



## A Call for a Sabbath Year to Repair a Broken World **By Jacob Feinspan**

Originally Printed in Tikkun Magazine, May/June 2007.

Many of us, when we step back and consider our place in the world, feel tremendous dissonance. Especially for those of us lucky enough to be born into privilege in the United States, our standard of living has never been better. We live longer, are more highly educated, and have more economic opportunities than ever before.

At the same time, the gulf between rich and poor in our country continues to grow every year. This gap is dwarfed by the gaping chasm between our wealth and that of the people living in the global South. Every day, 13 percent of the world's population goes hungry. One person in seven has no access to clean water for drinking, cooking or washing. All this while the average American, earning \$36,500 a year, is richer than 95 percent of the world's population.

The brokenness of the world is staggering. With this degree of poverty and inequity, none of us can be spiritually whole. Many of us, particularly those I encounter in my work for American Jewish World Service, an international development organization, are asking ourselves the same questions: Are we doing enough? What more can we do to effect *tikkun olam*, to heal the world around us?

As individuals, there is much we can do—from volunteering with local organizations to making *tzedakah*, or charity, a significant part of our lives. These actions, however, will only get us so far. The global inequity we confront is staggering in scope—too big for any one of us to solve alone. In the face of this struggle, against what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called “the ancient enemy, poverty,” what better place to look for inspiration than our sacred texts?

In the Torah we find a vision of life in community that is liberating and just, governed by Sabbath cycles—the Sabbath Day, the Sabbath Year, and the Jubilee Year. These cycles are a powerful reminder of God's intent that all creatures enjoy fullness of life and partake in the abundance of God's world. Just as Shabbat is a palace in time for weekly individual spiritual renewal, so too was the Sabbath Year a time for communal renewal—to fortify the land and renew interpersonal relationships. In biblical times, the Israelites were forbidden from planting or harvesting every seventh year in order to allow the land to replenish itself. For the people living on the land, it was also a time of replenishment: every seventh year debts were cancelled.

The Marshall Plan of its time, this seven-year cycle of debt cancellation was a structural

mechanism designed to address one of the biggest ethical challenges of all time—the cycle of intergenerational poverty. By canceling debts every seven years, and returning lands to their ancestral owners every fiftieth year—the Jubilee Year—the Torah instituted an economy where wealth was redistributed regularly. By living out the Torah's words, our ancestors prevented the rich from accumulating yet more wealth at the expense of the poor.

If ever there was a time to look back to this biblical structure for inspiration, it is now. Seven years after the beginning of the new millennium, we live in a world that is seriously out of balance. Never before has the gap between the rich and poor been as immense as it is today. In 1999, three men—Bill Gates, Paul Allen, and Warren Buffet—had a net worth greater than the combined GDP of the forty-one most impoverished nations and their 550 million people. Every day, 30,000 children die of easily preventable diseases due to malnutrition and lack of adequate medical care. Around the world, more than 70 million children do not go to elementary school because their parents cannot afford fees, books or uniforms.

In the face of this unimaginable inequity and poverty, the biblical vision of Sabbath and Jubilee provides reason for hope. In 2000, responding to a debt crisis that crippled impoverished countries' abilities to direct funds towards health and education, and inspired by the concepts of the Sabbath Year and Jubilee Year, millions of Jews, Christians, and Muslims worked together in the Jubilee campaign to demand debt relief for impoverished countries around the world. By speaking truth to power, we forced our elected leaders to relieve the debts of many impoverished countries, specifically those on the continent of Africa.

Debt relief has worked. Spending on health, education, and social services in countries that have received debt forgiveness has increased by 75 percent on average. Three billion dollars in debt relief enabled Tanzania to increase funding for poverty reduction by 130 percent over the last six years. New investments in education in that country enabled approximately 1.6 million children to return to school, almost overnight. Debt relief enabled Mozambique to make strides in combating HIV/AIDS. By 2002, 24 testing and counseling offices opened; 50 offices will be operating by the end of this year.

Though we won victories in the Jubilee 2000 campaign, we have not yet ended the global debt crisis. Twenty-one nations in Africa and Latin America have had their debts to the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and African Development Bank cancelled. But this is merely the beginning of what is needed. Only one in ten people in the developing world will benefit from the debt cancellation provided to date. For too many countries, demands of powerful creditors force a downward spiral of deepening poverty by forcing these nations to prioritize debt payments over clean water, adequate housing, AIDS prevention, basic health care, and schooling for their citizens. Moreover, in many cases undemocratic and authoritarian regimes, such as the Duvaliers in Haiti, Charles Taylor in Liberia, Mobutu Sese Seko in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Suharto in Indonesia, incurred the debts and used them to repress the very people who are now struggling to pay them back. At least forty-five additional countries require debt

cancellation to have any hope of reaching the Millennium Development Goals, which are internationally agreed upon anti-poverty targets for 2015.

In 2007, seven years after the victories of Jubilee 2000, communities of faith are calling on world leaders to observe a Sabbath Year by canceling the unjust debts of impoverished nations in Africa, Latin America and Asia. Canceling these debts will allow countries to invest more in the lives of their citizens: more children will attend school, more people will receive life-saving AIDS medications, and more families will have access to clean drinking water. This debt cancellation is a critical component of the Network of Spiritual Progressives' prophetic Global Marshall Plan that promotes security through generosity.

When our ancestors lived in the land of Israel, with the memory of the slavery in Egypt still fresh in their collective conscience, could they have known the impact they would have on us, their descendants, by living their lives through the rhythms of Shabbat, the Sabbath Year, and the Jubilee Year? Perhaps. God's words to Moses were still fresh in their ears, "For I the LORD your God am an impassioned God...showing kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love Me and keep My Commandments."  
(Exodus 20:5-6)

Today, we have the opportunity to bring justice to generations of our own descendants by doing our part to repair our broken world. Our ancestors' actions inspired the worldwide Jubilee movement, and the imperative to complete what was started in 2000 remains: to lift the excruciating burden of debt that continues to siphon resources from impoverished countries that should be used for health care, education, and clean water.

As Americans we enjoy much good fortune, and we understand that from those to whom much has been given, much is also required. As citizens of a rich country whose government played a role in the accumulation of these debts, we are uniquely placed to advocate for justice in solidarity with our brothers and sisters living in extreme poverty. If we care about the future of the world community, we must all do our part. We can start by calling on our elected officials in Washington, D.C. to pass the Jubilee Act, bold and prophetic legislation that would provide debt cancellation to many more of the countries that need it. This is not something we do for them. This is something we do for us—for all of us.

*Jacob Feinspan coordinates advocacy on International Debt Cancellation and HIV/AIDS at American Jewish World Service ([www.ajws.org](http://www.ajws.org)), an international development organization motivated by Judaism's imperative to pursue justice, and sits on the board of the Jubilee USA Network, an alliance of more than seventy-five organizations dedicated to cancellation of debts that cripple impoverished nations around the world.*

Jacob Feinspan, Senior Policy Associate  
American Jewish World Service  
1413 K St, 5th Floor, Washington DC 20005  
t 202.408.1380 f 202.408.1429 [www.ajws.org](http://www.ajws.org)  
*Pursuing Global Justice Through Grassroots Change*

