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Who is right??

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Emil W. Herman ז"ל ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל
who loved and supported Torah learning.

Va'eschanan

Who is right??

For over 100 years, there has been an ongoing debate between those who believe that businesses and citizens should be on their own without government interference (capitalists) and those who believe it is the government's responsibility to assure its citizens' health and well-being (socialists). And, of course, as we always do, we ask, "What does Judaism have to say about it?"

When we really look at the debate, we find a very interesting phenomenon.

Socialist purists will tell you that the Torah is a socialist document. And indeed, the Torah does tell us to show concrete concern for the poor. There are many mitzvos in the Torah whose entire purpose is to help poor people. For example, a Jew is required to give ten percent of his earnings to charity, and ideally 20 percent. Additionally, there are mitzvos like Peah, or leaving an unharvested corner of your field for the poor to take.

Socialist purists will also quote the explicit verse from the Book of Devarim that supports the aspiration that poverty be totally eliminated. This is Chapter 15, verse 4, which reads, "However, there will be no needy among you," which clearly indicates that society is capable of arriving at the point where there is no poverty.

On the other hand, capitalists will argue that their ideology also has a place in the Torah. As King David says in Tehillim, (128:2) "If you eat the toil of your hands, you are praiseworthy, and it is good for you." In other words, a person eats the food that he worked for and earned—and if he works harder, he'll have more.

The capitalists prove this from the same Parshah in Devarim we mentioned before, a few verses after the verse we just mentioned. There, the Torah says, "For there will never cease to be needy within the land"—in other words, the socialist utopia of no poverty and every citizen enjoying the same economic status will never happen. There will always be rich people and poor people—and the rich people will feed the poor people.

So we have two opposing ideologies here—and both have sources in the Torah.

Many of you have heard of some religious extremists who are opposed to the very existence of a Jewish State on the soil of the Holy Land. Among them, there are some extremists who even went to meet with the leader of Iran who has repeatedly called for the destruction of Israel.

But even such extremism has a source in the Torah.

There is a verse from Yirmiyahu, the Prophet Jeremiah, in which he prophesizes on the Destruction of the Holy Temple and says, "'They shall be brought to Babylon, and there they shall be until the day I remember them,' said the Lord, 'and I will bring them up and restore them to this place.'" Thus, if we are to interpret this verse simply, we are to remain in exile after our banishment from the Holy Land until a prophet, or Moshiach, comes along and tells us that G-d said that it's time to go back to the Holy Land.

Until then, at least according to this interpretation, it's forbidden to organize a mass migration back to the Holy Land.

On the other hand, there are those who argue that going back to Israel is the greatest mitzvah you could do. They quote the famous comment from Ramban, Nachmanides, on the verse, "You shall inherit the land"—about which Ramban says, "In my opinion, this is a positive commandment." This means that even today, it is a mitzvah in the Torah to go back to Israel—an obligation upon every Jew to "make Aliyah."

So again you have two opposing views. One argues that it is forbidden to go back to the Holy Land, and the other argues that it is an obligation to go back to the Holy Land—and both quote authentic verses from the Torah tradition!

Now, there are more ongoing debate in today's world – for example - whether it is moral to eat meat.

Is a person allowed to kill an animal to eat its meat? Here too, on the one hand, you have the vegetarians and the vegans arguing against eating meat. Why, even G-d doesn't want you to eat meat! To prove that, they quote the story of Creation, during which G-d told Adam and Eve (Genesis 1:29), "Behold, I have given you every seed bearing herb, which is upon the surface of the entire earth, and every tree that has seed bearing fruit; it will be yours for food"—to which Rashi adds, "Adam and Eve had not been given permission to kill an animal and eat meat."

In other words, the original plan was for humanity to *not* eat meat—only 1,500 years later, after the Flood, were the sons of Noah permitted to eat meat. As the verse in the Torah portion of Noach says explicitly: "Every moving thing that lives shall be yours to eat; like the green vegetation, I have given you everything." In other words, this was a permit created due to lack of options—they had to eat something. But originally, in a perfect world, there would be no need to eat meat.

On the other hand, you have those who love nothing more than a juicy, sizzling steak or a fresh burger right off the backyard barbeque. They argue: On the contrary! There are many mitzvos which consist entirely of eating meat—the most prominent of which is the Korban Pesach, the Passover Sacrifice, at which everyone is required to eat a certain amount of meat from the slaughtered lamb. The Passover Sacrifice is so important that the Torah even says, "The man who ... refrains from making the Passover [Sacrifice] shall be excommunicated..." On top of that, it's a mitzvah to eat meat on each Shabbos and holiday.

So again, we come to the same question: What really is the right thing to do?

The old folk tale is told of a rabbi who was visited by two men for a din Torah. The first man presented his arguments. The rabbi listened and said, "You're right!" The second man then presented his arguments. The rabbi listened and said, "You're right!" So the rabbi's wife, who had been listening from the other room, suddenly called out, "Hey, how can both of them be right?" So the rabbi answered, "You are right too!"

The Previous Lubavitcher Rebbe, relates in his letters that he was once traveling on the train and saw some other Jews on the train get into an argument. They were arguing whether the Torah believes in monarchies, meaning the type of government in which there is one king whom everyone must listen to—not a constitutional monarchy, or figureheads like the British Royal Family, but a real king with real daily decision-making power. They were arguing whether the Torah believes in monarchy, or in socialism.

At that time, Russia was celebrating 300 years of the rule of the Czar's Romanov Dynasty. The Rebbe just sat quietly. Then, the group asked him what he thought.

So the Rebbe told them: "You are all right. There are positive things and negative things to each side. There is no evil without good and no good without evil. The good things in each ideology can be found in the Torah."

In this week's Torah portion, we read the Ten Commandments.

Now, the Ten Commandments begin with the words, "I am the L-rd your G-d." But first, we need a quick lesson in Hebrew grammar here.

In English, you use the word "your" whether you're speaking to an individual or a group—for example, "Thank you for your time." But in Hebrew, there is one word for "your" when you speak to an individual and another one when you speak to a group.

Now, back to the Ten Commandments. In the original Hebrew, when G-d said, "I am the L-rd your G-d," He said "Elokecha," "your G-d" in the singular—not "Elokeichem," "your G-d" in the plural. In other words, G-d was not speaking to the Jews as a group but rather, He was speaking to each and every Jew as an individual. As the Midrash tells us, "When G-d spoke, every Jew said, 'G-d is speaking to me.' "

The Midrash continues and quotes something amazing in the name of Rabbi Yosi Bar-Chanina: "G-d spoke to each individual according to his strength." The Midrash then compares G-d's speaking to the Jewish people to the Manna that came from heaven, about which it is said, "Each person tasted the Mon according to his strength, the babies, the young men and the old men." It was the same thing when G-d spoke at the Giving of the Torah—each individual heard G-d according to his individual strength, according to his level, his understanding and his feelings.

G-d gave the Torah in a way that makes room for everyone. There is a place for socialism. There is a place for capitalism. There is place for Zionism, and place for opposition to Zionism. There is place for meat-eaters and place for those who don't want to eat meat.

As you can see, the positive attributes of each philosophy can be found in the Torah. Around the Jewish table, there is a place for everyone.

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