

Temple Aliyah
Shavuot 2017 Sermon Slam
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Walter Scheidel is a History professor at Princeton. This year, he published “The Great Leveler: Violence and the History of Inequality from the Stone Age to the 21st century”. He notes the richest 62 people equal the wealth of the bottom 3.5 billion people. That is huge wealth inequality. Sadly since his book went to press, it’s gotten worse. Now, the wealth of just 8 people equals half the planet.

Scheidel’s work was depressing. Through the arc of history, wealth inequality is normal. Think of what you know from the times of Pharaoh, feudal Europe, the caste system of India, monarchs and emperors thru the middle and far east. Worldwide the gap between rich and poor is an accepted fact of life.

Scheidel found four kinds of systemic shocks that dramatically reduced inequality, but they’re all terrible. Three of them are variations on the same theme: war, revolution and state collapse. Think mass mobilization war, like WW1 and 2 where millions upon millions are drafted. Then there’s Lenin, Mao, Castro. Everyone suffers in a revolution, but the wealthy have much more to lose.

Last is pandemic, like black plague. If 30% of the population dies, that’s terrible. But the remaining labor force is worth a lot more.

Also depressing: once reduced, wealth inequality returns in just one or two generations. The world is facing that now. World War 2 brought the marginal tax rate to 94% in the US, which accounted for serious wealth re-distribution. In 1945, one wage earner with a HS diploma could support a family. In 1963, 20 years after the war ended, the marginal rate was still at 91%. JFK reduced it to 77% in 1964. Since those golden 30 years 1945-75, the US has moved quickly back to wealth inequality. 6 of the 8 richest people in the world are Americans.

Scheidel concludes that only war and disaster reduce wealth inequality. Astonishingly though, Torah offers a peaceful solution right there in parsha B’Har which we read 3 weeks ago. Leviticus 25 describes the “yovail” or Jubilee year:

You shall hallow the 50th year, and proclaim liberty [or emancipation or release] throughout the land for all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you. Each of you shall return to his holding and each of you shall return to his family.

Two points. If you were indentured, you are personally freed to return to your family. God saved the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. The Jubilee year is protection against enslaving each other.

Second, emancipation isn't enough. There is an "economic reset" programmed in for the 12 tribes. If you sell your land, ownership returns to you or your heirs just as it was after entering the Promised Land.

v23 is clear. "The land is Mine (with a capital M); you are but strangers resident with Me. Throughout the land that you hold, you must provide for the redemption of the land."

And there's a framework defined for handling transactions and redemption.

"When buying from your neighbor, you shall deduct only for the number of years since the jubilee; when selling, only charge for the remaining crop years. The more such years, the higher the price you pay; the fewer the years, the lower the price, for what he is selling you is the number of harvests."

Knowing how bad most people are at managing assets, the Promised Land was founded on the principle that every generation or two gets a fresh start, an equal opportunity at a better outcome. Reducing wealth inequality was baked in to Israelite society, unlike the rest of the humanity.

Once again, Torah offers valuable insight into the human condition. If only we look.