The Jewish Ethicist: Globalization by [Rabbi Dr. Asher Meir, Business Ethics Center of Jerusalem](http://www.aish.com/search/?author=48865797)

The risks and benefits of a worldwide marketplace.

*Q. The spread of market institutions worldwide has very powerful supporters and very vocal detractors. What does Jewish tradition tell us about this phenomenon?*

A. "Globalization" refers to the increasing integration of the economies of virtually all nations of the world into a more unified global economy, in which market forces are dominant and multi-national companies play a major role.

Globalization tends to arouse extreme reactions. Some commentators view globalization with practically messianic admiration. It brings growth, democracy, peace, and integration of cultures leading to brotherhood.

Others have tended to demonize globalization, adopting a pessimistic view of the identical phenomena: It brings despoiling of poor countries, a breakdown of traditional social and authority structures, competition and resentment leading to conflict, and destruction of indigenous cultures resulting in a degraded world culture of the lowest common denominator.

In order to discern the Jewish approach to these questions, we need one fundamental insight: the process of globalization is not really a new phenomenon. The great empires of the ancient Near and Middle East also united markets and imposed aspects of the conqueror's cosmopolitan culture on a multitude of poorer and tinier kingdoms. The sages of the Talmud experienced this process and had a number of enlightening insights regarding it.

Our ancient rabbis certainly knew how to appreciate the economic benefits of globalization -- the ability to enjoy the products of many nations at a reasonable price and with minimal effort. The Talmud relates: "Ben Zoma…used to say, how much effort Adam had to invest in order to eat bread: he had to plow, sow, gather, heap, thresh, winnow, sort, sift, knead, and bake. Only then could he eat. Yet I wake up and find all of these prepared for me!…All the nations of the world go out of their way and come to my door step, and I wake up to find all these before me." (1) So those enamored of globalization can find support for their view in the Jewish tradition.

Yet other Jewish leaders were keenly aware that economic development can be a tool of domination and moral decay. When Rebbe Yehuda praised the Romans saying, "They have established marketplaces, built bridges, and made bathhouses," Rebbe Shimon bar Yochai replied cynically: "They have established marketplaces in order to provide a place for prostitutes; bathhouses to indulge themselves, and bridges in order to collect tolls." (2) It seems that the non-governmental organizations who protest the destructive impact of globalization also have a very distinguished precedent!

But it is critically important to note that Rebbe Shimon bar Yochai did not deny the benefits of marketplaces or bathhouses. The opposite is true, as we learn from the continuation of this very same story. The Talmud goes on to relate that the Roman authorities sought to punish Rebbe for his words; he hid out with his son for a number of years until the decree was rescinded. As he left the cave where he had been hiding, he decided that he had to do something practical to help mankind. His model, states the Talmud, was the patriarch Yaakov. For the Torah tells us that when Yaakov reached Shechem, he "graced" the city (Genesis 33:18). Our tradition explains that he graced it with some kind of material benefit, giving the specific examples of a marketplace or a bathhouse!

So we see that markets can be either a mortal enemy which we may risk our lives to protest, or conversely a source of human benefit which we go out of our way to establish. What exactly is the distinction? We need to examine more carefully the differences between globalization a la Yaakov and globalization a la the Roman empire. Let us examine a few:

1. INTENTION: Rebbe Shimon's statement that the intention of the Romans was for self-indulgence and self-aggrandizement is echoed by a very similar passage in the Talmud. (3.) By contrast, Yaakov's intention was to "grace the city" -- to show friendship to the inhabitants.
2. MORALITY: The Romans used the marketplace as a site for immorality such as prostitution. By comparison, we know that the family of Yaakov during the stay in Shechem were extremely zealous about morality and modesty.
3. COMPULSION: The verse in Genesis states that Yaakov graced the face of the city. The commentators explain that this means he didn't actually enter the city but established his encampment -- and his marketplace -- on the outskirts. This demonstrates a desire to attract, rather than compel, the residents to take advantage of the benefits of markets. This is rather different than the heavy-handed approach of Rome.
4. RESPECT FOR LEGITIMATE LOCAL LEADERSHIP: We see from the Torah that Yaakov tried to work with the king and prince of Shechem -- who obviously enjoyed the support of the citizens. The Midrash states that he sent gifts to all of the leading ministers. (4)
5. CONSISTENCY: One of the complaints against globalization is that the rich countries who try to impose market institutions in developing countries are personally busy trying to evade these same institutions by attaining special political favors. We see that Yaakov not only encouraged equitable market institutions, he also exemplified them by paying full price for his field. (Genesis 33:19.)

Globalization can be a force for both economic and humanistic benefit as long as both the powerful groups which spread it and the cultures that adopt it keep it in perspective. Worldwide markets are a good basis for prosperity and understanding, but we need to be careful not to follow the example of Rome that used them as a bridgehead for immorality and domination. Rather, we need to follow the example of Yaakov, who realized that the marketplace is a benefit when it has grace -- a sense of proportion and propriety.

***SOURCES:*** *(1) Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 58a.
(2) Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 33b.
(3) Babylonian Talmud Avoda Zara 2b.
(4) Bereshit Rabba*

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