

The Boundaries of our City in the Age of Globalization*

By Micha Odenheimer

Should the Jewish People and Israel actively care and become urgently involved with issues of extreme poverty in the developing world? Don't we have enough on our plate already?

As the founder of a Jewish-Israeli NGO whose *raison d'être* is to create just such involvement, I often encounter people who argue that we should not. "The poor of your own city take precedence," they say, quoting a Talmudic dictum, usually with some degree of indignation. If they are from the political left, they will add "There are plenty of Palestinians you should be helping first." If they are from the right, replace the word Palestinians with Jews; the rest of the formula can remain.

The use of this quotation would be problematic even if our reality were the same as in the days of the Talmudic sages. The Talmud says to give precedence to the local population only when all else is equal, not if the poor of your city, for example, are hungry, but the foreign poor are starving.

In today's world, moreover, the notion of the local—of what constitutes "your own city"—has itself been transformed. During Talmudic times, cities and their surrounding agricultural lands formed an economic unit, with their own markets, prices, values, and regulations. The precedence of the local poor was rooted in the notion that we are responsible for those who live within the economic and legal system that we have created and in which we participate.

The globalization of the economy, a process which has accelerated over the past three decades since the fall of the Soviet bloc, has created very different conditions. Today, the economy of all the world's nations are inextricably entwined and interconnected to a degree that even 20 years ago would have been hard to imagine. In Israel, as elsewhere, globalization takes myriad forms: Most of the food being grown in Israel is exported to Europe, while the workers on these farms are from Thailand or China. Our elderly and sick are being taken care of by Nepalese, Sri Lankan or Philippino caregivers. Many of Israel's largest companies are now subsidiaries of multi-national corporations—Osem, for example, was bought 7 years ago by Frito-Lay—while Israeli corporations have themselves gone multinational, and own companies in Europe, Asia or South America. And of course most of the products and resources we use are farmed or mined or manufactured or assembled in the developing world—often in places whose lack of human, labor, or political rights means are part of what makes them so attractive as production sites. All this without even mentioning environmental issues, which are by their nature borderless and trans-regional.

As full participants in the contemporary economic system, which is global in every respect, we cannot make ethics the single exception. Instead, it behooves us to become active participants in shaping the moral contours of our world. The capitalist system that has pushed globalization forward—creating much prosperity and also much suffering—often presents itself as the natural result of the free market. Yet the unification of all the world's markets into a single global system has been the result of laws and treaties that have been advanced through a concerted strategy based on specific ideas about human nature that has identified a certain form of economic growth as its supreme value.

If we are to reinvigorate Judaism, we must allow Jewish tradition and values to become part of the crucial discussion taking place about how to insure a more just and beautiful future for humanity. This means, first of all, experiencing first hand the lives and struggles of the 2 billion people who struggle every day to feed themselves, and who often lack access to clean water, sanitation, and basic education and health care. It means understanding the often hidden consequences of the way the world is being run today. I often think about the day when our volunteers in Nepal woke up to discover the whole city paralyzed by a massive strike when, as a result of commodities speculation in the United States and the globalization of the food market, the price of basic necessities shot up so high that the majority of Nepalese would no longer be able to afford even two meals a day.

Once the realities of life in the developing world have been felt and understood, we can begin to appreciate the 3000 year old discussion of economic justice that is a central spine of the Jewish tradition. Certainly, there is much to ponder, and room for many legitimate viewpoints in reading this tradition. Yet many of the basic principles seem clear and relevant. Rather than assume that economic growth will lead to prosperity for all, we are taught the opposite: create a just society that cares for the poor and the marginalized and prosperity will follow. Specifically, the Torah commands us to create a system in which the poor have access to interest free loans, and benefit from the periodic forgiving of debts as well as ongoing cycles of land reform. The price of basic foods (*ochel nephesh*), according to the Talmud and the Shulchan Aruch, should not be subject to financial speculation. Others examining the tradition might place more emphasis on the Torah's respect for private property or belief in markets—what is important at this stage are not the specifics, but participation in the discourse—putting the subject of global economic justice on the Jewish agenda.

As Israelis and Jews we have much to gain from a renewed engagement with the most urgent ethical challenges in our world today. Renewed, because Israel was deeply involved in aiding the developing world during the 50's and 60's and still has a deserved reputation in Africa and Asia as possessing game changing ideas and technologies in fields such as agriculture, education and health. I've seen first hand the enthusiasm with which Israeli volunteers and technical experts are greeted in the developing world, and the change in Israel's image that sharing knowledge and skills can bring. But skills alone are not enough: we have to add our ethical wisdom, based on the Torah, a foundational text for billions of people across the world, and honed through the Talmud and contemporary thinkers right up through Ashlag, Buber and Levinas.

I was inspired to create Tevel b'Tzedek after witnessing first hand another form of Israeli involvement in the developing world: the huge phenomenon of post-army travel to India, Nepal, South East Asia and South America. Along with the desire to unwind after years of difficult and fraught army service, it was clear to me that young Israelis, who travel more per capita by far than any other group, have a deep need to seek out an answer to the following question: What does it mean to be an Israeli and a Jew in the contemporary world? We have the right and the duty to answer: it means engaging, with all the wisdom and empathy we can muster, in creating a more just and beautiful world.

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