form of “memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.” His view is that the present is “shot through with shards of messianic time” – that is, that the present contains elements of the redemptive power of the past which we must revive to bring what was forgotten of the past back to life in the present. This is a truly *radical* idea of history. History, in Benjamin’s sense, contains a “weak messianic power” that it our duty is to reactivate. Radicalism, which is etymologically related to the idea of a root, seeks out the redemptive roots of the present in “messianic shards” left over from the past.

Leviticus, I want to suggest, offers us some of the radical potential that Benjamin says we can, and even must, draw from history. In Vayikra chapter 25, we read of the system of sabbaticals and super-sabbaticals, or jubilee years, that God commands the Israelites to observe. We see that for Leviticus, the land is in a sense equivalent to a living being: just as humans observe a weekly Shabbat, God commands that the land be given rest every seventh year. This corresponds well, I think, to what we might call a radical environmentalist perspective that the land must be accorded a respect that is equivalent to the ways in which an equitable society seeks to enshrine respect for the needs of individuals. The land is not something that we can simply objectify as a kind of “standing reserve” for our needs; it must be cared for and granted the much higher status of a partner or collaborator in all our doings. Much has been said recently about how different social groups can more effectively collaborate in land and resource management for the good of all; but Leviticus suggests that a partnership needs to be considered *also with the land as a party*. Now that’s a radical idea.

Things get only more radical in Leviticus, however, as Chapter 25 progresses. The jubilee year, or *sh’nat ha-yovel*, introduces a remarkable idea whose socially disruptive potential is such that, even today, the commandment regarding the jubilee year is honored by modern Jews in the breach rather than in the keeping. The jubilee year, as we know, is the year after the 49<sup>th</sup> year, representing seven sabbatical cycles of seven years each. In the jubilee year, not only does the land rest, once again but, more importantly, in that year, all possessions return to their original owners. These include general possessions of any kind, and especially what ancient Israelites regarded as the two most important possessions: land and self-possession. In the jubilee year, houses in cities and towns are to be returned to their original inhabitants just as agricultural land returns to its owners, while indentured servants—those among the Israelites who have sold themselves into service to their fellows in exchange for economic livelihood—must go free.

Now, the very fact that a jubilee is not actually observed in Jewish communities, including in Israel, should signal to us how radical an idea this really is. The theological reasons why it isn’t observed seem – at least to my non-theologian’s ears – tendentious at best. It is remarkable, in any case, that, at least in Israel, Sabbatical years are observed, but the Jubilee year is not. The seven-year cycle of *Shmita* – *shmitta* literally means “release” – have been observed since the

founding of the state, the first one having been designated in 1951-2 (5712) and the most recent one in 2014-15 (5775).

So, why isn't the Jubilee year observed? One answer, it seems almost self-evident, is that the concept of a jubilee, in which property is returned to the original possessor, is simply too radical an idea to be incorporated into modern social and economic systems. Can you imagine what it would mean to have to return all the land to its former owner at a precise given time, with no compensating exchange of money or goods? Now, that would be a radical idea, indeed. Imagine what it would mean in practical terms if we Canadians followed such a law vis-à-vis First Nations. That would certainly mean the end of Canada as we know it.

Or would it? Recently, my son Lev, who's six years old, came home and described the trouble he and his friends were having at their out-of-school program as they tried to navigate the system of what they called "trade-backs" among them. What is a "trade-back?", I naïvely wondered. He explained that when his friends traded Pokémon cards or other valuable commodities, the person who traded something away could at any time ask to "trade it back." But one of these fine young fellows wasn't following the rules; he refused to trade back. So a conflict had developed among them, which finally their teachers had to stop. Lev was upset that he hadn't gotten back what he had traded. I tried to explain to him that "trade-backs" are not the usual custom of the land, and that he shouldn't expect to trade something away and then get it back again. Later I thought to myself: why not? These kids have a system and it works for them, at least as well as the standard Western economic system in which we adults conduct our commerce. And when it doesn't work, they find ways to deal with that, including playful wars, that are mostly non-violent. That's a lot better than some of the ways in which our adult economic system deals with conflict.

Can you imagine a better system than our own? Maybe we have the least-bad economic system our economic players have ever devised, but is "least-bad" good enough? Or could it be better? Can we imagine a different system, such as that devised by the ancient Israelites, which protected people who got into economic trouble by restoring their former possessions after a certain time had elapsed? In contemporary parlance, such a system might be roundly derided as providing "hand-outs" or as interfering with the free accumulation of wealth. Free marketeers would scoff that a system of dependable "trade-backs" or redemptions of what had been sold away is a system that perversely incentivizes profligacy. But is that necessarily true?

I want to mention here a subject related to the Behar-Bechukotai and yet removed from its context. My friend and colleague at UVic, Daromir Rudnycky, an anthropologist, has been working over the last few years on the topic of the Muslim banking system. This system, as some of you may know, is the only economic system in much of the Muslim world. One of its primary rules, in contrast to the Western economic system, is that no interest can be charged on financial loans. This is very interesting because, for those who were following along closely as the Torah was read today, Leviticus 25 also forbids Israelites to charge interest, at least to other Israelites. Yet this commandment, like the jubilee, is not followed by modern-day Jews (or Christians). The Muslim banking system, whatever its flaws, *does* follow this rule – and Muslim

banks nevertheless manage to stay afloat and, believe it or not, they even make money! Now you may say that this is just a sleight of hand — that these banks simply make their money in other ways. But whatever the economic case may be, this example should serve to remind us that, despite any arrogance we may feel about the benefits of our existing economic and social system, no single system has a lock on societal benefits.

The ancient Israelite social and economic system described in Vayikra clearly made sense to the Israelites. It kept families and dynasties from falling apart by redistributing wealth, and it preserved the Israelites' system of tribal governance by preventing excessive accumulation or permanent divestiture of land and resources. It also preserved individual freedom and social equity by forbidding any formalized system of enslavement or permanent bonded servitude, even as it recognized temporary conditions of economic privation that led individuals to seek provisional indenture. What is remarkable is that all of this could have been addressed in an economic system that so radically rejected the idea that the land (or individual freedom) can be freely bought or sold, and hence instrumentalized. The Israelite socioeconomic system, if we grasp its messianic potential, as Benjamin might have urged, is a socially reparative system in which ethics are envisioned *above and beyond economic factors*. While this ancient system clearly preserves the social status quo in some ways, in other – let's call them "radical" – ways, it shows us the shards of messianic time that flash a message to us about the importance of refusing to leave the vulnerable behind, refusing permanent dispossession, and refusing the structural potential that a few will grow very rich at the expense of the rest.

We all know, of course, that radicalism as widely understood can lead to dangerous and destructive outcomes. So-called radical economic hawks, radical neoliberals, radical ideologues of all stripes – these hardened positions represent great potential dangers we must assiduously avoid. I would argue, however, that there is a difference between the authentic radicalism that Raymond Williams described in terms of hopefulness or possibility, and the false radicalism of arrogant single-mindedness that, in fact, is better described as fanaticism. Leviticus also has its moments of what might be aptly described as fanaticism, as when the laws against permanent servitude are explicitly applied to Israelites but not to any other group living among, or near, them. Or when God threatens the Israelites in Leviticus 26:29 by saying that, if they contravene His commandments, they will be forced to "eat the flesh" of their own sons and daughters. But such blood-curdling passages are perhaps what Benjamin would have counseled us to look beyond in search of something far more radical, or even messianic, in this text: the possibility of discovering an ethics latent in our history that now exhorts us to imagine the world otherwise than it presently exists.