

Judaism, Commerce, and Free Markets

An Interview Between Isaac Lifshitz and Joseph E. Gorra

Jewish economic thought is a rich tradition that Christian philosophers, theologians and economists can learn from and utilize in different ways. In this interview, Professor Isaac Lifshitz articulates some of the main economic concepts of the Jewish tradition, the development of those concepts in Medieval Jewish thought, and how such thought might contribute to Christian attempts at economic theory. We also talk about the interesting and fruitful collaborative work between Christian and Jewish philosophers at the Shalem Center.

For many years, you have been drinking from a rich well of Jewish theological and philosophical thought regarding the value of the market, commerce and the significance of a civil society. Can you tell us about your own journey into this area? How has the study of these areas of Jewish political and economic thought been formative to you?

My journey started at a very young age in a strong interest in the subject of property rights. Already at the age of 14 I was very curious to understand what ownership is. It seemed to me back then like a very tangible. Not at all as just a social fiction as is commonly understood. Of course I was wrong, but these sorts of thoughts helped later on to take social fictions seriously. I thus started to study the history of ownership and of the right for property, as well as moral philosophy and philosophy of law. I always believed that complex entities, like any political bodies, grow organically. I therefore decided to inquire into the relationship between private property and the development of state, and of course into the development of markets as well. That is one of the reasons that I picked the Middle-Ages as an era of study. At least in the western world, the Middle-Ages are when the western markets and even the modern state originated.

In brief, what are some concepts from the Jewish political and economic tradition that are the basis for helping to make sense of commerce, freedom and markets in a society?

There are several values that stand on the basis of Jewish politics and commerce. Among them the most important is the spirit of God that is given to every human being. The second but very important value as well is liberty. I see these two intertwined. As I understand it, the only justification for liberty is this portion of God that is given to man. When man expresses his spiritual portion, his needs and wishes

as well as his needs for dominium are justified. In my opinion, Jewish political thought is based upon a strong idea of property rights that express these ideas of liberty. The polity is an ensemble of many that have a linkage to property. These many generate a political body in a spontaneous way. I believe that at the same time, in the case of the Jewish nation, there is a common faith that unites them. With a common faith in God they form the spiritual Israel.

How do the concepts (if not the tensions) of “the individual” and “authority” or “charity” and “justice” or “individual rights” and the “public good” contribute to this discussion?

As a person who believes in spontaneous order, I see the tension as a result of too much “order of organization”. Running a political body demands applying authority, but this authority has to respect individual rights. Authorities have to override individual rights in order to maintain the public good, but they have to remember that this privilege is given in cases of emergency. It is very important for a leader to know that individual rights have to be preserved, as well as individual moral initiative. Justice and charity are observed, not only when they are coerced but mainly when the many believe in them and are behaving according to their values.

You are noted for (among other things) being a scholar on Medieval Jewish economic and political thought. Can you share with us how that area of research enriches the contemporary conceptualization (indeed, recovery!) of historical, Jewish political and economic trajectories?

Philosophers of the Renaissance related to the Middle-Ages as dark ages, but for any person who shares a religious faith, Jewish and Christian, the Middle-Ages are not considered dark but a source of inspiration. The concept of the political was developed in the high Middle-Ages and many economic concepts as well. I should mention two of them – the idea of investment and the idea of corporation. At the same time, medieval jurists and philosophers did not envision the market as an independent entity. Only after the development of the modern state during the 16th century enabled the abstraction necessary for the analysis of the sort that Adam Smith made. In my work I am trying to learn from the wisdom of medieval sages without making anachronistic mistakes. I am trying to consider medieval values while being aware of the very important contribution of modern economy.

Sometimes Jewish and Christian thought-leaders have argued that Judaism should be identified with some notion of a redistribution of wealth, given how “the poor” centrally figure in Judaism’s vision of life and society and given the challenges of wealth inequality. But you have argued that this is “alien to both the laws and the spirit of Judaism as reflected in the Hebrew Bible and the rabbinic tradition” (from “Foundations of a Jewish Economic Theory,” *Azure* [Autumn 2004], 34-66). Can you briefly explain your argument?

For Jews and Christians alike, charity is one of the most important values. Through charity one expresses an *imitatio dei* of God's grace. The last thing I wanted to say is a reduction from the utmost importance of charity. My main claim is though that charity is a moral value and not a legal value. The needy do not own a portion of the property of the reach. The solution of the problem of poverty will not be solved by a systemic distribution of the wealth, but rather by encouraging caring and giving to others. Therefore, one must not exchange charity with concepts of justice. This is a moral commandment that applies to human beings, and they are made responsible to their fellow people. Society as a whole bears the responsibility of encouraging the individuals to give from their money to charity, and even to force them to fulfill this commandment – but not to take the money and redistribute it.

How might a “Jewish Economic Theory” enrich and also differ from a “Christian Economic Theory”?

It will be unjust to talk about a Christian Economic Theory as a united theory. There is a big difference between Catholicism and Calvinism. In my opinion, Judaism is somewhere in between. Unlike Catholicism where man is passive to a reception of the grace of the Lord, in Judaism, man has a much more active role. Man shares a responsibility to improve the world and to prosper. But unlike Calvinism, in Judaism man is not judged upon his success in achieving prosperity. If in classical Christianity, poverty is a value; in Judaism it is rare to find a statement of this sort. In Judaism, man is obligated to refrain from poverty.

There is interesting and productive work happening at the Shalem Center, including some fascinating, Jewish and Christian philosophical theology collaboration, of which you are also a contributor. Can you offer some suggestions – maybe even some project and institutional vision – for how further work can develop

between Jewish and Christian philosophers and theologians on issues related to economic and political theory?

The Shalem center is involved indeed in Jewish and Christian philosophical theology collaboration. At the end of this month we are going to have a third conference on the Bible and its philosophy. The Shalem center is almost unique in its attempt as an academic institute to study the Bible seriously while accepting its narrative and its philosophy. This conference is focused on theology and moral philosophy and not biblical critic.

Here I would like to use the opportunity to say a word about future thought. Although Judaism and Christianity have different views in all kinds of different aspects in theology, we now, in the beginning of the 21st century, differ from medieval theologians in the fact that now we don't have to create our identity through our differences. Our rival in our time and age is atheism. Jews and Christians alike should be working together hand in hand in creating theology that will answer the challenges of post-modernity with its relativity and its collapse of the old world of values. I am glad that more and more Christian groups are extending their hands for collaboration, and I wish that it will continue to be so.

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