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Series A: Writings and Addresses. 1947-1991

Box 2, Folder 44, "Matters that Stand at the Heights of the World",  
February 1975.



## "Matters That Stand at the Heights of the World"

By Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum

What does Holy Year 1975 have to do with "the new realities" of our time? Is there any meaningful relationship between Holy Year and the dominant moral, spiritual, and human issues that so profoundly affect our lives — the energy crisis, the arms race, world famine and starvation, economic recession and unemployment, ecology, violence, terrorism and crime, the decline of moral standards? Do religious educators have any significant part to play in helping to construct a new world order? Such questions as these would be called in Rabbinic Judaism "matters that stand at the heights of the world" and therefore, insofar as they concern human fate and destiny, deserve our most reflective consideration and response. Given the limitations of space, this is necessarily a short reflection on a very large subject and should be regarded as suggestive and illustrative, intended mainly to point toward a direction for further serious study and action.

In my essay on "Holy Year 1975 and Its Origins in the Jewish Jubilee Year" — published by the Vatican Commission for the Observance of the Holy Year\* — I sought to demonstrate that the Bible set forth fourfold obligations for the observance of the Jubilee Year. Each of these obligations, enjoined in the Book of Leviticus, Chapter 25, focuses on the realizing libera-

tion in the actual life of the people of God as basic preconditions, or corollaries, to their spiritual liberation:

- a) Human — liberation of the slaves.
- b) Economic — the moralization of the use of property and material goods.
- c) Ecological — liberation of the land.
- d) Educational — the creation of a spiritual democracy by devoting the Jubilee Year to intensive education of all men, women, children, and "resident aliens" in the teachings of the Torah, the Word of God.

Significantly, this distinctive Biblical character of the Jubilee Year is reaffirmed by Pope Paul VI in his "Bull of Indicting the Holy Year 1975," (*Apostolorum Limina*) in these words:

*The ancient origins of the jubilee as seen in the laws and institutions of Israel already show that this social dimension is part of its very nature. In fact, as we read in the Book of Leviticus, the jubilee year, precisely because it was dedicated in a special way to God, involved a new ordering of all things that were recognized as belonging to God: the land which was allowed to lie fallow and was given back to its former owners; economic goods, insofar as debts were remitted; and above all, man, whose dignity and freedom were reaffirmed in a special way by the emancipation of slaves. The year of God, then, was also the year of man, the year of the earth, the year of the poor, and upon this view of the whole of human reality there shown a new light which emanated from the clear recognition of the supreme dominion of God over the whole of creation.*

That expresses eloquently the inextricable spiritual and moral links of the "Jubilaus Christianorum," the

\*Copies of this essay are available by writing to me at the American Jewish Committee, 165 East 56 St., New York, N.Y. 10022. Translations are also available in French, German, Spanish, and Italian.

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Holy Year as a Christian expression of the Jewish Jubilee Year. But what precisely do these Christian and Jewish versions of the monumental Biblical idea of jubilee have to say to us today?

### Jubilee and Human Liberation

Ancient slavery, with its savage brutalities and dehumanization, has by and large been abolished. But there are new forms of slavery today. Some 800 million people are suffering in the Holy Year of 1975 from debilitating famine, starvation and disease. Nearly 10,000 people are dying every week in Asia and Africa from hunger and disease. In affluent America, still the wealthiest nation in the world despite the seriousness of economic recession, approximately 14 million people go to bed every night suffering from hunger.

In proclaiming the Jubilee Year, which like the Ten Commandments was ascribed to divinely-inspired legislation revealed on Mount Sinai, the Bible ordained: "And if your brother waxes poor, and his means fail with you, then you shall uphold him; as a stranger and settler shall he live with you" (Leviticus 25:35). The Rabbis observe that the expression that "your brother may live with you" means that it is our personal communal duty to see to it that our fellow human beings do not die of starvation. Though the person be a "stranger" or "alien settler," he or she is to be included in the term "your brother" and is to be treated in a brotherly and compassionate manner.

Nothing is more fundamental in Biblical and Rabbinic ethics than the moral obligation of *Tzedakah*, a Hebrew term which means both "charity" and "to do justice." The Rabbinic sages of the Talmud declared that "almsgiving — i.e., aiding the poor and feeding the hungry — weighs as heavily as all the other commandments of the Torah" (*Talmud Baba Batra* 9a).

The supreme virtue of such care for the poor and hungry is depicted in Jewish tradition as the salient attribute of the "founding father" of Judaism, the Patriarch Abraham, who is called the archetype of the "Pharisee of Love." In a midrashic commentary that begins with the phrases, "Let your house be open; let the poor be members of your household. Let a man's house be open to the north and to the south, and to the east and to the west," the Rabbis describe the humanitarianism of Abraham:

*He went out and wandered about, and when he found wayfarers, he brought them to his house, and he gave wheat bread to him whose wont it was not to eat wheat bread, and so with meat and wine. And not only this, but he built large inns on the roads, and put food and drink within them, and all came and ate and drank and blessed God. Therefore, quiet of spirit was granted to him, and all that the mouth of man can ask for was found in his house. (Abot de Rabbi Nathan, VII:17 a,b)*

In Jewish communities from Biblical times through the present, there was much free and generous giving of alms to all who asked, and there was also much systematic and careful relief through established institutions. Each Jewish community boasted of a *Tamhui* (public kitchen) from which the poor received two meals daily. There was also the *Kupah* (alms box) for the disbursement of benevolent funds on Sabbath eve to provide three meals for the Sabbath (*Mishnah Peah* VIII,7). Additional care was exercised in respect of the itinerant poor, who were provided with a loaf of bread which sufficed for two meals, and who were also entitled to the cost of lodging.

The Biblical laws of charity relating to the "gleaning," "the forgotten sheaf," and "the corner of the field," implied the underlying idea that national territory belongs to the public as a whole. In accordance with Jewish law, landowners used to lay open fences surrounding their fields and vineyards and, during certain hours of the day, the needy were allowed to eat from the produce of the harvest. There was also a three-yearly allocation of *Maaser Ani* (poor man's tithe) from the threshing floor.

To underscore the centrality of personal and communal responsibility for caring for the poor and hungry, the Rabbis starkly declared, "He who has no pity upon his fellow creatures is assuredly not of the seed of Abraham our father" (*Talmud Bezah* 32b).

The needs of the hungry and poor constitute the greatest moral and humanitarian crisis of the latter half of the twentieth century. The lesson that the Jewish people learned from the trauma of the Nazi holocaust is the lesson yet to be learned by the whole human family — you shall not stand by idly while the blood of your brothers and sisters cry out to you from the earth.



Religious educators are in a unique role to help educate and motivate a whole generation of young Americans to their profound spiritual and moral obligations in helping avert human tragedy. A catechesis in values that reflects on the realities of world famine, and that leads children to act together in deciding how they can most effectively make a genuine contribution to alleviating such suffering during the days and decades ahead, would demonstrate how relevant religious instruction can be when it is related to genuine existential needs of mankind.

### Jubilee and Economic Liberation

The current crisis in oil and energy is symptomatic of a fundamental change that is taking place in our lifetime. As Lester Brown has written in his study, "In the Human Interest," we have moved into an age of basic discontinuity with our historic past. Our consumption has begun to outstrip our resources. Not only is oil in short supply, but so are some of the 36 basic raw materials on which our industrial society depends. And the shortages are becoming a permanent part of our human situation. Our entire lifestyle has been based essentially on an "ethic of abundance," especially in America which has been blessed with untold natural abundance of raw materials.

The economic recession and the rise in unemployment, which is now affecting the middle class as well as the lower class, means that our people will have to learn increasingly to cope with a far more modest lifestyle than in the past. In a society which has been marked by suffocating materialism, hedonism, and even forms of paganism, the shift from abundance to scarcity may not be altogether an evil. But our people and their children will need help.

First, they will need from us a form of moral-political help. Of all the groups in American society, our people — the consumers — are the least organized and the least protected against the "rip-offs" practiced by large corporations and manipulative advertising that fosters artificial demands. If every church and synagogue were to become a center for "consumer education," organizing their communities to help them with the crushing economic problems of unemployment and the astronomic cost of living, we would in fact be addressing ourselves to one of the most critical moral

and pastoral problems facing our society. For at the heart of such group discussions and joint actions are the making of moral decisions. At the time of their origin, synagogues and churches were as much "houses of assembly" as they were "houses of prayer." Such involvement in the actual problems of people during Holy Year would be an act of liberation to keep them, and especially the poor, from having to carry a disproportionate share of the burden of economic scarcity.

Second, churches and synagogues have an intellectual-spiritual task in helping to define and articulate "an ethic of scarcity." How do we live a meaningful, joyous life with less than we had in the past? What is really valuable in our lives? How do we find ways of sharing with the less fortunate — the hungry and the poor — when we have less ourselves?

In ancient Palestine, the staple food of the Jewish community consisted mainly of cereals, fruits, and other produce of the land. Meat was consumed solely in connection with the sacrificial obligations of every Jewish man and woman, of which the paschal lamb was an outstanding example. In 13th-century Spain, the Rabbis proclaimed a set of "sumptuary laws" which insisted that waste must be ended at celebrations of weddings and bar mitzvahs, and that even funeral coffins must become simplified pine boxes for rich and poor alike in order to put a brake on conspicuous consumption, even in the afterlife.

These two issues — hunger and economic scarcity — are illustrative of the profound fact that we have been catapulted in a very brief period of months into a radically different human condition at home and abroad. Perhaps more clearly than in the past, we now understand that the future of the human family depends far more on the development of moral understanding and the capacity to nurture compassionate commitment and service than it does on increased scientific and technological knowledge. Historically, teachers of religion have been custodians of our spiritual and ethical traditions which classically provided an eternal lamp unto our feet. In the darkness that prevails in so much of the world today, religious educators must lift that lamp of learning and love higher than ever before. And what better time than the Holy Year of 1975?