



Guest Voices

Simon Greer
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Sharing Hardship and Prosperity

“He who had gathered much had no excess, and he who had gathered little had no deficiency: They had gathered as much as they needed to eat.” (Exodus 16:18)

This past weekend, Jews and their friends sat down at dinner tables across the country to recall the story of the Exodus from Egypt. For forty years, we reminded ourselves, the Israelites wandered in the desert, searching for the Promised Land.

Each year the ritual meal known as the Passover Seder remains the same. Yet each year we find ourselves reflecting on the holiday with new eyes, as current events illuminate the significance of different chapters of the Exodus story.

This year, with the country sliding into a recession, we have reason to reflect on the forty-year period the Israelites spent in the desert. These were difficult years, yet according to the Torah, every member of the community had what he or she needed. Everyone had enough to eat, and no one had too much.

During times of scarcity, it is particularly difficult to hold fast to the ethic of sharing our prosperity. But it is also during these periods, when the vulnerable members of our society are at greatest risk, that it is most important to share what we have.

As slaves in Egypt, the Israelites experienced life on the wrong side of a fundamentally unequal society. As the lowest of laborers they had essentially nothing, while the royalty in Pharaoh’s palace had far more wealth than they needed.

Upon their departure from Egypt, the Israelites initially doubted that they would survive life in the desert. When they first saw the manna that had rained down from the sky, they picked up as much of it as they could. Some gathered enough to stockpile while others collected barely enough for one meal. But when the Israelites returned to measure what they had, they found that each member of their community miraculously possessed only as much as he or she needed for that day: “He who had gathered much had no excess, and he who had gathered little had no deficiency” (Exodus 16:18). The Israelites lived on the daily manna for a full forty years, until their time in the desert ended.

It is easy to understand how a society of no excess and no deficiency would be a step forward for a community of former slaves. Yet even when the Israelites reached the land of plenty, a generation later, they remembered the ethic of life in the desert.

Through the millennia since the Exodus, in all the regions where they have lived, Jews have created communal rules about the obligations of the rich to the poor; of the employer to the laborer; of the community as a whole to its most vulnerable members. Though the rules evolved over time, the ethic guiding their creation remained the same: the resources of a community belonged to all its members – during times of want and plenty alike.

As the weaknesses in the American economy today are revealed, and we begin to realize that we may soon be spending a period of time in the desert, we may have the impulse to deprioritize the work of creating a more equal society. After all, the task today seems particularly daunting. The gap between rich and the poor is at its highest level since the Great Depression. The average CEO, who in 1965 earned 24 times what an average worker earned, today earns about 350 times the average worker's wage. Middle-income Americans, who carry more debt than ever before, report that it is increasingly difficult to maintain their standard of living.

But as the Israelites learned so long ago, our fates are tied together. This has become abundantly clear as the current mortgage crisis, which originated in the difficulties of limited numbers of home owners, spreads to other borrowers and throughout the economy.

We must embrace this opportunity to share more broadly our more limited prosperity. I have seen this in faith communities in Memphis advocating to make work pay through living wages, in community-based financial institutions in Baltimore providing individuals with responsible loans to create healthy neighborhoods, and in volunteers traveling to New Orleans to help put roofs over the heads of local residents without resource or recourse.

Every year, as we celebrate the holiday of Passover, we are called to remember that we were once slaves in a land not our own. This year, let us also remember our years in the desert, when our burden of shared hardship gave way to an ethic of shared prosperity.

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http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/guestvoices/2008/04/he_who_had_gathered_much.html