

1. Ursula Le Guin, *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas* (excerpts)

<https://books.google.ca/books?id=aE6-gRWo16sC&pg=PA225&lpg=PA225>

With a clamor of bells that set the swallows soaring, the Festival of Summer came to the city Omelas, bright-towered by the sea. The rigging of the boats in harbor sparkled with flags. In the streets between houses with red roofs and painted walls, between old moss-grown gardens and under avenues of trees, past great parks and public buildings, processions moved. Some were decorous: old people in long stiff robes of mauve and grey, grave master workmen, quiet, merry women carrying their babies and chatting as they walked. In other streets the music beat faster, a shimmering of gong and tambourine, and the people went dancing, the procession was a dance...

Given a description such as this one tends to look next for the King, mounted on a splendid stallion and surrounded by his noble knights, or perhaps in a golden litter borne by great-muscled slaves. But there was no king. They did not use swords, or keep slaves. They were not barbarians. I do not know the rules and laws of their society, but I suspect that they were singularly few. As they did without monarchy and slavery, so they also got on without the stock exchange, the advertisement, the secret police, and the bomb. Yet I repeat that these were not simple folk, not dulcet shepherds, noble savages, bland utopians. They were not less complex than us...

Omelas sounds in my words like a city in a fairy tale, long ago and far away, once upon a time. Perhaps it would be best if you imagined it as your own fancy bids, assuming it will rise to the occasion, for certainly I cannot suit you all. For instance, how about technology? I think that there would be no cars or helicopters in and above the streets; this follows from the fact that the people of Omelas are happy people. Happiness is based on a just discrimination of what is necessary, what is neither necessary nor destructive, and what is destructive. In the middle category, however—that of the unnecessary but undestructive, that of comfort, luxury, exuberance, etc.—they could perfectly well have central heating, subway trains, washing machines, and all kinds of marvelous devices not yet invented here, floating light-sources, fuelless power, a cure for the common cold. Or they could have none of that; it doesn't matter...

In a basement under one of the beautiful public buildings of Omelas, or perhaps in the cellar of one of its spacious private homes, there is a room. It has one locked door, and no window. A little light seeps in dustily between cracks in the boards, secondhand from a cobwebbed window somewhere across the cellar. In one corner of the little room a couple of mops, with stiff, clotted, foul-smelling heads stand near a rusty bucket. The floor is dirt, a little damp to the touch, as cellar dirt usually is. The room is about three paces long and two wide: a mere broom closet or disused tool room. In the room a child is sitting. It could be a boy or a girl. It looks about six, but actually is nearly ten. It is feeble-minded. Perhaps it was born defective, or perhaps it has become imbecile through fear, malnutrition, and neglect...

They all know it is there, all the people of Omelas. Some of them have come to see it, others are content merely to know it is there. They all know that it has to be there. Some of them understand why, and some do not, but they all understand that their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weathers of their skies, depend wholly on this child's abominable misery...

If the child were brought up into the sunlight out of that vile place, if it were cleaned and fed and comforted, that would be a good thing indeed; but if it were done, in that day and hour all the prosperity and beauty and delight of Omelas would wither and be destroyed. Those are the terms. To exchange all the goodness and grace of every life in Omelas for that single, small improvement: to throw away the happiness of thousands for the chance of the happiness of one: that would be to let guilt within the walls indeed...

At times one of the adolescent girls or boys who go to see the child does not go home to weep or rage, does not, in fact, go home at all. Sometimes also a man or woman much older falls silent for a day or two, and then leaves home. These people go out into the street, and walk down the street alone. They keep walking, and walk straight out of the city of Omelas, through the beautiful gates.

2. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Chapter Four (1880)

Imagine that you are creating a fabric of human destiny with the object of making men happy in the end, giving them peace and rest at last, but that it was essential and inevitable to torture to death only one tiny creature—that baby beating its breast with its fist, for instance—and to found that edifice on its unavenged tears, would you consent to be the architect on those conditions?

3. William James, *The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life* (1891)

Or if the hypothesis were offered us of a world in which Messrs. Fourier's and Bellamy's and Morris's utopias should all be outdone, and millions kept permanently happy on the one simple condition that a certain lost soul on the far-off edge of things should lead a life of lonely torture, what except a sceptical and independent sort of emotion can it be which would make us immediately feel, even though an impulse arose within us to clutch at the happiness so offered, how hideous a thing would be its enjoyment when deliberately accepted as the fruit of such a bargain?

Jewish sources lead both ways

4. Devarim 15:9

השמר לך פן יהיה דבר עם לבבך בליעל לאמר קרבה שנת השבע שנת השמטה ורעה עינך באחיך האביון ולא תתן לו
Be careful lest there be an evil thought in your heart, saying, 'The seventh year nears, the year of release,' and your eye will be evil against our brother, the needy person, and you will not give him.

5. Talmud, Gittin 36a

זה אחד מן הדברים שהתקין הלל הזקן שראה את העם שנמנעו מלהלוות זה את זה ועברו על מה שכתוב בתורה (דברים ט"ו:ט) השמר לך פן יהיה דבר עם לבבך בליעל וגו' עמד והתקין פרוסבול

This is one of the matters Hillel the Elder enacted. He saw that the nation refused to lend to each other, violating "Guard yourselves lest you have a worthless thought in your heart," and he arose and enacted *prozbul*.

6. Talmud, Bava Metzia 80a

המוכר פרה לחבירו ואמר לו "פרה זו נגחנית היא, נשכנית היא, בעטנית היא, רבצנית היא," והיה בה מום אחד וסנפו בין המומין, הרי זה מקח טעות.

If one sells a cow and says, "This cow gores, bites, kicks and sprawls," and it only has one of those defects, which he included among these defects, that is grounds for claiming it was an erroneous purchase.

7. Talmud, Bava Batra 90b

תנו רבנן: אוצרי פירות ומלווי ברבית ומקטיני איפה ומפקיעי שערים...

Our sages taught: Hoarders of produce, usurious lenders, reducers of *ephah* measures and releasers of prices...

8. Rabbi Avraham Gombiner (17th century Poland), Magen Avraham 242:1

אם הערלים מיקרין השער דגים נכון לתקן שלא יקנו דגים וראיה ממשנה ספ"א דכריתות (צ"צ)

Should the non-Jews elevate the price of fish, it would be good to enact that they not purchase fish [for Shabbat]...

9. Talmud, Kiddushin 59a

רב גידל הוה מהפיד בההיא ארעא, אזל רבי אבא זבנה, אזל רב גידל קבליה לרבי זירא, אזל רבי זירא וקבליה לרב יצחק נפחא... אשכחיה, אמר ליה: עני מהפך בחררה ובא אחר ונטלה הימנו, מאי? אמר ליה: נקרא רשע...

Rav Gidel was trying to acquire a certain plot of land, but Rabbi Abba purchased it first. Rav Gidel complained to Rabbi Zeira, who complained to Rav Yitzchak Nafcha... Rav Yitzchak Nafcha asked [Rabbi Abba]: Where a pauper is pursuing a cake, and another takes it from him, what is the law? Rabbi Abba replied: He is called wicked...

10. Rashi to Talmud, Pesachim 54b

ועל התבואה שתרקב - שאם לא כן היו בעלי בתים מאצריין אותה, ומביאין רעבון לעולם.

"[Gd decreed] that produce should rot" – Otherwise, people would hoard it, causing famine.

11. Talmud, Sanhedrin 2b-3a

והאי דלא בעינן מומחין משום דרבי חנינא, דאמר רבי חנינא: דבר תורה, אחד דיני ממונות ואחד דיני נפשות בדרישה ובחקירה, ומה טעם אמרו דיני ממונות לא בעינן דרישה וחקירה - כדי שלא תנעול דלת בפני לוויין.

We do not require experts, because of Rabbi Chanina's principle: Biblically, both financial and capital matters should require extensive interrogation of witnesses. Why did they say that financial matters do not require extensive interrogation? To avoid locking the door before borrowers.

It depends

12. Talmud, Nedarim 80b

מעייין של בני העיר, חייהן וחיי אחרים חייהן קודמין לחיי אחרים. בהמתם [ובהמת אחרים בהמתם] קודמת לבהמת אחרים. כביסתן וכביסת אחרים כביסתן קודמת לכביסת אחרים. חיי אחרים וכביסתן חיי אחרים קודמין לכביסתן. רבי יוסי אומר כביסתן קודמת לחיי אחרים

If a spring is owned by a certain town, and there is a choice between their lives [in access to the spring] and the lives of others, their lives come before those of others. Their animals precede the animals of others, and if there is a choice between their laundry and that of others, their laundry comes before that of others. If there is a choice between the lives of others and their laundry, the lives of others precede their laundry.

Rabbi Yosi said: Their laundry precedes the lives of others.

13. Rabbeinu Tam, Tosafot (12th century France) to Kiddushin 59a עני

למה מחזר על זאת שטרה בה חבירו ילך וישתכר במקום אחר אבל אם היתה החררה דהפקר ליכא איסור שאם לא זכה בזאת לא ימצא אחרת
Why is he seeking this, for which the other worked? Let him hire himself out elsewhere! But if the cake is *hefker*, there is no prohibition; should the second one not take this, he would not find another.

From the bookshelf to the real world

14. Talmud, Bava Batra 91a

ת"ר אין משתכרין פעמים בביצים אמר מרי בר מרי פליגי בה רב ושמואל חד אמר על חד תרי, וחד אמר תגר לתגרא.

Our sages taught: One may not profit twice from eggs. Mari bar Mari said: Rav and Shemuel debate: One says this means to profit double; the other says it means the second merchant.

15. Tosafot (12th-13th century Western Europe), Comment to Bava Batra 91a "חד"

וא"ת מאי איריא ביצים, אפי' שאר דברים נמי כדאמר' (לעיל צ.). המשתכר אל ישתכר יותר משתות!" ותירץ ריב"ם דמיירי אפי' טרה דהיכא דאיכא טירחא יכול להשתכר יותר משתות... ולרשב"א נראה דהכא מיירי אפי' בביצים שאינו לוקח מן השוק אלא מתרנגולת שבביתו...

And if you will ask: Why specifically eggs? We have learned regarding other things, "One may not profit more than one-sixth"! Rivam explained that our case is where he strained; where there is strain, one may profit more than one-sixth... To Rabbi Shlomo ben Eliyahu it appears that here we are even including eggs which one does not buy from the market, but from someone with a chicken at home...

16. Rabbi Moshe Isserles (16th century Cracow), Responsum #10

"אמר רב הונא האי בר מבואה דאוקים ריחיא ואתא בר מבואה חבריה וקא מוקים גביה, דינא הוא דמעכב עליה."... אם כן הרי לפנינו שמדינינו אין לו ליענטילומר שני לדפוס זה כלל...

"Rav Huna said: Where an alley resident establishes a mill, and another resident then establishes a mill beside him, he may protest. (Bava Batra 21b)"... If so, we see that per Jewish law the second printer may not print this at all...