

Potomac Torah Study Center

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NOTE: Devrei Torah presented weekly in Loving Memory of Rabbi Leonard S. Cahan z"l, Rabbi Emeritus of Congregation Har Shalom, who started me on my road to learning 50 years ago and was our family Rebbe and close friend until his recent untimely death.

Devrei Torah are now Available for Download (normally by noon on Fridays) from www.PotomacTorah.org. Thanks to Bill Landau for hosting the Devrei Torah.

With so much going on in the world, leave it to me to miss an important anniversary. Last Sunday, 20 Iyar, was the 3332nd anniversary of our ancestors leaving their camp at the base of Har Sinai to continue their journey from Egypt to Israel (Bamidbar 10:11). We shall read what happened in three weeks (sixth aliyah). This Shabbat, however, we complete Sefer Vayikra, the middle section of the Torah, whose main focus is the conditions required to live in close proximity to our Creator.

Behar presents the mitzvot of shemittah and yovel. When the Jews enter the land that God promised to their ancestors, the land is to observe Shabbat in a way similar to the way that we observe Shabbat – by resting from productive activity. Every seventh year, the land of Israel is to rest – no planting, tilling, or working the ground. Should the land produce crops on its own, any person who wishes may take the produce – whatever the land generates is kefker (ownerless and thus available on a first come/first served basis). Every seven cycles of seven years (total of 49 years), the next year (50) is yovel, and all land “sold” to another owner reverts to the family that originally received the land at the time that the Jews divided the property under Joshua. (All slaves must be freed as well during the yovel year, even slaves who had voluntarily remained when eligible to be freed during a prior shemittah year.) Bechukotai, with the famous Tochachah (warnings, curses, or admonitions), describes the blessings to come to our people for following God’s mitzvot and horrific punishments that would result from failing to observe them. The Torah emphasizes that the land will vomit out the Jews if they fail to observe the requirements of shmittah and yovel (26:34-35). As we near our counting of the 50 days from Pesach to Shavuot, the Torah presents a parallel counting of the 50 year cycle of the land of Israel.

The requirement of considering Israel’s land kefker (and letting it rest completely) every shemittah and yovel year is an added limitation on the use of the land of Israel -- in addition to not harvesting the edges of the fields and leaving some harvested produce for the poor, orphans, widows, and foreigners. These restrictions on the use of the land of Israel raise an interesting question. Is God a socialist that He places so many restrictions and requirements on land owners? Here I turn from Torah commentator to my career as a professional economist.

Another way of phrasing this question is to ask why so many Jews have turned to communism and socialism. Marx and Lenin were both Jewish. The Forward started as a communist newspaper and has always favored anti-Capitalist views. Does a Jewish view of mitzvot inherently turn one toward socialism and away from a market economy? I believe that a proper understanding of a market system is entirely consistent with Orthodox Judaism. Given that our religion imposes an obligation to support the poor, disadvantaged, foreigners, widows, etc., what form of economy will do the best job of providing for those who “need” extra help? Economists have demonstrated that a market economy is far more efficient than socialism at generating wealth. (The proof is fairly sophisticated, but it won Frederick Hayek a Nobel Prize in Economics in 1974. President Reagan and Prime Minister Thatcher understood that a socialist economy could not keep up with a market economy, and their efforts in the 1980s led to the fall of the Iron Curtain.)

Given the inherent efficiency advantage of capitalism over socialism, what about taking care of disadvantaged members of society? Economists suggest separating income generation and distribution. By taxing income and using some of the proceeds to supplement income for the disadvantaged members of society, a market economy can provide for needy

individuals. A well designed market system with taxes and redistribution can provide more for the needy than a socialist system could.

The Torah, however, designated two types of help for the poor – Terumah (voluntary contributions) and Tzedakah (required contributions). Taxes are a form of Tzedakah. Private charity is a form of Terumah. One difference between Republicans and Democrats is that the former tend to prefer Terumah while the latter tend to favor Tzedakah. What form of society is better at caring for the needy – private charity or collective (government taxation and distribution)? This question raises political disputes that are outside the scope of religion.

Enough on economics and politics. Returning to Bechukotai, Rabbi David Fohrman turns to Rashi, who quotes a Midrash on the beginning of the Parsha. When the Parsha says, “im bechukotai telechu,” “if you will follow my commands,” the Torah says that “God will walk with you in Gan Eden.” The language and details of the blessings in Bechukotai follow the first six days of Creation at the beginning of the Torah. The Midrash and Rashi interpret the close parallel as indicating that following God’s mitzvot, specifically regarding shemittah and yovel, we can have a second chance of walking with God in Gan Eden, this time in Israel. Adam and Chava had God’s special tree (of Knowledge, which God forbid to them as food), and we Jews have our Etz Chaim, the Torah, and the land of Israel. To keep the right to live in Israel, however, we must strictly observe Shemittah and Yovel.

My beloved Rebbe, Leonard Cahan, z”l, disagreed with me on many political issues. We agreed on goals, but often disagreed on the best methods to achieve them. Similarly, we can agree on the meaning of the mitzvot of shemittah and yovel while disagreeing on the best ways of helping the poor and needy in our society. My hope for my children and grandchildren is that political differences return to how they were when I was young – topics to discuss in a positive way rather than invitations to fight.

Shabbat Shalom,

Hannah & Alan

Much of the inspiration for my weekly Dvar Torah message comes from the insights of Rabbi David Fohrman and his team of scholars at www.alephbeta.org. Please join me in supporting this wonderful organization, which has increased its scholarly work during the pandemic, despite many of its supporters having to cut back on their donations.

Please daven for a Refuah Shlema for Menachem Mendel ben Chana, Eli ben Hanina, Yoram HaKohen ben Shoshana, Gedalya ben Sarah, Mordechai ben Chaya, Baruch Yitzhak ben Perl, David Leib HaKohen ben Sheina Reizel, Zev ben Sara Chaya, Uzi Yehuda ben Marda Behla, HaRav Dovid Meir ben Chaya Tzippa; Eliav Yerachmiel ben Sara Dina, Amoz ben Tziviah, Reuven ben Masha, Moshe David ben Hannah, Meir ben Sara, Yitzhak Tzvi ben Yehudit Miriam, Yaakov Naphtali ben Michal Leah, Ramesh bat Heshmat, Rivka Chaya bat Leah, Zissel Bat Mazal, Chana Bracha bas Rochel Leah, Leah Fruma bat Musa Devorah, Hinda Behla bat Chaya Leah, Nechama bas Tikva Rachel, Miriam Chava bat Yachid, and Ruth bat Sarah, all of whom greatly need our prayers.

Hannah & Alan

Why is Meron So Special?

By Rabbi Mordecnai Rhine *

Why is Meron so special?

Following the tragedy last Friday, many people are wondering why is Meron so special that so many tens of thousands gather there each year.

Meron is the burial place of the great Talmudic scholar, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, a man who was known both for his intense scholarship and spirituality, as well as his intense love for each individual. When he hid from the Romans for over 12 years, he soared and is recognized as the author of the Zohar. When he came out of hiding, he encountered an individual who was carrying two bundles of fragrant Hadasim (Myrtle) in honor of Shabbos, and Rabbi Shimon celebrated this man's devotion.

When we have an awesomely great person who celebrates the "simple" accomplishments of the individual, we have the recipe for national unity. My take is that this is why Meron has become a shrine for people of all walks of life to connect with the Divine through song, dance, prayer, and meditation, at the site of the sacred bonfires that are lit each year [on Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's yahrtzeit, Lag B'Omer]. This, of course makes the tragedy that much more painful. May G-d bless the memories of those who died.

Tonight, at my online program "Home to Home" I posed the question, "Who do you have in your life who is very great, yet takes great joy in your accomplishments?"

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Drasha: Bechukosai: A Separate Peace

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky © 2002

[Please remember Mordechai ben Chaya for a Mishebarach!]

"If you will walk in my statutes, and heed my commandments ..." (Leviticus 33:3).

This week the Torah bestows its promise of blessing and peace to those who follow in the path of Torah. Rashi is bothered by the seeming redundancy of walking in statutes, and heeding commands. He explains that "walk in my statutes" refers to arduous Torah study, and "heed my commandments" refers to keeping the mitzvos.

And then there is peace. Hashem promises that if we adhere to the directives, "I will bring peace to the land" (ibid v. 6) In the same verse, the Torah also tells us that "a sword will not pass through your land." If there is peace, then obviously a sword will not pass through. What is the meaning of the redundancy? Once again, Rashi explains that the "sword passing through" is referring to a sword that is not directed against our people; rather it is a sword that is passing through on the way to another country. Thus the two types of peace.

But maybe there is a different type of peace; one that does not refer to guns and ammunition, but rather to a peace that is on another level.

Rav Yitzchak Zilberstein of B'nei Berak tells the story of Rav Eliezer Shach, the Ponovezer Rosh Yeshiva, of blessed memory.

Rav Shach once entered a shul and sat down in a seat towards the back, and, while waiting for the minyan to begin, Rav Shach began to study Torah. Suddenly a man approached him, hands on his hips, and began shouting at him.

"Don't you know that you are sitting in my seat?" the irate man yelled.

“Who are you to come here and just sit down, without asking anyone permission?”

Rav Shach quickly stood up and embraced the man. He hugged him lovingly as he begged the man for forgiveness. He agreed to the irate man’s every point.

“I am so sorry for taking your seat even if it was for a few moments,” he pleaded. Please forgive me. I must have absent-mindedly sat down there. Please forgive me.

The man was taken aback at the Rosh Yeshiva’s humility, and immediately apologized for his rude behavior.

“After the davening, students of Rav Shach approached him and asked why he so readily accepted blame and begged forgiveness for what surely was not a misdeed. After all, why should he not be able to sit down in the seat. Rav Shach explained, “If Torah is all that one aspires to have, then everything else in this world, all the items one would normally squabble about has no significance. When one is immersed in Torah, a seat is meaningless, a place is meaningless. Surely a material object is not worth getting upset over, surely no less tare they worth fighting over. Why shouldn’t I apologize?”

The Torah tells us a secret to peace in our community. If we toil in Torah, there will be peace in the land. The Torah is telling us that if we immerse ourselves in Torah then all the temporal objects that are the fulcrum of most fights are meaningless.

We think of peace as a concept that occurs between nations. However, we often forget that what we need is peace within our own community. A separate peace.

Good Shabbos!

A Society that Embodies the Principles of Shabbat

by Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah © 2013, 2021 *

This week, with the reading of Behar-Bichukotai, we end the book of Vayikra. The book of Vayikra is often thought of as devoted entirely to sacrifices or, a little more broadly, to the world of the kohanim – sacrifices and tumah vi’tahara, purity and impurity – and has thus also been called Torat Kohanim, the Torah of the Priests. However, this only described the first half of Vayikra. Beginning with Achrei Mot, the Torah turns to the lives of the entire people, and delineates the prohibitions of idolatry and forbidden sexual relationships, framed in terms of tumah and taharah.

This relocating of presumably Temple-centric concepts to the normal lives of the people is completed in the parasha of Kedoshim, where the entire people is called upon to be kadosh, to be holy just as God is holy. The concept of kedusha, we are told, is not limited to the Temple. It is a concept that must guide our lives in all its dimensions, and thus the parasha lays out a wide and diverse array of mitzvot for our lives outside of the Temple, mitzvot which allow us to achieve lives of kedusha. God had us build a Mishkan so that God could dwell in our midst, but the purpose of God dwelling in our midst is not to find God only in the Mishkan, but to take the encounter of God in the Mishkan, and to bring it out of the Mishkan and into all aspects of our lives.

Until now, the life of kedusha outside the Temple is defined by a life of mitzvot observance in general, and of the observance of Shabbat in particular. Shabbat serves as the counterpart to Mikdash. Mikdash is the holiness of space, and Shabbat is holiness of time. Thus, Shabbat and Mikdash are regularly juxtaposed in the Torah. And of the two, it is the kedusha of Shabbat that is greater. Shabbat precedes Mikdash chronologically – it existed at the beginning of Creation and was commanded even before the revelation at Har Sinai – and its sanctity cannot be violated even for the sake of the construction of the Mikdash. One aspect of its greater importance undoubtedly lies in this – that the kedusha of Shabbat applies to all – men and women, kohanim and Yisraelim – and at all times and at all places. It is the regular, ongoing, experience of kedusha, of veshakhanti bi’tokham, of “I will dwell in their midst”, that exists in our lives.

Shabbat is kedusha outside of the Temple for the individual and the community, but it still falls short of a full life of kedusha. It is only in parashat Behar, that the kedusha of Shabbat becomes the basis for structuring the entire society.

The mitzvah of shmitta, called here Shi'vi'it, the Seventh, is described in the opening section of the parasha as a "Shabbat for the land." The Torah underscores this point, repeating the word "shabbat" seven (!) times in the opening section, and then commanding the mitzvah of the yovel, after seven cycles of shmitta – it is a Shabbat of the Shabbats.

The use of the term "Shabbat" for the Sabbatical Year demands attention. It is the concept of kedusha, the concept of Shabbat, applied to the land and to the entire existence of the people as a nation. The Torah spells out in Bichukotai the consequences for not observing the Shabbat of the land: destruction of the Temple and exile from the land. The loss of these two is effectively the destruction of us as a nation. And, indeed, for two thousand years, from the destruction of the Temple and the exile until the establishment of the modern State of Israel, we have ceased to exist as a nation. We continued to exist as a people, as a religion, but we were not a nation.

Shmitta, then, is kedusha applied on the national level; it is the structuring of our national identity on the principle of kedusha. What does that mean? The refrain of the Torah in our parsha is "For the land is Mine, for you are strangers and sojourners with Me." (Vayikra 25:23). On the individual and communal level, the refrain from work one day a week, on Shabbat, structures our life so that it is not just about work, creating, and possessing. Our work takes place in a larger context, in a frame of kedusha, and it must serve a larger purpose. On the societal level, our refraining from working the land on year out of seven, on Shmitta, structures our society so that its goals and institutions are not – cannot – be about the acquisition of wealth and the exploiting of the land.

A society that keeps the shmitta understands that the land is not the owner's to dispose of how they please, and works to protect its natural resources. A society that keeps the Shmitta understands that our energies cannot be devoted to the massing of unlimited wealth, for property will revert to its original owners every 50 years. A society that keeps the Shmitta understands that other human beings are not put on Earth for us to maximally exploit them to our benefit, for humans are not made to serve others, but to serve God. The mitzvot of lending without interest also appear in this parasha, because a society that keeps these laws understands that our money is given to us not for our enrichment at the expense of others, but that our money, our wealth, and the land itself is given to us by God to serve God and to help people. A society that keeps Shmitta understands that everyone must be cared for, that everyone lives and thrives: "And you will strengthen him – the stranger and the sojourner – and he will live with you" (Vayikra 25:35) . Such a society structures its goals and institutions so that what it values is not wealth and possessions, but serving others and serving God.

Until now, we as a people have done very well in the observance of Shabbat and mitzvot. We have done less well in living lives of kedusha. Our lives of mitzvot often are ones of technical observance, and we lost sight of the values that underlie the mitzvot. We keep the Shabbat meticulously, but this often does not translate into a reframing of our working lives in a way that they serve a higher purpose. And, most significantly, we have never really structured a society around the principles of Shmitta. In short, we have never given Shmitta a chance. What would it mean to structure a society around principles and goals that are profoundly different from those of the society in which live, in which we have always lived? What would it mean if our financial, industrial, legal, and commercial institutions were structured around the principles of Shmitta?

It is hard to imagine how we can begin to realize such a restructuring of society, but there are places we can start. Not, perhaps, in our secular institutions, but in our Jewish ones. Over 100 years ago, one of the most important institutions for the immigrant Jewish communities in the United States was the Hebrew Free Loan Society. Built on the principles of our parasha, this institution realized the primary responsibility of the Jewish community to support its members, and to do so in ways that made them productive members of society. Through its membership-based structure, the reciprocity that it engendered, and the embracing of the value of communal responsibility, not only were individuals helped, but the entire community was strengthened. Today, we do not have such communal institutions. And often the communal religious institutions that we do have – synagogues and Jewish schools – more buy into the values of academic achievement, professional achievement, earning potential, and amassed wealth – that are those of the secular society than they attempt to redirect our communal values to those of the Torah and those embodied by Shmitta.

On this Shabbat, let us think how in our individual lives we can bring the kedusha of Shabbat into the week, to structure our working week to serve a higher purpose. And let us think how we can bring the kedusha of Shi'vi'it into our society – how we can work without Jewish institutions so that they embrace and communicate the values of a society that serves a higher purpose, that reaches for kedusha.

Shabbat Shalom.

* Rabbi Linzer's Dvar Torah for this week came after my deadline. I am therefore substituting a Dvar from the YCT archives. I expect to be able to post his 2021 Dvar Torah at PotomacTorah.org before Shabbat.

<https://library.ycttorah.org/2013/05/a-society-that-embodies-the-principles-of-shabbat/>

Sabbath Mode

by Rabbi Mordechai Rhine* © 2021 Teach 613

The idea of having a day of rest is an important one. In Mitzrayim (Egypt), even before the Torah was given, Moshe appealed to Paroh to allow the Jewish slaves to rest on the seventh day. Moshe explained, "If they have a day of rest, they will regain their strength and will serve you much better."

In Torah Judaism we take the concept of Shabbos to far greater levels than just a physical day of rest. Shabbos is a time of reconnection to the purpose of creation. It is a time when we shut down so much of the hustle of our lives to recalibrate, reconnect with Torah, and our eternal values. Shabbos is a time for family, for community, and for self. Shabbos is a good time to think.

In this week's Parsha the concept of Shabbos is taken to a new level. Shemita, the Sabbatical year, is an entire year in which "Shabbos" is practiced by the farmer. It is a year which the farmer uses to reconnect with values and energize himself with his priorities. Although the Jewish farmer would certainly learn Torah daily, during Shemita he could really engross himself and grow as a Jew in a phenomenal way.

The theme of Shemita is seen most clearly in the Mitzva of Yovel, the year following 7 cycles of Shemita. That fiftieth year was a year of national recalibration, in which people sold into servitude, and much land sold under financial stresses, would return to their prior status. As the Torah states, "Call freedom throughout the land!" The seven cycles of the seven-year Shemita cycle produce an opportunity for personal clarity and reconnection.

I recall from my days learning in Lakewood, there is a Beis Medrash (study hall) known at Mizrach (East) which is a bit underground. An atomic clock was placed prominently, and it was expected to provide extremely accurate time. With time, however, it was found to be running noticeably slow. We were quite befuddled as to why this expensive clock was not keeping time properly, until someone pointed out that it was radio controlled. Since the room was somewhat underground, the clock was apparently not receiving the signal needed to keep accurate time. Indeed, when the clock was removed from the wall and carried outside it immediately received the signal of the correct time. I had the privilege to be present as the clock was brought outside and watched as its hour and minute hands began to magically move quickly to adjust to the radio signal it just received.

Sometimes in life we become quite busy with life. Shabbos, like Shemita and Yovel, serve as an opportunity for us to be more receptive to the radio signal of Torah.

A few months ago, I visited a baby store to buy a highchair. Since the last time I bought a highchair (about fifteen years ago) everything has changed. Today the highchairs are high tech, and much like ovens, they come with all kinds of gadgets and features. One of the most intriguing features was that one highchair had a sensor to detect when the baby was crying. Then, the highchair was programmed to play soothing music, and even enter into a mode that provided a gentle rocking motion to calm the baby.

As I was admiring the features, a salesperson approached me and offered to assist. "Is there anything I can help you with," he asked. I said I was doing fine. Then, as an afterthought I asked him if he happened to know if any of these high featured highchairs had a Sabbath mode. He said he did not think so.

As I left the store with a simple highchair that my wife and I chose and purchased, I thought to myself about the importance of having a Sabbath mode in life -- Not only every fiftieth year, every seventh year, or even every week on Shabbos. A Jew needs to be able to enter into "Sabbath mode," to take a few moments to experience the taste of Shabbos serenity, whenever necessary. It may come in the form of an inspirational read or podcast, or simply pausing life

for a few moments, to think, recalibrate, and reconnect with who you are. Shabbos was not just so that we can regain our strength and serve Paroh better. Shabbos is a personal gift so that we can be all we were meant to be.

With heartfelt blessings for a wonderful Shabbos!

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Sinai and Sinah: Thoughts for Parashat Behar-Behukotai

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

Religion has two faces. One face is that of saintliness, idealism, holiness and selflessness. But the other face is one of hatred, cruelty, selfishness and egotism. Within the world of religion, one can find the most exemplary human beings; but one can also find inquisitors and terrorists. In his play, "The Father," August Strindberg has one of his characters state: "It is strange that as soon as you begin to talk about God and love, your voice becomes hard and your eyes full of hate."

This week's Torah portion begins: "And God spoke with Moses on Mount Sinai." According to a rabbinic homily, this special mountain was chosen for God's revelation because it is a low, humble mountain. God wanted the recipients of Torah to appreciate the value of humility and to avoid the vice of arrogance. A Talmudic passage (Shabbat 89a-b) links the word Sinai with the word Sinah—hatred. Those who emulate the ideals of Sinai are those who reflect the beautiful face of religion. Those who breach those ideals fall into the trap of Sinah, becoming hateful and jealous.

There is a fine line between Sinai and Sinah. Sinai brings out the best in us; Sinah evokes the worst in us. Sinai symbolizes positive, responsible thought and action. Sinah represents negative, destructive energy.

Whereas Sinai gives people the benefit of the doubt, Sinah accuses and finds fault. Whereas Sinai calls on us to first obtain facts before lodging complaints, Sinah prods us to complain even when we do not have the facts or when we do not know all sides of the story.

Some years ago, the New York Times published an article by Professor Adam Grant, "Raising a Moral Child." This article sheds light on the Sinai/Sinah dichotomy.

Professor Grant notes that when disciplining a child, a parent should be careful to criticize the child's actions, not the child him/herself. For example, one should not say: you are a bad boy/girl. Rather one should say: you behaved badly. One should not say: you are foolish; but rather, one should say: you acted foolishly. What is the difference?

When a parent says that a child is bad/foolish/stubborn etc., a child internalizes that indeed he/she is in essence bad, foolish, or stubborn. When a parent says that the child's behavior was unacceptable, then the lesson is: you are good, but your actions need correction. The child's self-respect is maintained, and he/she knows that he/she can improve. The child is not stigmatized by a negative self-image of being bad, foolish or stubborn by nature.

A Sinai approach is to criticize faulty behavior, in the hope of generating better behavior from the child in the future. A Sinah approach tears down the child's ego. This lesson applies not only to children. When criticizing others—including adults—one should not call names or give negative labels. Rather, one should address the problematic action or idea without casting aspersions on the basic goodness of the person being criticized.

Here is another distinction between Sinai and Sinah. Sinai, although humble and lowly, is still a mountain. It has weight and strength. Sinah is a bodiless emotion, not rooted, not permanent. Sinai teaches humility, but also the principle of holding fast to righteousness, of standing like a mountain against the forces of negativity. Sinah is the antithesis of calm, reasonable, moral courage. Sinah seeks to stir negative energy, creating dissension and confusion.

Sinai and Sinah represent two faces of religion, two approaches to life. How much happier we would be and how much better the world would be if everyone chose Sinai and repudiated Sinah.

* <https://www.jewishideas.org/sinai-and-sinah-thoughts-parashat-behar-behukotai> **The Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals has experienced a significant drop in donations during the pandemic. The Institute needs our help to maintain and strengthen our Institute. Each gift, large or small, is a vote for an intellectually vibrant, compassionate, inclusive Orthodox Judaism. You may contribute on our website jewishideas.org or you may send your check to Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, 2 West 70th Street, New York, NY 10023. Ed.: Please join me in helping the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals at this time.**

A Woman of Valor Has Been Found

by Rabbi Hayyim Angel *

Simple glass reflects the beam of light that shines on it only once. A precious gem, in contrast, reflects different sparks with its many facets; a single beam of light that shines on it is reflected and is returned to us greatly enhanced. ~ Feivel Meltzer [1]

INTRODUCTION

This analogy can serve as a guide for understanding a literary gem, Megillat Ruth. Seldom do we come across such an ideal society, characterized by hesed (loyalty, loving-kindness), heroes, and no villains. At worst, there are average characters such as Orpah, Boaz's foreman, and So-and-so who serve as foils to highlight the greatness of Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz.[2] R. Zeira's classic statement captures the essence of the megillah:

R. Zeira said: This scroll [of Ruth] tells us nothing either of cleanliness or of uncleanness, either of prohibition or permission. For what purpose then was it written? To teach how great is the reward of those who do deeds of kindness (Ruth Rabbah 2:14).

Although it appears that hesed is the predominant theme of our megillah, there is considerably less clarity over how to define that hesed, or what other religious lessons emanate from the text of Megillat Ruth. Which characters truly epitomize R. Zeira's statement? What is the relationship between divine providence and human hesed?

Although the surface reading of the Book of Ruth appears idyllic and straightforward, many elements in the book that initially appear clear are more elusive after further scrutiny. Rather than limiting ourselves to one side or another, it is preferable to see how these viewpoints coexist. By doing so, one stands to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the text and its messages.

Mordechai Cohen sets out two criteria for ascertaining deliberate ambiguities in a biblical text: (1) one must establish the cogency of two separate readings; (2) one must demonstrate how the ambiguity contributes to the literary context by expressing something that could not be expressed in unambiguous language.[3] Taking this argument to a different level, one might contend that much in Megillat Ruth fits these criteria. This chapter will consider some of the major issues of the megillah with an eye toward its overall purposes.

THE FIRST FIVE VERSES: PUNISHMENT FOR SINS?

The Book of Ruth opens in a jarring fashion, with Elimelech, Mahlon, and Chilion dying at the outset. Some midrashim and later commentators contend that Elimelech and his sons deserved their respective deaths. They maintain that Elimelech left the Land of Israel,[4] or a starving community behind,[5] while his sons lingered in Moab and intermarried. [6]

Perhaps the juxtaposition of Elimelech's departure and his death and the juxtaposition of the sons' marriages and their deaths suggest these conclusions. However, there is a ten-year gap between the sons' marrying Moabites and their deaths (1:4). By including the lengthy time separating the two events, the megillah appears to exclude intermarriage as a direct cause of their deaths.[7] We also are not told how long Elimelech remained in Moab before he died. These uncertainties yield at least three possible lines of interpretation:

1. Elimelech, Mahlon, and Chilion simply died: They maintain that the family left during a famine for legitimate reasons. Ibn Ezra (on 1:2, 15) insists that Ruth and Orpah converted prior to their marriages to Elimelech's sons. The book's

opening verses are primarily background setting the stage for the main story of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz, and should not be understood as punishment for sins.

2. This story is parallel to Job: Like Job, Naomi first complained about her God-given lot (1:20–21). The deaths and suffering at the outset of Ruth are theologically significant, but the reader is not told how.

Unlike the Book of Job, however, where God's direct involvement is discussed in the beginning and end of the book, in Ruth it is not. Additionally, the characters in Megillat Ruth played an active role in changing their fate, whereas Job did not. It is unclear whether Megillat Ruth was intended to parallel the Book of Job or whether the two books should be contrasted, with Megillat Ruth's characters held responsible for their original suffering and credited for their eventual happiness. [8]

3. This is a story of God giving just recompense: Elimelech and his family are punished for leaving a starving community behind. The unwarranted lingering of Mahlon and Chilion in Moab led them to intermarry, causing their untimely deaths. Likewise, the happy ending of Megillat Ruth may be viewed as God's reward for the acts of hesed performed over the course of the story.

Does the text teach divine recompense? This reading is possible, but no more compelling than a non-recompense reading. This uncertainty encapsulates our difficulty in pinpointing any one specific interpretation of the ephemeral characters in the opening verses of Megillat Ruth. The initially straightforward narrative contains significant ambiguities that will continue throughout the book.

Simple glass reflects the beam of light that shines on it only once. A precious gem, in contrast, reflects different sparks with its many facets; a single beam of light that shines on it is reflected and is returned to us greatly enhanced. ~ Feivel Meltzer [1]

INTRODUCTION

This analogy can serve as a guide for understanding a literary gem, Megillat Ruth. Seldom do we come across such an ideal society, characterized by hesed (loyalty, loving-kindness), heroes, and no villains. At worst, there are average characters such as Orpah, Boaz's foreman, and So-and-so who serve as foils to highlight the greatness of Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz.[2] R. Zeira's classic statement captures the essence of the megillah:

R. Zeira said: This scroll [of Ruth] tells us nothing either of cleanliness or of uncleanliness, either of prohibition or permission. For what purpose then was it written? To teach how great is the reward of those who do deeds of kindness (Ruth Rabbah 2:14).

Although it appears that hesed is the predominant theme of our megillah, there is considerably less clarity over how to define that hesed, or what other religious lessons emanate from the text of Megillat Ruth. Which characters truly epitomize R. Zeira's statement? What is the relationship between divine providence and human hesed?

Although the surface reading of the Book of Ruth appears idyllic and straightforward, many elements in the book that initially appear clear are more elusive after further scrutiny. Rather than limiting ourselves to one side or another, it is preferable to see how these viewpoints coexist. By doing so, one stands to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the text and its messages.

Mordechai Cohen sets out two criteria for ascertaining deliberate ambiguities in a biblical text: (1) one must establish the cogency of two separate readings; (2) one must demonstrate how the ambiguity contributes to the literary context by expressing something that could not be expressed in unambiguous language.[3] Taking this argument to a different level, one might contend that much in Megillat Ruth fits these criteria. This chapter will consider some of the major issues of the megillah with an eye toward its overall purposes.

THE FIRST FIVE VERSES: PUNISHMENT FOR SINS?

The Book of Ruth opens in a jarring fashion, with Elimelech, Mahlon, and Chilion dying at the outset. Some midrashim and later commentators contend that Elimelech and his sons deserved their respective deaths. They maintain that Elimelech left the Land of Israel,[4] or a starving community behind,[5] while his sons lingered in Moab and intermarried. [6]

Perhaps the juxtaposition of Elimelech's departure and his death and the juxtaposition of the sons' marriages and their deaths suggest these conclusions. However, there is a ten-year gap between the sons' marrying Moabites and their deaths (1:4). By including the lengthy time separating the two events, the megillah appears to exclude intermarriage as a direct cause of their deaths.[7] We also are not told how long Elimelech remained in Moab before he died. These uncertainties yield at least three possible lines of interpretation:

1. Elimelech, Mahlon, and Chilion simply died: They maintain that the family left during a famine for legitimate reasons. Ibn Ezra (on 1:2, 15) insists that Ruth and Orpah converted prior to their marriages to Elimelech's sons. The book's opening verses are primarily background setting the stage for the main story of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz, and should not be understood as punishment for sins.

2. This story is parallel to Job: Like Job, Naomi first complained about her God-given lot (1:20–21). The deaths and suffering at the outset of Ruth are theologically significant, but the reader is not told how.

Unlike the Book of Job, however, where God's direct involvement is discussed in the beginning and end of the book, in Ruth it is not. Additionally, the characters in Megillat Ruth played an active role in changing their fate, whereas Job did not. It is unclear whether Megillat Ruth was intended to parallel the Book of Job or whether the two books should be contrasted, with Megillat Ruth's characters held responsible for their original suffering and credited for their eventual happiness. [8]

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[Article continues; see below]

[Note: The full version of this article would require six pages – too long for this format. For the remainder of this article, see:

<https://www.jewishideas.org/print/article/woman-valor-has-been-found>

I also plan to include the full version with the E-mail attachment]

Rabbi Hayyim Angel, the National Scholar of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, teaches Tanakh at Yeshiva University. This article appeared originally as "A Midrashic View of Ruth amidst a Sea of Ambiguity," Jewish Bible Quarterly 33:2 (2005), pp. 91-99. This revised version appeared most recently in Rabbi H. Angel's book, Vision from the Prophet and Counsel from the Elders: A Survey of Nevi'im and Ketuvim (New York: OU Press, 2013), pp. 272-282..

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Behar-Bechukosai – Sublime Simplicity

by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer *

The Medrash Yalkut Shimoni in the beginning of Bechukosai quotes a verse from Tehillim where Dovid Hamelech tells us that he stayed on the proper path in life by calculating his paths. "I calculated my paths and returned my feet to your testimonies." (Tehillim 119:59) On the simple level Dovid Hamelech is telling us that he regularly evaluated his path in life to ensure he was following G-d's will, and not veering off course.

The Medrash quotes Rav Huna who tell us in the name of Rav Acha that there is an additional profound lesson in this verse. Dovid Hamelech is also telling us why and how he managed to live a life of righteousness. He considered his "paths" – his options in life. One path was to devote his life to G-d. His other choice was to give in to his passions and

desires. He carefully considered and evaluated both options, weighing the gains of mitzvos and the losses of sin, and only then turned his feet to G-d's will. Tehillim is filled with expressions of Dovid Hamelech's love and devotion to G-d, and with expressions of the most sublime spiritual awareness. Yet, Dovid Hamelech is telling us here that even he was human and was challenged with passions and desires. Moreover, he is telling us that despite his great spiritual achievements and close connection with G-d, he did not strengthen himself against sin only by focusing on lofty spiritual concepts. He would focus and reflect on the basic concepts of reward and punishment to balance his passions and desires.

The Medrash continues with another interpretation adding another meaningful layer to this concept. Rabbi Abba the son of Rabbi Chiya explains in the name of Rabbi Yonasan that Dovid Hamelech did not only focus on the consequences of the two paths before him, but he also focused on G-d's attitude towards those paths. When he considered the paths before him, Dovid Hamelech studied the blessings and curses found in our Parsha and studied how G-d deals with our choices. He saw that the blessings begin with letter aleph and end with the letter tav, the first and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet. This teaches us that the blessings are all encompassing, beyond the specific details written in the Torah. The curses on the other hand begin with the letter vav and end with the letter hey, two letters which are next to each other in the Hebrew alphabet. This teaches us that the curses are limited and non-encompassing. Dovid Hamelech further noted that the order of these letters is reversed from their order in the alphabet, indicating that G-d is always ready to reverse the curses and turn them into blessings if we safeguard the path of Torah.

Dovid Hamelech would focus on the blessings and curses and consider these messages. G-d is seeking to reward us significantly when we choose His path and will only punish us as necessary when we veer off course. Furthermore, even when we sin G-d is still yearning to reward us and is ready to do so, as soon as we repent. Dovid Hamelech would reflect and consider how G-d is on our side, rooting for us and longing for our success. It was through this reflection that he was able to devote himself to G-d as he did, and to reach sublime, lofty spiritual heights.

This Medrash is giving us an insight into the inner secrets of the heart of one of the greatest people who ever lived, and his heart looks much like ours. He struggled with passions and chose to focus on reward and punishment to balance those emotions. He cared for himself and sought to be cared for and cherished. It was only after he understood that G-d deeply cares for us to succeed and to bestow blessing upon us that he was able to devote his heart and soul to G-d. Dovid Hamelech's greatness was rooted in the struggles we live with day in and day out. When we seek to appreciate why mitzvos are worthwhile and to see G-d's love for us we are walking in the footsteps of Dovid Hamelech. The study and ongoing reflection are an integral aspect of our service of G-d. When we take the time reflect on these concepts we are on the path to spiritual greatness.

* Rabbi, Am HaTorah Congregation, Bethesda, MD.

What's Your "Shemittah - Sinai" Question?

by Rabbi Moshe Rube*

"What does Shemittah (the Sabbatical year) have to do with Sinai?" said most of my rabbis when confronted with any Torah text that connected elements that seem to have nothing to do with each other.

We build the best Devrei Torah on a solid foundation of shock. When we read a part of Torah that seems totally foreign and chaotic, we search out an answer so the fire that's just been lit does not consume us.

The best paradigm for all questions of this nature is the Shemittah - Sinai question. Our Torah portion of Behar starts the discussion of the Sabbatical year by emphasizing that God spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai. By no other mitzvah does the Torah make a special declaratory statement that God spoke it to Moses at Sinai when we are told about it in the Torah. Not by Kosher. Not by Shabbos. Only by Shemittah does the Torah give this specific formulation. So what does one thing have to do with the other? Two elements. Brought together by the Hand of God. It's winking at us. Inviting us to plumb the depths contained within the connection.

So many approaches have been proffered throughout the ages.

Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra (1092-1164) says that there is no special connection between Shemittah and Sinai. The Torah took a multi page detour into the laws of the Tabernacle and its program after the sin of the Golden Calf. It was more important for the Torah to continue with the story of how the Jews set up and instituted the Mishkan then record everything said at Sinai first. Now that we've finished that, the Torah just tells us here about other laws that were mentioned at Sinai at the time of the giving of the Ten Commandments. For the Ibn Ezra, the Sinai mention is a functional literary device with no discernible connection to Shemittah. This is a fine answer. It's important for the Torah to be beautiful even on the simplest of levels.

Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim Luntschitz (1550-1621), the rabbi in Prague before the Maharal (the Golem creator of legend) sees something else. The Torah highlights Shemittah's connection to Sinai because the practice of Shemittah derives from everything that happened at Sinai. The Shemittah cycle of the land resting every 7 years and an extra year of rest on the 50th year, i.e. the Yovel year, replays the Sinai process. The Jewish nation counted 7 weeks and received the Torah on the 50th day that heralded their spiritual freedom from bondage. So too the Yovel year gave freedom to all those in debt and those working as a servant in another's home to pay off debt. To illustrate the basis of the Shemittah practices, the Torah connects it to Har Sinai.

I thought that we could build on Rabbi Shlomo Luntscitz's approach. Shemittah is the great equalizer. All lands lie fallow. All people don't work. The endless game and competition of the rat race pauses for a full year while we re"jew"venate other aspects of ourselves. This reaches a climax in Yovel, when we forgive all outstanding loans and return ancestral lands to their families. It's a reminder that the Land of Israel belongs to God, and though some may be richer than others, we are all equal on a fundamental human level. This is what also happened at Har Sinai. All of us stood together like one person with one heart to receive the Torah. All Jews. Young, old, smart, not-as-smart, wealthy, poor, leaders and followers. We all stood together and for a brief instant experienced the oneness. God wants the world to be built so we can't always be in that specific spiritual space. But Sinai extends into Shemittah and Yovel providing it's experiential bedrock.

Maybe you liked these observations. Or maybe not. You can approach the Shemittah - Sinai question by not approaching it. What's the big deal about one little reference? If this question does not interest you, that's fine. This might not be a question that lights your fire. But we all need questions that do. If nothing lights our fire and stimulates our curiosity, then our life will be lived in the way of automatons who do not allow ourselves to wonder about what lies beyond.

How do we most efficiently access our potential that we know lives in our souls? Through questions. Only when we are flabbergasted with the incongruity of a matter can we break open a space in our minds where we can present something. The Arizal says this is why we must present the Exodus in the form of questions. "A person prone to shame cannot learn," says Ethics of the Fathers, because he or she refuses to ask questions.

Of all the things you could learn in this world, I suggest choosing the topic whose very existence bothers you to no end. If your Shemittah - Sinai question is "Why do people have such different perspectives on life?" then that means there's a huge space in your mind waiting to gobble up info on this matter. So feed it with psychology and sociology books, discussing with others, respectable Youtube videos, etc.

You may find other Shemittah - Sinai questions on your journey. Such is the way of learning. If you uncover one cavern, more will appear waiting to be filled. Like with the act of eating, learning fills up a hole that if you don't feed it, something inside you can starve. But don't worry, in our Freedom of Information Age, five course knowledge meals surround every corner.

Shabbat Shalom.

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Rav Kook Torah

Behar: The Intrinsic Sanctity of the Land of Israel

The Objection of the Ridbaz

Rabbi Yaakov David Willowski (1845-1913) of Safed, known as the “Ridbaz,” was one of the most vociferous opponents to the heter mechirah — the temporary sale of land in Israel to a non-Jew in order to avoid the restrictions of working the land during the Sabbatical year. More interesting than his Halachic objections to the sale, however, is the philosophical argument that the rabbi of Safed raised.

The stated purpose of the heter, the Ridbaz wrote, is to uphold the mitzvah of *Yishuv Ha'aretz*, settling the Land, by allowing the fledgling agricultural settlements in the Land of Israel to grow and prosper. But if the legal sale is indeed effective, then the Land would lose its sanctity and the special agricultural mitzvot — tithes, the Sabbatical year, and so on — would no longer apply. And if the Land is not holy, there is no longer a mitzvah to settle the Land. Thus the heter in effect undermines the very goal it was designed to support!

To paraphrase the Ridbaz: the whole purpose of our return to Eretz Yisrael is to fulfill its special mitzvot and experience its unique sanctity. If we use loopholes and legal fictions to avoid these mitzvot, we may as well be living in Warsaw or New York!

Rav Kook and the Heter

Despite common belief, Rav Kook was not in fact the author of the heter mechirah. This legal mechanism was first designed for the Sabbatical year of 1889. At that time, Jewish farmers in Eretz Yisrael, whose livelihood depended upon the export of wine and citrus fruits, turned to the leading Halachic authorities in Europe to find a way to avoid the ruin of the fragile industry they were struggling to develop. Were they to let the land lie fallow, the young orchards would suffer greatly, and the export business they had built up would be lost. They also feared that land left fallow could be lost to squatters and thieves. This was particularly problematic due to Ottoman Empire land laws, which allowed ownership of uncultivated land to be challenged by squatters.

In response to this difficult situation, three prominent rabbis met in Vilna and devised the heter mechirah, based on similar legal sales to avoid the prohibitions involved with bechorot (firstborn animals) and chametz on Passover. The heter was approved by famed Halachic authority Rabbi Yitzchak Elchanan Spector. However, many prominent rabbis opposed it, including some of the greatest authorities of the time - and the controversy over the heter mechirah was born.

As rabbi of the town of Jaffa and its surrounding communities, Rav Kook needed to take a position regarding the heter. While still in Europe, he had discussed the issue with his father-in-law (later chief rabbi of Jerusalem), and they both decided against supporting it.

But after coming to Eretz Yisrael and seeing first-hand the great need for the heter, Rav Kook changed his mind and became a staunch supporter of the leniency. Prior to the Sabbatical year of 1910, he penned a Halachic treatise in defense of the heter mechirah, entitled *Shabbat Ha'aretz*.

The Sanctity of the Land

In his remarks defending the heter, Rav Kook responded to the Ridbaz's objection that the heter undermines its own stated goal — supporting the settlement of the Land of Israel — because selling the Land to non-Jews annuls its sanctity and circumvents its special mitzvot.

This argument, Rav Kook explained, is based on the false premise that the special holiness of Eretz Yisrael is limited to *המצוות הتلויות בארץ*, those mitzvot that only apply in the Land. According to this view, once these special mitzvot are no longer binding, there is no longer any holiness to the Land and no mitzvah to settle it.

But this is not the true outlook of the Torah. Instead, we should compare the mitzvah of settling the Land of Israel to the mitzvah of studying Torah. While it is true that Torah study enables one to learn how to properly discharge all mitzvot, one cannot say that the value of Torah study is only as a preparation to fulfilling mitzvot. In fact, there is an intrinsic holiness in

the act of studying Torah. Even when studying subjects which have no current practical application, this study is nonetheless invaluable. As the Sages taught: "One who studies the laws of the Chatat offering is considered as if he offered a Chatat" (Menachot 110a).

The holiness of the Land of Israel is independent of those mitzvot that may be fulfilled while living there. Just the opposite: the primary holiness of the Land is reflected in the mitzvah to settle it, and the obligation of mitzvot ha-teluyot ba'aretz is an expression of this special holiness. As the Sages taught, merely living in Eretz Yisrael is equal to all the mitzvot in the Torah - and this 'equation' includes those mitzvot that only apply in the Land.

Equal to all the Mitzvot

This statement about the overriding value of living in the Land appears in the Sifri (sec. 80) in the context of the following story:

"Rabbi Elazar ben Shamua and Rabbi Yochanan HaSandlar set out to travel to Nitzivim [in Babylonia] in order to study Torah from Rabbi Yehudah ben Beteira. But when they arrived in Sidon, they remembered the Land of Israel. They lifted their eyes, and their tears flowed. They rent their garments and quoted the verse: "You will expel them and dwell in their land" (Deut. 12:29). Then they returned home and declared: Dwelling in the Land of Israel is equivalent to all of the mitzvot of the Torah."

These scholars had pure motives for leaving Eretz Yisrael. They sought to learn Torah from one of the leading sages of the generation. Yet in the end, they decided that the mitzvah of dwelling in the Land takes precedence. They placed greater value on living in Eretz Yisrael, even at a time when the country suffered from foreign rule and economic hardship. The mitzvah of living in the Land was still in force, even though the Sages of that time found legal loopholes — similar to the heter mechirah — to lighten the financial burden of certain mitzvot (such as Hillel's pruzbul, and avoiding tithes by bringing produce into the house by way of the courtyard or the roof (see Berachot 35b)).

Why did these scholars quote this particular verse, "You will expel them and dwell in their land"? Apparently, they noted that the word 'their' is extraneous; it could have just read "and dwell in the land." They deduced from here that even when the Land of Israel has not been fully released from the control of foreign nations — even when it was still considered "their land," the land of the Canaanite nations, and many of the land-dependent mitzvot were not yet incumbent — we are nonetheless obligated to dwell in the Land.

This lesson was also valid during the time of Rabbi Elazar ben Shamua and Rabbi Yochanan HaSandlar. Even after the destruction of the Temple, even in a time of foreign rule, the mitzvah of dwelling in the Land is still equal to all the mitzvot.

The author of Kaftor VaFerach (Rabbi Ishtori HaParchi, 1280-1355) similarly wrote that the sanctity of the Land of Israel is independent of the mitzvot ha-teluyot ba'aretz. His proof: why did Jacob, Joseph, and Moses all seek to be buried in the Land when it had not yet been conquered and sanctified?

In summary, Rav Kook concluded, it is not only possible to be lenient in our days, it is proper to do so, in order to encourage settlement of the Land. Furthermore, the heter does not cancel all aspects of the Sabbatical year. It only permits those types of agricultural labor that are rabbinically prohibited. Thus the Sabbatical year is not completely uprooted. This heter, Rav Kook explained, is similar to the permission — and obligation — to desecrate the Sabbath in life-threatening situations. As the Sages wrote: "The Torah teaches that we should desecrate a single Sabbath for one whose life is in danger, so that he will be able to keep many future Sabbaths" (Yoma 85b). Similarly, by permitting certain agricultural work now, we will enable the full observance of the Sabbatical year in the future.

(Sapphire from the Land of Israel. Adapted from the Preface to Shabbat Ha'aretz, pp. 61-63.)

http://www.ravkooktorah.org/BEHAR_67.htm

Minority Rights (Behar & Bechukotai 5777)

By Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l, Former Chief Rabbi of the U.K.*

One of the most striking features of the Torah is its emphasis on love of, and vigilance toward, the ger, the stranger:

Do not oppress a stranger; you yourselves know how it feels to be strangers, because you were strangers in Egypt. (Ex. 23:9)

For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the stranger residing among you, giving them food and clothing. You are to love those who are strangers, for you yourselves were strangers in Egypt. (Deut 10:17-19)

The Sages went so far as to say that the Torah commands us in only one place to love our neighbour but thirty-six times to love the stranger. (Baba Metsia 59b).

What is the definition of a stranger? Clearly the reference is to one who is not Jewish by birth. It could mean one of the original inhabitants of the land of Canaan. It could mean one of the “mixed multitude” who left Egypt with the Israelites. It might mean a foreigner who has entered the land seeking safety or a livelihood.

Whatever the case, immense significance is attached to the way the Israelites treat the stranger. This was what they were meant to have learned from their own experience of exile and suffering in Egypt. They were strangers. They were oppressed. Therefore they knew “how it feels to be a stranger.” They were not to inflict on others what was once inflicted on them.

The Sages held that the word ger might mean one of two things. One was a ger tzedek, a convert to Judaism who had accepted all its commands and obligations. The other was the ger toshav, the “resident alien”, who had not adopted the religion of Israel but who lived in the land of Israel. Behar spells out the rights of such a person. Specifically:

If any of your fellow Israelites become poor and are unable to support themselves among you, help them as you would a resident alien, so they can continue to live among you. (Lev. 25:35)

There is, in other words, an obligation to support and sustain a resident alien. Not only does he or she have the right to live in the Holy Land, but they have the right to share in its welfare provisions. Recall that this is a very ancient law indeed, long before the Sages formulated such principles as “the ways of peace”, obligating Jews to extend charity and care to non-Jews as well as Jews.

What then was a ger toshav? There are three views in the Talmud. According to Rabbi Meir it was anyone who took it upon himself not to worship idols. According to the Sages, it was anyone who committed himself to keeping the seven Noahide commandments. A third view, more stringent, held that it was someone who had undertaken to keep all the commands of the Torah except one, the prohibition of meat not ritually slaughtered (Avodah Zarah 64b). The law follows the Sages. A ger toshav is thus a non-Jew living in Israel who accepts the Noahide laws binding on everyone.

Ger toshav legislation is thus one of the earliest extant forms of minority rights. According to the Rambam there is an obligation on Jews in Israel to establish courts of law for resident aliens to allow them to settle their own disputes – or disputes they have with Jews – according to the provisions of Noahide law. The Rambam adds: “One should act towards resident aliens with the same respect and loving kindness as one would to a fellow Jew” (Hilkhot Melachim 10:12).

The difference between this and later “ways of peace” legislation is that the ways of peace apply to non-Jews without regard to their beliefs or religious practice. They date from a time when Jews were a minority in a predominantly non-Jewish, non-monotheistic environment. “Ways of peace” are essentially pragmatic rules of what today we would call good community relations and active citizenship in a multi-ethnic and multicultural society. Ger toshav legislation cuts deeper. It is based not on pragmatism but religious principle. According to the Torah you don’t have to be Jewish in a Jewish society and Jewish land to have many of the rights of citizenship. You simply have to be moral.

One biblical vignette portrays this with enormous power. King David has fallen in love and had an adulterous relationship with Batsheva, wife of a ger toshav, Uriah the Hittite. She becomes pregnant. Uriah meanwhile has been away from home as a soldier in Israel's army. David, afraid that Uriah will come home, see that his wife is pregnant, realise that she has committed adultery, and come to discover that the king is the guilty party, has Uriah brought home. His pretext is that he wants to know how the battle is going. He then tells Uriah to go home and sleep with his wife before returning, so that he will later assume that he himself is the father of the child. The plan fails. This is what happens:

When Uriah came to him, David asked him how Joab was, how the soldiers were and how the war was going. Then David said to Uriah, "Go down to your house and wash your feet." So Uriah left the palace, and a gift from the king was sent after him. But Uriah slept at the entrance to the palace with all his master's servants and did not go down to his house.

David was told, "Uriah did not go home." So he asked Uriah, "Haven't you just come from a military campaign? Why didn't you go home?"

Uriah said to David, "The Ark and Israel and Judah are staying in tents, and my commander Joab and my lord's men are camped in the open country. How could I go to my house to eat and drink and make love to my wife? As surely as you live, I will not do such a thing!" (2 Samuel 11:6-11)

Uriah's utter loyalty to the Jewish people, despite the fact that he is not himself Jewish, is contrasted with King David, who has stayed in Jerusalem, not been with the army, and instead had a relationship with another man's wife. The fact that Tanakh can tell such a story in which a resident alien is the moral hero, and David, Israel's greatest king, the wrongdoer, tells us much about the morality of Judaism.

Minority rights are the best test of a free and just society. Since the days of Moses they have been central to the vision of the kind of society God wants us to create in the land of Israel. How vital, therefore, that we take them seriously today.

* Note: because Likutei Torah and the Internet Parsha Sheet, both attached by E-mail, normally include the two most recent Devrei Torah by Rabbi Sacks, I have selected an earlier Dvar. See <https://rabbisacks.org/minority-rights-behar-bechukotai-5777/>

Behukkotai's Challenge to Us

by Matthew Berkowitz
Director of Israel Programs, JTS © 2016

Blessing comes to fruition through journey. The journey may be as simple as lighting Shabbat candles or it may be as complicated as leaving the comfort of one's home to discover new worlds. Either way, that which is familiar is left behind, and a new reality challenges one to grow and thus to earn God's blessing. Such is the challenge of this week's parashah.

Parashat Behukkotai, which forms the epilogue of Vayikra (Leviticus), opens with a promise of God's blessing and the imagery of a journey: "If you walk in My laws" [im behukkotai telekh], says God to the Jewish people, "and faithfully observe my commandments, I will grant your rains in their seasons, so that the earth shall yield its produce" (Lev. 26:3-4). The theme and language of this verse evoke God's call to an individual, Abraham, in Genesis 12. There, God also makes a promise of blessing, and Abraham, responding to God's command, lekh lekha, leaves his homeland. When one remains in the same physical place, the promise of blessing remains just a promise. Physical movement is intimately connected to spiritual movement. Indeed, Abraham must journey from his land, his birthplace, and his father's house to realize the promise of God's blessing.

In explaining the opening verse of our parashah, Rashi queries:

Could it be that this verse refers solely to upholding God's commandments? This, one can understand from the second clause, "and faithfully observe My commandments." But what is the meaning of the first clause, "if you walk in My laws"? This means that one should labor, even painfully, in Torah.

For Rashi, then, the journey alluded to by our verse resembles the physical journey of Abraham. This journey of the mind and soul entails the same investment of self and departure from routine. One sacrifices time and other activities to become worthy of the blessing of learning. Mere obedience to the commandments is inadequate; one must invest oneself in discovering their deeper essence. The process of learning then becomes an indispensable part of observance. Precisely through learning Torah, one leaves the familiar and becomes challenged in ways previously not conceived of. It is no wonder that Judaism refers to its system of law as halakhah—"the way" or "path." Through physical and spiritual journeys, we become worthy not only of God's blessing but also God's closeness.

The Hebrew word *lalekhet*, "to walk" or "to embark on a journey," becomes a motif of the parashah. As a consequence of walking in God's ways, we are given a powerful promise by God: "I will walk about in your midst" (Lev. 26:12). Rashi explains that God's presence will be felt so strongly that it will be as if God is literally dwelling among us. Responding to the human willingness to embark on a journey, God promises to take action. In the third appearance of walking in our parashah, God declares, "I made you walk upright" (Lev. 26:13). Here, *lalekhet* refers to God's freeing the Israelites from Egypt and guiding them on a path to Torah and the Land of Israel. For it is God-given freedom—along with Torah—that allows one to walk upright. But how do we walk together with God?

A fascinating midrash weaves together our walking and God's walking:

Rav Hama, son of Rav Hanina, said: "After the Lord your God shall you walk" [Deut. 13:5]. But is it possible to walk right behind the Presence?! . . . What the verse means is that you are to follow the ways of the Holy One. He clothed the naked: "The Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skin and clothed them" [Gen. 3:21]. So should you clothe the naked. The Holy One visited the sick: "The Lord appeared unto him in the terebinths of Mamre" [Gen. 18:1]. So should you visit the sick. The Holy One buried the dead: "He buried Moses in the valley" [Deut. 34:6]. So should you bury the dead. The Holy One comforted mourners: "And it came to pass after the death of Abraham that God bestowed blessing upon Isaac his son" [Gen. 25:11]. So should you comfort mourners. (BT Sotah 14a)

This midrash gives us beautiful insight into what it truly means to walk in the way of God. Observing mitzvot such as clothing the naked, visiting the sick, burying the dead, comforting mourners, and learning Torah are some of the opportunities we are given to walk in God's ways. Yet, just as God gives us the ability to draw near through God's ways (halakhah), our acts of lovingkindness have the ability to draw God into our midst.

As we approach Shavuot, one can think of no better heroine for undertaking such a journey than the character of Ruth. Ruth declares to her distraught mother-in-law, Naomi, "For wherever you go, I will go [ki el asher tilkhi elekh]" (Ruth 1:16). Ruth's absolute selflessness and loyalty in the path she chooses are reflected by the passion and awareness underlying these words. Her declaration is personal, in the singular first person, I will go.

Such is the challenge of Parashat Behukkotai. Like Ruth, we must be willing to embrace the halakhah, the way that God sets before us—following God and walking with God. And may each of us, like Ruth, have the power to declare, "I will go," and to begin our journey

Silence: A Response to Tragedy

By Chaya Mushka & Nechama Krimmer

A few weeks ago, we read parshas Shemini, which recalled the dedication of the Mishkan and the deaths of Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu, who were consumed by fire in the Mishkan on the very day of the dedication.

In the Midrash, it states that there are seventy faces or facets to the Torah, seventy ways the Torah can be interpreted. It may be surprising that often these interpretations contradict each other. Such is the case with Nadav and Avihu.

Some commentators say that their deaths were a punishment for entering the Holy of Holies in the improper time, and offering a "strange fire" which Hashem did not command. Others interpret that the brother's were brought home to Hashem through a "Divine Kiss" as a reward for their zealousness and pure intentions to serve Hashem.

Either way this event is interpreted, Aaron's response was the same. In the Jewish tradition of "two Jews, three opinions" and the struggling with, and questioning of G d, as a matter of course, Aaron's response was unusual. The verse says "And Aaron remained silent" (Leviticus 10:3).

Silence. Not a particularly Jewish response at first glance.

Aaron remained silent because of the juxtaposition of the joyousness and excitement of the long awaited holy dedication of the Mishkan with the sudden and unexpected death of his sons. How could such a joyous and holy time be marred by such a tragedy?

His silence indicates that no amount of questioning or explanations of why his sons may have been called to Hashem on this holy day would comfort him. He remained silent in the face of what is not understandable from our finite, human perspective. It is as if we are looking at the knots and strings and imperfections on the back of a beautiful tapestry. Hashem creates and sees the beauty of the tapestry yet we are left looking at what almost amounts to a chaotic web of fabric.

In the face of tragedy, sometimes silence is the only reaction that makes sense for our emunah, our faith, and our bitchon, trust in G d, to remain intact.

This week, we are all reeling from the events of Lag B'Omer in Meron, a situation similar to the dedication of the Mishkan, where joyous dancing, inspiration, and excitement turned to tragedy and mourning in the blink of the eye.

Many thousands of Jews from all over the world were gathered at the holy site of the burial place of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai in honor of his yahrzeit. On his deathbed, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai asked his disciples to fulfill one request: To keep the day of Lag B'Omer a day of joy and celebration, even after his passing.

Ever since then, around two thousand years ago, there has been a yearly celebration of life in his honor by his burial ground in Meron. As we know, this year, right before the annual lighting of the bonfire, there was a horrible accident which caused the death of 45 individuals.

When people die before their time, they are often called "Kedoshim" or Holy Ones. Their souls, like those of Aaron's sons Nadav and Avihu, were taken before their time. For a reason we can't understand, G d wanted them closer to Him.

When a tragedy like that in Meron occurs, although we lack understanding, we can turn to Aaron as a model, considering silence as a response.

Sometimes there are no suitable answers, and that's okay. As the Tanya, the Magnum Opus of the first Rebbe of Chabad writes, "G d's ways are not the ways of man". G d does not run on human intellect; He acts with Divine Knowledge. We must grieve those we lost, pray for those who are injured to have a speedy and complete recovery, comfort those who lost loved ones, and do all we can to make peace with G d's will.

There is a famous concept of exile being compared to pregnancy, with the ultimate "birth" being the revelation of Moshiach and the Messianic Era. The Lubavitcher Rebbe stated many times that we are in the final stages of exile. The tragedy, pain, and loss that we currently experience are equivalent to the "Birthpangs of Moshiach".

May our moments of pain lead to lifetimes of growth and service to Hashem in honor of those who passed, and may we be able to be reunited with all of our deceased loved ones in the near future with the Coming of Moshiach. May it be right now!

https://www.chabaddayton.com/templates/articlecco_cdo/aid/5109959/jewish/Kedoshim.htm

Finding the Hidden Sweetness

By Menachem Feldman * © Chabad 2021

At the conclusion of the third book of the Five Books of Moses, the Torah lays out the blessings we'll receive if we keep the mitzvahs:

*If you follow My statutes and observe My commandments and perform them, I will give your rains in their time, the Land will yield its produce, and the tree of the field will give forth its fruit.*¹

The Torah then continues on to administer rebuke, describing the painful and tragic exile that will occur if we abandon the Torah.

Chassidic philosophy teaches that all negativity and darkness within the world is a shell that covers and conceals the spark of good that lies at the core of the experience or phenomenon. If this is true about worldly matters, it is certainly true about every verse in the Torah. Thus, the rebuke, which literally describes terrible curses, contains a deeper hidden meaning. Beneath the surface, the curses actually contain hidden blessings, blessings so intense that the only way they can descend to this earth, unobstructed by the forces of judgement, is under the guise of a curse.

One example for this principle is the following verse:

*Each man will stumble over his brother, [fleeing] as if from the sword, but without a pursuer. You will not be able to stand up against your enemies.*²

Rashi addresses the words “Each man will stumble over his brother” and explains:

One person will stumble because of someone else's sin, because all Jews are guarantors for one another.

Rashi is telling us that in addition to the simple reading—that we will stumble on our brother in the physical sense—there is a deeper meaning to the curse: we will be responsible and accountable for the sins of each other, because we are guarantors for each other.

The Hebrew word for “guarantor,” *ערב* (arev), has two additional meanings: “mixed” and “pleasant.” These three seemingly unrelated words, “guarantor,” “mixed” and “pleasant,” are, upon deeper analysis, deeply connected. Why is every Jew a “guarantor,” responsible for all other Jewish people? Because we are integrated—“mixed”—with each other. Just as the different parts of a body make up one organism, the wellbeing of one limb affecting all others, so, too, all Jews are specific parts of one collective soul and are integrated with each other.

The exile is horrific, but there is a hidden blessing. While living tranquilly in Israel, we didn't necessarily appreciate how interdependent and connected we are. Yet, under the tragic circumstance of the exile, we realize that we are guarantors for each other because we are part of one whole. This recognition that we are truly one is “pleasant”—it is the blessing that is contained within the curse. And it is this recognition that will ultimately serve as the spiritual healing of the exile, allowing us to experience the sweetness of the return to our homeland.³

FOOTNOTES:

1. Leviticus 26:3-4.
2. Leviticus 26:37.
3. Adapted from the teachings of the Rebbe, *Igrot Kodesh*, vol. 2, p. 346.

* Director of the Lifelong Learning Department, Chabad of Greenwich, CT.

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/4738383/jewish/Finding-the-Hidden-Sweetness.htm

Bechukotai: Honoring our Children

by Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky

“If a man consecrates part of his house to be holy to G-d.... If a man consecrates his inherited field to G-d”
(Leviticus 27:14-21)

The Torah instructs the Jewish people in the ways one may donate real estate or land to charity in service of the Temple. Now, why would the Torah allow us to give to the Temple possessions that G-d has granted us? Isn't this being ungrateful to G-d, or perhaps shirking the responsibility that He has placed upon us by putting these resources at our disposal?

The answer is that all our possessions really belong to G-d. He has just entrusted them to our care during our lifetimes in order that we refine them, and in order that by refining them, we refine ourselves and the world. It follows that we have no inherent “rights” to what we possess; they are not ours to abuse or waste at our discretion.

If this is true of our external possessions, it is true all the more of ourselves: our unique talents and our physical bodies. We must take proper care of them and direct them toward positive, holy ends; they are not ours to abuse or misuse. And if this is true of ourselves, it is true all the more of those whom we value even more than ourselves: our children. Our children belong to G-d, who has entrusted them to our care in order for us to raise them to be good, upright, and holy. It is our nature as parents to spare no effort or expense in pursuit of what is best for our children.

Our highest priority should be to provide them with a Jewish education, based on the Torah's eternal values. This is the best way both to ensure their truest, most lasting happiness, and to ensure that they grow into the kind of people that G-d wants them to be.

– From *Daily Wisdom*

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5781 B'H

Covenant and Conversation

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l

"We the People"

In the final parsha of the book of Leviticus, in the midst of one of the most searing curses ever to have been uttered to a nation by way of warning, the Sages found a fleck of pure gold.

Moses is describing a nation in flight from its enemies: Just the sound of a windblown leaf will put them to running, and they will run scared as if running from a sword! They will fall even when no one is chasing them! They will stumble over each other as they would before a sword, even though no one is chasing them! You will have no power to stand before your enemies. (Lev. 26:36-37)

There is, on the face of it, nothing positive in this nightmare scenario. But the Sages said: "They will stumble over each other" – read this as 'stumble because of one another': this teaches that all Israelites are responsible for one another." [1]

This is an exceedingly strange passage. Why locate this principle here? Surely the whole Torah testifies to it. When Moses speaks about the reward for keeping the covenant, he does so collectively. There will be rain in its due season. You will have good harvests. And so on. The principle that Jews have collective responsibility, that their fate and destiny are interlinked – this could have been found in the Torah's blessings. Why search for it among its curses?

The answer is that there is nothing unique to Judaism in the idea that we are all implicated in one another's fate. That is true of the citizens of any nation. If the economy is booming, most people benefit. If there is law and order, if people are polite to one another and come to one another's aid, there is a general sense of well-being. Conversely, if there is a recession many people suffer. If a neighbourhood is scarred by crime, people are scared to walk the streets. We are social animals, and our horizons of possibility are shaped by the society and culture within which we live.

All of this applied to the Israelites so long as they were a nation in their own land. But what about when they suffered defeat and exile and were eventually scattered across the earth? They no longer had any of the conventional lineaments of a nation. They were not living in the same place. They did not share the same language of everyday life. While Rashi and his

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family were living in Christian northern Europe and speaking French, Maimonides was living in Muslim Egypt, speaking and writing Arabic.

Nor did Jews share a fate. While those in northern Europe were suffering persecution and massacres during the Crusades, the Jews of Spain were enjoying their Golden Age. While the Jews of Spain were being expelled and compelled to wander round the world as refugees, the Jews of Poland were enjoying a rare sunlit moment of tolerance. In what sense therefore were they responsible for one another? What constituted them as a nation? How could they – as the author of Psalm 137 put it – sing God's song in a strange land?

There are only two texts in the Torah that speak to this situation, namely the two sections of curses, one in our parsha, and the other in Deuteronomy in the parsha of Ki Tavo. Only these speak about a time when Israel is exiled and dispersed, scattered, as Moses later put it, "to the most distant lands under heaven."

(Deut. 30:4) There are three major differences between the two curses, however. The passage in Leviticus is in the plural, that in Deuteronomy in the singular. The curses in Leviticus are the words of God; in Deuteronomy they are the words of Moses. And the curses in Deuteronomy do not end in hope. They conclude in a vision of unrelieved bleakness: You will try to sell yourselves as slaves—both male and female—but no one will want to buy you. (Deut. 28:68)

Those in Leviticus end with a momentous hope: But despite all that, when they are in enemy territory, I will not reject them or despise them to the point of totally destroying them, breaking my covenant with them by doing so, because I am the Lord their God. But for their sake I will remember the covenant with the first generation, the ones I brought out of Egypt's land in the sight of all the nations, in order to be their God; I am the Lord. (Lev. 26:44-45)

Even in their worst hours, according to Leviticus, the Jewish people will never be destroyed. Nor will God reject them. The covenant will still be in force and its terms still operative. This means that Jews will always be linked to one another by the same ties of mutual responsibility that they have in the land – for it was the covenant that formed them as a nation and bound them to one another even as it bound them to God. Therefore, even when falling over one another in flight from their

enemies they will still be bound by mutual responsibility. They will still be a nation with a shared fate and destiny.

This is a rare and special idea, and it is the distinctive feature of the politics of covenant. Covenant became a major element in the politics of the West following the Reformation. It shaped political discourse in Switzerland, Holland, Scotland and England in the seventeenth century as the invention of printing and the spread of literacy made people familiar for the first time with the Hebrew Bible (the "Old Testament" as they called it). There they learned that tyrants are to be resisted, that immoral orders should not be obeyed, and that kings did not rule by divine right but only by the consent of the governed.

The same convictions were held by the Pilgrim Fathers as they set sail for America, but with one difference, that they did not disappear over time as they did in Europe. The result is that the United States is the only country today whose political discourse is framed by the idea of covenant.

Two textbook examples of this are Lyndon Baines Johnson's Inaugural of 1965, and Barack Obama's Second Inaugural of 2013. Both use the biblical device of significant repetition (always an odd number, three or five or seven). Johnson invokes the idea of covenant five times. Obama five times begins paragraphs with a key phrase of covenant politics – words never used by British politicians – namely, "We the people."

In covenant societies it is the people as a whole who are responsible, under God, for the fate of the nation. As Johnson put it, "Our fate as a nation and our future as a people rest not upon one citizen but upon all citizens." [2] In Obama's words, "You and I, as citizens, have the power to set this country's course." [3] That is the essence of covenant: we are all in this together. There is no division of the nation into rulers and ruled. We are conjointly responsible, under the sovereignty of God, for one another.

This is not open-ended responsibility. There is nothing in Judaism like the tendentious and ultimately meaningless idea set out by Jean-Paul Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* of 'absolute responsibility': "The essential consequence of our earlier remarks is that man,

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being condemned to be free, carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulders, he is responsible for the world and for himself as a way of being.”[4]

In Judaism we are responsible only for what we could have prevented but did not. This is how the Talmud puts it:

Whoever can forbid their household [to commit a sin] but does not, is seized for [the sins of] their household. [If they can forbid] their fellow citizens [but do not] they are seized for [the sins of] their fellow citizens. [If they can forbid] the whole world [but do not] they are seized for [the sins of] the whole world. (Shabbat 54b)

This remains a powerful idea and an unusual one. What made it unique to Judaism is that it applied to a people scattered throughout the world united only by the terms of the covenant our ancestors made with God at Mount Sinai. But it continues, as I have often argued, to drive American political discourse likewise even today. It tells us that we are all equal citizens in the republic of faith and that responsibility cannot be delegated away to governments or presidents but belongs inalienably to each of us. We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers.

That is what I mean by the strange, seemingly self-contradictory idea I have argued throughout this series of essays: that we are all called on to be leaders. One may fairly protest: if everyone is a leader, then no one is. If everyone leads, who is left to follow? The concept that resolves the contradiction is covenant.

Leadership is the acceptance of responsibility. Therefore if we are all responsible for one another, we are all called on to be leaders, each within our sphere of influence – be it within the family, the community, the organisation or a larger grouping still.

This can sometimes make an enormous difference. In late summer of 1999 I was in Pristina making a BBC television programme about the aftermath of the Kosovo campaign. I interviewed General Sir Michael Jackson, then head of the NATO forces. To my surprise, he thanked me for what “my people” had done. The Jewish community had taken charge of the city’s 23 primary schools. It was, he said, the most valuable contribution to the city’s welfare. When 800,000 people have become refugees and then return home, the most reassuring sign that life has returned to normal is that the schools open on time. That, he said, we owe to the Jewish people.

Meeting the head of the Jewish community later that day, I asked him how many Jews were there currently living in Pristina. His answer? Eleven. The story, as I later uncovered it, was this. In the early days of the conflict, Israel had, along with other international aid agencies, sent a field medical team to work

with the Kosovar Albanian refugees. They noticed that while other agencies were concentrating on the adults, there was no one working with the children. Traumatised by the conflict and far from home, the children were lost and unfocused with no systems of support in place to help them.

The team phoned back to Israel and asked for young volunteers. Every youth movement in Israel, from the most secular to the most religious, immediately formed volunteer teams of youth leaders, sent out to Kosovo for two-week intervals. They worked with the children, organising summer camps, sports competitions, drama and music events and whatever else they could think of to make their temporary exile less traumatic. The Kosovo Albanians were Muslims, and for many of the Israeli youth workers it was their first contact and friendship with children of another faith.

Their effort won high praise from UNICEF, the United Nations' children's organisation. It was in the wake of this that “the Jewish people” – Israel, the American-based “Joint” and other Jewish agencies – were asked to supervise the return to normality of the school system in Pristina.

That episode taught me the power of chessed, acts of kindness when extended across the borders of faith. It also showed the practical difference collective responsibility makes to the scope of the Jewish deed. World Jewry is small, but the invisible strands of mutual responsibility mean that even the smallest Jewish community can turn to the Jewish people worldwide for help, and they can achieve things that would be exceptional for a nation many times its size.

When the Jewish people join hands in collective responsibility, they become a formidable force for good.

[1] Sifra ad loc., Sanhedrin 27b, Shavuot 39a.

[2] Lyndon B. Johnson, Inaugural Address (United States Capitol, January 20, 1965).

[3] Barack Obama, Second Inaugural Address (United States Capitol, January 21, 2013).

[4] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes, New York, Washington Square Press, 1966, 707.

Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

These words were written before the unbearable tragedy in Meron. Rabbi Riskin hopes to address the theological understanding of what happened after the Shlosim. Our hearts go out to all that mourn; may the Almighty Comforter bring healing to their souls.

“I am the Lord your God who brought you forth from the land of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan to be your God.” (Lev 25:38)

Citing the verse above from this week's Torah reading, our Sages make the striking declaration that only one who lives in the Land

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of Israel has a God, while one living outside the Land of Israel is comparable to someone without a God [Babylonian Talmud, Ketubot 110b].

Rashi, in his commentary, offers a slightly different formulation: “Whoever lives in the Land of Israel, I am God to him; whoever goes out of Israel is as one who serves idols.” Here, too, the text equates the exile (or Diaspora) with idolatry, but the transgression of idolatry is specifically assigned to someone who lived in Israel and left, rather than on one who was born in the Diaspora and remained there.

Nevertheless, how are we to understand that to have or not to have a God depends on the stamp in your passport? Do people outside of Israel not also believe in God? Is God only to be found in Israel?

Rabbi Yaakov Yehoshua Falk, best known by the name of his Talmudic commentary *Penei Yehoshua*, suggests that the Land of Israel is qualitatively different from any other land in the world in that what happens to the Jewish People within it is a direct result of Divine activity and intervention. Elsewhere, the major influence comes from God's messengers, so to speak, such as the natural forces of sun, wind, rain and rivers, the stars of the zodiac, and the astrological movements of the heavens. In Israel, God Himself directs the destiny of its inhabitants.

Rabbi Shlomo Efraim Luntchitz, author of *Kli Yakar*, notes that a person could imagine that after allowing the land to lie fallow during the Sabbatical year—and in the event of the Jubilee year, the land would lie fallow for two whole years—the Jews would not have enough to eat during the following year. The fact that they did, demonstrated to them—as well as to the rest of the world—that Israel and her people were directly guided by the Divine, and not by the usual laws of nature, climate and agriculture.

Rabbi Yitzhak Arama, in his Biblical commentary *Akedat Yitzhak*, sees in the Sabbatical-Jubilee cycle an allegory to ultimate world redemption: six years of work and one year of rest are intended to invoke the messianic era that will begin at the end of the sixth millennium when the world as we know it, and the work we do in it, will also come to a halt. At that time, one thousand years of the Sabbath, or the messianic millennium, will commence.

These unique years, as well as ultimate salvation, are inextricably bound up with the Land of Israel, both in terms of the fact that they are laws that apply exclusively to the Holy Land and that all our prophets insist that the acceptance of ethical monotheism and peaceful harmony by all nations of the world will be the result of Torah emanating from Jerusalem against the backdrop of a secure Israel.

I would like to add a more prosaic view to these fascinating interpretations. The Biblical phrase, “a Sabbath unto God” with regard to the Sabbatical year summarizes exactly how our land is different from all other lands: Jews in all lands are commanded to keep the Sabbath, but there is only one place in the world where even the land must keep the Sabbath (six years of work and one of rest)—here in Israel!

The significance of the land keeping the Sabbath is that in the very essence of Israel’s soil lies an expression of the Divine will. In Israel, even the land is literally commanded to obey God’s laws! God thereby becomes intimately involved in the very soil of the Land of Israel, something which does not happen anywhere else.

I would also suggest that every other country in the world distinguishes the religious from the civic, the ritual from the cultural. Only in Israel does there exist an opportunity for the Jew to express his culture and the culture of his environment in religious and Godly terms. Only in Israel can the Jew lead a life not of synthesis but of wholeness, not as a Jew at home and a cultural, national gentleman in the marketplace, but as an indivisible child of God and descendant of Abraham and Sarah. Here we have a unique opportunity to express our spiritual ideals in Mahane Yehuda as well as in the synagogue, in the theater as well as in the study hall.

This sets the stage for a most profound vision of the Sabbatical and Jubilee years: when the values of the Torah permeate both sacred and mundane, then all forms of slavery can be obliterated, financial hardships resolved, and familial homesteads restored. Only in Israel do we have the potential to fully experience God both in the ritual and in the social, political and economic aspects of our lives. Only in Israel do we have the potential of taking our every step in the presence of the Divine.

Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Yovel Is About Going Back to the Source
In Parshas Behar, following the laws of the Sabbatical year, the Torah says, “You shall count for yourself seven Sabbaths of years, seven years seven times; and the days of the seven Sabbaths of years shall be for you forty-nine years.” [Vayikra 25:8] This introduces the laws of the Jubilee (Yovel) year, which are associated with the laws of the Sabbatical (Shmitah) years. Following seven cycles of seven years – on the fiftieth year – a very interesting thing happens. If someone sells his family plot in the Land of Israel, the purchaser is only entitled to keep it until the Yovel year. At Yovel, all family-inherited property returns to the original family who had owned it prior to the sale. Furthermore, even a Hebrew slave who was indentured past his original six-year servitude – which the Torah calls “and he is a

slave ‘forever’ (l’olam)” – goes free on the Yovel year.

The pasuk then says, “You shall sound a broken blast on the shofar, in the seventh month, on the tenth of the month; on Yom Kippur you shall sound the shofar throughout your land.” [Vayikra 25:9]. The Yovel year is announced with the blowing of the shofar. Even though, strictly speaking, the year begins on Tishrei 1 (Rosh HaShannah), regarding Yovel, the Yovel laws take effect on Yom Kippur of the fiftieth year.

Now we all know that the tenth day of the month of Tishrei is Yom Kippur. Nevertheless, the previously-cited pasuk redundantly identifies the start of the Yovel year both by saying “in the seventh month, on the tenth of the month” and by saying “on Yom Kippur.” Rashi on that pasuk questions this redundancy. Rashi answers that this teaches that the blowing of the Shofar for Yovel overrides any associated prohibition of Shabbos or Yom Kippur.

The Maharal, however, asks a very interesting question. If someone listens carefully to the words of the pasuk, the first identifier mentioned is “the seventh month, on the tenth of the month.” Only subsequently does it add “on Yom Kippur.” Now, let us ask – which of the two identifiers are extra? It would seem that “Yom Kippur,” which is the second mentioned identifier is the extra one. Yet, this is not how Rashi articulates his question. Rashi says “From the fact that the pasuk mentions Yom Kippur, do I not understand that we are speaking of the tenth day of the seventh month?” It should be the other way around! The Maharal asks that Rashi should have phrased the question in the reverse – “From the fact that the pasuk states the tenth day of the seventh month, do I not know that this is Yom Kippur?”

Maharal gives two answers. We will only concentrate on the Maharal’s second answer, in which he says a beautiful thought.

The Maharal says it is no coincidence that Yovel is related to Yom Kippur. Yovel is not triggered by Rosh HaShannah of the fiftieth year, or Succos of the fiftieth year, or Pesach of the fiftieth year. It is specifically Yom Kippur of the fiftieth year. The Maharal says there is something interrelated between Yom Kippur and Yovel. The connection is thematic. Yovel is all about going back to the source. Things return to the original configuration that they are supposed to be in. The slave who sold himself beyond the specified six-year term, goes free. He goes back to his family. He goes back to where he belongs. The field that was in someone’s family for generations but had to be sold out of desperation because of poverty – now that field comes back to where it belongs.

“Everyone who understands the depths of the matter realizes that Yom Kippur and Yovel

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teach one and the same lesson. Yovel marks the return of everything to its original status. And so too, on Yom Kippur, everyone returns to his original status (of presumed innocence).”

Yes, we may have strayed during the course of the year. We all stray. But Yom Kippur, we go back to the Source. We go back to the Ribono shel Olam. We go back to our pristine relationship with Him. That is why Rashi emphasizes the primary role of Yom Kippur in setting the date of Yovel: “From the fact that it mentions Yom Kippur, would I not realize that we are speaking about the tenth of the seventh month?” Even though it might be mentioned second in the pasuk, it needs to be treated as the primary factor in the setting of the Yovel year because Yovel and Yom Kippur are two sides of the same coin.

Dvar Torah

Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

Do you know a four lettered Hebrew word comprised of the same four letters? The answer is וְוָוָו spelling the word ‘U’vavo’ meaning, ‘and his hook’. I doubt there is a phenomenon of this sort in any other language and I doubt that there is a letter as significant and powerful as the ‘ו’ in any other language.

Let’s look at an example in Parashat Bechakotai. The Torah presents us with the tochacha in which we’re told, God forbid, the time could come when the people of Israel, dispersed amongst the nations, would suffer immeasurably. Hashem then gives us a promise וְזָרַתִּי אֶת בְּרִיתִי יְעַקֹּב וְזָרַתִּי אֶת יְהוָה I remember my covenant with Jacob – meaning, God tells us – the Jewish people will live on forever.

Rashi highlights the fact that the name ‘Ya’akov’ in this verse, is spelled with a ‘ו’. It’s one of only five occasions in the whole of the bible in which Ya’akov has a ‘ו’. He points out that this matches the five occasions on which Eliyahu the prophet is missing a ‘ו’ at the end of his name.

Rashi tells us that Ya’akov took the ‘ו’s from Eliyahu as collateral, to guarantee that one day, Eliyahu will come to the descendants of Ya’akov to retrieve his ‘ו’s and then in our presence he would herald the arrival of the great messianic era.

Now, why the ‘ו’ to represent all of this? In the concluding Mishnah in Masechet Ediyot, our sages teach us that Eliyahu will come ‘תָּשִׁיעַ’ – ‘שְׁלִים בְּעוֹלָם’ – ‘to make peace on earth’. The ‘ו’ is the ultimate coordinating conjunction. It is a symbol of togetherness, of unity and of peace. We know from the book of Shemot, that in the construction of the Mishkan, that the ‘ו’ (hooks) were used. And indeed, in the Torah, the letter ‘ו’ looks like a hook. The ‘ו’ were used in order to bring all the elements together to construct one edifice.

That's the power of the **ו**, that's why the middle letter of the Torah is a **ו** in the word **וְיַדְךָ** in Parshat Shmini, bringing the two parts together. As is the case with the opening letter of every column of the Torah, with the exception of only five (all for good reasons), starts with a **ו**, to show that the whole Torah was given as one from Hashem.

So this is the power and significance of the letter **ו** – and we are finding that it is the prevailing mood and atmosphere within our society right now, as the coronavirus sweeps through our counties. In the midst of the tragedy we are seeing a welcome element of unity. People feel connected to one another and at peace.

The reason is obvious! All our societies are being threatened by the same hidden enemy. Let us therefore guarantee that the spirit of the letter **ו**, this element of togetherness and peace, will prevail well beyond these times. May we witness the coming of the prophet Elijah, followed by the messianic era speedily in our times.

OTS Dvar Torah

Does the Curse Overpower the Blessing?

Rabbi Netanel Lederberg

The disparity between the relatively meager description of the blessings and the richer description of the curses beckons us to take a deeper look, which may allow us to arrive at a good explanation for the substantial difference between the blessing and the curse.

Parshat Bechukotai describes a bi-polar covenant, with a curse at one pole, and a blessing at the other. The covenant is concluded “through Moses on Mount Sinai, between Himself and the Israelite people” (Leviticus 26:46). An initial covenant that is also cited in the descriptions of a subsequent second covenant appearing in Parshat Ki Tavo, in the Book of Deuteronomy. The passage concludes as follows: “These are the terms of the covenant which Hashem commanded Moses to conclude with the Israelites in the land of Moab, in addition to the covenant which He had made with them at Horeb.” (Deuteronomy 28:69). Eventually the second covenant would come into being at Mt. Eval and Mt. Gerizim, opposite the grave of Joseph, whose sale into servitude in Egypt began the first diaspora in Egypt. This may have been a way station for the entire nation upon entering the Land of Israel. The first covenant described in this week’s Parasha, which may have been hinted at in the Brit Ha’aganot (the “Covenant of the Bowls”): “Then he took the record of the covenant and read it aloud to the people...” (Exodus 23:7). This was the covenant at Mt. Horeb, in the Sinai desert, which followed the giving of the Torah. As such, these two biblical passages describe a covenant containing descriptions of both a blessing and a curse. The first is from Parshat Bechukotai, at the conclusion of the books of Exodus and Leviticus, and the second

appears in Parshat Ki Tavo, in the book of Deuteronomy.

From the Israelites’ vantage point, the covenant concluded at Mt. Sinai is the covenant concluded just before they entered the Land of Israel. The next stage, after the covenant had been concluded, should have been their entry into the Land of Israel, were it not for the Israelites future sinfulness the summer after the Torah is received, which climaxed with the Sin of the Spies (which is already a central narrative in the Book of Numbers). This is the covenant with and through which they should have entered the land. Perhaps this is where the Torah should have ended – with the giving of the Torah to the Jewish people, the Torah that the Jewish people carried as they crossed directly into the Land of Israel.

What stands out in the descriptions of the initial covenant between Hashem and the Israelites? We’d feel discomfort when we review the verses of the covenant for the first time, because of the imbalance between the “blessing verses” and the “curse verses”. About ten verses discuss the blessing that will come into being “If you follow My laws and faithfully observe My commandments” – these blessings include rainfall, harvest, abundance, security, victory over enemies and the presence of the Eternal. Later, “But if you do not obey Me and do not observe all these commandments,” we read 28 verses of curses, taking us from Verse 14 to Verse 42. They include tuberculosis, fever, the loss of the harvest, famine and plague, exodus, desolation, and much more. Is the curse more powerful than the blessing? How can we account for the imbalance between the blessing and the “curse verses”? Though the rest of the chapter deals with Hashem remembering the Israelites and a future ingathering of the exiles, to avoid violating the covenant in which Hashem promised to “not reject them or spurn them so as to destroy them, annulling My covenant with them,” we are still left wondering why the descriptions of the blessings are so lacking compared to the rich descriptions of the curses. By reviewing these verses, we’ll notice a major difference between the blessing and the curse. The “blessing verses” begin with the proclamation of “If you follow My laws,” but after that, there is no progression in the fulfillment of the blessing. It is like a blessing of abundance that knows no bounds. It is an overflowing and ubiquitous abundance, like a gushing stream filling valley after valley. The blessings of goodness are wide-hearted and are given in good spirit. They come all at once, they are limitless, and there are no strings attached. “If you follow My laws” the entire blessing will envelop everyone, all at once.

The “curse verses” describe something entirely different. Numerically, there are more of them, so the initial impression is disproportionate and is far from the truth. Not

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because of how many curses there are, but rather, because of the many preconditions attached to each curse, which expresses the notion that there are different levels of sinfulness. At the beginning, “... if you do not follow My laws”, you’ll get tuberculosis and fever, but that’s where it ends. However, another precondition appears in the verse: “And if, for all that, you do not obey Me,” if you continue down this path, you’ll be beset by more hardships and tragedies, and you won’t have a harvest to sow. Once more, there’s a pause, and then, only if the situation gets worse, “And if you remain hostile toward Me and refuse to obey Me, I will go on smiting you sevenfold for your sins.” The wild beasts will come. Then, the text pauses once more, and in the following verse, we read that “And if these things fail to discipline you for Me, and you remain hostile to Me,” the plague and famine will become even more severe. Once more, “But if, despite this, you disobey Me,” the decrees will grow worse. When we finish counting the verses describing the curses themselves, and not the actions that brought about the curses (variations of “if you do not listen to Me”), we arrive at 10 or 11 verses – exactly the same number of “blessing verses”! This means that after each warning in the form of “... if you do not listen...”, there are only 2 or 3 verses containing curses. However, we recall that in the case of the blessings, after “if you follow My laws”, we read ten verses in a row, abounding in blessings!

In other words, if we delve into these verses, we’ll realize that the first impression we get is illusory, and in effect, there are far more blessings than there are curses. This opposition teaches us something crucial about the life of blessing, as opposed to the life of curse: blessings are abundant, they are given to us and they permeate everything, infusing the world with their goodness. The blessings aren’t gradual, involving a process of constant review and assessment. They simply come into being, in their full splendor: “I will surely open the floodgates of the sky for you and pour down endless blessings on you.” (Malachi 3:10). Curses, by nature, are partial. They are shrouded in hesitation and ignorance of what will happen in the future. They involve assessments and reassessments, and dilemmas at every turn. They are constrictive rather than broad. In that sense, the gap between the world of blessings and the world of curses isn’t just about their content, that is, whether there is abundant rainfall or drought. It’s also about the rhythm at which these things are happening. Will there be plentitude showered upon us endlessly, or will we constantly be stopping? Will there be additional preconditions and assessments to ascertain what needs to be done? Will we be unable to truly be present and experience wholeness and the presence of the Divine?

Do Not Detest Us: A Lesson of Relationships**Rabbi Eliyahu Safran**

When our love was strong, we could have slept on the blade of a sword, but now that our love is not strong there is no bed in the world that is big enough to hold us both - Sanhedrin 7a

Bechukotai is the first of the two Tochachos (admonitions) in the Torah, sobering accounts of punishments, frustrations, and curses that await us should we cast aside our absolute commitment to God and His covenant. While it is true that God, in His great mercy, will never allow for these curses to befall His children in any one, single unbearable instance we need only cursory glance at Jewish history – and the last century in particular – to know what has been recorded in the Tochacha has most certainly been visited upon us. Which is to say, Tochacha is not mere rhetoric, it is not a poetic rendering of God's rebuke; it is real. It is powerfully experienced.

However, no matter how painful and difficult, it is leavened by God's final words of the Admonition, His promise that He will remember His covenant with the Avot and will redeem His children. We will be redeemed. Indeed, we live in the process of redemption. We feel it. We know it.

Our redemption is as real as the Tochacha.

Before the Tochacha begins, we are soothed by reassuring verses, reminding us that if we walk in God's ways and observe His commandments we will be showered with endless blessings. We will experience timely rains, abundant produce, fruit, and bread; our lands will be secure, and we will know peace. Our numbers will increase. God will dwell among us. Ve'lo tiga'al nafshi etchem, and He will not be disgusted by us.

Wait, what?

God showers us with the promise of His love, protection, and goodness only to conclude, And I will not be disgusted by you? This is jarring and unsettling. We bristle, hearing an Israeli parent scold his child's obnoxious playground behavior, zeh goal nefesh, that is, "that's disgusting!" To our ears, it is hardly a loving benediction! Certainly not the language or tone we expect from a caring parent. And yet, here we have God telling us the same thing, at the culmination of His many blessings. Ve'lo tiga'al nafshi etchem. I will not be disgusted by you.

What does it mean to have this statement conclude God's many promised blessings?

To understand this dissonance, we might look to an insight found in the Shemen HaTov, cited by Rabbi Yissacher Frand as we consider another moment when the potential for blessing and disappointment balances on the edge of a razor; let us consider the chupah.

We know well the emotions of the wedding day. The beauty of the bride. The nervousness of the groom. The pride and nachas of parents. The love, the hope, the dreams... they are palpable. But those who have lived a life know equally well that joy of the chupah can be more than matched in hurt and sadness should the marriage fail.

Marriage and divorce are not two sides of the same coin but opposite ends of the same emotional span. Still, they have one thing in common. In both, there must be respect and dignity. We must embrace the same dignity and care at the end of a marriage just as we do at the beginning. We must. And yet, too often we do not. Too often, where there was once love – or at least the sincere hope for love – we see expressions of hatred and spite, men withholding a Get as an emotional – and practical – cudgel, effectively enslaving a woman, damning her to a life that is neither here nor there, neither married nor able to move on with her life.

Our sages were wise, but they were not blind. They knew that not every marriage entered is "meant to be". Marriages do not always work. And it does not matter what the reason is that a marriage fails. What matters is only that, despite an honest attempt by at least one of the partners to make a successful marriage and life, the marriage is untenable.

It was not bashert.

That realization is a hard blow. Sometimes the truth that a marriage is unsuccessful takes years to become clear. Other times, it takes nearly no time for either the husband or wife to discover that the marriage will not work. "Only three days into the marriage, I knew I had made a terrible mistake." He is "controlling and belittling."

We can all weep for the sadness of a marriage that simply does not work. But our sadness necessarily turns to astonishment and then anger when we learn that the husband, far from acknowledging and accepting this reality, lashes out in anger and vindictiveness.

Divorcing couples become as opposing armies in a state of war. They behave as if in the gutter (where it is, literally, goal nefesh – disgusting). There are few things in life more horrible to behold than two human beings who once loved one another come to hate each other.

Our relationship with God is, in many ways, like the intimate and passionate bond of marriage. God's promises are sure. They are clear. They are unwavering. As the first verses of our parasha make clear, if we follow His ways, if we remain true to the covenant of Sinai (our communal ketuba with God), the rewards will be endless.

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He will be our God and we will be His people. We will be in a binding relationship with God, just as the bride and groom enter a binding relationship with one another. But, not every marriage is meant to be, not between man and woman, and not between God and His bride.

So, it is that God, anticipating His bride possibly reneging on her commitment says, "I will place My Sanctuary among you." He sets up His home in our midst and welcomes us, His bride. God commits His love and sensitivity to His nation. His blessings are there for them. But when we, God's bride, turns away from Him, He will have to send us away, exiled. In doing so, God teaches us a divine and a very human lesson.

The split will be tragic. It will be hurtful. But it will never be hateful. God tells us, I will never detest you. I will never be disgusted by you. I will continue to love you. After all, I chose you from among all nations of the world. Ve'lo tiga'al nafshi etchem.

The lesson is clear for every divorcing husband. You invited this one and only bride to join you in your life's journey. How dare you now behave as a goal nefesh! God would never do that. Even in divorcing His bride, God remains God. So too, in divorce you must remain a mensch. The one who cannot divorce as a mensch casts much doubt as to the type of person he was when he stood under the chupah.

The Get is like God's blessed fingers, untying the ribbon tied at marriage. To use it to bludgeon the person for whom you once declared love and devotion is wrong.

When God must separate from His people, He does so with love. He will never detest us. He will never ever forget the blessings that forged our relationship. Indeed, that is the reason why God's promise that He will "not detest us" rightfully appears with the blessings not the curses. It is God's "divorce seminar 101".

Indeed, every day of this Covid-19 pandemic makes clear that the lesson here is not only for divorce but for every relationship. In the cauldron and pressure of isolation, the challenges to a relationship are amplified. It is easier to see flaws than gifts.

As a rabbi, I receive emails and communications from our rabbinic organization concerning so many interpersonal issues, challenges and sha'ilos never contemplated before. Over and over, I see the reminders about the 24/7 numbers for abused and battered wives! Oh, these are trying times indeed! Our fundamental menschlichkeit and civility are being tested day by day, minute by minute. Our space, our time, our privacy, our most basic "midos" are threatened.

People for whom home had always been a sanctuary may find themselves "disgusted"

being home. Imagine how much worse it is for those at home with a spouse who had already declared his disgust before Corona!

The threat is real. In just the past few days the Jerusalem Post has reported that four people have been murdered and another four have committed suicide – all due to domestic violence!

The threat is very real. And so, rabbis are reminded of the 24/7 numbers for those abused wives. Even the best marriage can be challenged by the isolation brought on by Coronavirus.

Slovie Jungreis-Wolff's "Keeping Your Marriage Strong during Quarantine" on Aish.com reminds us of the things we need to remain conscious of to honor our wives during this difficult time. She tells us to focus on needs and goals, to allow for personal space, to practice kindness and to find new ways of connecting.

In short, her advice reminds us that the chupah, rather than being a single moment in the past that we acknowledge once a year with a card on our wedding anniversary is an experience that continues through the years. We carry our chupah with us throughout our marriage. Our vows need to grow with us; our love needs to mature just as we do.

God offers us blessings and, for those who turn from those blessings, He continues to offer love and respect. He will never detest us.

Let us all embrace what that message is teaching us, whether in divorce, in a challenging or challenged relationship or in a loving one.

Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

Rabbi Eliakim Koenigsberg

Overcoming Natural Instincts - The Ultimate Power Struggle

The Torah says (Behar 25:20-21), "If you will ask what shall we eat in the seventh year if we have not planted or gathered our produce, I will direct my blessing to you (i.e. to your land) in the sixth year, and it will provide for the three-year period." The Torah promises those who observe the laws of shemita that the land will produce double or triple its normal yield in the sixth year, and that will last until they are able to plant and harvest once again. Why are those who observe shemita rewarded with such an unnatural occurrence?

The Midrash Tanchuma (Vayikra 1:1) comments: "The strong warriors (giborei ko'ach) who do Hashem's bidding, to obey the voice of His word (Tehillim 103:20)"...Rav Huna explained in the name of Reb Acha: this refers to Klal Yisrael who said na'aseh before nishma (and thus accepted to perform mitzvos before they heard what their obligation entailed). Reb Yitzchak Nafcha said: this refers to those who observe the laws of shemita.

And why are they called strong warriors? A person sees his field and his trees (being treated as if they are) ownerless, the fences are open, his fruits are being eaten, and he controls himself and does not protest. The Sages teach, "Who is a gibor - a strong person? One who controls his natural temperament. (Avos 4:1)"

The middah of gevurah involves controlling one's natural tendencies. One who overcomes feelings of anger or jealousy, or one who resists an improper desire for physical pleasure demonstrates inner strength. Such behavior is so fundamental to one's avodas Hashem that Rav Yosef Karo chose to begin his Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 1:1) by alluding to this very idea. He writes, "One should be strong as a lion to rise up in the morning to serve his Creator" - echoing the statement of Reb Yehuda ben Teima (Avos 5:20) that one should be "strong as a lion to do the will of your Father in heaven." One who fights his natural inclination to continue sleeping is as powerful as a strong lion.

The Avos d'Rebbi Nossen (23:1) adds, "There is no one stronger than giborei Torah - the mighty warriors of Torah." Those who study Torah diligently also demonstrate the middah of gevurah. By sacrificing their time, their sleep, and even their financial well-being, they act against human nature. Similarly, the Gemara (Gittin 36b) says, "Those who are shamed but do not embarrass in return, they are insulted but do not respond...about them the posuk says, 'And those who love Him (Hashem) will be like the sun rising in its full strength.' (Shoftim 5:31)" One who resists his desire for retribution is compared to the strength of a rising sun.

When Klal Yisrael said na'aseh v'nishma they were acting against their natural instincts because most people would refuse to accept an undefined obligation. That is why Klal Yisrael are called giborei ko'ach because their statement was an expression of inner strength. And by the same token, those who observe shemita also demonstrate gevurah by submitting their will to the command of the Torah to allow others to enter their fields during the year of shemita and take fruits for free.

What is the reward for those who overcome their natural tendencies in order to serve Hashem? They are treated to extraordinary blessing. Chazal comment (Midrash Rabba, Vayeishev 87:8), "The sea split in the merit of Yosef's bones - 'The sea saw and fled (Tehillim 114:3)' in the merit of the one about whom it says, 'And he fled and went outside. (Vayeishev 39:12)" Hashem performed a miracle and split the sea before Klal Yisrael in the merit of Yosef who acted with superhuman strength when he resisted the wife of Potiphar and he ran outside. One who acts against his nature is repaid with supernatural blessing. Similarly, Chazal say, "One who is not so exacting in the way he deals with others will

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have his sins forgiven. (Yoma 23a)" If someone overlooks a wrong that he has suffered, then Hashem will also overlook that person's wrongdoings. One who rises above his natural instincts when dealing with others is not judged in heaven by the normal rules.

Perhaps this is why those who observe shemita are blessed with extra produce during the sixth year. By giving free access to their fields they overcome their natural impulse to act as owners. In return, Hashem promises that in the sixth year the fields will produce much more than their normal yield. The unnatural self-control of those who observe shemita is rewarded with unusual blessing.

This idea - the importance of controlling one's natural impulses - is especially relevant during the period of Sefiras HaOmer. On Pesach we offer the Korban HaOmer which is made of barley, an animal food (see Sotah 14a), while on Shavuos we bring the Shetei HaLechem (two loaves) which are made of wheat, a human food. These korbanos symbolize the inner transformation that the Torah demands of us - to overcome our natural animal instincts for self-satisfaction, and to act instead with restraint and self-control. By observing mitzvos with dedication and discipline, and by interacting with others with humility and self-control, we demonstrate a powerful inner strength, and we make ourselves worthy of extra blessing.

Rabbi Mayer Twersky Bitachon and Initiative

We approach this essay, with Hashem's help, with the goal of helping identify the role of bitachon (faith and trust in God) in our current situation (and, to a degree, by extension, in avodas Hashem (service of God) in general). It is self-evident that bitachon is a core, fundamental value.

...as Yirmiyahu emphasized, and pronounced '(Cursed is the man who trusts in mankind) and establishes flesh as his arm (17:5)'. David, in all his praises, latched on to it 'In God, I trusted' (Tehilim 26:1); 'Yisra'el, trust in God' (Tehilim 115:9). Furthermore, Yeshayahu said 'Trust in God evermore' (Yeshayahu 26:4)" (Meshech Chochmah, Parshas Eikev).

It is also true, however, that Hashem has demarcated distinct, discrete domains in His world and in His Torah. Any facet of His Torah -- even one which is most holy, lofty and significant -- must be situated in its rightful domain without infringing upon other domains. In that vein: a crucial principle regarding the role of bitachon is that bitachon in no way mitigates our obligations in other religious domains. If we are charged with mitzvos, then there is no room to defer our duties out of a sense of bitachon. "Throw your burden upon God (Tehilim 55:23)" -- but not your mitzvos, your obligations!

When the mitzvah of u'sh'mor nafshecha me'od devolves upon us, we are forbidden to substitute bitachon for the appropriate precautions and preventive measures. There can be no segulah, no talismanic stratagem, which would exempt us from this mitzvah, or any other. Functionally, bitachon works in tandem with, but not in any degree as a substitute for, all appropriate precautions and preventive measures.

To further drive home this critical principle, we would do well to consider a selection of my grandfather, Rav Soloveitchik's zt"l forceful, authoritative treatment of this dynamic in his essay, *The Lonely Man of Faith*[1]:

The conquest of disease is the sacred duty ... and he must not shirk it ... the Halakhah remained steadfast in its loyalty to scientific medicine. It has never ceased to emphasize the duty of the sick person to consult a competent physician. The statement quoted in both the Tur and Karo's Shulchan Aruch **אמ מועע עצמן** "And if he refrains [from consulting a physician], it is as if he shed his own blood," which can be traced indirectly to a Talmudic passage, is a cornerstone of Halakhic thinking. Vide Yoma 82a, 82b, 83a; Kiddushin 82a; Rashi sub **טו**; Bava Kamma 85a, Tosafot sub **תנין**; Tur Yoreh Deah 336; Bayit-Chadash sub **תנין**. See also Pesachim 56a, Rashi and Maimonides' Commentary.

The doctrine of faith in God's charity **בתחזון** is not to be equated with the folly of the mystical doctrine of quietism, which in its extreme form exempts man from his duty of attending to his own needs and lets him wait in "holy" idleness and indifference for God's intervention. This kind of repose is wholly contrary to the repose which the Halakhah recommends: the one which follows human effort and remedial action. Man must first use his own skill and try to help himself as much as possible. Then, and only then, man may find repose and quietude in God and be confident that his effort and action will be crowned with success. The initiative, says the Halakhah, belongs to man; the successful realization, to God.

Certainly, "except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it," but if those who labor stop building, there will be no house. The Lord wants man to undertake the task which He, in His infinite grace, completes.

In the above citation, the Rav focused specifically on medicine; his words are even more relevant to our topic at hand, the mitzvah of u'sh'mor nafshecha me'od. Even those solitary opinions (which were unequivocally rejected by normative halacha) that deemed standard medical care as optional perforce agree that the Torah's prescription of u'sh'mor nafshecha me'od, qua mitzvah, obligates us to take all necessary precautions and preventive measures in the face of prospective danger.

Rabbeinu Yonah[2], commenting on the pesukim in Mishlei (21:30-31) "There is neither wisdom nor understanding nor counsel against the Lord. A steed is prepared for a day of battle, but the victory is the Lord's[3]," writes:

Let us say, then, regarding "there is neither wisdom nor understanding nor counsel against the Lord," that neither wisdom, understanding, or counsel have the force to nullify [Divine] edicts, much as it says "except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it."

When it says (Mishlei 21:22) that a wise man "brought down the stronghold in which it trusts," it means to say that victory and triumph are brought about [but not effected] through wisdom. It is similarly brought about through feats of strength and waging war...

What it means by saying "a steed is prepared for a day of battle [, but the victory is the Lord's]," is that people are obligated to watch out for themselves, to prepare steeds and weapons, for a time of war, and Hashem Yisbarach will save and pity on those whom He chooses to pity (see Shemos 33:19).

Let us both consider and comply with Rabbeinu Yonah's exhortation "that people are obligated to watch out for themselves... and Hashem Yisbarach will save and pity on those whom He chooses to pity." Would that we act accordingly!

May it be Hashem's will that our lot be with those who are saved and pitied.

[1]Pp. 89-90

[2] Cited by HaGaon Rav Shmuel Hominer zt"l in Mitzvas HaBitachon

[3] Translations of Mishlei are taken from Rabbi AJ Rosenberg's edition (Judaica Press)

Likutei Divrei Torah

We see two opposite ends of the spectrum here. The prospect of inviting abundant blessing or the terrifying possibility of bringing curse. The language of that action that opens the door for a world of good is, "Im Bechukasi Telechu – If you will go in My decrees..." Rashi says that means to toil in the learning of Torah. How do those words imply toiling in Torah? The polar opposite of that which invites all the horrors is expressed as, "But if you will not listen to me...". We learn an important point from this seeming disparity of language.

What is the most important word in the Torah? True, all words are important! However, if you could highlight one word that is shouted the loudest and with the greatest frequency, which word would it be? You can only imagine that if this word is so important it must be the cure for many ills, personal and societal. If it's hard to conjure up the answer it's probably because the meaning has become obscured or it remains under-understood. Let's look together.

A Jew was riding on a train traversing the Siberian tundra. Seated next to him was a soldier of the Czar quietly boiling and seething with deep hatred toward the Jew. In one moment he let loose his anger to the Jew who, unaware of the danger, was staring into one of his holy books when he barked, "What makes you people so smart?"

The Jew was startled. He realized his life was at risk and he had better give the correct answer. Without hesitation, with help from heaven, he responded with perfect calm, one word - "Herring!" "That little bony fish!?" the soldier sternly inquired, "Do you have any?" The Jew acknowledged that he had a few pieces remaining which the soldier demanded with authority should be handed over to him.

Taking a big risk, the Jew refused and insisted he be compensated 20 Rubles for the now desirous herring. The soldier hurriedly threw the money at him and took hold of the prize. In a one gulp, like a hungry bear, he swallowed the whole lot of them. After wiping his mouth brutally he turned to the Jew, who had calmly returned to his books, and protested, "20 Rubles for those few pieces of fish! Where we are going to in Moscow I can get five times that amount for the same price!" At that point the Jew turned to him with a full face and declared, "You see, it's starting to work already!"

It's not just a joke. Perhaps the secret is in something like herring- hearing. What makes you people so smart? Hearing! Hear O' Israel... That statement is the clearest expression of the mission of the Jewish People, singularly and collectively! Not only is it the declaration at each door -post of the Jewish home or the continuous cry of loyal Jewish tongues twice daily for thousands of years even while being led to their death. It's the cry of the universe!

Torah.Org Dvar Torah by Rabbi Label Lam

A Devastating Error

If you will go in My decrees and keep My Mitzvos and perform them; then I will provide rains in their time, and the land will give its produce and the tree of the field will give its fruit. (Vayikra 26:3)

If you will go in My decrees...If you follow My decrees by engaging in intensive Torah study, with the intention that such study will lead you to observe ... (Rashi)

But if you do not listen to Me and do not perform all these commandments and if you despise My statutes and reject My ordinances, not performing any of My Commandments, thereby breaking My covenant then I too, will do the same to you; ... Your enemies will rule over you; you will flee, but no one will be pursuing you. And if, during these, you will not listen to Me, I will add another seven punishments for your sins: (Vayikra 26:14-18)

Isn't that what wives are telling husbands, often with desperation? How often do we hear these words, "He doesn't listen to me!" It's what parents are telling children and what children are telling parents. SHEMMAA! Listen! It's what the teacher and student hope from each other for the relationship to succeed. Most importantly it's what THE ALMIGHTY shouts to His people, "SHEMA Yisrael" Listen Israel... It's also what we request in prayer daily, "Shema koleinu- HASHEM ELOCHEINU...Hear our voices HASHEM our G-d!

Here's a concept I've shared with my children at bedtime for years and recently I saw that the Vilna Gaon (Mishlei 4:1) defines the word SHEMA in the same three ways. Perhaps my approach is more playful but as I recently discovered, not less true. The word "SHEMA" with its three letters onomatopoetically sounds out three ideas that together may help us get our arms around that giant of a word- "SHEMA"

SHHH- Listen! Quiet down for a moment! Remove all external distractions. Focus undisturbed! (Not so easy!) MMMMM- Understand! Listen empathically. Merge into another's world. Hear well what's being said. Let the message be absorbed gently and thoughtfully into your system. Finally- AHHHH- Accept! Stop resisting what you know to be true in your heart of hearts! Surrender to an idea that is bigger than you! Be ready to act upon and live up to it. If only the word- "SHEMA" would be heard, understood, and accepted properly and exercised practically. What a different world and what a different life it would be.

When we pray we are talking to HASHEM but when we learn Torah we are listening to, hearing, and accepting HASHEM. Learning Torah as one who is open to accept, embrace and even revel in the enormous opportunity to imbibe the Ratzon HASHEM, the desire of the Creator, is to already be going in HIS while way. However, by taking the learning of Torah as a casual option, an academic exercise, or as an awful burden is deserving of the description, "and if you will not listen to ME!" That's a devastating error.



BS"D

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date: May 6, 2021, 9:57 PM
subject: Tragedy in Meron; Significance of Yerushalayim; Election Day on a Chag?

YOM YERUSHALAYIM

From Meron To Yerushalayim: Reconciling Tragedy with Celebration
Rabbi Moshe Taragin

May 6, 2021

It has been a week of tears and of numbness. Every time I read the list of 45 I become dizzy and faint, wincing in disbelief. Too many names to remember and too many tears to hold back. My eyes are fatigued from withholding tears and throat is soar from choking the pain. Standing with thousands at the funeral of Danny Morris z"l, we all looked to Heaven for answers we knew would not come. Our people have been gashed with sorrow and our nation throbs with grief. At this point additional words are pointless. Life sometimes moves quickly, and this upcoming Yom Yerushalayim we will relive the great miracles of the six-day war and of our triumphant return to Yerushalayim. We will abruptly transition from suffering to national joy. These two experiences feel so antithetical but life is complex and often demands that we merge sadness and joy. Can we fuse these two adverse experiences? As the intense grieving for the Meron tragedy subsides, how can we merge this disaster with the celebration of Yom Yerushalayim? Here are three recommendations:

1. Rendezvous with Holiness

For a Jew, not all locations are created equal. The land of Israel possesses unique sanctity and, within Israel, Yerushalayim and the Mikdash are vested with even greater holiness. Our three Avot ascended this mountain and ever since, Jews have journeyed to these points of encounter with G-d. Our spiritual landscape isn't a flat grid; there are spiritual highlands!!.

Exile altered all that. We were dislocated from holy sites and, sadly, most of these locations were vacated of their formal holiness. For thousands of years, most Jews were severed from these summits of encountering G-d. For many, Torah study and

prayer were sufficient. The Talmud (Tamid 32) announces that G-d's presence visits anyone studying Torah. Similarly, the Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 26) equates prayer on Rosh Hashanah to entering the inner sanctum of the Mikdash. Torah study and prayer thrust us into a different realm- a location-independent zone standing in the presence of G-d. For some however, these spiritual "minds" are not sufficient. Many continue to yearn to stand in "actual" land spaces which could serve as bridges to a higher spiritual realm of connectedness. Grave-sites of tzadikim and the righteous provide these platforms. Platforms for prayer, spirituality, hope and connection. Full disclaimer: I don't visit Rabbi Shimon's grave on Lag Ba'omer. In general, visiting graves isn't part of my tradition. I visit graves of close relatives or personal Rabonim and I time my visit to the guidelines of Shulchan Oruch – around Yomim Noraim. When I do visit, I visit alone so that my experience is private and, for me, more profound. Despite this, I encourage and support those who are drawn to Meron and to the spiritual connection which it bridges.

That does the experience of visiting graves share in common with 1967? When the state was founded in 1948 we witnessed miracles and tasted national triumph. However, lost amidst the euphoria, was the sorrow of being expelled from our historical holy sites. During the Holocaust it appeared as if G-d had turned His attention away from Jews in Europe; just a few years later Jews in Israel were expelled from His private quarters. We could no longer access the Kotel, the grave of Rachel or Me'arat Hamachpeilah. It is difficult, in historical hindsight, to fully appreciate the frustration of being evicted for those 19 intervening years.

In 1967 we returned to these holy wards. We were invited back to the land of Tanach, back to the graves of our ancestors and back to the wall of history. Inviting us back to His home, G-d also invited us back into history and back into redemption. The 1967 invitation convinced us that we were returning to an earlier period in our history when we actively stood before G-d in holy sites. The Meron pilgrims were expressing a longing we all feel – to climb the mountain and encounter G-d. Tragically so many lost their lives fulfilling this common longing.

My Rebbe, HaRav Yehuda Amital was once questioned about the historical accuracy of Kever Rachel. Evidence has emerged that Rachel may not even be buried there, perhaps diminishing the value of prayers at this site. Rav Amital responded that even if Rachel isn't buried at this site, the tears shed by Jews throughout history have invested this tomb with historical sanctity. I believe the same about Meron. Many connect with the kabbalistic lore of this mountain. Even for those who don't actively live Kabbalah, Jewish tears throughout the centuries have consecrated this mountain. Sadly, there is a new river of tears streaming through this mountain. That river has 45 streams.

2. Thronging

The day on which Torah was delivered is nicknamed as the day of "gathering" since millions amassed beneath the mountain and spoke directly with G-d. The Sinai gatherings were re-dramatized every seven years during the Hakel ceremony. Likewise, throngs of Jewish pilgrims flocked to Yerushalayim during each chag. Our tragic exile dispersed Jews around the globe and suspended these gatherings. The Talmud (Berachot 58) mandates that a blessing be recited when witnessing a Sinai-sized crowd of 600,000 Jews. For two thousand years Jews must have chuckled at this prospect-never imaging gatherings which could approach that size.

Finally, back in our homeland, our generation has, once again, experienced mass gatherings. The experience of thronging together with large crowds of Jews has returned to our lives. Sometimes we gather to mourn, other times to celebrate. One day soon, we will assemble upon Yerushalayim to jointly celebrate three national holidays. Throngs of Jews in Israel is one step toward Messianic redemption.

One of the first mass gatherings in the modern state occurred a week after the victory in 1967. For a week, teams worked feverishly to remove the rubble and pave the plaza-entrance to the Kotel. Finally, on Shavuot, Jews were invited back and over 200,000 streamed to the wall of Jewish dreams which

had been off-limits for 19 dark years. This may have been the largest mass crowd of Jews in thousands of years!

The pilgrimage to Meron is part of this historical revival. Masses of Jews standing shoulder to shoulder searching for connection and spirituality was unimaginable outside our homeland. Sadly, the existing infrastructure in Meron wasn't able to support this crowd and horror ensued. We all hope to continue mass Jewish gatherings under safer conditions and, one day, we will gather, at the end of time, along with all of humanity to celebrate the conclusion of history. It is so sad that those who gathered at Meron had their lives cut so short.

3. A City of Unity

The Talmud (Yerushalmi, Chagiga 3) famously portrays Yerushalayim as a "unifying city". The city was never allocated to a particular tribe and, as a public commons, was an instrument of national unity. Throughout our diaspora, Yerushalayim united Jews across the globe who all prayed in a common direction. Our return to Yerushalayim in 1967 was a signature moment of national unity. Secular and religious each sensed the "moment" of Jewish triumph and of national destiny. The national solidarity was unlike any unity which had been experienced until that point. Sadly, that unity has long since frayed. Israeli society and the broader Jewish world are both badly splintered along many "lines of division". Sadly, we haven't even preserved the unifying potential of the Kotel as we haven't been able to fully include all who are drawn by this historical magnet. What type of event will it take to unify our people? In theory, the devastating viral pandemic should have unified us but, instead, it fractured us. Sadly, a disaster of the magnitude of Meron seems to be the only event we can experience 'jointly'. If we can't cry together over the loss of innocent life, we share little in common. Don't ruin this unity. In the upcoming days and weeks our mourning will abate and we will begin to unpack the causes of this tragedy. Understandably, we will analyze logistics, event-management, ideology, culture and their respective roles in this unspeakable tragedy. This conversation is not only legitimate but extremely necessary on many levels. However, the conversation must be kept respectful, sensitive and constructive. Lives have been shattered and our conversation will be conducted in the shadow of death and tears. Positions should be asserted with intellectual humility and sincerity. If we convert the tragedy into a launching pad for scorn, rivalry and derision, we dishonor the memory of those who perished and we travel further away from the day we returned to Yerushalayim.

The words of this author reflect his/her own opinions and do not necessarily represent the official position of the Orthodox Union.

from: **Rabbi Sacks** <info@rabbisacks.org>

subject: Covenant and Conversation

"We the People" (Behar-Bechukotai 5781)

Rabbi Sacks zt'l had prepared a full year of Covenant & Conversation for 5781, based on his book Lessons in Leadership. The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust will continue to distribute these weekly essays, so that people all around the world can keep on learning and finding inspiration in his Torah. In the final parsha of the book of Leviticus, in the midst of one of the most searing curses ever to have been uttered to a nation by way of warning, the Sages found a fleck of pure gold.

Moses is describing a nation in flight from its enemies:

Just the sound of a windblown leaf will put them to running, and they will run scared as if running from a sword! They will fall even when no one is chasing them! They will stumble over each other as they would before a sword, even though no one is chasing them! You will have no power to stand before your enemies. (Lev. 26:36-37)

There is, on the face of it, nothing positive in this nightmare scenario. But the Sages said: "They will stumble over each other" – read this as 'stumble because of one another': this teaches that all Israelites are responsible for one another."^[1]

This is an exceedingly strange passage. Why locate this principle here? Surely the whole Torah testifies to it. When Moses speaks about the reward for keeping the covenant, he does so collectively. There will be rain in its due season. You will have good harvests. And so on. The principle that Jews have collective responsibility, that their fate and destiny are interlinked – this could have been found in the Torah's blessings. Why search for it among its curses?

The answer is that there is nothing unique to Judaism in the idea that we are all implicated in one another's fate. That is true of the citizens of any nation. If the economy is booming, most people benefit. If there is law and order, if people are polite to one another and come to one another's aid, there is a general sense of well-being. Conversely, if there is a recession many people suffer. If a neighbourhood is scarred by crime, people are scared to walk the streets. We are social animals, and our horizons of possibility are shaped by the society and culture within which we live.

All of this applied to the Israelites so long as they were a nation in their own land. But what about when they suffered defeat and exile and were eventually scattered across the earth? They no longer had any of the conventional lineaments of a nation. They were not living in the same place. They did not share the same language of everyday life. While Rashi and his family were living in Christian northern Europe and speaking French, Maimonides was living in Muslim Egypt, speaking and writing Arabic. Nor did Jews share a fate. While those in northern Europe were suffering persecution and massacres during the Crusades, the Jews of Spain were enjoying their Golden Age. While the Jews of Spain were being expelled and compelled to wander round the world as refugees, the Jews of Poland were enjoying a rare sunlit moment of tolerance. In what sense therefore were they responsible for one another? What constituted them as a nation? How could they – as the author of Psalm 137 put it – sing God's song in a strange land? There are only two texts in the Torah that speak to this situation, namely the two sections of curses, one in our parsha, and the other in Deuteronomy in the parsha of Ki Tavo. Only these speak about a time when Israel is exiled and dispersed, scattered, as Moses later put it, "to the most distant lands under heaven." (Deut. 30:4) There are three major differences between the two curses, however. The passage in Leviticus is in the plural, that in Deuteronomy in the singular. The curses in Leviticus are the words of God; in Deuteronomy they are the words of Moses. And the curses in Deuteronomy do not end in hope. They conclude in a vision of unrelieved bleakness:

You will try to sell yourselves as slaves—both male and female—but no one will want to buy you. (Deut. 28:68)

Those in Leviticus end with a momentous hope:

But despite all that, when they are in enemy territory, I will not reject them or despise them to the point of totally destroying them, breaking my covenant with them by doing so, because I am the Lord their God. But for their sake I will remember the covenant with the first generation, the ones I brought out of Egypt's land in the sight of all the nations, in order to be their God; I am the Lord. (Lev. 26:44-45)

Even in their worst hours, according to Leviticus, the Jewish people will never be destroyed. Nor will God reject them. The covenant will still be in force and its terms still operative. This means that Jews will always be linked to one another by the same ties of mutual responsibility that they have in the land – for it was the covenant that formed them as a nation and bound them to one another even as it bound them to God. Therefore, even when falling over one another in flight from their enemies they will still be bound by mutual responsibility. They will still be a nation with a shared fate and destiny.

This is a rare and special idea, and it is the distinctive feature of the politics of covenant. Covenant became a major element in the politics of the West following the Reformation. It shaped political discourse in Switzerland, Holland, Scotland and England in the seventeenth century as the invention of printing and the spread of literacy made people familiar for the first time with the Hebrew Bible (the "Old Testament" as they called it). There they

learned that tyrants are to be resisted, that immoral orders should not be obeyed, and that kings did not rule by divine right but only by the consent of the governed.

The same convictions were held by the Pilgrim Fathers as they set sail for America, but with one difference, that they did not disappear over time as they did in Europe. The result is that the United States is the only country today whose political discourse is framed by the idea of covenant.

Two textbook examples of this are Lyndon Baines Johnson's Inaugural of 1965, and Barack Obama's Second Inaugural of 2013. Both use the biblical device of significant repetition (always an odd number, three or five or seven). Johnson invokes the idea of covenant five times. Obama five times begins paragraphs with a key phrase of covenant politics – words never used by British politicians – namely, "We the people."

In covenant societies it is the people as a whole who are responsible, under God, for the fate of the nation. As Johnson put it, "Our fate as a nation and our future as a people rest not upon one citizen but upon all citizens."^[2] In Obama's words, "You and I, as citizens, have the power to set this country's course."^[3] That is the essence of covenant: we are all in this together. There is no division of the nation into rulers and ruled. We are conjointly responsible, under the sovereignty of God, for one another.

This is not open-ended responsibility. There is nothing in Judaism like the tendentious and ultimately meaningless idea set out by Jean-Paul Sartre in Being and Nothingness of 'absolute responsibility': "The essential consequence of our earlier remarks is that man, being condemned to be free, carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulders, he is responsible for the world and for himself as a way of being."^[4]

In Judaism we are responsible only for what we could have prevented but did not. This is how the Talmud puts it:

Whoever can forbid their household [to commit a sin] but does not, is seized for [the sins of] their household. [If they can forbid] their fellow citizens [but do not] they are seized for [the sins of] their fellow citizens. [If they can forbid] the whole world [but do not] they are seized for [the sins of] the whole world. (Shabbat 54b)

This remains a powerful idea and an unusual one. What made it unique to Judaism is that it applied to a people scattered throughout the world united only by the terms of the covenant our ancestors made with God at Mount Sinai. But it continues, as I have often argued, to drive American political discourse likewise even today. It tells us that we are all equal citizens in the republic of faith and that responsibility cannot be delegated away to governments or presidents but belongs inalienably to each of us. We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers.

That is what I mean by the strange, seemingly self-contradictory idea I have argued throughout this series of essays: that we are all called on to be leaders. One may fairly protest: if everyone is a leader, then no one is. If everyone leads, who is left to follow? The concept that resolves the contradiction is covenant.

Leadership is the acceptance of responsibility. Therefore if we are all responsible for one another, we are all called on to be leaders, each within our sphere of influence – be it within the family, the community, the organisation or a larger grouping still.

This can sometimes make an enormous difference. In late summer of 1999 I was in Pristina making a BBC television programme about the aftermath of the Kosovo campaign. I interviewed General Sir Michael Jackson, then head of the NATO forces. To my surprise, he thanked me for what "my people" had done. The Jewish community had taken charge of the city's 23 primary schools. It was, he said, the most valuable contribution to the city's welfare. When 800,000 people have become refugees and then return home, the most reassuring sign that life has returned to normal is that the schools open on time. That, he said, we owe to the Jewish people.

Meeting the head of the Jewish community later that day, I asked him how many Jews were there currently living in Pristina. His answer? Eleven. The story, as I later uncovered it, was this. In the early days of the conflict, Israel had, along with other international aid agencies, sent a field medical team to

work with the Kosovar Albanian refugees. They noticed that while other agencies were concentrating on the adults, there was no one working with the children. Traumatised by the conflict and far from home, the children were lost and unfocused with no systems of support in place to help them. The team phoned back to Israel and asked for young volunteers. Every youth movement in Israel, from the most secular to the most religious, immediately formed volunteer teams of youth leaders, sent out to Kosovo for two-week intervals. They worked with the children, organising summer camps, sports competitions, drama and music events and whatever else they could think of to make their temporary exile less traumatic. The Kosovo Albanians were Muslims, and for many of the Israeli youth workers it was their first contact and friendship with children of another faith.

Their effort won high praise from UNICEF, the United Nations' children's organisation. It was in the wake of this that "the Jewish people" – Israel, the American-based "Joint" and other Jewish agencies – were asked to supervise the return to normality of the school system in Pristina.

That episode taught me the power of chessed, acts of kindness when extended across the borders of faith. It also showed the practical difference collective responsibility makes to the scope of the Jewish deed. World Jewry is small, but the invisible strands of mutual responsibility mean that even the smallest Jewish community can turn to the Jewish people worldwide for help, and they can achieve things that would be exceptional for a nation many times its size.

When the Jewish people join hands in collective responsibility, they become a formidable force for good.

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By Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Behar

Cheating is Forbidden -- Honesty is the Best Policy as Well

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: #1160 – The Mahram of Padua, The Ramo, and l'Havdil the Pope. Good Shabbos!

Parshas Behar contains the Torah's prohibition against cheating: "When you make a sale to your fellow or when you buy from the hand of your fellow, do not victimize one another (Al tonu ish es achiv)." [Vayikra 25:14] Rashi explains that "Al To'nu" refers to deception regarding monetary matters. It is not a coincidence that this prohibition against cheating immediately follows the section of the Sabbatical year requirements. If there is one lesson that emerges from the parsha of Shemittah, it is that the Ribono shel Olam provides man with his livelihood needs. In the seventh year, farmers (and in Biblical times the economy was almost totally agrarian) were asked to stop working for an entire year, and they were somehow supposed to survive. How can they do that?

The answer is that the Ribono shel Olam promises that He will take care of them. The takeaway lesson of the parsha of Shemittah is that the Almighty provides our parnassa, and in the seventh year a person can in fact not work, not plant, not harvest, and yet survive – and according to the Torah he will do even more than survive!

If we believed that with all our hearts and souls, we would never be tempted to cheat. Why do we cheat? We cheat so that we can make a couple of extra dollars. However, if we fully internalized the idea that a person's income is determined by the Almighty each Rosh HaShannah, and whatever we are destined to get will come our way and not a penny more, we would have no reason to cheat and try to deceitfully make those couple of extra dollars! This idea is sometimes very hard for people to accept in practice.

I read a very interesting story about Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky, zt"l. As we have mentioned countless times, Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky exemplified and

personified what it means to be an honest person. It is no coincidence that he named his sefer on Chumash Emes L'Yaakov. This is what he preached, and this is what he practiced.

One of Rav Yaakov's sons was Rav Noson Kamenetsky. Rav Noson wanted to trace his family's roots and went to visit the little Litvishe European town in which Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky had been the Rav. While he was there, he discovered a very interesting historical fact: Even though much of Lithuanian Jewry was wiped out during the Shoah, to a large extent, the Jews of that particular city survived the war and escaped the Nazi Holocaust.

Rav Noson Kamenetsky went to the mayor of the town and asked him if he could explain how the Jews of this town were successful in saving their lives. The mayor said, "I can tell you exactly why the Jews escaped." He said that before the war, the fellow who eventually became the mayor was the postmaster of the town. He would have a test for the clergy members of that town – both Jews and non-Jews. The test was that when they would come in to buy postage, he would purposely give them more change than they deserved, and he would see whether they would return the money or not. That was his acid test of what type of people he was dealing with.

He did this three times with Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky. Each time he gave Rav Yaakov more money than he was entitled to in change, Rav Yaakov would always return the money. This postmaster was so impressed with Rav Yaakov, who was the head of the Jewish community, that when years later he was mayor of the town – any time he became aware of a German action which would have wiped out the Jews, he would notify the Jews and they would go hide in the forest or wherever, and that is how the Jews of the city were saved.

When Rav Noson Kamenetsky returned to America from his trip to Europe, he asked his father if he had any recollection of the post office, if he remembered the postmaster, and if he recalled these incidents. Rav Yaakov said that he did not remember the particular story about being tested, but all he remembered was that the postmaster in town did not know how to count.

The Strength of the Shomer Shmita

There is pasuk in Tehillim [103:20] "Bless Hashem, O His angels; the mighty men who do His bidding, to obey the voice of His word." Basically, Dovid HaMelech invokes a prayer that the people who do the will of G-d should be blessed.

The Medrash comments: Who are these "mighty men" who obey the Word of the Ribono shel Olam? Rav Yitzchak states: The pasuk is speaking about those individuals who observe the laws of the Shemita. Normally a person will do a mitzvah for a day, a week, or a month. But the Sabbatical year continues for an entire twelve-month agricultural cycle, during which you cannot as much as prune your tree! This is a tremendous nisayon (test) and it is ongoing. It is not a passing test that lasts a day or a week. It lasts a year! The farmer sees his field—his entire source of income—lie fallow for a whole year and he keeps quiet! Is there a greater "mighty person" than this? However, we must ask a question: When the Torah commands the Jewish people to keep Shemita, it says that in the year before the Shemita, they will be blessed with a bounty of a crop, and their fields will yield double their normal produce. So, let us say that the after-expense profit of a farmer is normally \$100,000 per year. In the sixth year of the Shemita cycle he suddenly earns \$200,000. Therefore, he is set for the next two years! What then is the great "strength" alluded to by the pasuk in Tehillim? He is getting his payment "up front"! He has his money in the bank – so where is his nisayon?

Rav Ahaon Kotler explained – someone who asks this question does not understand human nature. If a fellow in the sixth year makes \$200,000, he says to himself, if I could only plant in the seventh year, imagine how much income I would have then! I am not forgoing just \$100,000—perhaps I am forgoing \$200,000 or more! That is the nature of human beings.

This is how life works. Say you bought Apple stock at \$100 a share. Apple then goes up to \$300. You don't sell. Apple goes up to \$600. You don't sell. Why don't you sell? Because Apple is going to go higher. Apple goes up to \$700. "Ahh! You see what a Chochom I am? I did not sell!" Now Apple falls

back down to \$400. You see what a shoteh you are! But why didn't you sell at the peak? It's because you always expect to make more money and more money.

That is what this farmer is thinking. Yes, I had a banner crop in the sixth year. I could have done even better in the seventh year! To walk away from that natural aspiration and expectation qualifies one as a Giborei Koach. That takes a strong person!

Ribis Is Not Just Another Lav

Parshas Behar contains the prohibition of charging another Jew interest. The Medrash records a scary result of engaging in this prohibition: "See how great the punishment is for one who lends with interest: He will not rise up at the time of the Resurrection of the Dead."

Ribis is a lav—a negative commandment—one of 365 such "Thou Shall Not" commandments in the Torah. This is not a lav that is punished by Kares (spiritual excision); it is not a lav that is punished by misah b'dei Shamayim (Death at the Hands of Heaven); it is not a capital offense at all. It is simply a "regular negative commandment." I am not belittling that, but it is just a lav. Nowhere are we told that for wearing clothes made out of wool and linen (shatnez) that we will not get up at the time of Techiyas HaMeisim. Nowhere are we told that for eating pork (chazir) we will not get up at the time of Techiyas HaMeisim. Why is Ribis so severe that the Medrash warns that for violating this prohibition, a person forfeits his chance for resurrection? Rav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld once gave an explanation for this: We know that there is a mitzvah called Shiluach HaKen (the prohibition of taking a mother bird together with her chicks from their nest). A person must first send away the mother bird and only then take the eggs. The rationale behind this mitzvah, according to many commentaries, is the following: Normally, a person can never catch a bird. (When I was a little boy, they told me that if you put salt on the tail of a bird, you can catch it. I tried this experiment. In theory it might work, but it is impossible to put salt on the tail of the bird! The bird flies away!)

So, what kind of prohibition is this to not take a mother bird? Mother birds are not catchable! The answer is that in this case, it is possible to catch the mother, because the mother bird does not want to abandon her nest. She is vulnerable when sitting on top of her chicks. The Torah teaches: Do not take advantage of someone's vulnerability, because if not for her mercy on her chicks she would fly the coop—literally and figuratively.

Rav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld explained that it is the same when a person comes to ask to borrow money. Generally speaking, the person needs the money badly. He will do anything to get it. "I need the money. If not, my business will collapse, the bank will take away my house, my property will be foreclosed. I need the money!" The natural response of a man with capital to such a plea might be, "Okay, I'll lend you the money, but I want 13%" "Thirteen percent!?" "Listen, do you want the money or don't you?"

The Torah does not want us to take advantage of vulnerable people. When a person is down and out, the Torah frowns upon taking advantage of his desperation. The prohibition of Ribis is an expression of the Torah's strong displeasure with such behavior. Therefore, the Torah is far stricter by the prohibition of charging interest that it is by other issurim.

Bechukosai's Blessings Are Conditional; Kohanim's Blessings Are Unconditional

The Rokeach, one of the earlier Chumash commentaries, makes the following observation: The words starting from Bechukosai [Vayikra 26:3] until the words "V'Olech Eschem Komemiyus" [Vayikra 26:13] contain every single letter in the Hebrew alphabet except for the letter Samech. This symbolizes, he says, that all these blessings were given on condition – "If you follow My decrees and observe My commandments and perform them..." The promised blessings will all happen – but only if you keep the Mitzvos. They are all conditional—except for the "Samech Osiyos" (the sixty letters) present in the Birkas Kohanim.

The Priestly Blessings contains exactly sixty letters, and those blessings are guaranteed regardless of our behavior, whether good, bad, or ugly! The

Rokeach gives no further elaboration or explanation of this very mysterious formulation. What is the meaning of the Rokeach's terse statement? I saw the following explanation in the sefer Darash Mordechai: Birkas Kohanim follows the Blessing of Thanksgiving (Modim anachnu Lach) in the morning shemoneh esrei. If a person is already thanking the Almighty and is aware of our debt of gratitude to Him, that alone suffices to raise the person to a level where he deserves blessing. The Blessing that follows our expression of thanksgiving to the Almighty comes without any strings attached.

My good friend, Rav Shragi Neuberger, offered a different interpretation: He suggested that Birkas Kohanim is the legacy of Aharon HaKohen. Aharon HaKohen was the quintessential "lover of peace and pursuer of peace." Aharon HaKohen is so precious and so dear to the Ribono shel Olam that his blessing comes with no strings attached.

I myself had a third thought on the matter: Birkas Kohanim is a very difficult Mitzvah. The Kohanim are commanded to bless the Jewish people out of love (b'Ahavah). The Kohanim need to wish each of their fellow Jews every possible good that they can imagine, no matter what their own personal lives are like. It could be that a particular Kohen does NOT have shalom (peace) in his house. It could be that the Kohen does not have parnasa (a good livelihood) in his house. But he must bless his Israelite neighbor that he should have shalom and parnasa in his house. It is a blessing that is totally altruistic.

We once mentioned that following the Birkas Kohanim, the Kohanim say a brief prayer including the phrase "we have done what you have DECREED upon us." What kind of DECREE was it to have to bless the Jewish people? The DECREE is that they need to give the full bracha with their full heart, no matter what is going on in their own lives. That is hard. But if the Kohanim are willing to do that, and they do in fact do that, then their Bracha comes with no strings attached. They give it in such a spirit of generosity and altruism that the blessing which flows from such generosity of spirit is a bracha ad bli dai – a blessing without limit or condition.

You are all welcome to ponder this Rokeach and come up with your own interpretations at your Shabbos table.

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Jerusalem Day: The Two Messengers

Rav Kook Torah

The prophet Isaiah used a metaphor of two messengers, the Herald of Zion and the Herald of Jerusalem, who together proclaim the imminent redemption of Israel:

"Herald of Zion, ascend a lofty mountain! Herald of Jerusalem, lift up your voice with strength, be not afraid!" (Isaiah 40:9)

Who are these two messengers? Why was one commanded to scale the mountain, while the second messenger was instructed to raise her voice?

Zion and Jerusalem

We must first analyze the difference between the names "Zion" and "Jerusalem."

"Zion" represents our national aspirations for autonomy and independence, while "Jerusalem" symbolizes our lofty visions for holiness and spiritual greatness. The Herald of Zion is none other than the Zionist movement, demanding the restoration of independence and sovereignty for the Jewish people in their own land. This call is heard clearly around the world; there is no need to further raise its voice.

However, secular Zionism is only concerned with our legitimate rights to self-rule. Its aspirations are the same as those of every other nation.

The Herald of Jerusalem, on the other hand, speaks of our return to holiness, so that we may fulfill our national destiny as "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod. 19:6). This messenger of redemption calls for the restoration of Jerusalem, our holy city, and the holy Temple. Unlike the

Herald of Zion, she stands on "a high mountain" - her vision comes from a high and lofty standpoint. But her voice is faint and her demand is not heard clearly. The Herald of Jerusalem seems to fear raising her voice too loudly. The prophet found fault with both messengers. He reproved the Herald of Zion: Why are you standing down below, together with all the other nations? Why do you only speak of the commonplace goals of the gentile nations? "Ascend a lofty mountain!" Speak in the Name of God, in the name of Israel's holy mission, in the name of the prophetic visions of redemption for the Jewish people and all of humanity.

The prophet then turned to the Herald of Jerusalem: You who call for the return to the city of holiness, you are speaking from the right place, demanding our lofty ideals. But your voice is not heard. You need to learn from the Herald of Zion and "Lift up your voice in strength, be not afraid!"

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Rav Shmuel Brazil

Parshas Behar Bechukosai

SHEMITTA AND THE TITLE OF ADAM

Chizuk: Lag B'omer In Retrospect

The parsha Behar begins with וידבר ה' אל משה בר סיני לאמר that Hashem spoke to Moshe at Har Sinai. Then the next passuk elaborates on the topic which was spoken there – Shemittah. The meforshim all ask why was the mitzvah of Shemittah singled out with a special relationship to Har Sinai over many other mitzvos?

We suggest the following answer. In the Haggadah we recite אילו קרבנו לפניו זר סיינו ולא נתנו את התורה דינו. If you brought us to Har Sinai and did not give us the Torah, that would have been sufficient. The question is how would that suffice if the entire purpose of Yetzias Mitzrayim was to receive the Torah as Hashem told Moshe at the revelation of the Burning Bush העבדון על ההר הזה? Many answer, that at Har Sinai Am Yisrael attained a level and madraigah that no other nation could attest to, that of Achdim על ההר נגד. Many answer, that at Har Sinai Am Yisrael attained a level and madraigah that no other nation could attest to, that of Achdim על ההר נגד. Many answer, that at Har Sinai Am Yisrael attained a level and madraigah that no other nation could attest to, that of Achdim על ההר נגד. Many answer, that at Har Sinai Am Yisrael attained a level and madraigah that no other nation could attest to, that of Achdim על ההר נגד. The passuk should have said ויהיו in plural form but rather it was written in singular form. The singular form was chosen in order to convey כאיש אחד בלב אחד as Rashi brings the Chazal, they were likened to one person with one heart. This was a demonstration of Achdus on the highest level! Coming to Har Sinai and reaching such a lofty level of unity of ויהי which also is rooted in the word ויהי, to find favor in each other's eyes, was worth it even if it meant not receiving the Torah.

In a deeper way of understanding this phenomenon of achdus, the sefarim tell us that the root of each individual neshama originates from one source neshama called כנסת ישראל which means the gathering of Yisrael. Therefore, in our very essence we are essentially one. It is for this reason that the Torah can command and demand from us with the directive as ואהבת לרעך כמוך because in truth the other Yid is כמוך משכנך! What then distracts us from feeling this unity and allows us to get into machlokes and anger with other individuals? The culprit is not the neshama but rather the גוף. The neshama does not take up any space but earthliness does. Two bodies cannot stand in the same place.

When we recite the kedusha and the words of קדוש קדוש, we elevate our bodies. Why? The answer is that order to acquire holiness and become sacred, one must be willing to sacrifice some earthliness and materialism. The same applies to achdus. Physical objects separate and blind us from seeing the source of all neshamos to which we all belong and nurture from. Physicality creates jealousy, strictness, הקידות, pettiness, animosity, greediness, hatred, resentment, anger selfishness etc. The Pri Tzadik writes (Kedoshim 5)

שכתב בזוהר הקדוש דהנשמה היא דנקראת אדם והגוף נקרא בשם אדם והנשמה טרם החלבשה בגוף היהת נקייה וטהורה והגוף מושכח לחמדת עולם הזה

The Zohar writes that the neshama is called אדם and the body is called גוף. The neshama before it was clothed in the body it was pure, and it is the body which schlepps it to earthly pleasures.

One of the mitzvos that helps a person to seek less earthliness is Shemitta. The Torah commands that six years you could work the land but on the seventh it must be a Shabbos to Hashem. During this year the landowner must renounce his ownership to these properties and it becomes ownerless for everyone to use it even male and female slaves. You are no longer the proprietor and everyone else possesses equal rights. The Shemitta emphasizes that Hashem is the real proprietor on your property from beginning to end. Interesting that the words one and own really should be pronounced the same. There is no letter w before the word one only the letter o. This says that the only owner of everything in the universe is the power called ONE ה' אֶחָד.

This awareness frees the neshama from the clutches of the body and its gravity to earthliness. Then neshama during Shemitta regains its reign over the body and the Yid gets a refresher course in what true achdus means which is portrayed by the title אֶחָד. Yovel brings a deepening of this awareness since your land that you owned and worked on for years must be returned to the original owner way back then.

There is a story (I cannot verify its truth) of two close brothers who came before a Rav arguing the issue of ownership of a particular property after their father passed away. No one could bring proof that it was him whom the father told it was his רַיִשׁ. So the Rav said please take me to the land and I will ask it who is the rightful owner. They both showed him the property and he bent down and put his ear to the earth as if it was telling him something. They stood there astonished because they never saw anything like this before. As he rose he told them that the earth informed him that you both belong to it. What he meant to convey was that here we have a situation where no one has proof and yet because of this earthliness that you both possess you are allowing this machlokes to separate your two families forever and for generations to come when you won't even be here. My advice to you is to split the land and don't split your brotherhood.

This is why Shemitta in particular is connected to Har Sinai. It was the standing opposite Har Sinai when Am Yisrael attained the highest level of achdus כָּאֵשׁ אֶחָד בְּלֹב אֶחָד. They reached such a level of spirituality that their bodies were like neshamos. They experienced being bonded to the source neshamah above. This learning experience of achdus is repeated every seven years during the Shemitta.

Chazal (Baba Metziah 114b) tell us אַתֶּם קָרְיוּם אָדָם. You Yisrael are called the title of אָדָם. This derasha is applied to the passuk אָדָם כִּי יִמּוֹת בְּאַהֲלָיו (Bamidbar 19,14) that if a person enters a tent where there is a corpse he becomes tamei. This applies only to Yidden since the Torah used here the word אָדָם to exclude goyim. What is so special about this title אָדָם? The meforshim explain that there are four words in Lashon Hakodesh which express the term man: אִישׁ גָּבֵר אֲנָשׁ אָדָם. They all possess a plural form except the term אָדָם which possesses the singular form. Only Am Yisrael merits this reality because we all originate from the same one neshama.

I am always amazed that with all the friction that existed and exists today between the different sects in Klal Yisrael, when it comes to Lag B'omer there is an unbelievable achdus between everyone, young and old, Chassidish, Litvish, Mizrachi, Sefardim, Ashkanzim, Dati Leumi, Chareidim, Baalei Teshuvah etc. On this day no one looks at the type of clothing, shoes, sneakers, payos, dialect, yarmulke, hat or color of skin. Why is that? I humbly think because Rav Shimon revealed the סוד הַתּוֹרָה, the deep secrets of the Torah, those which are concealed under many layers. On his yartzeit when he revealed these inner secrets, we too can merit to take an inner look and peek behind those layers of every Yid, to feel beyond the external surface, connect to our brethren's inner neshama, and to draw light from the place where all Yidden are one. On Lag B'omer everyone is שחורה אַנְיָנָה black and beautiful. On the outside I might look in your eyes as an undesirable which doesn't fit into your mold because of my struggling, but you should recognize that inside in my core I am as beautiful as you.

In the shir of בר יְהָנִי we sing "נַעֲשֵׂה אָדָם נִאמֵּר בְּעִבּוֹרֵךְ" Let us make man" was said because of You. Why do we attach the creation of אָדָם to Rav Shimon? According to above, אָדָם is the title given to highest level of achdus. The

sefarim tell us that Adam Harishon contained all the neshamos of Am Yisrael in his body. Each neshama was situated in a different part of his body but they were nevertheless all bonded as one. For example, if one accidentally hit his hand with the other one, he doesn't think of reacting negatively to his hand that hit since it is the same body and why would he hurt himself? The neshamos in Adam Harishon were in full achdus mode even inside his body. This is how it was meant to be even with different bodies. ואַהֲבָת לְרֹעֵךְ כִּמְךָ. Until we had the revelation of the secrets of the Torah, Klal Yisrael as a whole did not merit to see, or even realize the reality of this secret that lies in every Yid. There was a shortcoming in the shelaimus of this achdus until Rabbe Shimon and the revelations of the סוד הַתּוֹרָה. On his yartzeit when he revealed these secrets, that is the day that we are infused with his lenses and we can glean from this achdus even though our bodies are separated. נַעֲשֵׂה אָדָם נִאמֵּר בְּעִבּוֹרֵךְ. The manner in which Adam Harishon was created with the achdus of all neshamas of Am Yisrael, was made possible for all Klal Yisrael on the day when Rabbe Shimon revealed the Zohar Hakadosh.

Lag B'omer is the day when title of אָדָם becomes prominent and available for everyone. But why does it leave so fast the day after? Every time when there is Lag B'omer of incredible insane achdus. Yet in contrast, the division between all the varying sects in Klal Yisrael gets increasingly worse as days and months pass which enlarges a kitrug against our title אָדָם. In the tragedy of this past Lag B'omer of which we are still reeling from, an exact number of 45 neshamos died. This maybe points to the gematriah of אָדָם. Rabbe Shimon brings to us every year the awareness to our מילָה of achdus אָדָם נִאמֵּר בְּעִבּוֹרֵךְ, and yet we find ourselves losing grip on this unique crown day by day.

It took 45 neshamos gematriah אָדָם to bring this message home. How many incredible stories and displays of achdus, mesiras nefesh, chesed, tzedakah emerged from the moment that the tragedy began until today. A Talmid told me a story that I can't get out of my head. One Yid ztl, as he was already lying on top of others and being trampled by more who were falling, could be heard saying over and over again "I am mocheil everyone for stepping and falling on top of me". Only a Yid could be thinking and talking this way during his last breaths of life. I am not makpid!!!!!! וּמֵעַמְקַדְּשָׁאֵל.

Unfortunately tragedy unites. By happening on Lag B'omer in the height of the simcha, we now carry this achdus of Lag B'omer further than usual, into days when we would have normally fallen back into the old פִּרְזָד behavior. The passuk mentioned above alludes to this tragedy. זֹאת הַתּוֹרָה אָדָם כִּי יִמּוֹת בְּאַהֲלָיו. This is the Torah – אָדָם. It was given to Yisrael who are called the title of achdus כָּאֵשׁ אֶחָד בְּלֹב אֶחָד. Every Yid corresponds to a letter or part of a letter in the Torah. If it is missing, the Torah is passul. If one ה' despises another Yid and would rather get rid of him, it is tantamount to erasing that letter or part of it. The passuk continues אָדָם כִּי יִמּוֹת בְּאַהֲלָיו that in order to bring Klal Yisrael back on the track of achdus, and fight against the kitrug, אָדָם that 45 neshamos יִמְתֹּה will die in the Ohel of Rabbe Shimon. אַהֲלָו means light as it says in (Iyuv 29,3) בָּהֲלוּ נָרוּ עַל רַאשֵּׁי. At the Ohel of Rabbe Shimon where it is known that on Lag B'omer for minhag Yisrael is to be bountiful with displays of fires.

Please don't stop what your are doing for the deceased and for their families. Everyone's heart is broken and saddened yet at the same time whole and united with Klal Yisrael. Hashem is sending us a window of tikkun during these remaining days of sefirah leading up to Matan Torah where we once stood with the acdus of כָּאֵשׁ אֶחָד בְּלֹב אֶחָד. How can we celebrate the Yom Tov of Matan Torah if we have letters or parts of letters missing in the Torah. Hashem is giving us today the opportunity of experiencing the original Matan Torah כָּאֵשׁ אֶחָד בְּלֹב אֶחָד. Give the niftarim z'l the zechus that they, by being the sacrifices, have once in for all permanently united us to be אָתָן צָאַנִּי צָאַן מֶרְעֵתִי אָדָם אַתֶּם אַנְיָנִים (Yechezkail 34,31) and may we merit to the fulfillment of the passuk - Rav Brazil Gut Shabbos

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Parshas Behar-Bechukosai

Rav Yochanan Zweig

Mi Field Es Su Field

And Hashem spoke to Moshe on Mount Sinai, saying... (25:1)

Parshas Behar begins with an in depth discussion of the laws of shemittah. Rashi (ad loc) famously asks: Why is the discussion of the laws of shemittah juxtaposed with “Mount Sinai”? In other words, why are the laws of shemittah specifically attributed to being given on Mount Sinai when all the other mitzvos were also given at Mount Sinai?

Rashi answers that it is to teach us that just as shemittah was taught at Mount Sinai, with all of its general rules and specific rules, so too all the mitzvos were given at Mount Sinai with their accompanying general and specific rules. Yet Rashi does not explain why shemittah is chosen as the representative example of this concept. Why was shemittah picked as the specific mitzvah to teach us what was taught at Mount Sinai?

When the Torah relates the events leading up to Kabolas HaTorah, Rashi comments on the verse “and there Yisroel camped before the mountain” (Shemos 19:2). Rashi explains that a remarkable change had come over the Jewish people; “It was like a single man with a single purpose.”

There are two methods in which groups of people can come together. The first way is when a disparate set of personalities unite because they have a singular purpose; this is how Rashi describes Pharaoh rallying his Egyptian nation to chase down the Jewish people who were escaping Egypt – “a single purpose, a single man” (Shemos 14:10).

The second way is when people come together and unite as individuals and merge their identities into “a one,” and afterwards find a common purpose to fulfill the desires of the merged identity. This second method is what happened at Mount Sinai. Rashi (ad loc) explains that the encampment at Mount Sinai was without any fighting or bickering. In a similar fashion, a person’s left hand doesn’t feel imposed upon by the right hand nor is the right hand jealous if the left hand is being massaged, because they both serve the greater “whole.” So too, at Mount Sinai Bnei Yisroel achieved a oneness that allowed them to live together in absolute harmony. This is how Bnei Yisroel received the Torah.

This kind of oneness applies to the family unit as well. Upon entering your parents’ home, you feel perfectly comfortable going into their fridge or taking food from their pantry. However, the biggest challenge of keeping the mitzvah of shemittah is that of letting others come into one’s field and take whatever they desire. The first Midrash Tanchuma on this week’s parsha describes the violators of shemittah (those who profited by selling the fruits in their field instead of letting whomever wanted to enter their field and collect it for free) as having a “begrudging eye.” Meaning, instead of feeling that we are all one big family and that we need to take care of each other, each landowner felt imposed upon by other Jews. We were NOT a united whole. Shemittah is the one mitzvah where we need the unity that we attained at Mount Sinai. That is why it is the representative mitzvah chosen to convey what happened at Mount Sinai.

Unfortunately, this “begrudging eye” was an epidemic of epic proportions. Rashi, in the second half of this week’s double parsha (26:35), makes the calculation that NOT A SINGLE SHEMITTAH was observed once the Jews entered Eretz Yisroel. In fact, our first exile, after the destruction of the first Beis Hamikdosh, lasted for seventy years – exactly one year for every shemittah that Bnei Yisroel failed to keep. Of course our current exile, which led to the destruction of the second Beis Hamikdosh, was because of sinas chinom – baseless hatred between Jews.

Nevertheless, shemittah is the representative mitzvah for all that ails the Jewish people because it represents the loss of the lesson that we learned on Mount Sinai. The Torah is teaching us that the only way to ever recover from our painful and way-too-long diaspora is to start treating all Jews as family and begin caring and looking out for each other. When we recognize that we

are all cells of a single body there will be no more fighting or disagreements and this will bring the ultimate redemption.

Here and There

If you walk in my statutes, and keep my commandments, and do them... (26:3)

Rashi (ad loc) is bothered by why the possuk would first list “statutes” (chukim in Hebrew) and then use the catch-all phrase of “commandments” (mitzvos in Hebrew) in the second half of the possuk. After all, the Torah’s statutes are all included in the commandments of the Torah; so why mention statutes at all? Rashi answers that the word “chukim” here refers to the concept of being immersed in Torah study. That is, each person has an obligation to become seriously involved with the study of Torah.

Targum Yonason Ben Uziel (ad loc) is seemingly bothered by the same question, but he takes a different approach: “chukim” refers to those laws that are given without a discernible (or an accompanying) reason for doing them, the way a chok is commonly understood, whereas the word “mitzvos” refers here to dinim (laws of social justice). But Targum Yonason’s understanding of the word mitzvos seems a bit problematic, after all the word mitzvos is all encompassing as there are many types of mitzvos; why should it be limited to the laws of social justice?

The Mishna in Peah (1:1) reads: “...These are things the fruits of which a man enjoys in this world, while the principal remains for him in the World to Come: Honoring one’s father and mother, acts of kindness, and bringing peace between a man and his fellow. But the study of Torah is equal to them all.”

Maimonides, in his commentary to this Mishnah, states a very interesting principal of how a person is rewarded for doing the mitzvos: “There are two types of mitzvos; 1) those mitzvos that are between an individual and Hashem such as teffilin and tzitzis, observance of Shabbos, and the prohibition against idol worship, and 2) those that are between an individual and his fellow man, such as the prohibition against stealing and otherwise hurting another, the obligation to love others, and honoring one’s parents.” Maimonides continues: “Those mitzvos that are between man and Hashem are rewarded in the next world. Mitzvos that are between an individual and his fellow man are rewarded both in this world and in the next.” Maimonides is explaining a basic principal of reward; mitzvos as they relate to the development of the human soul, in general, are an eternal concept.

Therefore, their proper reward is in the next (eternal) world. But there are also mitzvos that have substantive benefits to others in this world. These mitzvos are also rewarded in the next world, but because they have positive effects in this world, the “interest” on the “principal” is paid to the individual in this world as well. This is what the Mishna means by the “fruit” is enjoyed in this world but the principal remains for the World to Come.

This week’s parsha is introducing all the benefits in this world of keeping the mitzvos. The reason Targum Yonason Ben Uziel translates mitzvos as the commandments related to social justice is because he agrees with Maimonides that those are the only mitzvos that are rewarded in this world as well as the next.

Fascinatingly, the Mishna equates the study of Torah to all the mitzvos. In other words, there are tangible benefits to this world through the study of Torah. Perhaps this is what the Gemara (Brachos 64a) means when it says “Torah scholars increase peace in the world.” The Gemara in brachos ends with the statement explaining that those scholars are builders of the world and increase the peace within it. This might also explain why Rashi understands “Bechukosai” to mean immersion in Torah study.

Did You Know...

This week’s parsha contains many important themes that were often repeated in the Jewish people’s history. Bechukosai opens with a bracha, a very generally-termed promise of the good things that will happen if we do what we are supposed to do (studying Torah and keeping certain mitzvos). Then, it tells of the bone-chilling tochacha, the five stage admonition that tells us in very specific and certain terms what will happen to us if we fail to earn the bracha, each more severe than the last.

Finally, we learn of Hashem's promise to preserve us, even when we are at our lowest.

The Mishnah, in Megillah 31a, relates that we are to read the tochacha on fast days (not our custom) and that one may not divide the tochacha (according to Rashi referring to that of Parshas Bechukosai) into more than one aliyah. Interestingly, the halacha not to break up the tochacha only applies to the one in Vayikra, not to the tochacha in Devarim. This is also taught in Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 428:6). The Gemara there gives two reasons for this rule. One is based on Mishlei 3:11, "My son, don't be disgusted with Hashem's mussar." Rashi explains that if we divide the tochacha, it will appear as if we stopped in the middle because the person receiving the first aliyah was disgusted with it.

The second reason is offered by Reish Lakish, who explains that one should not recite a bracha on punishments. Therefore, we begin the aliyah a few posukim before the tochacha and don't stop reading until a few posukim after it is completed. If we would separate it, the second aliyah would invariably have to recite a bracha on punishments.

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Perceptions

By Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Dedicated to the speedy recovery of Mordechai ben Chaya

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Behar

Bigger Picture

Friday Night

ON ONE HAND I'd rather not talk about it, especially so soon after it happened. I do not know all the facts, nor can we know all of them. Our insatiable need for meaning, especially when it comes to tragedy, compels us to look for it everywhere we can. But without prophecy, who can really know why God does what He does, and why one person is saved when another is not?

On the other hand, it doesn't seem right not to say something, and act as if it is business as usual when it clearly is not. It is like what happened when Nadav and Avihu died, when the Jewish people went from the heights of spiritual celebration to the depths of tragic mourning. The video clip taken right before the catastrophe in Meron shows an area packed with Jews feeling tremendous achdus and singing heartfully for the coming of Moshiach. It makes this even more painful.

Some would argue that this was an accident waiting to happen, that the potential for it to occur has been there every year. The safety conditions were not great, especially during the time of Corona and at a time that mutations are making rounds. It's as if the miracle simply ran out.

The Gemora says that during the years of Rebi Elazar ben Shimon's suffering, no one died prematurely (Bava Metzia 85a). But how does the Talmud even know this, when it says that one's day of death is a secret not shared with man (Shabbos 153a)? It also says that Moshe died earlier than he should have though he lived exactly 120 years, something that was decreed back in Noach's time (Sha'ar Hapesukim, Noach).

In Sha'ar Hagilgulim it says that people die "young" because their soul has finished its rectification for that lifetime. Since it cannot get its next level without first dying and reincarnating, they are taken "early" for their own benefit, so they can get on with their overall tikun.

But their family does not know this. As far as parents are concerned, their child is destined to live a full lifetime, to grow up, mature, marry, and have a family of their own. We always worry about the safety of our loved ones, but do not anticipate those concerns coming true. Certainly not when those loved ones go to a Lag B'omer gathering at the kever of one of the greatest tzaddikim to have ever lived, on his very yahrzeit...on a day that also marks

the time Rebi Akiva's talmidim stopped dying. May God comfort all of them.

I once spoke to someone who told me that he adds to the list of his daily prayers that when his time comes, God should take him while in the middle of doing a mitzvah. He said that he hoped it would be while in the middle of the Shemonah Esrai, while praying with a lot intention, and ideally, during the blessing that praises God. One of his greatest fears is not dying, but breathing his final breath while doing something meaningless.

Even the evil Bilaam came to appreciate this idea, with the help of prophecy, saying:

"May my soul die the death of the upright and let my end be like his." (Bamidbar 23:110)

Maybe the miracle simply ran out. Or maybe God has something else in mind yet to unfold, and it just cost us the lives of these elevated 45 souls. "Eretz Yisroel," it has been said, "was built on the ashes of the Holocaust." There will be discussions about safety. There will be finger pointing to distribute the blame. There will be criticism about the behavior of those involved directly and indirectly. But how many people will rise above all of it, and accept that the cheshbonos of God are beyond us?

Shabbos Day

THE SECOND HALF of this week's reading is Parashas Bechukosai with its blessings for obedience and its 49 curses for disobedience. The Talmud teaches that God works middah-k'neged-middah, measure-for-measure (Sanhedrin 90a). A Torah Jew is raised with the idea that getting good usually means we have done good, and getting bad usually means that we have acted badly.

Hester panim, when God hides His face from us, does not mean that the rule changes, as Rashi explains. It just means that we won't be able to see how the "measure" we received was in response to the "measure" that we did. But as the Talmud says, God is not a vatran, meaning He never usually ignores the thing we do right or wrong. If He does, that person is in worse shape than the one getting punished.

So when 45 people die "tragically," many naturally assume that someone is being punished for something. Nadav and Avihu may have been greater than Moshe and Aharon, but the Talmud cites at least three reasons why they warranted death. As the Talmud states, God deals with righteous people to a hairsbreadth (Bava Kamma 50a), making insignificant sins to us reprehensible sins to God.

Chizkiah Hamelech almost died in this world and the next one because he held off having children (Brochos 10a). And it wasn't as if he didn't want to have children so he could travel lighter, like many today. He had learned through prophecy that his son would turn the nation to idol worship, and had denied himself the mitzvah and pleasure of fathering children to save the nation.

And yet God's response was not only to cut Chizkiah—the man who was almost Moshiach (Sanhedrin 94a)—down in this world, but to cut him off from the next world as well! After being told that he was wrong to try and second-guess God by Yeshaya Hanavi, he did marry and fathered Menashe who, as prophesied, turned the nation to idol worship.

Aharon had it right. After his two sons died before his very eyes, and though Moshe consoled him by speaking highly of them, Aharon chose silence as his response. Yes, his sons had erred gravely, but he too had made the mistake of being involved with the golden calf, even though he had done it for all the right reasons. In fact, he may have known that all four of his sons were supposed to have died, and would have had it not been for the prayer of Moshe.

The bottom line? There were a bunch of straws on the camel's back, and who knows which one broke it? And when you factor in concepts like "alilus" and similar ideas that emphasize the hidden and mysterious ways of God, is there any better response than silence?

The blessings and the curses teach us that God takes note of and cares about what we do, so we should as well. But by no means do they open a clear view of God's reactions to the actions of man. The only clear thing we can

count on with complete faith is that everything God does is just and good (Brochos 61b). Not because we believe blindly, but because God made a point of telling us, and that He showed us that this is true (Devarim 4:35). What happened in Meron on Lag B'omer, like every last thing in history, was set in motion at Ma'aseh Bereishis. Forty-five people were meant to die as they did. And God, being above time, even knew which 45 people specifically would die that day, at the precise moment they did. Not knowing this, and not even suspecting it would happen, we can only experience shock and great sadness. We are forced to call upon levels of emunah we haven't had to for some time now, especially the families and friends directly affected.

Seudas Shlishis

THE OTHER THING people forget to do is consider the "Big Picture." Life is so involving, so incredibly distracting, that we lose sight of the overall plan for Creation. This year is 5781. The Roman Exile began around 3698, over 2,000 years ago. To us that is ancient history, but to history it was the beginning of the fourth and final exile that we are now in the process of completing. We're as connected to that time period as we are to the one just before our own. It's all one history.

But why stop there? The Roman Exile is just one of the four hinted to in the second verse of the Creation story, the one about null and void, etc. What happened last week in Meron, and countless other places around the world we don't even know about, is rooted in that second verse about Creation. But why stop there? Everything that goes wrong in history is rooted in what went "wrong" in history before our world even began. Even the Talmud talks about the "974 Generations" that "existed" prior to Creation, though it seems from the Talmud that they never really existed until after Creation (Shabbos 88b; Chagigah 13b).

Kabbalah says differently. According to Kabbalah, not only did the 974 Generations exist, but they were the first to actualize evil, making possible the sin of Adam Harishon and expulsion from Paradise. Expulsion made possible the world we now know in which God's Presence seems to fluctuate, confusion seems to reign, and all kinds of things go wrong in every generation since.

That's why, as the verse says at the beginning of Behar, God took us out of Egypt to bring us to Eretz Canaan, to be our God. From Day One history has been about Tikun Olam—World Rectification. And once Adam failed to do that, a story unto itself, then history just seemed to whip about like a hose pipe that has gotten out of hand. The question since then has not been, "Why did that bad thing happen?" but, "How come more bad things haven't happened?"

Melave Malkah

WHEN A WATER pipe bursts, it usually catches us by surprise. Since the walls of the pipe do such a good job at keeping the water inside contained, we forget about the pressure they "feel" moment-to-moment from the water inside. The walls say, "No, no, no, we must not let you go!" but the water says, "Yes, yes, yes, we will burst through you with much stress!"

History is the water in the pipe, crazily anxious to fix the world and bring Moshiach. It only knows exile and redemption, hates the former and yearns for the latter. If only we could say the same thing about ourselves.

But we can't. For reasons we cannot control, and for some that we can, we lose our focus. One of the most uplifting things about being exposed to Kabbalah, is how it helps a person to remain focused on the BIG Picture, on the need to end exile and actualize redemption, even while enjoying the niceties of the world. It reminds you about the pressure inside the "pipe," and makes you wary of potential "leaks."

I particularly found it moving to hear those at Meron singing in unison about awaiting Moshiach's arrival. It was one of those moments, one of those rare moments these days, when people were focused on the right thing. I didn't wonder how this could happen to them because of it, but it occurred to me that it specifically happened because of it. It was as if it made them fitting more than everyone else that day to become the missing sacrifice to greatly further the cause of redemption.

I'm not saying that this is what happened. Vayidom Aharon—and Aharon was quiet. I'm just wondering out loud, not because I need to find meaning in tragedy, because we have emunah for that, and "All that God does, He does for the good." I am just saying that big events such as this one do not belong to our narrow-minded subjective realities of everyday life. They belong to a much larger picture of history that most people do not even recognize...but really ought to.

May God comfort all the families and friends of those who have suffered, which should be all of us on some level, and may the loss signal the imminent arrival of Moshiach Tzidkaynu and Geulah Shlaimah.

Note: I have, with the help of God, just completed my translation of Vayikra, Bamidbar, and Devarim of Sha'ar Hapesukim, and have decided to dedicate it in memory of those who died in Meron, especially since I finished on the same day. It was suggested to me that others might want to have a part in this, which they can do by using this link: https://www.paypal.com/donate?hosted_button_id=JNTUTEMPJ9QBU. Money dedicated will be passed on to funds set for families directly affected by the tragedy.

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www.matzav.com or www.torah.org/learning/drasha

Parsha Parables By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Drasha By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Parshas Behar - No One to Hide From

This week we read the Tochaha, a series of unimaginable curses that, with prescient clarity, foretold the horrors that were destined to befall our people in its wanderings in exile.

Listen to the tales of the inquisition, the cruelty of the crusades, and the horrors of the Holocaust. They reflect the Torah's stern admonitions of a wayward nation cast asunder from the land of its inheritance. It tells of the destruction of cities and the starvation their citizens. And one of those curses is about running from our enemies. "And you shall run the flight of one who flees from a sword, yet no one is pursuing you" (Leviticus 26:36). Simply explained, the Torah is telling us of the inherent fear that we shall have from the suffering that we have endured. We shall run at the slightest thought, even when there is no one in pursuit. Recently I saw a question: Is it not better to run from a figment of imagination than having to flee an actual pursuer? All in all, the imagination can not brandish a weapon!

As I listened to a survivor tell the tale of his survival and its aftermath, I wanted to offer a homiletic interpretation.

Al Feurstein is a retired businessman who volunteers in our yeshiva's financial office. But more than that, he is a Holocaust survivor who recently told the story of his ordeals of concentration camps and death marches that wracked his 16-year-old body but were unable to conquer his faith and conviction.

After enduring years of unspeakable horrors, the war ended and Al arrived in the United States. With the help of relatives, he resettled in Laurelton, New York. A few weeks after his arrival, he was invited to speak at his cousin's synagogue.

As he recounted his personal story and detailing the atrocities perpetrated by the Nazis and their willing civilian executioners, mouths fell open in literal disbelief. News had reached the US of mass murders and barbarism, but never had these congregants heard in full detail how men born to human mothers performed such horrific crimes.

What happened after his talk back then was most depressing, compounding the terror of his experience a hundredfold. A few prominent members of the congregation approached him. "Al, my dear boy," they coddled him. "You couldn't have seen and experienced those tales you told! We are sure you are shell-shocked from the terrible hardships you endured. After all, it could not have been all that bad."

The worst curse may actually be when no one believes that the other calamities happened. Perhaps that is also included in the curse “no one shall pursue you.”

A great Rosh Yeshiva was complaining bitterly about not feeling well. Some colleagues did not take him seriously at first, and humored him by saying that the pains were more in his mind than in his body. Before those pains were actually diagnosed as the disease that eventually claimed his life, he lamented: “The Talmud in Bava Basra (15a) debates the historical timeframe of the story of Iyov (Job). Some say he lived during the time of Moshe, while others maintain he lived during the period of the Judges, and yet others even claim that he lived during the period of Purim. However, there is one opinion that Job never existed at all and the entire episode is only a parable.”

Painfully, the Rosh Yeshiva sardonically commented, “that opinion was Iyov’s worst tzarah (distress). Imagine, after all the pain and suffering Iyov endured, there is an opinion that he did not even exist!”

Perhaps this week, the Torah alludes to another form of curse. “When there is pain and suffering, when there is persecution and oppression, yet the world ignores the cries of those suffering – as if “no one is pursuing,” — that is a terrible curse, too. Perhaps that curse is as unfortunate as when the aggressors are clearly recognized for whom they are. Often our greatest enemies are not recognized as such. We are told that they are our partners and our fears are nothing but paranoia. Even our past experiences are being discredited by deniers, scoffers and skeptics.

We cannot control the ears and eyes of our detractors, but we can do our utmost to tell the story and make sure that they live on. And we can do our best to hear, too, the pain and suffering of those who cry to us, to make sure we understand the pursuers behind the pain.

Good Shabbos!

Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Dedicated in memory of Rabbi Elias Lauer HaRav Eliezer ben Aharon Dovid of blessed memory — 26 of Iyar by the Lauer Family

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Unfathomable on Every Level

by Jonathan Rosenblum

Mishpacha Magazine

May 5, 2021

<http://www.jewishmediaresources.com/2106/unfathomable-on-every-level>
UNFATHOMABLE ON EVERY LEVEL

By Yonoson Rosenblum | MAY 4, 2021

Finally, we are united, if briefly. United, if only in anguish

I have never felt such a pall fall over the Torah community in Israel as that in the wake of the Meron nightmare.

The scene of the tragedy is a familiar one to all of us. Each of us has been to Meron many times to pour out our hearts at the kever of Rabi Shimon bar Yochai. And hundreds of thousands have joined the Lag B’omer festivities at one time or another. Even those of us with a fear of crowds, such as myself, have had arguments with yeshivah-age children eager to go to Meron on Lag B’omer, and when we lost those arguments, spent nights filled with apprehension of a disaster like that which occurred last Thursday night. At least two close family members told me after being in Meron on Lag B’omer that they would never go back; the feeling of being crushed was too frightening.

Beyond our ability to visualize the scene and imagine ourselves or those closest to us having been there, we are all feeling implicated in another way as well. When the v’nahafoch hu (turnabout) of Purim is itself reversed, and a day of celebration turned into one of mourning, who can avoid asking themselves the question, “What did I do to bring this about?”

On Leil Shabbos, my rav shared a story of Rav Elyashiv ztz”l during the 1982 Lebanon War. Every day, Rav Elyashiv would ask for the names of the

wounded so that he could daven for them. One day, he was informed that a rocket had fallen on Meron and killed a Jewish woman.

“If someone was killed in Meron,” he said, “then there is a powerful kitrug against Klal Yisrael in Shamayim.”

And Rav Elyashiv was speaking of one death, not 45; and of one day during the year, not of a day when we joyously celebrate the cessation of the deaths of the talmidim of Rabi Akiva.

No segment of the religious community was excluded from the pain: chassidim and Litvaks, Sephardim and Ashkenazim, chareidi and national-religious, Israelis and those from abroad who excitedly came to join with tens of thousands of their fellow Jews at Meron. Finally, we are united, if briefly. United, if only in anguish.

LATE ON MOTZAEI SHABBOS, I join hundreds of other Har Nof residents at the levayah of Elazar Yitzchak (Azi) Kolta, a recent bar mitzvah boy. His father is an acquaintance with whom I share many friends.

The levayah takes place in the main building of the cheder in which my grandsons learn. I’ve been there many times before for happier occasions — siddur parties, siyumim on the completion of a sefer of Chumash. Tonight, however, the only sound heard, as we approach the building, is that of heartrending wailing.

I cannot make out much of the hespedim, through the sobbing of Azi’s brother, brothers-in-law, and father, even though they are largely in English. But I do learn — and this was confirmed by friends of mine who are much closer to the Kolta family — that he was an unfailingly friendly, upbeat, and enthusiastic young man. No family member could remember him ever being angry. He was once brought to tears by the fear of hurting someone’s feelings because everyone in the class wanted to sit next to him. That is fully believable as I survey the stunned faces of his classmates, still not quite at ease in their bar mitzvah hats, as they approached the mitah to ask mechilah. As we exit the building, one of the father’s closest friends relates how just less than a year ago, the father turned to him at Azi’s bar mitzvah and expressed his pride and joy in his youngest child — the only one fully educated in Eretz Yisrael, after the family made aliyah from Passaic. “This one we really got right,” he said.

At the shivah house, I hear more stories about Azi a”h that bring out his unique chein. Yesterday, the mailman was crying outside the building. He told a passerby, “He always helped me distribute the mail, and stopped to speak to me.” A day katter, three street cleaners came to offer condolences. “He always stopped to thank us for cleaning the streets,” they explain.

A building contractor who worked on the Koltais’ apartment related that his Arab workers won’t tolerate children around when they are working, but they let Azi follow them and observe what they were doing. One of the members of the shul in which the Kolta family daven pays a large amount each year to retain an empty seat next to him for the Yamim Noraim. But he was delighted to have Azi sit next to him. They had bonded, as chavrutas on a ski vacation, when Azi was eleven.

Azi seems to have had a premonition that his sojourn in this world would be a brief one. Last week, he rushed home from his nearby cheder every day to spend his 20-minute lunch break with his father, even though he did not eat. And he kept telling his mother in recent months, “I’m going away soon” — an ostensible reference to going to yeshivah ketanah, though he never explicitly mentioned it in those terms.

The pain reverberating from the families of those killed — parents, siblings, children — has touched each and every one of us. And that suffering does not even include the tens of thousands who were at the scene and will require a very long time to heal from the trauma.

THERE ARE TWO CLASSIC Jewish responses to tragedy. The first is that of Aharon HaKohein after the death of his two sons, on the joyous day of the dedication of the Mishkan: “Vayidom Aharon — Aharon was silent.” The other, that described by the Rambam in Hilchos Taanios (1:3), where he warns against those who fail to cry out and who dismiss tragedies as a natural part of existence. That is the path of cruelty, writes the Rambam, for it risks bringing yet greater tragedies in the wake of the current ones.

Both responses are correct, and both are necessary. We cannot know all Hashem's ways and calculations, and must not pretend otherwise. Please, no emails calling for the recitation of the following kapitlach Tehillim, as if that recitation is somehow the tikkun for what brought about the tragedy.

And yet we must each grasp for such hints in the Torah as we can, and seek to apply them to our own lives.

As I returned from delivering Shabbos food to my mother, the rabbi speaking on the radio relayed the words of one of the gedolim, who told him, "Before all explanations and all cheshbonos, we must first be much quicker to fargin our fellow Jews — slower to anger, quicker to sympathize, less jealous. On a day when so many Jewish neshamos have been lost, and so many others still hang in the balance, at the very least, let us value more highly all those Jewish neshamos that remain."

Here are a few of the hints I gleaned over Shabbos. In the Tolna Rebbe's Chumash shiur last week, delivered before the tragic events of Lag B'omer, he stressed how much each of us must strive to avoid causing any pain to a fellow Jew. The Rebbe began with the Rashi at the end of Emor (Vayikra 24:12). Rashi informs us that the mekallel was not placed in custody together with the mekosheh. That the latter was going to be put to death was already known; all that remained to be determined was the form of execution. The din of the mekallel, however, was not yet known. If he were not to be subject to the death penalty, then he would suffer from being placed together with the mekosheh, as he would anticipate that he was also to be executed. Such is the degree of sensitivity that must be shown even to one who has sinned greatly (and the mekallel was, in fact, put to death). Similarly, we are commanded to help our "enemy" reload his donkey if we should see his donkey stumble and fall. And why is he our enemy? According to the Gemara (Pesachim 113b), it is because he falls into the category of an evildoer whom the Torah commands us to hate. And yet the Midrash (Tanchuma) brings a case of a donkey driver who stopped to help his enemy reload his donkey, and how through the fulfillment of the mitzvah, the two became reconciled. The implication, said the Tolna Rebbe, is that it is the will of the Torah that we should be on good terms even with one whom it is legitimate to consider an enemy.

In his Leil Shabbos drashah, my rav informed us that every one of gedolei hador who had been asked about the tragedy had identified, in one form or another, sinas chinam (causeless hatred) as the culprit. Even a drop more hatred than is justified is an expression of the sinas chinam for which the second Beis Hamikdash was destroyed. Similarly, any hatred of another that has in it some element of personal interest is an expression of sinas chinam. The Tolna Rebbe told the story of a group of yeshivah bochurim who were going to confront someone they felt had spoken disparagingly of their rebbe. Along the way, they met Rav Gad Eisner ztz"l, the late mashgiach of Yeshivas Chiddushei Harim. He asked them whether they were going to confront that individual because he had spoken negatively about a great Torah leader, or because he had spoken negatively about their rebbe. The bochurim heard the message and turned back from their mission; they realized that it was also their own kavod they intended to avenge, not just the kavod haTorah.

In a shiur on the deaths of the talmidim of Rabi Akiva, given 20 years ago, Rav Moshe Shapira ztz"l put it bluntly — anyone who thinks their sin of not showing kavod to one another was some failure in mitzvos bein adam l'chaveiro is a fool. Rather, their failure to give the kavod (honor) due to one another was a much finer, more dakasdig failure, a lack of kavod haTorah. They viewed one another as just one more talmid chacham in the beis medrash, but not as a unique expression of Torah.

When we count something, we show how dear it is to us, and it takes on an importance such that it cannot be mevatel b'rov. The 32 days that we count during the Omer, which correspond to the deaths of the talmidim of Rabi Akiva, are the gematria of kavod. Our counting is the tikkun for the failure of Rabi Akiva's talmidim to properly understand what was singular, and therefore important, about every member of the beis medrash.

As the names of those neshamos lost at Meron were publicized, we sought out every detail available about them to be able to grasp something of their lives. We stared at their pictures and contemplated the magnitude of the loss. Two sets of brothers; fathers of eight, nine, and eleven children; the new father of an infant daughter. And we cried.

But had we seen those lost on the street the day before, especially if they did not belong to our particular group within the Torah world, we would likely not have noticed them at all. They would have been for us just another member of the collective of Torah Jews, but not unique individuals. And therein lies an aspect of the corrective — to learn to seek out the individuality of every fellow Jew.

I confess to an instinctive and powerful aversion to all attempts to map terrible tragedies to specific aveiros. But at the very least, we can use what has befallen us as a wake-up call to value each and every one of our fellow Jews as a singular expression of Klal Yisrael, with a unique contribution to make to revealing kavod Shamayim in the world. But to do that, we must first enter into the world of our fellow Jews and, at the very least, be sensitive to every drop of pain that they experience.

And if the lack of the most refined sensitivity to the kavod of their fellows as a unique expression of the tzelem Elokim, among the talmidim of Rabi Akiva, brought about, in Rav Shapira's words, a loss of Torah such that the world was almost returned to its original state of tohu, and Bar Kochba did not realize the potential that Rabi Akiva saw in him to be Mashiach, can we be surprised if we witness terrible tragedies in our day in the wake of blatant acts of disgrace to talmidei chachamim and open violence between factions, even during the days of Sefirah?

Enough already to machlokes; enough to all petty divisions.

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What is a Tree?

By Rabbi Yirmiyahu Kaganoff

Question #1:

Eggplants grow on a woody stem. Does this make the eggplant a tree and prohibit the fruit that grows during its first three years as orlah or not? Although this idea may seem strange to most people, at least one prominent posek held that eggplant is prohibited as orlah.

Question #2:

What is the correct beracha to recite when smelling carnations, lilies, or mint?

Question #3:

What is the correct beracha to recite before eating papaya, cane sugar, or raspberries?

Question #4: Question:

May someone plant tomatoes in his vineyard in Eretz Yisroel?

Although these questions seem completely unrelated, each query revolves around the same issue: What is the halachic definition of a tree?

It is usually easy to identify a tree. We know the obvious characteristics that define oak and apple trees, and it is clear that trees differ from plants that grow in a vegetable patch. However, from a halachic standpoint it is not always obvious whether many of Hashem's botanical wonders are trees or not.

It is critical to determine what fits the definition of a tree in order to clarify the following halachic issues:

1. What beracha one recites on its fruit.
2. What beracha one recites on its fragrance.
3. Whether the prohibition of orlah applies to its fruit.
4. How severe is the prohibition to destroy it (ba'al tashchis).
5. There are several agricultural halachos concerning kelayim, shemittah, and maaser, all of which are relevant only in Eretz Yisroel.

Let us clarify these five areas of halacha before we discuss the main focus of our article, in order to understand the ramifications of why we must know which plants are considered trees.

1. What beracha one recites on its fruit.

As the Mishnah teaches, the beracha before eating the fruit of a tree is borei pri ha'eitz, whereas the beracha on fruit that grows from the ground, such as peas, beans, cucumbers, and melons, is borei pri ha'adamah. (The botanical definition of a fruit is the fleshy part [technically, the developed ovary] of the plant that nourishes the developing seed. Many of the foods that we colloquially call "vegetables," are in

reality “fruits of the ground.”) Thus, it is important to ascertain how certain fruits such as bananas, papayas, and berries grow in order to determine whether they grow on what is halachically classified as a tree, in which case their beracha is ha’etz, or whether the plant upon which they grow is not a tree and the correct beracha is ha’adamah.

2. What beracha one recites on its fragrance.

Chazal established five different berachos on fragrances, one of which is “borei atzei besamim,” “He who created pleasant-smelling wood (or trees),” and another, “borei isvei besamim,” “He who created pleasant-smelling grasses.” Just as one must recite the correct beracha on a food before eating it, so it is important to recite the correct beracha on a fragrance before smelling it. We will see later that whether the closest English translation of atzei besamim is pleasant-smelling wood or pleasant-smelling trees depends on an interesting dispute.

Determining whether the correct beracha is atzei besamim or isvei besamim is even more significant than determining whether the correct beracha is borei pri ha’etz or borei pri ha’adamah for the following reason: If one recites borei pri ha’adamah on a fruit that should have been borei pri ha’etz, one fulfills the minimal requirement bedei’eved (after the fact) and should not recite an additional beracha of borei pri ha’etz. The reason for this is that every tree grows from the ground -- thus praising Hashem for “creating the fruit of the ground” when eating a fruit that grew on a tree is not inaccurate. Therefore, someone who is uncertain whether a certain fruit is “of the tree” or “of the ground” should recite borei pri ha’adamah before eating it.

However, when in doubt whether to recite atzei besamim or isvei besamim on a specific fragrance, one may not recite either beracha. This is because trees and grasses are mutually exclusive categories -- if something is a grass, it is not a tree and vice versa. Thus, reciting the beracha praising Hashem for creating pleasant-smelling grasses before smelling a tree is a beracha levatalah, a beracha said in vain, because it is inaccurate.

When someone is uncertain whether a plant is considered a tree or a grass, he should recite a third beracha, borei minei besamim, “He who created types of pleasant-smelling items,” even though this is certainly not the optimal beracha on this fragrance. This is equivalent to reciting the beracha of shehakol before eating an apple. One has fulfilled the mitzvah, albeit not in the optimal way, since an apple “deserves” a more specific praise.

3. Whether the prohibition of orlah applies to its fruit.

The Torah prohibits eating fruit that grew within the first three years of a tree’s life. Thus, if a particular plant is a tree, the fruit produced in its first three years is prohibited; if it is not a tree, the fruit may be eaten immediately.

Although orlah is an agricultural mitzvah, it applies outside Eretz Yisroel. However, there is a major difference between orlah on fruits that grow in Eretz Yisroel and those that grow in chutz la’aretz. In chutz la’aretz only fruit that is definitely orlah is prohibited, and one may eat fruit that is questionably orlah. This fact has major halachic ramifications. There is also a mitzvah of re’vai that requires redeeming the fruit of the fourth year. Ashkenazim follow the ruling that in chutz la’aretz the laws of re’vai apply only to grapes (Rema and Gra, Yoreh Deah 294:7), whereas Sefardim require the laws of re’vai on all fruit trees.

4. How severe is the prohibition to destroy it (ba’al tashchis).

Destroying a fruit-bearing tree without gaining benefit in the process is prohibited min HaTorah. Although one may not destroy anything without purpose, the Rambam rules that destroying a tree is a more serious prohibition (Hilchos Melachim 6:8, 10). Some poskim explain that only destroying a tree is prohibited min HaTorah, whereas destroying other items, including plants, is prohibited only miderabbanan, and therefore would have some leniencies.

5. There are several agricultural halachos concerning kelayim in a vineyard (kil’ei hakerem), shemittah, and maaser, all of which are relevant only in Eretz Yisroel. There are also halachos related to grafting one species onto the stock of another (harkavas ilan), which applies equally in Eretz Yisroel and in Chutz LaAretz.

One may not plant vegetables in a vineyard in Eretz Yisroel because of the prohibition of kil’ei hakerem, mixing species in a vineyard (Rambam, Hilchos Kelayim 5:7), although one may plant trees in a vineyard (Rambam, Hilchos Kelayim 5:6). In addition, if something is categorized as an edible plant, one must be careful not to plant it too close to another edible plant because of kil’ei zera’im, mixing species when planting. This mitzvah does not apply to trees.

OTHER LAWS

How one determines the year in which a plant grows differs between trees and plants. The cut-off point for determining the years of tree fruits is usually determined by Tu Bishvat, whereas for plants it is Rosh Hashanah. This affects the halachos of maaser and of shemittah.

In addition, which year of the maaser cycle a fruit belongs to is determined by whether its chanatah, which refers to a stage early in the fruit’s development, took place before Tu Bishvat or after; for a plant, it is determined by whether it is harvested before Rosh

Hashanah. Furthermore, a plant that grew uncultivated during the shemittah year would be prohibited because of the prohibition of “sefichin,” whereas the fruit of a tree would not be affected by this concern.

We now understand why it is important to determine whether a particular plant qualifies as a tree or not.

WHAT IS THE DEFINITION OF A TREE?

The Random House dictionary I have on my desk defines a tree as, “a plant having a permanently woody main stem or trunk, ordinarily growing to a considerable height, and usually developing branches at some distance from the ground.” If we exclude the qualifiers, “ordinarily” and “usually,” then this definition does not consider a grape vine to be a tree since it lacks height if not supported and does not develop branches some distance from the ground. Since we know that halacha considers grapes to be fruits of the tree, this definition will not suffice. On the other hand, if we broaden the definition of “tree” to include all plants that have a “permanently woody stem or trunk” we will not only include grape vines, but also probably include eggplant, pineapple, and lavender which all have woody stems. On the other hand, several plants, such as the date palm and papaya, fit the Random House definition as a tree and yet grow very differently from typical trees. Are all of these plants trees? Having demonstrated that the dictionary definition of tree is insufficient for our purposes, let us explore sources that may give us a halachic definition. The Gemara (Berachos 40a) states that one recites borei pri ha’etz if “when you remove the fruit, the gavza remains and produces more fruit; but if the gavza does not remain, the beracha is not borei pri ha’etz, but borei pri ha’adamah”. What is the “gavza” that remains to bear more fruit from one year to the next?

Among the major commentaries, we find three interpretations. Rashi translates gavza as branch, meaning that any plant whose branches fall off one year and then grow again the next is not considered a tree, even if the root and trunk (or stem) remain from one year to the next. There are berries whose stem remains from one year to next, but whose branches fall off during the winter (Tehillah Ledavid, Chapter 203). According to Rashi, the correct beracha on these berries is ha’adamah.

A second opinion, that of Tosafos, explains that “gavza” is the trunk or stem of the plant that remains from one year to the next and produces fruit (Ritva, Sukkah 35a). A plant whose root remains from one year to the next, but not its stem, is not a tree. Many perennial fruits do not have a trunk that remains from year to year. (A perennial is a plant whose root remains from one year to the next and grows each year without replanting.) A banana plant is a perennial whose entire structure above ground dies each year and then grows again the next year from the root. According to Tosafos, bananas are not trees but plants; therefore their beracha is ha’adamah, not ha’etz, and there is no orlah prohibition.

A third opinion, that of the Rosh and the Tur (Orach Chayim, Chapter 203), explains that any perennial is considered a tree and its beracha is ha’etz. If the plant must be replanted each year (i.e., it is an annual) to produce fruit, then the beracha is ha’adamah, not ha’etz. According to this understanding, the correct beracha on strawberries and bananas is ha’etz since they are both perennials (not annuals), whereas according to the other opinions, the beracha on strawberries and bananas is ha’adamah.

The Shulchan Aruch and the Rema (Orach Chayim 302:2) rule that one recites borei pri ha’etz if there is some type of stem that remains from year to year and produces fruit, but that the beracha is ha’adamah on perennials whose stem dies each year. However, it is disputed whether the reason we recite ha’adamah is because the Shulchan Aruch concluded like Tosafos, or because it is uncertain whether the beracha should be ha’etz (like the Rosh and the Tur), or ha’adamah (like Tosafos), and we recite ha’adamah because of this uncertainty (Maamar Mordechai 203:3). There are several halachic ramifications that result from this question as I will explain later.

IS A TREE ALWAYS A TREE?

Is the definition of a tree the same for the halachos of orlah and kelayim as it is for berachos?

Tosafos (Berachos 40a) cites a passage in Talmud Yerushalmi (Kelayim 5:7) that something may not qualify for the definition of a tree for the laws of berachos and yet be considered a tree for the laws of kelayim, whereas the Ritva (Sukkah 35a) contends that the definition of the Gemara (Berachos 40a) for berachos applies to orlah as well. Tosafos concludes that the beracha on most perennial berries is ha’adamah because the bush does not remain from year to year, even though the bushes have the status of trees concerning kelayim and therefore may be planted in a vineyard.

IS HEIGHT A FACTOR?

Are there any other factors that define a tree other than what the Gemara mentioned? Must a plant grow tall to be considered a tree?

The Magen Avraham (203:1) rules that even if a tree grows very short, the correct beracha on its fruits and berries is borei pri ha’etz. However, the prevalent minhag is to make a pri ha’adamah on berries that grow on plants which are less than three tefachim tall (about nine or ten inches), even though they meet all the other

requirements of trees. The reason for the minhag is that a plant with such short stature is not considered significant enough to be a tree (Chayei Odom 51:9; Mishnah Berurah 203:3).

However, we should note that although the custom is to recite ha'adamah on the fruit of these small perennial bushes, the fruit grown in the first three years of the tree's life is nonetheless prohibited because of orlah (Ritva, Sukkah 35a). Cranberries would fit into this category since they are perennial, yet grow on the ground of a bog. Thus, orlah applies to them, yet their beracha is borei pri ha'adamah.

We have now covered most of our opening questions, and plan to continue this discussion in a future article.

Man himself is compared to a tree (see Rashi, Bamidbar 13:20); and his responsibility to observe orlah, terumos, and maasros are intimately bound with the count that depends on Tu Bishvat. As Rav Hirsch explains, by observing Hashem's command to refrain from the fruits of his own property, one learns to practice the self-restraint necessary to keep all pleasure within the limits of morality.

The author thanks Rabbi Shmuel Silinsky for his tremendous assistance in providing agricultural information for this article.

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May 1, 2021

Rabbi Yitzchak Berkovits United in Grief

Tragedy is not to be dealt with by blaming others, but rather by doing our own personal soul searching.

Forty-something hours later and it's still not possible to digest.

Lag Ba'Omer commemorates the passing of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, the Mishnaic scholar and author of The Zohar, the source book of Torah mysticism. On the day of Rabbi Shimon's passing, the Jewish nation celebrates our endless potential of understanding beyond where logic can take us, and our ability to elevate ourselves and connect with the infinite source of all existence, The Creator.

In Israel where Rabbi Shimon is buried, tradition marks the day with bonfires and song, telling of the greatness of Rabbi Shimon. At his tomb in Meron, hundreds of thousands of Jews come to pray, to sing and dance around bonfires, and to connect with The Creator and with their fellow Jews. Unquestionably, the most beautiful aspect of the Lag Ba'Omer celebrations in Meron is the way Jews of every flavor come to celebrate together. Nothing warms the heart more than joining in a circle to dance with Jews of every ethnic origin and every Jewish affiliation. Not to mention the abundance of free food and drink provided by Jewish organizations and individuals from around the globe. It is perhaps the most vivid expression of that unspoken awareness that at the core we are all one and the same, and despite our ideological and cultural differences there is a deep love we all have for one another.

May the Almighty soothe our pain and may the Jewish nation united in grief remain united forever.

And that is what makes the tragedy so much more painful. How could this most pronounced festival of Jewish unity be marred by our inadvertently crushing one another to death?

Tradition has taught us that tragedy is not to be dealt with by blaming others, but rather by doing our own personal soul searching.

Yes, those who were trusted with the responsibility for the safety of the tens of thousands will have their performance investigated. But for the rest of us, the question of what went wrong must send us thinking about the sincerity of the love for one another that we were exhibiting. Do we perhaps crush one another with our statements and actions without considering the consequences?

For the families of the victims and for the young and old that were seriously hurt, life will never be the same. Let us all be sure that we not return to daily life as if nothing happened. We must internalize the destruction we are capable of causing, and teach ourselves to disagree when necessary but never to feel or express hatred.

May the Almighty soothe our pain and spare us from all tragedy in the future. And may the Jewish nation united in grief remain united forever.

<http://nleresources.com/2021/05/the-lag-bomer-tragedy/#.YJTeWrVKiMo>
The Lag B'Omer Tragedy

by Rabbi Avraham Edelstein | May 3, 2021

Any tragedy that happens to the Jewish people – or to the world in general – requires us to pause, check ourselves and do Teshuva on everything that needs it. The tragedy that just happened in Meron is no different. But there was surely something deeper going on.

The period between Pesach and Shavuos was originally meant to be a happy time. We became a nation at Pesach and we marched in seven short weeks to get the Torah, the purpose of that nationhood. The death of the students of Rebbe Akiva introduced an element of semi-mourning. An entire generation of scholars – 24,000, were wiped out – their Torah gone forever. For those who keep the first part, this ends with the joy of Lag B'Omer. Their Torah may be gone, but the light of the Zohar shone into the world through another student of Rebbe Akiva, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai.

The tragedy this Thursday night happened on Lag B'Omer, at the grave of Rebbe Shimon Bar Yochai. It is a tragic mystery made more so by the contradiction of what this time in that place means. We cannot fathom the reasons, because such things come from the hester Panim of Hakadosh Boruch Hu. Perforce, they are hidden. Perforce, they represent that part of our relationship with G-d where I realize that I cannot reduce G-d's thoughts to the level of mine. And I am relieved that G-d is so much bigger, deeper, more profound than that.

In the Daas Tevunos, the Ramchal states that at the end of time, G-d will need to speed up history at the end of days to make sure that everything is completed in time for Moshiach. History, said the Chofetz Chaim, will go faster and faster. In order to do this, G-d will activate a special hanhaga through which He will run the world. Let's call this the "fast-track hanhaga." Part of this is for G-d to use the suffering of Tzadikim to create the final Tikunim (lit. fixings) that we need in order to ensure the general Tikun – the Tikun Haklali – that is needed for Bias Ha'Mashiach.

The Holocaust, says Rav Chaim Friedlander, was just such an event. The Kedoshim who suffered and died produced a staggering amount of Kedusha, that ripple effects of which were felt in the unprecedented wave of Torah learning (when we would have expected the opposite to have taken place), the baal-teshuva movement, and more. (Nesivos Shalom).

The event of Lag B'Omer – in its timing, in its place, in the way it unfolded, and the people to whom it happened – all have the signs of just such an event. We must feel the tragedy and our tears must flow. And, simultaneously, we must feel the unleashing of the powerful Kedusha that the death of these Kedoshim – and the suffering of those injured – unleashed. [Rabbi Avraham Edelstein is the Education Director of Neve Yerushalayim College for Women and a senior advisor to Olami. Many of Rabbi Edelstein's foundational publications addressing the world of Kiruv appear on OlamiResources.com: Series on Kiruv and Chinuch, Commentary on Chumash and Yom Tovim, The Laws of Outreach, as well as contributing articles. Rabbi Edelstein has just published The Human Challenge available from Mosaica Press.]

from: matzavblasts@gmail.com <matzavblasts@gmail.com> via
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date: May 3, 2021, 6:42 PM
subject: Boy Won A Trip To Meron As A Prize For Learning. He Never Came Home

As the heartbreaking photos of the 45 men & boys lost in Meron continue to circulate, one face stands out in the particular. That of one of the smallest boys lost in the tragedy, 14-year-old Moshe Levy. Moshe, who parents describe as an "angel," had begged his parents for years to attend the Meron festivities. As a reward for his learning, his dream came true: He would go to Meron with his rebbi & the rebbi's son.

The rebbi, R'Avigdor Hayut, enjoyed the evening of singing and dancing with his 13-year-old son Yedidya, and his beloved talmid Moshe. As it became clear that the crowd was getting out of control, Hayut made the decision to head out, to keep the boys safe. He had no idea that the exit from the main concert area would become the site of the crush.

As they descended the metal ramp, Hayut and the boys were thrown to the floor despite holding hands. As the crowd overtook them, Hayut began to lose feeling in his body. It was only on Friday morning, as he regained his strength in the hospital, that he was able to attain the news he feared most: The two young boys were killed

CLICK HERE TO HELP THE FAMILIES OF THOSE LOST IN MERON

Reporters recorded heartbreak footage as Hayut arrived in a wheelchair to pay a shiva call to Moshe Levy's father. Both men are carrying the unbearable burden of losing a young son. Hayut, however, seems crushed by the responsibility of having been their caretaker at the time of tragedy.

"I did everything I could," said the cheder rebbi, breaking down into sobs. In a moment of inspiring warmth and strength, father David Levy places his hand on Hayut's lap to comfort him, and nods knowingly. Despite his overwhelming grief, he understands that no one person is at fault for the unthinkable tragedy.

Their interaction encapsulates a greater theme which has arisen since the disaster took place. Where resentment, anger, and blame were possible, Jews around the world have risen up to unite and support each other. Crowds of Israelis of all stripes lined up to donate blood to the wounded, secular TV anchors wept on live television, and hundreds have united to donate money to the victims' families as well.

Funds are being urgently raised by charity organization Vaad HaRabbanim to help the mothers, wives, and children of those lost in Meron on Thursday. The fund says that 42 young children lost their fathers.

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<https://ymlpcdn2.net/82ee7qsuavaewubyapayqaaaambqyqh/click.php>

from: Shabbat Shalom <shabbatshalom@ounetwork.org>

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date: May 6, 2021, 9:57 PM

Donny Morris Memorial Program

All of Klal Yisrael is mourning the loss of the 45 precious souls that were taken from us on Lag BaOmer. We are particularly pained by the loss of Donny Morris z"l (דונן דניאל בן אריה צבי ז"ל).

Donny was known for his **מידות**, sensitivity, passionate davening, and love of learning. In his limitless pursuit of growth in **עבودת ה'**, Donny Morris z"l established a rigorous schedule for himself, aimed towards maximizing his daily learning, as well as covering a broad range of Torah study. Donny's ambitious schedule serves to inspire each one of us to maximize our own potential in **לימוד התורה**.

The "Donny Morris Memorial Program" seeks to emulate Donny's strong commitment to living a life of growth in dedication to **לימוד התורה** and cultivating the most refined **מידות טובות**. This initiative seeks to fill the void that now exists following Donny's **פטירה**.

The goal of this project is threefold:

To take upon ourselves to improve and refine our character, **מידות**, and sense of **בון אדם להכיריו**;

To complete **שלישים** (ס' ש", ס' משניתה, ס' תב"ג) for Donny's schedule;

To have as many people as possible take upon themselves to learn a **סדר** of **לימוד** on Donny's schedule - for Thirty Days.

Please insert your name in any of the slots in the spreadsheets below, to follow in Donny's footsteps and continue to journey down the path that Donny set for himself. May all the learning done through this initiative serve as an **עליה** for Donny's sweet **שנה**

<https://sites.google.com/view/donnymorris/home>

fw from hamelaket@gmail.com

from: Destiny Foundation/Rabbi Berel Wein <info@jewishdestiny.com>

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subject: Weekly Parsha from Rabbi Berel Wein

Home Weekly Parsha BEHAR – BECHUKOTAI 5781

Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

The reading of these two sections of the Torah concludes the book of Vayikra – the book that contains most of the commandments given to the Jewish people on Sinai and for all eternity. One of the central commandments that appears in this week's reading is that of shmita – the rules regarding the sabbatical year that the Jewish people were to observe when they were in the land of Israel. This commandment, in many of its forms, remains viable today, at least as a rabbinic ordinance.

There is discussion that as the present Jewish population here in the land of Israel continues to grow and expand, there is a possibility that this sabbatical year ordinance will revert once again to its original status as a Torah commandment. But even in its present circumstance, as a rabbinic ordinance, it has strong influence over the everyday life of citizens of the State of Israel. Special arrangements must be made regarding agricultural produce grown in the Holy Land in this sabbatical year, and various ways have been found to enable the agricultural economy to continue to function according to Jewish law and tradition, even during the sabbatical year.

But the idea behind the sabbatical year remains fixed in the minds and hearts of the Jewish people wherever they may live. And that basic idea is simple: that the world and all its land belongs to and is subject to the will of the Creator, and that human beings are only temporary trustees over the land. One of the most difficult ideas to for people to accept is that life itself is transitory and temporary. We pretend we will be here forever and we live our lives accordingly, even though we are all aware of our mortality and the transient nature of human existence. We are always saving for tomorrow, even when we are quite old and advanced in years, and logically, really do not need to save for a tomorrow that, deep down in our hearts, we know we may never see.

We involve ourselves in future projects that can only benefit future generations, because we believe that somehow that future benefit and achievement will accrue to our credit when heaven balances the books, so to speak. It is this contradictory nature of human beings, to plan for a future that instinctively one knows one will not actually witness in this world, that really fuels all human progress and is the basis for the advancement of civilization over the ages.

All of this is based upon the realization that the sabbatical year imposes upon us, that there is no permanence for anything, and what we do achieve does not permanently belong to us. We are merely temporary custodians of the riches of the Almighty that He has bestowed upon his creatures in this world. This is really the sublime and internal message that the sabbatical year, with all its laws, ordinances, and adjustments, imposes upon us, and makes it a year of renewal and uniqueness.

Shabbat shalom Rabbi Berel Wein

Home In My Opinion TRAGEDIES

Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

It seems that, in spite of the best efforts of human beings and societies, tragedies are unavoidable in the regular course of human existence. The tragedy that we in Israel suffered on Lag B'Omer is still too fresh and the wound is too open to be able to assess it properly. There will be the commissions of inquiry, recommendations as to future security and crowd control, as well as a frenzied attempt to allocate blame for what occurred. But tragedies occur on a regular basis in all human societies, and they have done so since the beginning of recorded human history.

Natural disasters such as earthquakes and floods form an integral part of the new meta-narrative of life. People still build homes near volcanic mountains and on the shores of rising dangerous waters. Florida and Texas in the United States are the two fastest growing states in the country. Both are prone to severe hurricanes and the tragedies that accompany those storms. Yet people still willingly move there, knowing the danger, and convinced that, somehow, it will not affect them. That is the nature of human beings, and,

perhaps, human life could not continue and be of any purpose, if our nature on these matters was any different.

We all know that tragedy eventually awaits us in one form or another, but we do not and cannot live our lives based on the fear of impending tragedies or inevitable troubles. That is not how human beings operate, for human beings are basically optimistic, hopeful, and somehow convinced that they will escape the tragedies that have gone before them.

Built into the human personality and character is the ability to withstand tragedy, and even, to a certain extent, overcome it. It is this enormous gift of resilience, which is so characteristic of the human race, generally, and certainly of the Jewish people, particularly, that provides the impetus for life itself, and for civilization to expand and improve. It has been said that human beings are the only creatures who are constantly aware of their mortality. As such, they should be the least adventurous risktakers on the face of this planet. Yet, we know that this is not true, and that human beings follow the words of the great prayer that we recite on the high holidays, i.e., we risk our lives for our bread.

As human beings, we, somehow, can cope with tragedy of personal and national significance, and to move on with life and its demands. In fact, it is almost no exaggeration to state that the nature of human beings is to ignore tragedies, and not plan for them in advance as we move forward in life. I think that this is part of the makeup of the human personality, simply because we sense that within us there is immortality. No matter how great the tragedy and how severe the anguish, the ability to go forward is almost instinctive within human beings.

There will undoubtedly be many important lessons that will be learned from examining and dissecting the events that led to the great tragedy of this past Lag B'Omer. But after time passes, there will still be a demand by multitudes to visit the mountain of Meron on Lag B'omer, irrespective of the tragedy that occurred there. In fact, there probably will be a greater incentive to visit in the future, simply to illustrate and emphasize the resilience of the human spirit that lies innately within all of us.

I know that all of this sounds counterintuitive, perhaps unrealistic and irrational, but I think it is clear to all of us that human beings do not behave rationally and do not always see things realistically and accurately. In fact, it is the drive of unreality within us that pushes us forward and is the engine for human progress in all fields of human endeavor. Judaism has always viewed the commemoration of tragedy, not so much as a demonstration of the helplessness of human beings and a propensity for error, but, rather, as a beginning point for further self-improvement and human development. It encourages the dominance of this natural resilience that lies within us, and always points us in pursuit of a better society in the world with justice, compassion, and modest behavior. May it be the will of heaven to spare us from tragedies and help us develop our progress on our own initiative.

Shabbat shalom

Berel Wein

A Woman of Valor Has Been Found

by Rabbi Hayyim Angel *

Simple glass reflects the beam of light that shines on it only once. A precious gem, in contrast, reflects different sparks with its many facets; a single beam of light that shines on it is reflected and is returned to us greatly enhanced. ~ Feivel Meltzer [1]

INTRODUCTION

This analogy can serve as a guide for understanding a literary gem, Megillat Ruth. Seldom do we come across such an ideal society, characterized by hesed (loyalty, loving-kindness), heroes, and no villains. At worst, there are average characters such as Orpah, Boaz's foreman, and So-and-so who serve as foils to highlight the greatness of Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz.[2] R. Zeira's classic statement captures the essence of the megillah:

R. Zeira said: This scroll [of Ruth] tells us nothing either of cleanliness or of uncleanliness, either of prohibition or permission. For what purpose then was it written? To teach how great is the reward of those who do deeds of kindness (Ruth Rabbah 2:14).

Although it appears that hesed is the predominant theme of our megillah, there is considerably less clarity over how to define that hesed, or what other religious lessons emanate from the text of Megillat Ruth. Which characters truly epitomize R. Zeira's statement? What is the relationship between divine providence and human hesed?

Although the surface reading of the Book of Ruth appears idyllic and straightforward, many elements in the book that initially appear clear are more elusive after further scrutiny. Rather than limiting ourselves to one side or another, it is preferable to see how these viewpoints coexist. By doing so, one stands to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the text and its messages.

Mordechai Cohen sets out two criteria for ascertaining deliberate ambiguities in a biblical text: (1) one must establish the cogency of two separate readings; (2) one must demonstrate how the ambiguity contributes to the literary context by expressing something that could not be expressed in unambiguous language.[3] Taking this argument to a different level, one might contend that much in Megillat Ruth fits these criteria. This chapter will consider some of the major issues of the megillah with an eye toward its overall purposes.

THE FIRST FIVE VERSES: PUNISHMENT FOR SINS?

The Book of Ruth opens in a jarring fashion, with Elimelech, Mahlon, and Chilion dying at the outset. Some midrashim and later commentators contend that Elimelech and his sons deserved their respective deaths. They maintain that Elimelech left the Land of Israel,[4] or a starving community behind,[5] while his sons lingered in Moab and intermarried. [6]

Perhaps the juxtaposition of Elimelech's departure and his death and the juxtaposition of the sons' marriages and their deaths suggest these conclusions. However, there is a ten-year gap between the sons' marrying Moabites and their deaths (1:4). By including the lengthy time separating the two events, the megillah appears to exclude intermarriage as a direct cause of their deaths.[7] We also are not told how long Elimelech remained in Moab before he died. These uncertainties yield at least three possible lines of interpretation:

1. Elimelech, Mahlon, and Chilion simply died: They maintain that the family left during a famine for legitimate reasons. Ibn Ezra (on 1:2, 15) insists that Ruth and Orpah converted prior to their marriages to Elimelech's sons. The book's opening verses are primarily background setting the stage for the main story of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz, and should not be understood as punishment for sins.
2. This story is parallel to Job: Like Job, Naomi first complained about her God-given lot (1:20–21). The deaths and suffering at the outset of Ruth are theologically significant, but the reader is not told how.

Unlike the Book of Job, however, where God's direct involvement is discussed in the beginning and end of the book, in Ruth it is not. Additionally, the characters in Megillat Ruth played an active role in changing their fate, whereas Job did not. It is unclear whether Megillat Ruth was intended to parallel the Book of Job or whether the two books should be contrasted, with Megillat Ruth's characters held responsible for their original suffering and credited for their eventual happiness. [8]

3. This is a story of God giving just recompense: Elimelech and his family are punished for leaving a starving community behind. The unwarranted lingering of Mahlon and Chilion in Moab led them to intermarry, causing their untimely deaths. Likewise, the happy ending of Megillat Ruth may be viewed as God's reward for the acts of hesed performed over the course of the story.

Does the text teach divine recompense? This reading is possible, but no more compelling than a non-recompense reading. This uncertainty encapsulates our difficulty in pinpointing any one specific interpretation of the ephemeral characters in the opening verses of Megillat Ruth. The initially straightforward narrative contains significant ambiguities that will continue throughout the book.

NAOMI

A second ambiguity is evidenced in the character of Naomi. It is unclear whether she was a passive follower of her husband, or an active participant in the abandonment of the community (assuming that there was anything negative about their leaving). Sensitive to the vagueness of the text, several midrashim address both sides of the question:

He was the prime mover and his wife secondary to him, and his two sons secondary to both of them (Ruth Rabbah 1:5). [9]

Why did the text mention him, his wife, and his children? To teach that all of them were stingy (Ruth Zuta 1:2).

From the text, it is difficult to determine whether Naomi did anything wrong, if she was an innocent victim of her family members' sins, or if she was a victim of the unexplained deaths of her family members.

The motives behind Naomi's efforts to persuade her daughters-in-law to remain in Moab also remain elusive. Although Naomi emphasized the marital prospects of Ruth and Orpah (in 1:8–15), it is possible that she was driven by other considerations as well:

R. Samuel b. Nahmani said in the name of R. Judah b. Haninah: Three times is it written here "turn back," corresponding to the three times that a potential proselyte is repulsed; but if he persists after that, he is accepted (Ruth Rabbah 2:16).

Why did Naomi want to return them? So that she would not be embarrassed by them. We find that there were ten markets in Jerusalem, and they [the classes of people who shopped at each] never intermingled.... The people were recognized by their clothing—what one class wore, another would not (Ruth Zuta 1:8).

Ruth Rabbah 2:16 casts Naomi as unwilling to compromise Jewish religious standards. This view receives textual support from Naomi's observation that Orpah's return to Moab came with religious consequences as well: "So she said, 'See, your sister-in-law has returned to her people and her gods. Go follow your sister-in-law'" (1:15; cf. Ibn Ezra, Malbim).

In contrast, Ruth Zuta 1:8 depicts a less flattering portrait of Naomi. Her professed concern for the welfare of her Moabite daughters-in-law cloaked a desire to protect her own noble self image in Judean society. The inordinate emphasis on Ruth as a "Moabite" (seven times in this tiny megillah) could support this reading as well.

Despite the potentially complex nature of her concern for their welfare, Naomi certainly emerged successful by the end of the narrative. She had her estate redeemed by Boaz; she was esteemed by her neighbors; and Ruth's son was born into her family. It appears that there are several textually valid readings of Naomi's character:

1. Naomi as a paragon of hesed: Who could ask for a better mother-in-law than Naomi? Bereft of her husband and sons, with only Ruth and Orpah to comfort her, Naomi was more concerned with their welfare than with tending to her own loneliness. Moreover, Naomi never stopped caring for Ruth, helping her find security via matrimony. As a consequence of her hesed, God rewarded Naomi at the end of the megillah with family, friends, and land (4:14–17).

2. Naomi as self-serving: Although Naomi always verbally expressed interest in her daughters-in-law, she really was more concerned for herself. She joined her family in abandoning her community. She wanted to drive her Moabite daughters-in-law away because they would harm her social status upon return. Naomi knew she could benefit from Boaz's intervention; therefore, she orchestrated the encounter between Boaz and Ruth to help herself. Fittingly, the narrative concludes with Naomi's happiness—she took the child and had the blessings of her friends along with her land. Ruth is only a tangential figure in the megillah's climactic frame. [10]

3. Naomi as similar to Job: Naomi suffered without any explanation, complained against God, and then was restored in the end:

She said to them, Call me not Naomi; call me Mara; for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me (ki hemar Shaddai li me'od) (Ruth 1:20).

As God lives, who has taken away my judgment; and the Almighty, who has tormented my soul (ve-Shaddai hemar nafshi) (Job 27:2).

Although Naomi used similar language to that of Job, possibly indicating that she viewed herself as suffering unjustly, the narrator remains conspicuously noncommittal as to whether or not Naomi's story parallels that of Job.

4. Complexity: Naomi was concerned with herself, and also for Ruth. One might view the happy ending either as a consequence of Naomi's and the other characters' actions, or as a providential reward for her goodness, or some combination thereof. This view combines the first two explanations above, and each layer of motivation appears to be simultaneously sustained by the text.

BOAZ

Yet another ambiguity can be found in the person of Boaz. According to all readings, Boaz was a hero. He protected Ruth from harassment (2:9, 15) and helped her in other ways unbeknownst to Ruth (2:15–17). He provided sustenance for Naomi (3:15), completed the redemption of Naomi's field, and married Ruth (3:18–4:10). Boaz deserves praise for overcoming the anti-Moabite biases of Judean society.

However, Boaz allowed Ruth to glean for approximately three months (cf. Ruth Rabbah 5:11) and needed prodding from Naomi and Ruth before he took more substantial action. Why didn't he help earlier, especially given his awareness of Ruth's character and outstanding accomplishments (2:11–12)?

Perhaps the Moabite issue figures decisively in answering that question, since there was a stigma against marrying her. Additionally, Boaz assumed that he was too old so Ruth would not be interested in marrying him (3:10–11). These reasons may explain Boaz's possible reluctance to marry Ruth; but how do we justify his allowing her to glean in his field for so long instead of giving her food and support directly? As Feivel Meltzer observes, "it is impossible to understand adequately why Boaz did not see it fit to visit the widows and attend their needs." [11]

Sensitive to these cues, some midrashim cast Boaz as one who acted kindly only when he knew he would receive something in return:

R. Isaac commented: The Torah teaches you that when a person performs a good deed he should do so with a cheerful heart.... If Boaz had known that the Holy One, blessed be He, would have it written of him that he "Gave her parched corn" (2:14), he would have given her fatted calves! (Lev. Rabbah 34:8).

Rabbah, son of R. Huna, said in the name of Rav: Ibzan is Boaz. What does he come to teach us?... Boaz made for his sons a hundred and twenty wedding feasts, for it is said, "And he [Ibzan] had thirty sons, and thirty daughters he sent abroad, and thirty daughters he brought in from abroad for his sons; and he judged Israel seven years" (Jud. 12:9); and in the case of every one [of these] he made two wedding feasts, one in the house of the father and one in the house of the father-in-law. To none of them did he invite Manoah, [for] he said, "Whereby will the barren mule repay me?" All these died in his lifetime (Bava Batra 91a).

Boaz certainly is a paragon of hesed. At the same time, however, these midrashim view Boaz's hesed as insufficient and motivated at least partially by his own interests. Both lines of interpretation are simultaneously supported by the text.

DIVINE-HUMAN CONTINUUM IN MEGILLAT RUTH

There is an apparent ambiguity in 2:20 concerning Naomi's gratitude upon learning that Ruth was gleaning in Boaz's field:

Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, "Blessed is he to the Lord, who has not abandoned His kindness with the living and with the dead."

or

Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, “Blessed to the Lord is he who has not abandoned his kindness with the living and with the dead.” [12]

It is unclear whether Naomi acknowledged God for orchestrating Ruth’s chancing upon Boaz’s field, or whether she blessed Boaz for his efforts in treating Ruth well and for his potential as a redeemer. Mordechai Cohen views this verse as intentionally ambiguous, highlighting the complex relationship between human and divine action in Megillat Ruth. This ambiguity runs throughout the megillah, as it often is unclear where human initiative stops and God’s intervention begins.

While Boaz blessed Ruth by saying that God should reward her for coming under His wings (tahat kenafav, 2:12), Ruth eventually realized that nothing would get done unless Boaz actively spread his “wings” over Ruth (u-parasta kenafehka al amatekha, 3:9). Earlier, Naomi had prayed that God grant marital security (menuhah) to her daughters-in-law (1:9); but she ultimately had to orchestrate the threshing floor scene to provide that manoah, “security,” for Ruth (3:1). One might view the happy ending as a consequence of the concerted actions of the characters. It is equally possible to view the human actions as mirroring God’s plan—the divine blessings people had wished on one another had been realized.

It is noteworthy that the only two times the narrator explicitly mentions God’s involvement are regarding the end of the famine (1:6)—which is presented only as something Naomi heard—and Ruth’s getting pregnant (4:13). [13] The omission of such references in the rest of the narrative leaves the extent of God’s involvement subject to speculation. According to one reading, the megillah teaches that God “withdrew” Himself to allow greater human action. According to another, it reveals God’s providential hand constantly assisting these paragons of hesed.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RUTH AND JUDGES

The opening verse of Megillat Ruth connects the narrative to the period of the Judges. What is the connection between the Dark Age of Judges and the display of hesed in Megillat Ruth, where the Judeans were religiously faithful and kind to one another?

The megillah does not offer greater precision in dating the narrative than that it occurred in the period of the Judges—a period spanning centuries. Some midrashim link Ruth to the time of the earlier judges, [14] while others identify Boaz with the later judge Ibzan (Jud. 12:8). [15] Malbim, however, suggests that the story of Ruth is not dated precisely, casting it as representative of the entire period.

How Megillat Ruth is representative of the period of the Judges, however, remains problematic. Malbim asserts that the opening verses of Megillat Ruth highlight the negative atmosphere of Judges. These verses demonstrate that people were concerned primarily for themselves, and this selfishness was characteristic of the period. According to Malbim, Megillat Ruth’s connection to the period of Judges is limited primarily to its opening verses. In contrast, the remainder of Megillat Ruth is characterized by hesed.

Alternatively, one might argue that Megillat Ruth is characteristic of the period, but in a more complex manner. Most people were generally righteous or at least average. However, the unwillingness of individuals to help one another except when they could gain themselves, demonstrates a general lack of hesed. The Talmud cited earlier regarding Boaz—one of the great figures of that era—captures this theme (Bava Batra 91a). Boaz certainly demonstrated hesed in the megillah; but the Talmud accuses even this hero of not inviting Samson’s father Manoah to his children’s wedding feasts since he would not receive a reciprocal invitation. To remedy this societal problem, and to break out from the cycle of the period, the Israelites needed an outsider like Ruth to teach them what true hesed was. One midrash captures this message:

God said: may Ruth, who is a convert, and who did not challenge her mother-in-law—come and rebuke Israel who has rebelled against Me (Ruth Zuta 1:7).

This midrash looks beneath a superficial reading of Megillat Ruth, where the Judeans are not depicted as “rebels.” Instead, the midrash forges an intimate connection between Megillat Ruth and Judges and determines the root problem inherent in Israel’s society to be selfishness.

CONCLUSION

Ruth is the only character in the megillah who is unambiguously positive, as she reflects genuine hesed. She sacrificed

heroically to accompany Naomi and to accept God. A textual parallelism points to Ruth being compared to Abraham in leaving her family to serve God:

The Lord said to Abram, “Go forth from your native land and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing” (Gen. 12:1–2).

Boaz said in reply [to Ruth], “I have been told of all that you did for your mother-in-law after the death of your husband, how you left your father and mother and the land of your birth and came to a people you had not known before” (Ruth 2:11).

In light of this comparison, one might argue that Ruth is portrayed even more favorably than Abraham. God spoke directly to Abraham and promised him reward. In contrast, Ruth came voluntarily and hardly could have expected anything but a lifetime of begging and discrimination in return for her sacrifices. Ruth also declined marriage opportunities with younger Judeans in order to marry Boaz in order to preserve Mahlon’s name.

The ambiguity of Ruth’s world is reflected in the many ambiguous characters and circumstances presented by the text. The extent of God’s intervention in her suffering and salvation is unclear, as are the motivations of the members of the society on whom she depended. Nevertheless, she remained steadfast in her commitment to Naomi, Mahlon, and God. Ruth has the distinction of being the only biblical woman explicitly called by the epithet *eshet hayil*, “woman of valor” (3:11). While Ruth struggled mightily to preserve Mahlon’s name, she in fact has immortalized her own name, winning the hearts of readers generation after generation.

Megillat Ruth is characterized by deliberate ambiguity. Not only are multiple readings possible; these ambiguities are precisely the vehicles through which the short narrative captures so many subtleties in so short a space.

NOTES

[1] Da’at Mikra: Ruth, in Five Megillot (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Mosad HaRav Kook, 1973), introduction p. 3 n. 1.

[2] See especially Meltzer, introduction to Da’at Mikra: Ruth, p. 8; Moshe Garsiel, “Literary Structure, Development of Plot, and the Goal of the Narrator in Megillat Ruth” (Hebrew), in *Hagut ba-Mikra*, vol. 3, ed. E. Menahem (Tel Aviv: Israel Society for Biblical Research, 1979), pp. 66–83.

[3] Mordechai Cohen, “Hesed: Divine or Human? The Syntactic Ambiguity of Ruth 2:20,” in *Hazon Nahum: Studies in Jewish Law, Thought, and History Presented to Dr. Norman Lamm*, ed. Yaakov Elman and Jeffrey S. Gurock (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1997), pp. 11–38, esp. pp. 32–33.

[4] See *Bava Batra* 91a; *Gen. Rabbah* 25:3; *Rashi* (on 1:2).

[5] See *Ruth Rabbah* 1:4; *Tanhuma Behar* 3; *Zohar Hadash Ruth* 77b; *Rashi* (on 1:2).

[6] See *Ruth Rabbah* 2:9; *Targum* (on 1:4), *Rashi* (on 1:12), *Malbim* (on 1:4), who maintain that Ruth and Orpah did not convert prior to their marriages to Mahlon and Chilion. *Ibn Ezra* (on 1:2, 15) disagrees, as does *Zohar Hadash Ruth* 79a. *Rambam* (Hil. Melakhim 5:9) maintains that the family members were punished because they were communal leaders and therefore held to a higher standard of conduct. *Malbim* adopts a middle position: the initial departure of Elimelech and family was justified, since they went only as a temporary measure (*la-gur*); once they elected to stay permanently, however (*va-yeshev sham*), they brought punishment upon themselves.

[7] Sensitive to this difficulty, *Tanhuma Buber Behar* 8 states: “For those ten years, God was warning them. When He saw that they were not repenting, He began to strike their camels and cattle—yet they still did not repent. When He saw that they did not repent, immediately (!) ‘Mahlon and Chilion died also.’” See also *Ruth Zuta* 1:4: “This teaches that decrees are suspended for ten years.” Of course, without these modifications, the text is far less clear in presenting their deaths as punishment.

[8] See further discussion in R. Amnon Bazak, “The World Is Built on Hesed: Between Megillat Ruth and Job” (Hebrew), *Megadim* 18–19 (1993), pp. 169–175.

[9] Cf. *Rashi*, *Malbim*.

[10] The dialogue in chapter 4 intimates that Boaz considered Naomi’s field to be the primary element in the redemption altogether; Ruth is mentioned only in passing (4:3, 9–10). Ezra Z. Melammed (“Megillat Ruth in Light of the Halakhah” [Hebrew], *Sinai* 24 [1961], p. 156) maintains that Ruth was the more important aspect of the deal, but Boaz emphasized the field out of respect for Ruth.

[11] Meltzer, Da’at Mikra: Ruth, p. 16, n. 20.

[12] See the survey of opinions on this verse in Cohen, “Hesed: Divine or Human? The Syntactic Ambiguity of Ruth 2:20,” pp. 11–38. The above translations are from his article, pp. 11–12.

[13] The formulation that God “gave her pregnancy” (*va-yitten lah herayon*) is unique in Tanakh. Perhaps this expression

signals divine approval of the union of Boaz with the Moabite Ruth (Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *The Jewish Publication Society Commentary: Ruth* [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2011], introduction p. ii). [14] Ruth Rabbah 1:1; Seder Olam Rabbah 12; cf. Makkot 23a. [15] Bava Batra 91a.

Byline:

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Rabbi Bouskila Interviews Rabbanit Shira Marili Mirvis-- Israel's First Female Spiritual Leader of an Orthodox Synagogue in Israel

Byline:

Rabbi Daniel Bouskila



This week, Rabbanit Shira Marili Mirvis made history as the first-ever Israeli woman appointed to be the sole rabbinic leader of an Orthodox synagogue, the Shirat Hatamar congregation in Efrat. I talked to Shira about her fascinating journey to this groundbreaking milestone.

From her earliest childhood years growing up in Jerusalem, Shira fell in love with Torah study. She loved the “sacred books” of Judaism, particularly the Talmud and rabbinic commentaries. These books were traditionally the domain of boys and men, but Shira’s father Yitzhak, a deeply pious Moroccan Jew, always encouraged her to study them.

In fact, he insisted she buy as many sacred books as her heart desired. “Kids today walk around with their parent’s credit cards, but that wasn’t the norm when I was growing up,” said Shira. “Yet I actually had my father’s credit card, not to go shopping in the mall, but in case I chanced upon another sacred book [that] I wanted... My father wanted to be sure that I would never be deprived of buying books that would help advance my knowledge and love of Torah.” Given this week’s announcement, Yitzhak’s investment in Shira’s book-buying clearly paid off.

In between the celebrations and press interviews surrounding the exciting news of her appointment, Shira took the time to answer my questions, and despite not being with her in person, I could feel the emotions coming through the telephone.

DB: What was it like growing up in Jerusalem as a young girl who loved studying Talmud?

SM: I grew up in a religious home in the Kiryat Moshe neighborhood of Jerusalem. Both my parents were born and raised in Morocco, and our home was deeply entrenched in Moroccan-Sephardic traditions. Those traditions included a love for Torah and a deep respect for our Torah sages. We prayed in the synagogue of Hakham Mordechai Eliyahu, who became the Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel. My love for Torah study was nurtured in my family from childhood.

DB: So your eventual decision to enroll in the five-year Lindenbaum Women’s Program in Talmud and Halakha was not viewed in your family as a rebellion from your traditionally religious Sephardic-Moroccan upbringing?

SM: Quite the contrary. My decision to pursue advanced Talmud study at Lindenbaum is actually a result of my Sephardic-Moroccan upbringing. The love of Torah study was a supreme value in our

home, and my decision to study Talmud at the highest level was met with great enthusiasm by both of my parents. In fact, admission to the Lindenbaum program is quite competitive, and the acceptance process lasted one year. I don't know if I would ever have made it through that year without the constant positive encouragement from my father and mother.

DB: What was your parents' reaction when you were accepted to the program?

SM: They were both thrilled! Especially as a woman who would now be engaged in the intense study of Talmud and Halakha (Jewish Law), they saw me as a link in the chain of continuity with my ancestors. They viewed it as a privilege that their daughter would take the legacy of the pious Moroccan-Sephardic women of previous generations to the next level.

DB: As you are now about to complete this program, how does your father feel as the one who helped fund your love of sacred books from childhood?

SM: Unfortunately, my father passed away after my first year at Lindenbaum. Throughout that first year in this demanding program, my father was my greatest source of encouragement. He was constantly telling me to study, study and study some more and that whatever would come of it, he was sure I would be able to do great things to advance Torah and Judaism for the Jewish people.

Symbolically... the last Jewish holiday we spent together was Shavuot, the holiday when we celebrate receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai. My father died the day after Shavuot, and his words of encouragement accompany me and inspire me to this day.

DB: Your historic appointment as Israel's first ever female rabbinic leader of an Orthodox synagogue is both exciting and emotional. How did all of this come about?

SM: The synagogue in Efrat where my family prays — Shirat Hatamar — is a relatively new community. For the past few years, perhaps because I was studying at Lindenbaum, people in our synagogue started approaching me with serious halakhic questions... I was also asked by the community to deliver sermons on Shabbat. All of this was unofficial, and I was doing it as an individual, not in any official capacity.

DB: So how did it now become official?

SM: When Shirat Hatamar was established, we adopted Rabbi Shlomo Riskin as our official halakhic advisor and community mentor. Rabbi Riskin is the founder of the Or Torah Stone Institutions, which includes the Lindenbaum Women's Talmud & Halakha program where I studied these past five years. Rabbi Riskin has done tremendous work in advancing women's Torah study and leadership, turning the Lindenbaum program into the women's equivalent of what men study here in Israel for rabbinic ordination from Israel's Chief Rabbinate.

Knowing that I was functioning as my synagogue's halakhic authority for the past few years, Rabbi Riskin approached the community a few months ago and said it's time to make it official, so the process began... The community engaged in an exploratory process, which included many meetings on Zoom and discussions via WhatsApp chat groups. I stepped away from this process to allow the community to make this decision without influencing them. This past week they felt ready to take a vote, and the results were that 83% of the community voted in favor of appointing me as the rabbinic leader of the community.

DB: So, is your title the "rabbi" of the synagogue?

SM: When people address me in an official title, I go by "Rabbanit Shira." My title in the synagogue

is not “Rabbi” or “Rabbanit” but Manhiga Ruchanit Hilkhatit [“Spiritual and Halakhic Leader”].

DB: Does the difference in title alter in anyway your “rabbinic duties”?

SM: My duties in the synagogue are to serve as the sole halakhic authority for our community, teach Torah and rule in halakhic matters, which [were] always the traditional [duties] of a rabbi in halakhic Orthodox communities. I will also counsel families and individuals, deliver sermons and teach Torah classes for our community. There are no other rabbis serving in our synagogue; I will be the sole “rabbinic voice” and “spiritual leader” in all religious matters.

DB: How did your mother react to your historic appointment?

SM: My mother had a challenging year, as she unfortunately was sick with COVID-19. Thank God she is fully recovered and doing well, and upon hearing the news of my appointment, she was beaming with pride and joy. Given her health challenges this past year, she was particularly emotional and thankful to see this day in her daughter’s life. She is very supportive of what I am doing.

DB: Ten years ago, you and your husband Shlomo and your kids came to Los Angeles, where you served as emissaries (shlichim) for the Bnei Akiva Religious Zionist Youth Movement for two years. Did your time in the Los Angeles community have any impact on your journey?

SM: The two years we spent in Los Angeles had a very deep impact on my life. In Israel, synagogues are often just a place to pray. In Los Angeles, I learned how much more a synagogue can be, as I was both witness to and personal beneficiary of the tremendous support system that the synagogue community provides to one another.

We prayed in Beth Jacob, and I remember how the community came together to celebrate joyous occasions and how they supported one another during times of illness or mourning. When my family needed support during some challenging times, I still have vivid memories of every delicious meal lovingly provided to my family from the famous “community meal trains.”

Beth Jacob and the Los Angeles Jewish community exposed me to the power of community life. From the welcoming of guests to teaching us how to shop at Ralphs on Pico, the acts of loving kindness in that community were amazing.

DB: Did you find any support as a woman who loves to study and teach Talmud in the Los Angeles Orthodox community?

SM: I will always have gratitude to Beth Jacob for giving me the opportunity to teach Torah in the synagogue. Their openness helped open this path for me, and I am eternally grateful for that. Additionally, my day job in Los Angeles was as a Torah Studies teacher to Middle School girls at the Maimonides School. That teaching experience will remain with me forever, and the girls I taught were an inspiration to me. The two years we spent in LA were two of the most special years in my life, and everything I did and learned there will most definitely serve me in this position I now officially assume.

DB: As you officially assume this historic position, do you feel like a representative for the women of your generation?

SM: I don’t consider myself a representative of any movement or trend, and I am not waving any particular ideological banner as I assume this position. If God gave me the privilege to study and teach Torah to a new generation of students and congregants, it is only by the merit of the

righteous and pious women of previous generations, especially those from my Sephardic-Moroccan ancestry. If I represent anyone at all, it is the women who studied Torah with deep faith and piety, raised their families with love and served their communities.

While I recognize the historic significance of my new title and position, I don't think the essence of what I am doing in any way differs from the women of my ancestry. I'm doing what they did, only in a different capacity [and] in a modern context and setting. I hope to be blessed with the same level of faith and spiritual strength that they had.

This interview has been edited for clarity.

Postscript

During my recent three-month stay in Israel, I was privileged to get to know Rabbanit Shira. In one of our conversations, I asked her if she had any particular women from the past that she considered a role model for her own life? "Rabbanit Farha Sasson," she said. Farha Sassoon (1859-1936) was a Sephardic Iraqi woman who loved to study Talmud and Halakha. She was widely known in her circles as a female Torah scholar and extensively corresponded with some of the most prominent rabbis of her day on Halachic subjects. With this week's historic news, Rabbanit Shira Marili Mirvis now continues Rabbanit Sassoon's legacy.

Byline:

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Parshas Behar: Sh'Mittah And Sinai

By Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

I. WHAT DOES SH'MITTAH HAVE TO DO WITH SINAI?

"And God spoke to Mosheh B'har Sinai, saying:" Our Parashah opens with this familiar phrase, set off with a twist. Instead of the usual "And God spoke to Mosheh, saying.", we are told that the following series of commands were given B'har Sinai – (presumably) "on top of Mount Sinai." This phrasing is odd, as follows: We hold one of two positions regarding the giving of Mitzvot. Either Mosheh received the entire corpus of Law when he was on top of the Mountain, or else he received the first section of the Law on top of Sinai, received more Mitzvot inside the Mishkan – and still more in the plains of Mo'av before his death. If we hold that all of the Mitzvot were given on Sinai, then why does the Torah underscore that these particular Mitzvot (those presented in Chapters 25 and 27 of Vayyikra) were spoken atop the mountain? Conversely, if we hold that, subsequent to the construction of the Mishkan, all Mitzvot were given (beginning with the first chapter of Vayyikra) in the Mishkan – then why is this "earlier" section written later?

II. RASHI'S ANSWER

Rashi – and many other Rishonim – is sensitive to this anomaly. The first comment of Rashi on our Parashah (citing the Torah Kohanim) is:

"What is the association between Sh'mittah (the Sabbatical year – i.e. the first Mitzvah in our Parasha) and Sinai? After all, weren't all Mitzvot given at Sinai? Rather, to teach you that just as all of the rules and details of Sh'mittah were given at Sinai, so were all of the rules and details of all Mitzvot given at Sinai."

Rashi's answer (see also S'forno, Ramban and Ibn Ezra for different responses to this question) leaves us only a bit more satisfied. We now understand that Sh'mittah is a model for all the Mitzvot – but why Sh'mittah? Why not idolatry, Shabbat or some other area of law?

Before suggesting another answer, I'd like to pose several other questions on our Parashah:

In v. 2, we are told that when we come to the Land, it shall rest (every seven years). This "rest" is called a "Shabbat for God". How can land, which is inanimate, experience a Shabbat? All of our Shabbat-associations until this point have been oriented towards people (and, perhaps animals – we are not allowed to make them work on Shabbat). Why does the Torah refer to the "year of lying fallow" as a Shabbat?

Subsequent to the laws of Sh'mittah, the Torah commands us to count seven series of Shabbat-years, totaling forty-nine years. The fiftieth year will be called a Yovel (Jubilee), which will involve the blasting of a Shofar and the freeing of all indentured servants and land. Why is this year called a Yovel and why is the blasting of the Shofar the "catalyst" for this freedom?

Further on in the Parashah, the Torah delineates a series of Mitzvot affecting social welfare – beginning with support for fellows who are suffering, helping them redeem their land etc. Why are these Mitzvot in our Parashah – shouldn't they be in Parashat Mishpatim (Sh'mot 21-23) with the rest of civil and criminal laws? Finally, our Parashah ends with a verse which shows up elsewhere in Torah (Vayyikra 19:30): "Observe My Shabbatot and revere My Sanctuary, I am YHVH". What is the meaning behind this twofold command?

III. "B'HAR" – "ON" OR "AT" THE MOUNTAIN?

To address our first concern, we have to investigate the meaning of the phrase "B'har Sinai". Although many translations render it "on top of Mount Sinai", this is not the only proper reading. In several other places in the Torah (e.g. Bamidbar 28:6, D'varim 1:6), this phrase can only be translated "at Mount Sinai". I'd like to suggest a similar read here: "God spoke to Mosheh AT Mount Sinai, saying:" The difference between the two is significant, as follows:

Although the Mishkan was dedicated at the end of Sefer Sh'mot, and we were told that the Cloud would rest on it "during all of our travels", that doesn't mean that those travels began immediately. The entire book of Vayyikra, which was given by God in the Mishkan (see Vayyikra 1:1), was also given "At Mount Sinai"! In other words, since the B'nei Yisra'el had constructed the Mishkan at the foot of the mountain – and that's where they remained throughout the book of Vayyikra (and ten chapters into Bamidbar), all of these Mitzvot were simultaneously given Me'Ohel Mo'ed (from the Mishkan) and B'har Sinai.

Once we establish that "b'Har Sinai" does not exclude me'Ohel Mo'ed, we have to ask why the Torah chose to highlight the "Mishkan" component during the first part of Vayyikra – and to highlight the "Sinaitic" component in our section.

We will be able to understand this once we reconsider the first Mitzvot in our Parashah. The Torah teaches us that the Land of Israel needs a Shabbat. We asked why this year is called "Shabbat.. When we remember that Shabbat was woven into the creation of the world, we can easily understand the message. Just as the weekly Shabbat is not associated with an external event, but is part of the fabric of creation (see B'resheet 2:1-3), so is Shabbat a part of the nature of the Land. In other words, the Land of Israel is (so to speak) alive – and must be treated with that sensitivity.

IV. TWO KINDS OF SANCTITY

When we compare the sanctity of the Ohel Mo'ed with that of Sinai, we discover that whereas the Mishkan was holy because of God's Presence which rested there as a result of B'nei Yisra'el's work (donation, construction and dedication), Sinai was already holy before we got there (Sh'mot 3:1). This was the first "place" that they ever encountered which had inherent holiness!

When the Torah highlights that these Mitzvot were given at Mount Sinai, it is reminding us that there are two types of holiness which we will encounter in the Land – "constructed" holiness, which we imbue by conquering and settling Eretz Yisra'el – and "inherent" holiness, which has been there from time immemorial. This dimension of holiness is the reason why the land itself needs a Shabbat. That is why the Parashah is captioned as being said "b'Har Sinai".

Once we see the association between Sinai and the Land, it is easier to understand the role of the Shofar blast in the Yovel – and the reason the year is called a Yovel. When we first stood at Sinai, God revealed His Law to us. This Revelation was accompanied with the blast of a Shofar – which the Torah calls a Yovel! (Sh'mot 19:13). In other words, the Jubilee year is a commemoration of the Sinai experience, again reminding us of the inherent holiness of location – the Sinai model in Eretz Yisra'el.

We can now understand the inclusion of the various social-welfare Mitzvot in this Parashah: Each of them is associated with one of two directives: Ki Li ha'Aretz (the Land belongs to Me) or Li B'nei Yisra'el Avadim (the B'nei Yisra'el are My slaves). All of these Mitzvot are reminders that our ownership of the Land or of each other (as slaves) is merely an illusion and must be "corrected" every fifty years.

We can now address the double phrasing at the end of our Parashah: "Observe My Shabbatot and revere My Sanctuary, I am YHVH". As mentioned, the sanctity of Shabbat is built into creation, it is part of the fabric of reality. Conversely, the sanctity of the Mishkan is a constructed holiness in which Man's role is indispensable. The Torah is reminding us that both types of holiness are Godly and become unified within the matrix of Halakhah – "I am YHVH."

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Parshat Behar: Mitzvot of Shevi'it and Yovel

by Rabbi Eitan Mayer

1) Shevi'it (AKA "Shemita") means "seventh year": every seven years, a special set of agricultural laws applies in Eretz Yisrael. We are commanded to refrain from working the land in just about any way, including plowing, planting, and harvesting. The prohibition of harvesting does not mean we are supposed to either go hungry or scrape by just on the previous year's harvest; we are allowed to eat produce from the fields, but it must remain basically ownerless. Anyone who wants to take it is allowed to; we cannot harvest it and prevent access to it. In Devarim 15, we learn of the other dimension of this seventh year, the economic dimension: all debts between Jews are canceled by divine decree.

2) Yovel is the name given to every fiftieth year, the year after seven Shevi'it cycles have been completed. During Yovel, as during Shevi'it, most agricultural work is forbidden in Eretz Yisrael. In addition, all land in Eretz Yisrael which has been sold since the previous Yovel must be returned to its original owners, and all Jewish slaves must be released by their masters (even those slaves who have previously declined freedom at the conclusion of the normal six-year period of Jewish slavery).

A LOOK AT THE TEXTUAL LANDSCAPE:

On the surface, at least, there seems to be nothing particularly "priestly" about the mitzvot of Shemita and Yovel. If so, why are these mitzvot placed in VaYikra, AKA 'Torat Kohanim' ('Instructions for Priests')? What are these mitzvot doing in the same neighborhood as, for example:

- 1) The laws of korbanot (sacrifices), which occupy primarily perakim (chapters) 1-10.
- 2) The laws of tahara and tum'a (purity and impurity), which occupy primarily perakim 11-16.

Perhaps we must readjust our understanding of Sefer VaYikra's status as 'Torat Kohanim' to include themes other than those which directly address the kohanim and their duties. When we add up all the material in VaYikra which does not seem explicitly 'priestly' (i.e., no apparent connection to tahara, no apparent connection to korbanot, etc.), we come up with the following material, organized by perek (chapter):

- 18: arayot (sexual crimes such as incest, male homosexual sex, bestiality)
- 19: potpourri: interpersonal laws, ritual laws, agricultural laws, etc.
- 20: arayot etc.
- 23: mo'adim (holidays and holy days, e.g., Pesah, Shavuot, Succot, Rosh HaShana, Yom Kippur)
- 24: the mekallel (the blasphemer; "packaged with" laws of murder and damages).
- 25: Shevi'it and Yovel
- 26: berakha and kelala (blessings for those who keep the mitzvot and curses for those who don't).
- 27: laws of donating things to the Bet haMikdash.

What does all of this material have in common? Are there particular reasons why each of these sections deserves to appear in Sefer VaYikra, or is there one theme which unites them and justifies their inclusion in the sefer?

THE HOLINESS THEME:

The most obvious possibility for uniting the above sections is the theme of kedusha (usually translated 'holiness'), a theme we have discussed extensively in previous shiurim (mostly in Parashat Shemini). Kedusha's dominance as a motif in the latter third of Sefer VaYikra is explicit in the text itself:

- 19:2 -- Speak to the congregation of the Bnei Yisrael and say to them, "You shall be HOLY [kedoshim], for I am HOLY [kadosh], Y-HVH, your God."
- 20:7 -- You shall SANCTIFY yourselves [ve-hit-kadishtem] and be HOLY [kedoshim], for I am Y-HVH, your God.
- 20:8 -- You shall keep my laws and do them; I am Y-HVH, your SANCTIFIER [me-kadishkhem].
- 20:26 -- You shall be HOLY [kedoshim] to Me, for I, Y-HVH, am HOLY [kedosh]; I have separated you from the nations to be for Me.

21:6 -- They shall be HOLY [kedoshim] to their God, and not profane the name of their God, for the offerings of Y-HVH, the bread of their God, are they offering; they shall be HOLY [kodesh].

21:8 -- You shall SANCTIFY him [ve-kidashto], for he offers the bread of your God; he shall be HOLY [kadosh] to you, for I, Y-HVH, who SANCTIFIES you [me-kadishkhem], am HOLY [kadosh].

22:3 -- Say to them, for all of their generations, "Any of all of your descendants who approaches the SANCTIFIED things [kodashim] which Bnei Yisrael SANCTIFY [ya-kdishi] to Y-HVH, and his impurity is upon him, that soul will be cut off from before Me; I am Y-HVH."

22:9 -- They shall keep My watch and not bear sin for it and die when they profane it; I am Y-HVH, their SANCTIFIER [me-kadsham].

22:32 -- Do not profane My HOLY [kadshi] name; I shall be SANCTIFIED [ve-ni-kdashti] among Bnei Yisrael; I am Y-HVH, your SANCTIFIER [me-kadishkhem].

23:2 -- Speak to Bnei Yisrael and say to them, "The meeting-times of Y-HVH which you shall proclaim as proclamations of HOLINESS [kodesh], these are my meeting times."

There are many, many more examples, but perhaps these will suffice; the point is that many of the mitzvot in the latter third of Sefer VaYikra are connected with the idea of creating and protecting kedusha.

In summary, the theme of kedusha joins with the other two major themes of Sefer VaYikra to yield the following:

Theme I: Korbanot (perakim 1-10)

Theme II: Tahara and Tum'a (perakim 11-16)

Theme III: Kedusha (perakim 17-27)

As should be clear by now (close as we are to the end of Sefer VaYikra), while these three themes are centered in particular locations in the sefer, they are also freely interspersed among the material in all of the sections of Sefer VaYikra. In general, the korbanot material is centered in the first 10 perakim of the sefer, the purity material is centered in the middle of the sefer, and the kedusha material is centered in the end of the sefer. But these borders are highly permeable: for example, korbanot material appears in 17 (between the purity and kedusha sections), purity material appears in 20 (among the kedusha material), and kedusha material appears in 11 (among the purity material).

This brings us back to where we began: the mitzvot of Shemita and Yovel, found deep in the kedusha section. The Torah connects Shemita and Yovel with kedusha as well:

25:10 -- You shall SANCTIFY [ve-kidashtem] the year of the fiftieth year [this is not a typo] and proclaim freedom in the land for all its inhabitants; it shall be Yovel for you: each man shall return to his land portion, and to his family shall he return."

25:12 -- For it is Yovel; it shall be HOLY [kodesh] for you; from the fields shall you eat its produce.

[Although only Yovel (and not Shemita) is explicitly called "kadosh" by the Torah, I am lumping Shemita together with Yovel as kadosh because the Torah itself lumps the two together in perek 25, switching back and forth several times between the two topics without warning. This textual intertwining implies that these mitzvot are thematically intertwined as well. In addition, they are halakhically interdependent as well: the cancellation of debts on Shevi'it, for example, is biblically mandated only during periods in which Yovel as well is kept; see Rambam, Shemita ve-Yovel 9:2. See also 10:9, which, depending on the version of the text, may hinge the entire biblical status of agricultural Shevi'it on the concurrent performance of Yovel.]

MY PET THEORY ABOUT KEDUSHAH (AGAIN):

What is 'holy' about Yovel and Shemita? Taking a certain view of kedusha would make this question irrelevant, or at least unanswerable: if we understand kedusha as some sort of mystical/metaphysical/spiritual quality of ethereal, mysterious, imperceptible nature, not apprehensible by either the senses or the intellect but only by the soul (perhaps), then we can close the books right here. What could we possibly have to say about something we cannot perceive or understand? If the

Torah commands us to be "holy" and then tells us that Yovel and Shemita generate "holiness," then we should of course observe Yovel and Shemita so that we can become "holy."

But why would the Torah bother to tell us about "holiness" if we could not really understand it? If the "holiness" characterizations are in the Torah as an inducement to us to do the mitzvot ("Do the mitzvot so you will become holy"), it follows that we must be able to develop a good understanding of what kedusha is -- otherwise, what is the inducement? Why would the Torah bother repeating the holiness theme so many times (see examples above) if we could never really understand holiness anyway?

As we have developed in detail in our discussion of Parashat Shemini and other parshiot in Sefer VaYikra, one other possibility for understanding kedusha (besides the "mystical essence" perspective) is that it is not really the point! Kedusha is not our **goal*,* it is one of our ways of getting to our real goals. To understand this idea, it might be best to discard the word "holiness" as a translation for "kedusha," and replace it with the word "dedication." The word "dedication" is a nice fit because it means "set aside for specific purposes" and carries the connotation of "being set aside for a **higher** purpose."

To illustrate how this "kedusha" is not the goal but is one of our ways of getting to our goals: imagine you are the executive of a company. Your company has a contract to complete a challenging project for an important client within a certain amount of time. Now, you certainly expect "dedication" from your employees, but "dedication" itself is not your goal -- finishing the challenging project in time is your goal; if your workers are "dedicated," you will get there on time! [Of course, the use of the word "dedication" in a non-religious context is not quite the same as "kedusha," which carries that all-important connotation of "higher purpose."]

The Torah expects "dedication" (read "kedusha") of us in two ways:

- 1) The Torah commands us to **be** "kedoshim": we are to be the "am kadosh" (dedicated nation); we are commanded "kedoshim tihyu" ("You shall be dedicated"). According to this understanding of kedusha, we are not commanded to be "holy," a command we wouldn't really understand; we are instead commanded to be "dedicated." Of course, this "dedication" is not itself the goal; the **object** of the dedication -- the mitzvot -- are the goals. Kedusha is a way of getting there: if we are "kedoshim," we are "dedicated" to the mitzvot.
- 2) The Torah commands us to dedicate ("me-kadesh") things other than ourselves: times, places, objects, and people, for example. Shabbat and the moa'dim are "dedicated" (kadosh) times; the Mishkan and Bet HaMikdash are "dedicated" (kadosh) spaces; the korbanot and the utensils of the Mishkan are "dedicated" (kadosh) objects; the Kohanim and others are specially "dedicated" (kadosh) people. The process of dedicating these things is not a secret ritual, it is apparent from the meaning of the word "dedicate": these things are to be set apart and restricted for higher purposes.

KEDUSHAH AND RESTRICTION:

This explains why kedusha is so often connected in the Torah with restrictions:

- 1) The kedusha of time always triggers a prohibition to do work ("mikra'ei kodesh" is not just followed by, but is explained by, "kol melakha/melekhet-avoda lo ta'asu"), since dedicated time is time that cannot be used for everyday purposes;
- 2) The kedusha of space is always connected with restriction of access to that space (who can ascend Har Sinai, who can enter the Mishkan and the Kodesh ha-Kodashim) because, by definition, dedicated space is restricted to a particular use;
- 3) The kedusha of objects is always connected to their restricted use (e.g., objects dedicated to the estate of the Mishkan--"hek'desh"--may not be used for personal benefit; korbanot may be eaten only by certain people for certain amounts of time and in certain places) because they are dedicated to a higher purpose;
- 4) The kedusha of people is always connected to restrictions about what they may have access to and who may have access to them (e.g., a Kohen is prohibited from contacting a corpse, marrying women with certain personal statuses; the Kohen Gadol, who is even more dedicated (kadosh), may not even contact the corpses of immediate family members and may not marry even a widow) because they are dedicated to higher purposes.

The connection between restrictions and kedusha is quite direct:

Kedusha = Dedication --> Restricted Access.

If I have a telephone line "dedicated" to my fax machine or my computer modem or whatever, that line is *by definition* restricted from other uses. Kedusha, by definition, means restriction.

HILLUL:

This also explains what we mean by "hillul," usually translated as "profanation," the direct opposite of kedusha. Examples of "hillul" in the Torah:

1) Eating a korban shelamim on the third day after its sacrifice is called a "hillul" (19:8). Because it is "dedicated" (kadosh) as an offering to Hashem, it must be treated specially, differently than non-dedicated meat: the shelamim must be eaten in the first two days after sacrifice. By definition, one who violates this restriction undoes ("profanes") the kedusha, because the entire essence of the kedusha is the restriction. It is like using my "dedicated fax line" for a voice conversation: doing this reverses the dedication of the phone line, by definition, because here I am using what used to be the fax-only line for a voice call!

2) Causing one's daughter to become a prostitute is called a "hillul" by the Torah (19:29) because by definition, a woman who is available to *everyone* is dedicated (kadosh) to *no one*! The opposite of this hillul is "kiddushin," the word we use, by no coincidence, for marriage, which *dedicates* a woman to her husband to the exclusion of all other men.

I apologize to all those who are tired of hearing me repeat this idea of kedusha through the course of Sefer VaYikra, but it seems to me an important point to stress. It makes Sefer VaYikra no longer the locus of the obscure imperative to become "holy," and turns it into the locus of the powerful and concrete demand for *dedication!* We are to dedicate ourselves entirely to serving Hashem; we are commanded to dedicate times, places, objects, and people to special religious purposes, restricting them from normal access so that important goals can be accomplished in the fenced-off space created by the restrictions. The fence of Shabbat keeps work out so that we can contemplate Hashem's creation of the world; the fence of incest prohibitions (arayot) restricts sex between relatives so that the family may develop in the space thereby created; the fence of korbanot restrictions protects the korbanot (AKA kodashim) from being used in ways which would compromise their quality as offerings to Hashem.

THE KEDUSHHA OF YOVEL AND SHEMITA:

To get back to our parasha, what is the theme of the kedusha of Yovel and Shemita? What values are protected by or embodied in these mitzvot? According to the Rambam, the answer is quite obvious:

MOREH NEVUKHIM (GUIDE OF THE PERPLEXED) 3:39 --

"The mitzvot included in the fourth group are those encompassed by the Book of Zera'im ("Seeds," one of the 14 books of the Rambam's halakhic code, Mishneh Torah) . . . all of these mitzvot, if you think about them one by one, you will find that their benefit is obvious: to be merciful to the poor and disadvantaged and to strengthen the poor in various ways, and to avoid causing anguish to people who are in difficult situations . . . Among the mitzvot counted among the Laws of Shemita and Yovel (which is in the Book of Zera'im): some include mercy and generosity to all people, as it says, "And the poor of your nation shall eat it, and the rest shall the beast of the field eat," as well as that the produce of the ground should increase and strengthen through its fallowness; some [other mitzvot in this category] show mercy to slaves and poor people, i.e., the cancellation of debts and the freeing of slaves; some take care that people will have a consistent source of financial support, so that the entire land is protected against permanent sale . . . a person's property remains always for him and his heirs, and he eats his own produce and no one else's."

In other words, Shemita and Yovel bring us:

- 1) Generosity toward the poor (free food in the fields).
- 2) Improvement of the land (letting it lie fallow).
- 3) Mercy toward the poor (canceling debts).
- 4) Mercy toward slaves (freeing them).
- 5) Economic security for all (return of land to original owners).
- 6) Prevention of economic domination over others (return of lands).

These "achievements" fall into the class of human-focused concerns: taking care of the powerless (poor, slaves, etc.) and constructing a fair and stable economy (land returned to owners, land must lie fallow periodically). This is by no means a disparagement; at the core of these concerns is the desire for social justice, mercy, stability and equality, certainly a roster of important values.

Yet, something important seems to be missing from the Rambam's list, a major theme which is nearly explicit in the Torah itself: the *theological* dimension of Yovel and Shemita:

VAYIKRA 25:

"... When you come to the land I am giving to you, the land shall rest a Sabbath **TO Y-HVH in the seventh year shall be a Sabbath for the land, a Sabbath **TO Y-HVH** If you shall say, "What will we eat in the seventh year, since we cannot sow or gather our produce?" I shall command My blessing upon you in the sixth year; it will produce enough for all three years The land shall never be sold permanently, for ALL THE LAND IS MINE; for you are 'immigrants' and temporary dwellers with Me If your brother's hand falters [financially], and he is sold to you [as a slave] . . . until the year of the Yovel shall he work with you. He shall then go out from you, he and his sons with him, and return to his family and to the land of his fathers. For THEY ARE MY SLAVES, whom I took out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as [permanent] slaves.**

On the one hand, the Sabbath is a Sabbath for the land, which 'rests,' and for the poor and the animals, which eat freely from all fields. These aspects are mentioned by the Rambam. On the other hand, it is also "a Sabbath to Y-HVH," as the Torah tells us twice. What does Hashem want from this Shabbat?

In addition, the absolute prohibition to work the fields during this year does not quite flow from a desire to make sure the fields have a year to replenish themselves so that they can remain fertile. If field-improvement were the true motivation for the agricultural-work prohibition, it would have been enough to command that we simply let some of our fields lie fallow each year; there would be no need to go so far as to cancel all agriculture nationwide for a year. Furthermore, if the motivation is to allow the fields to rest, then the Torah should prohibit plowing and planting, not harvesting. After all, the fields would not be depleted by our harvesting whatever happens to grow in them--yet the Torah forbids also harvesting.

Perhaps the claim could be made that the goal of the Torah is to provide sustenance for the poor and the animals, and that harvesting by landowners would deprive them of this food. But this claim seems weak indeed, for if the point is to feed the poor and the animals, why does this mitzvah arrive only once in seven years? Are the poor and the animals supposed to starve in the interim? Additionally, there is already an elaborate structure of mitzvot in place also during non-Shemita years to provide for the needs of the poor: ma'aser ani (tithes for the poor), leket (the requirement to leave behind for the poor the stray pieces of the harvest which the harvesters drop accidentally), shikheha (a similar mitzvah), pe'ah (the requirement to leave the corner of a field for the poor to harvest), and other mitzvot. It seems, therefore, that a different value is being served by the requirement to halt agriculture for this year.

Reading further in the Torah, it appears true that there is an interpersonal dimension to the requirement to return all land to its original owners at Yovel, but the Torah's justification for this mitzvah points clearly at Hashem, not at man: **"The land shall never be sold permanently, for ALL THE LAND IS MINE; for you are 'immigrants' and temporary dwellers with Me."**

Reading further, it is again true that there is an interpersonal dimension to releasing all Jewish slaves at Yovel, but again, the Torah's justification points to Hashem, not only to mercy and social justice: **"For THEY ARE MY SLAVES, whom I took out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as [permanent] slaves."**

What is the dimension of Shemita and Yovel which focuses on Hashem? Perhaps it is obvious already, but the Sefer Ha-Hinnukh brings it out explicitly:

SEFER HA-HINNUKH, MITZVAH 84:

"Among the roots of this mitzvah: to fix in our hearts and vividly paint in our minds the concept of the creation of the world, for in six days did Hashem create the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh, when He created nothing, he proclaimed rest for Himself Therefore He, blessed is He, commanded that we also declare ownerless (le-hafkir) all that the fields produce in this year, besides the prohibition of agricultural work: in order that man should remember that the land, which produces fruits for him every single year, does not do so on the basis of its own strength and qualities, but instead that it has a Master over it and over its [human] owners, and when He desires, He commands that it [the produce]

be declared ownerless

"One other result [which this mitzvah] produces in a person is that the person strengthens his trust in Hashem, for anyone who finds in his heart the ability to freely give to the world and declare ownerless all the produce of his lands and his fathers' inheritance for an entire year, and he and his family are accustomed to doing so all their lives--such a person will never develop the trait of miserliness or the trait of lack of trust in Hashem."

Shemita and Yovel remind us that the goal of life is not to build empires. Every few years, the possessions about which we feel so 'possessive' become public property, for all practical purposes. Imagine you run a clothing store. Business is booming, hems are down, prices are up, you see big growth ahead and branch out into another few stores. You're up to two dozen branches when suddenly the rules change: instead of selecting clothing they want and can afford and then paying for it, your customers start to just walk out with what they want without paying a dime. You appeal to the authorities, but they explain to you that for the next little while, this is the way it is supposed to be. If so, you wonder, what happens to your empire? More fundamentally, if this environment is unfriendly to pure capitalism, then what is it that you are supposed to be pursuing? Clearly, you conclude, not empire-building. **Your possessions do not belong to you in any absolute sense; they belong to this Higher Authority, which periodically overrides your 'temporary possession' status to remind you just Who is the real Owner.**

Perhaps more fundamentally, as the Hinnukh points out, Shemita and Yovel point us away from the world and back to Hashem. Spending all our days out in the fields (boardroom/ office/ operating room/ trading floor/ bank/ classroom/ laboratory) planting (investing/ lending at interest/ strategizing/ leveraging/ writing computer code) and sowing (selling high/ closing the deal/ healing the patient/ raiding the corporation/ selling the product), we start to believe that the source of our success is the things we can see--our own hard work and the system in which we do our hard work. Instead of bitahon, trust in Hashem, we trust ourselves and the arena in which we exercise our skills. Sustenance no longer comes from Providence, but instead from the futures market, from a technology startup, from our boss, from the booming real estate market. The 'real world' becomes for us the one in which we spend most of our time and on which we focus most of our energies.

Shemita and Yovel crack this facade wide open. No one, the Hinnukh notes, can maintain an arrogant self-reliance if he knows that every few years his livelihood disappears and he depends completely on the bounty of Hashem to see him through to the time when Hashem allows the everyday to rush back in. Even when we return to this 'natural' world, the one in which we create for ourselves the illusion that we are in control and that we are our own Providers, we remember the experience of Shemita and Yovel.

May we merit to see the restoration of Yovel (possible only with the gathering of the Jews to Eretz Yisrael) and to see the more complete implementation of the mitzvah of Shemita. It is our job to find ways in our own lives to internalize the lessons behind these mitzvot, even if we are not farmers or do not live in Eretz Yisrael. May we grow in our trust in Hashem and remain dedicated to pursuing a life of empire-building in serving Him.

PARASHAT BE-HUKKOTAI: "LISTEN UP . . . OR ELSE":

Parashat Be-Hukkotai presents the first of the two major 'tokhaha' ("warning") sections in the Torah: sections in which we are told in detail exactly what will happen to us if we abandon the mitzvot. The other tokhaha section is much later on, at the end of Sefer Devarim (Deuteronomy), in Parashat Ki Tavo. The phenomenon of a tokhaha section signals a great opportunity to think about many key issues; for example:

- 1) Are reward and punishment for our deeds delivered to us here in this life, as the tokhaha seems to imply, or at some later stage beyond the life of this world (or at both points)? [Since this issue is really a philosophical one, we will stick to more concretely textual concerns. Abravanel discusses this issue at length, presenting 7, count 'em, 7 different perspectives.]
- 2) If Hashem is a truly merciful God, can it be that He will really punish us in the horrible ways depicted in the tokhaha? If so, how does that impact our understanding of Hashem's nature? [Another issue of philosophy; not our focus in a parasha shiur.]
- 3) Do these recipes for disaster remain in reserve in Hashem's arsenal, or do they echo in history in events that we have actually experienced as a nation? What do they say about our future? [Looks promising as a topic, but may get us sidetracked in trying to identify biblical predictions with historical events; also, we may run into serious trouble if we try to

fit the Sho'a into this framework.]

4) What is the function of tokhaha, and what does the tokhaha have to say? Does the Torah expect that we will be more obedient if it threatens us with what will happen if we don't behave, or is there some other purpose to the tokhaha?

This last set of questions is the one with which we will deal this week. What is the Torah saying to us besides "Listen to Me, or else . . .?"

A LOOK AT THE BOOKENDS:

At the beginning of Parashat Be-Har, the Torah says:

25:1 -- Y-HVH spoke to Moshe in Mount Sinai, saying . . .

This introduction is followed by the mitzvot we discussed: Shemita and Yovel, which require that:

1) We perform no agricultural work in Eretz Yisrael in the last year of every seven years, that we consider all produce which grows (by itself) that year ownerless and allow the poor and the animals to take it;

2) We cancel all loans between Jews in this seventh year;

3) We treat the last year of every fifty years just like we treat a seventh year, abstaining from agricultural work etc.;

4) We free all Jewish slaves in this fiftieth year;

5) We return to the original owners all land which has been sold in the past 49 years.

As discussed, these mitzvot shatter the illusion we might otherwise begin to believe that the 'reality' of earning our bread is the *real* reality and that worshipping Hashem is a nice addendum but is not part of the hard-nosed real world. There is perhaps nothing more hard-nosed and 'real' than Shemita and Yovel. Imagine if this were to happen next week -- the government announces that all work is to stop for the next year, all food which grows is deemed ownerless, all debts are canceled, all land returns to the people who owned it half a century ago. Sound like a recipe for economic chaos and disaster? Exactly! By mandating this behavior, the Torah punctures our illusion of reality and shoves it aside before a more 'real' reality: we are forced to recognize that we own what we do only by the generosity of Hashem and that the economy is completely instrumental; it is not at all important in any ultimate sense, it is there only to facilitate our service of Hashem.

This lesson is so important that it is followed by a series of warnings about what will happen if we do not keep the mitzvot of Shemita and Yovel: the tokhaha. The fact that the tokhaha is aimed primarily at reinforcing our observance of Shemita and Yovel is supported by several features of the text. Most basically, the Torah's placing the tokhaha immediately after the mitzvot of Shemita and Yovel intimates that the warnings apply most directly to these mitzvot.

The connection between Shemita/Yovel and the tokhaha is strengthened further by the 'bookends' with which the Torah surrounds the section on Shemita and Yovel and the tokhaha. We noted above that the Torah begins Parashat Be-Har with the news that what we are about to learn was delivered by Hashem to Moshe at Sinai. Then come the mitzvot of Shemita and Yovel. Then comes the tokhaha (in the beginning of Be-Hukkotai), and just after the tokhaha, the Torah places another bookend, reporting that what we have just read was what Hashem communicated to Moshe at Sinai. (Another such bookend appears at the end of Parashat Be-Hukkotai, sealing Sefer VaYikra.) What the Torah may be hinting again by placing bookends before Shemita/Yovel and after the tokhaha is that these warnings are aimed at neglect of these mitzvot in particular.

Further and more explicit evidence of the connection between the tokhaha and Shemita/Yovel can be found in the text of the tokhaha itself. As the tokhaha begins, it sounds like a general warning about neglecting any of the mitzvot: (26:14-15) "If you do not listen to Me, and do not do all of these mitzvot; if you despise My laws, and if your souls revile My statutes, by not doing all of My mitzvot, thereby abrogating My covenant" However, as we move toward the end of the tokhaha, it seems clearer that the phrase "all of these mitzvot" refers not to the mitzvot as a whole, but to "these mitzvot" which have just been discussed: Shemita and Yovel. After the Torah describes how the rebellious nation would be driven

out of its land:

"*Then* the land will enjoy its Sabbaths [=Shemita years], all the days of its abandonment, with your being in the land of your enemies; *then* the land will rest, and enjoy its Sabbaths! All the days of its abandonment, it shall rest the rests it did not rest during your Sabbaths [i.e., during the years that were supposed to have been Shemita years], when you lived upon it!" (26:34-35).

"The land shall be abandoned of them, and it shall enjoy its Sabbaths in its abandonment from them, and they [the nation] shall expiate for their sin, since they despised My statutes and their souls reviled My laws" (26:43).

We commit sins, unnamed at the beginning of the tokhaha, but by the end it seems apparent that the abandonment of the land and the consequent cessation of its cultivation through agriculture atones for the sins. The best conclusion: the sins referred to by the tokhaha are the neglect of Shemita and Yovel. Our not ceasing to work the land during Shemita requires our exile from the land so that it can rest on the Sabbaths we have denied it; our not canceling loans during Shemita requires that we become impoverished and powerless; our not returning land to its owners during Yovel requires that we be denied ownership over even our own land; our not freeing Jewish slaves during Yovel requires that we ourselves be taken captive and sold as slaves by those whom Hashem sends to conquer us. Mida ke-neged mida, measure for measure.

MEETING THE CHALLENGE:

The Torah knows how difficult it is to keep Shemita and Yovel. It is certainly a tall order to take a forced sabbatical, to resist the urge to try to make the maximum profit by planting during this year, and to trust that Hashem will provide enough food to compensate for this year's lack of harvest. It is a tremendous challenge to forgive all loans to Jews every seven years. It is certainly no simple matter to release one's hold on one's real estate empire and return the parcels of land to their owners, and in a society which accepts slavery, it is almost 'unrealistic' to expect that slaveowners will release their Jewish slaves in response to a Divine command. But this is what Shemita and Yovel demand.

The Torah prepares us for the challenge of Shemita and Yovel in various ways. One way is the tokhaha, a warning of the dire consequences of neglect: disease, destruction, disaster, death. Other indications that the Torah expects these mitzvot to run into resistance, and other ways in which the Torah tries to strengthen us, are amply provided by the text itself. First, the Torah anticipates our fear that if we do not plant in the seventh year, we will starve:

(25:20-21) If you shall say, "What shall we eat in the seventh year? After all, we shall not be planting or gathering our produce!" I shall command My blessing for you in the sixth year, and it will provide produce for three years.

Next, the Torah anticipates that canceling all loans to Jews will prove a very unpopular mitzvah, and duly warns and encourages us:

(Devarim 15:7-10) If there shall be among you a pauper, from among your brothers, in one of your gates, in your land, which Y-HVH your God is giving to you--do not harden your heart and do not close your hand to your poor brother; instead, completely open your hand to him and lend him enough to provide whatever he lacks. Beware lest there be an evil thought in your heart, saying, "The seventh year, the year of Shemita [literally, 'cancellation'] is approaching," and you shall look ungenerously upon your poor brother, and you shall not give to him, and he shall call out against you to Y-HVH, and you will have sinned. You shall surely give to him, and let your heart not be bitter when you give him, for because of this thing Y-HVH, your God, shall bless you in all of your works and in all of your efforts.

HINTS FROM THE RAMBAM:

The Rambam's *Hilkhot Shemita ve-Yovel* (Laws of Shemita and Yovel) provides subtle but crucial confirmation that Shemita and Yovel are mitzvot that we accepted as a nation somewhat reluctantly. Instead of warnings and exhortations, these indications are assumptions which are built into the halakhic system:

Chapter 1, Law 12 -- One who plants during the seventh year, whether purposely or accidentally [i.e., with or without the awareness that it is the seventh year and that planting is forbidden], must uproot what he has planted, for *the* *Jews* *are* *suspected* *by* *[halakha]* *of* *violating* *the* *laws* *of* *the* *seventh* *year,* [!!!] and if we were to permit leaving the plant in the ground if it had been planted accidentally, those who had planted purposely would just claim to have planted accidentally.

Chapter 4, Law 2 -- All plants which grow wild during this year are rabbinically prohibited to be eaten. Why did they [the rabbis] decree that they be forbidden? Because of the sinners: so that one should not go and secretly plant grain and beans and garden vegetables in his field, and then when they sprout he would eat them and claim that they grew wild; therefore they forbade all wild plants which sprout during the seventh year.

[See also 4:27, 8:18]

Chapter 9, Law 16 -- When Hillel the Elder saw that the people were refusing to lend money to each other and were transgressing the verse written in the Torah, "Beware lest there be an evil thought in your heart . . .", he established for them the "pruzbul," [a special contract] which would prevent the cancellation of their debts to each other

Clearly, Shemita and Yovel are difficult mitzvot, and they require the Torah's encouragement.

TWO SIDES OF A COIN:

We have seen that the tokhaha appears closely connected to the mitzvot of Shemita and Yovel (or, more precisely, the neglect of these mitzvot) and that the Torah and halakha take pains to encourage observance of these mitzvot and prevent abuses of the halakha. But now that we have zeroed in these mitzvot as the focus of the tokhaha, we return to the question with which we began: what is the purpose of the tokhaha? Does the Torah expect us to be frightened by these threats into properly keeping Shemita and Yovel? Perhaps threats work in some cultures (or in all cultures in some centuries), but from our perspective in the 20th (almost 21st) century, and considering that most of us are products of Western culture, threats don't usually have much effect. (Take a look around and try to estimate what percentage of the Jewish people remain faithful to the mitzvot of the Torah despite the many warnings and exhortations the Torah offers.) Since the Torah is an eternal and divinely authored document, we must be able to find significance in it in all generations and in all cultures. So what does message does the tokhaha communicate to us?

Surprisingly, the tokhaha may teach us the same lesson as Shemita and Yovel themselves attempt to teach us.

In the 'normal' course of life, we go about our business, doing our best to achieve some level of material comfort. The world either rewards our efforts or doesn't, but either way, we are eternally and tragically prone to two enormous errors: 1) we begin to believe that making money and achieving domination over material and people are ultimate goals in their own right, and 2) we begin to believe that credit for our success or failure (but particularly our success) goes entirely to us. Shemita and Yovel come to prevent or correct these errors: completely interrupting the economy every few years has a nasty way of sucking all of the wind out of the pursuit of wealth and reminding us that in any event we are not in control of the system.

But there is another option. Shemita and Yovel are only one way of helping us maintain our awareness of these truths and therefore forcing us to look outside wealth and power to find the goals of our lives. Although Shemita and Yovel are obligatory, in some sense, they are a 'voluntary' way of reminding ourselves of where our ultimate attention should be directed. If we choose to reject Shemita and Yovel and insist that the economy (and our pursuit of wealth and power) will march on no matter what, Hashem has other options for reminding us of these truths. We can either choose to puncture the economic facade every seven years of our own volition, shattering our own mounting illusions and taming our growing greed, or Hashem will do the puncturing for us. Either way, we will remain inescapably aware of what Hashem wants us to know, but we get to choose whether to take the 'bitter pill' ourselves, or have our figurative national limbs amputated by plague, invasion, destruction, exile, and oppression.

That this is one of the deeper meanings of the tokhaha is hinted by the Torah and by the Rambam's interpretation of it. The tokhaha uses the word "keri" several times to describe the unacceptable behavior of the Jews in rejecting Shemita and Yovel; Hashem promises powerful retribution. But, amazingly, we still have the potential to miss the point. Apparently, *nothing* can guarantee that someone who refuses to see Hashem's control of the world will suddenly open his eyes. Shemita and Yovel are good options, but we can choose to ignore them. Destruction and punishment are more highly aggressive options, but they too can fail at their task if we do not see our misfortune as Hashem's "plan B" for getting us to look away from the material world and ourselves and toward Him and His goals for us:

Rambam, Laws of Fast Days, Chapter 1:

Law 1 -- It is a positive biblical command to cry out and to blow with trumpets over every crisis which comes upon the

community .

...
Law 2 -- This practice is among the paths of repentance, for when a crisis comes and they cry out over it and blow the trumpets, all will know that it is because of their evil deeds that evil has befallen them . . . and this will cause them to [try to] remove the crisis from upon them.

Law 3 -- But if they do not cry out and blow, and instead say, "This disaster which has occurred to us is just the way of the world," "This crisis simply happened by coincidence," this is the way of callousness, and causes them to maintain their evil ways, and then the crisis will grow into further crises, as it says in the Torah [in the tokhaha in our parasha], "You have behaved with Me as if all is 'keri' [happenstance], so I shall behave with you with wrathful keri [happenstance]," meaning, "If I bring upon you a crisis to make you repent, if you then say that it is a meaningless coincidence, I will add fury to that occurrence [and punish you further]."

As the tokhaha begins, Hashem warns that He will punish us for ignoring Shemita and Yovel; according to the interpretation we have been developing, the point is not so much to punish us as to provide a less friendly way of achieving what Shemita and Yovel were supposed to achieve (26:14-17). Our planting will yield nothing (as our voluntary non-planting during Shemita should have done) and our security will be destroyed by diseases which blind and confuse us. Our sense of control and mastery will be shattered by defeat at the hands of our enemies. If we still do not respond, we are punished further (18-20): Hashem will "smash the pride of your power"; He will turn the sky and ground into unyielding metal, and our attempts to violate Shemita will amount to nothing. At this point the Torah introduces the word 'keri': "If you behave with Me with keri" (21), if you ascribe these disasters simply to global warming or acid rain or ozone depletion or any other cause unconnected with the theological lesson of Shemita and Yovel, "I will add to your suffering seven times for your sin." (Not that environmental damage should be ignored.) Because we refused to make our food available to the animal as commanded during Shemita, the animals will help make us suffer (22) and topple the sense of domination and order we have imposed on the world. Hashem sarcastically asserts that He will respond to our claim of 'keri' with more of that 'keri'; if we believe it is all just part of the natural process, then we will just keep getting more of that 'natural process' until it dawns on us to wonder whether something is amiss. Eventually, we are to be exiled, and then "the land shall enjoy its Sabbaths." Again, Hashem speaks with bitter sarcasm: if we refuse to accept Shemita and Yovel, and if we reject our suffering's meaning, then finally at least the unthinking *land* will understand and will celebrate Shemita when there is no one left to pick up a shovel and violate the Sabbath of the land.

In this light, the blessings we find just before the tokhaha, which are promised to us if we keep Shemita and Yovel, also take on new meaning. These blessings are not simply rewards for good behavior and obedience, they are in fact only possible if we keep Shemita and Yovel. We can be allowed to enjoy material success, military victory, personal fertility, and the other blessings mentioned there only if we keep Shemita and Yovel, because otherwise these blessings begin to compete with Hashem for our attention. Only if we 'voluntarily' impose Shemita and Yovel on ourselves and remind ourselves of the ultimate goals to which we are to dedicate ourselves can we be trusted to properly interpret the meaning of our success.

The end of the tokhaha promises that no matter how bad things get, Hashem will never abandon us completely. But this is comforting only now that we have seen the tokhaha in empirical historical Technicolor. In our century, now that Hashem has shown us a smile of gracious generosity, may we think creatively and seriously to find personal ways to remind ourselves of our ultimate goals and to prevent ourselves from being blinded by greed and egotism.

Shabbat Shalom

Parshas Behukotai: The Condition of the Blessing

By Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

I. THE STRUCTURE OF THE BLESSING

The first half of Parashat B=behukotai is made up of the promise of Divine blessing (if the B=nei Yisra=el observes all of God=s commandments, 26:3-13) and the threat of Divine disfavor and curse (if they fail to do so B vv. 14-45). Although a complete analysis of both parts of this text is beyond the scope of this forum, we will try to present an analysis of the nature of the blessing:

- * 3: If you walk in My statutes and observe My commandments and do them.
- * 4: I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit.
- * 5: Your threshing shall overtake the vintage, and the vintage shall overtake the sowing; you shall eat your bread to the full, and live securely in your land.
- * 6: And I will grant peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and no one shall make you afraid; I will remove dangerous animals from the land, and no sword shall go through your land.
- * 7: You shall give chase to your enemies, and they shall fall before you by the sword.
- * 8: Five of you shall give chase to a hundred, and a hundred of you shall give chase to ten thousand; your enemies shall fall before you by the sword.
- * 9: I will look with favor upon you and make you fruitful and multiply you; and I will maintain My covenant with you.
- * 10: You shall eat old grain long stored, and you shall have to clear out the old to make way for the new.
- * 11: I will place My dwelling in your midst, and I shall not abhor you.
- * 12: And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people.
- * 13: I am Hashem your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be their slaves no more; I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you walk upright.

Let=s examine the opening line B the condition of the blessing:

If you walk in My statutes and observe My commandments and do them.

All of the consequent blessings are contingent on our fulfilling this brief directive. What is the meaning of this Divine command, fulfillment of which carries so many wonderful blessings, such as peace, prosperity and national holiness?

Before moving on, there is an anomaly in the structure of the blessing section which calls for our attention. Note the table below:

Verse B Promise

3 B The Condition

4 B Bountiful Crops

5 B Plenty and Security

6 B Peace in the Land

7-8 B Military Success

9 B Fertility and Recovenanting (see Rashi and S=foron ad loc.)

10 B Bountiful Crops (again!)

11 B God=s Sanctuary in our Midst

12 B God=s Presence in our Midst

13 B Concluding Sentence

As can be seen, v. 9 is a natural conclusion; however, there are another four verses in the blessing. So, the second question is what we are to make of these two blessing-sections. If it were not for v. 10, which returns to the theme of agricultural success, it would have been simple to identify the first section as financial, political and military success; the second could be tagged as spiritual excellence. The inclusion of v. 10, va=Akhalem Yashan Noshan, v=Yashan miP=nei Hadash Totzi=u B (you shall eat old grain long stored and you shall have to clear out the old to make room for the new)

makes this division untenable. Is there some other way to divide the blessings or can we reorient our understanding of either v. 10 or v. 9 (the first AConclusion@) that will help our understanding of this section?

Our final question is more fundamental to the nature of the blessing: Aren=t we taught that we should perform Mitzvot because we were so commanded or because they represent the most noble Alife-style@? Why does the Torah present this list of agricultural, political, military and spiritual ARewards@ for doing that which we are otherwise obligated to do?

In order to address these questions, let=s return to the first verse and the seeming redundancy. We will find two approaches among the Rishonim which, if taken together, will be the key to understanding this blessing.

II. UNDERSTANDING THE CONDITION

RASHI=S APPROACH: A>AMELIM BATORAH@

Rashi, following the Torat Kohanim, addresses the seeming redundancy in the first verse: Alf you walk in My statutes: I might think that this refers to fulfillment of Mitzvot; but when it says And observe My Mitzvot, observance of Mitzvot is already stated. If so, how do I understand If you walk in My statutes? that you should be laboriously engaged in Torah study. (sheTih=yu >Amelim baTorah@.)

In other words, Rashi understands the condition which we must fulfill as made up of two components: We have to observe the Mitzvot and we must also be >Amelim baTorah B laboring in Torah study.

S=FORNO=S APPROACH: AUSH=MARTEM ZU MISHNAH@

R. Ovadia S=forno, bothered by the same redundancy, arrives at a similar conclusion B but from an opposite textual direction. He understands that Awalking in My statutes@ refers to the performance of Mitzvot B and that *Mitzvotai Tishmoru* refers to study. He bases this on the statement in the Sifri: uSh=marthem B zu Mishnah (Aobserving@ refers to learning). (Sifri R=eh #6)

In summary, Rashi and S=forno both understand that the blessings will only be fulfilled when and if the B=nei Yisra=el accomplish both performance of Mitzvot and Torah study. What, then, is their bone of contention B what underscores their different textual derivation?

III. ENGAGED ACTION

Both Rashi and S=forno are addressing the issue of cognitive awareness in the performance of Mitzvot. Rashi sees the mode of performance which will ensure these blessings as Aintellectually engaged action@. Although a person may properly fulfill a Mitzvah while only being familiar with the operative details B e.g. how to hold the Lulav with the other three species, how much Tzedakah to give B someone who is intellectually engaged in the details, concepts and import of a particular Mitzvah will have a greatly enhanced experience when performing that Mitzvah. To that end, Rashi reads the first phrase of the verse as referring to Alaborious Torah study@ B the hard work which goes into clarifying Halakhic concepts, analyzing various approaches and formulae etc. With that level of involvement, the performance which follows reflects a total involvement B i.e. loving God with all of the heart.

INTEGRATED ACTION

S=forno accentuates a different component of the cognitive perspective in Mitzvah-observance. He picks up the process where Rashi left off B with the performance of Mitzvot which is enhanced with intellectual involvement. S=forno raises the bar to a new level B not only must we come to the performance of Mitzvot armed with our own cognitive involvement; we must maintain that level of awareness while we are engaged in the performance. That is why S=forno emphasizes the Aguarding = learning@ equation B holding onto that which we have learned while performing, avoiding the all-too-common dichotomy of knowledge and action which, although consistent with each other, are often relegated to different times and settings.

Both of these Rishonim understand that in order for us to receive the blessings which follow, we must achieve a level of observance of Mitzvot which includes an investment of learning and attaching that intellection with the action implied therein. In order to understand this demand, let=s address the other two questions.

IV. YASHAN NOSHAN

As mentioned above, we were promised that we would have a bountiful harvest (vv. 4-5); the sequence from there on seems to spiral Upward@, to political security, military success and spiritual fulfillment. Why does the Torah Ajump back@ to the agricultural theme in v. 10? (You shall eat old grain long stored, and you shall have to clear out the old to make way for the new.)

If we look at the previous verse (the Afirst conclusion@, v. 9), we can see a subtle shift in the focus and nature of the blessing. Up until this point, we have been promised many blessings B and now God promises that He will turn to us and fulfill His covenant with us. Which covenant is meant here?

As Ibn Ezra points out, we might posit that the earlier part of the verse, the promise of fertility, is the Acovenant@ association B a fulfillment of the covenant with Avraham that we would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. There is, however, another critical component of the B=rit Avraham which may be the stress and shift here.

When Avraham was first commanded to go to the Land, God told him that he would be a source of blessing for all people. This promise was repeated at the Akedah B the concluding narrative of Avraham=s life. Along with the Land and numerous descendants, God promised that Avraham=s Aall nations of the earth will be blessed through your seed@ (B=reshet 22:18). In other words, all peoples would eventually come to know God and recognize His authority through the progeny of Avraham. This may be the covenant which God promises that He will establish with us in v. 9 B that we will be enabled to realize our goal and role a ALight unto the nations@. The question is then raised: If we are indeed all together in our Land, living a blessed and righteous national life, how will the nations of the world Atake notice@ of us?

V. MAKING ROOM FOR THE GRAIN

The answer, counterintuitively, is to be found in the realm of commerce. Let=s take a fresh look at v. 10: You shall eat old grain long stored and you shall have to Totzi=u the old to make room for the new. The phrase Totzi=u can alternatively translated as Aclear out@, as above; or as Aexport@, as S=forno renders it. As he explains, we will have so much grain that we will be able to safely export to other nations. By engaging in commerce with other nations them, two things will become readily apparent:

- 1) We have been generously blessed by our Creator B indicating Divine favor; and
- 2) Our behavior, specifically in the realm of interpersonal relations and business ethics, is of the highest standard.

Remember, this entire blessing is contingent on our integrating serious Torah study into our behavior. Certainly someone who studies Hoshen Mishpat (the section of Halakhah dealing with civil and criminal law) before getting involved in the world of commerce (Rashi) and who endeavors to internalize the sensitivities of that law into his business dealings (S=forno) will serve as an ethical beacon for others. Imagine an entire nation behaving like that!

We can now understand the continuum of the blessing. Subsequent to our own development as a strong and secure nation (see below), the Torah promises us that the covenant B of our being a blessing to the nations of the world B will be fulfilled WITH US. In other words, instead of this covenant being a B=rit Avot, which is operative even if we fail in our tasks, the covenant will be directly with us B in our own merit. That blessing will be enabled first by developing an association with other nations B through the commerce of exporting the goods of the Land.

VI. AND ONCE WE HAVE SUCCEDEDY

From this verse on, where we would reasonably have the concern that once we have drawn the nations of the world to us and they have rallied around the cry ALet us go up to the mountain of the House of God, that He will instruct us of His waysY@

Therefore, the next few verses promise us that our special relationship with God will not only be maintained B but that it will be intensified, hinting at a return to the intimate relationship enjoyed by Man and God in the Garden of Eden (Al will walk among you@; compare with B=reshet 3:8.)

This also explains why these Arewards@ are necessary. In order for us to make our impression on the nations of the world, giving us the opportunity to teach, we must have our own stable, safe and economically sound nation. It is hard to develop a holy nation when the threat of war or hunger is constantly over our head; God=s blessings insure that we can more easily fulfill our task and lead the world to a full awareness of the Creator and His moral guidance.

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PARSHAT BEHAR

Shouldn't Parshat Behar be in Sefer Shmot? After all, its opening pasuk informs us that these mitzvot were given to Moshe Rabeinu on **Har Sinai**! Why then does Chumash 'save' it for Sefer Vayikra instead?

To complicate matters, Parshat Behar is only one example of many 'parshiot' towards the end of Sefer Vayikra that appear to belong in Sefer Shmot. Take for example the law to light the menorah (recorded at end of Parshat Emor (see 24:1-3). As you most probably noticed, that parshia is almost a direct quote from Parshat Tetzaveh! [Compare 24:1-3 with Shmot 27:20-21.]

To answer these (and many other) questions, this week's shiur investigates the intriguing possibility of a chiastic structure that may explain what otherwise seems to be a random progression of parshiot in Sefer Vayikra.

INTRODUCTION

Recall our explanation that Sefer Vayikra contains primarily mitzvot, and neatly divides into two distinct sections:

- 1) Chapters 1-17: laws relating to the **mishkan** itself,
- 2) Chapters 18-27: laws relating to living a life of 'kedusha' even **outside** the mishkan.

Even though this definition neatly explained the progression of mitzvot in Parshiot Acharei Mot and Kedoshim, many of the laws in Parshat Emor seem to contradict this definition.

As the following summary shows, most of the mitzvot in Parshat Emor relate to the mishkan itself, and hence (according to our above definition) should have been recorded in the first half of Vayikra.

Using a Tanach Koren [or similar], scan from the beginning of Parshat Emor to verify the following summary:

- * Chapter 21 - Laws pertaining to **kohanim**;
- * Chapter 22 - Animals not fit for **korbanot**;
- * Chapter 23 - Special **korbanot** offered on the mo'adim.
- * Chapter 24 - Oil for lighting the **menora**; and
baking the 'lechem ha-panim' for the **shulchan**.

Based on our above definition of the two halves of Sefer Vayikra, just about all of these topics would fit better in the 'first half'.

STORY TIME?

To complicate matters, at the very end of Parshat Emor we find a different type of difficulty. Review 24:10-23, noting how we find a **narrative** - i.e. the story of an individual who cursed God's name in public and was subsequently punished. Not only is this story totally unrelated to either half of Sefer Vayikra, it is the only narrative in the entire Sefer! [Aside from the story of the dedication of the mishkan found in chapters 8-10 (that relates to the mishkan itself).]

As you review these psukim (and their context), note how this story seems to 'come out of nowhere'! Nor is there any apparent reason why Sefer Vayikra records this story specifically at this point. [See Rashi's question on 24:10 'Me-heichan yatza?' - Where did the 'mekallel' come from!]

MORE PROBLEMS!

Parshat Behar (chapter 25) is no less problematic! Even though its laws of 'shmitta' and 'yovel' fit nicely into our definition of the second half of Sefer Vayikra (see Ibn Ezra 25:1), the opening and closing psukim of this unit present us with two different problems.

The first pasuk of Parshat Behar (25:1) informs us that these mitzvot were given on **Har Sinai**, and hence suggests that this

entire Parsha may really belong in Sefer Shmot!

More disturbing (and often not noticed) is the very conclusion of Parshat Behar. There we find three 'powerful' psukim that seem to come out of nowhere! Let's take a look:

- * "For Bnei Yisrael are servants to Me, they My servants whom I freed from the land of Egypt, I am the Lord your God." (25:55).
- * "Do not make for yourselves any other gods.." (26:1).
- * "Keep My Sabbath and guard My Temple, I am your God" (26:2).

Indeed, the first pasuk (25:55) forms a nice summary pasuk for the laws of that unit (i.e. 25:47-54);, however the last two laws are totally unrelated! Furthermore, all three of these psukim seem to 'echo' the first four of the Ten Commandments.

Why do they conclude Parshat Behar, and why are the first four 'dibrot' repeated specifically here in Sefer Vayikra?

[Note the discrepancy between the chapter division (i.e. where chapter 26 begins) and the division of parshiot (note that Parshat Bechukotai begins with 26:3) - which reflects this problem.]

The above questions appear to shake the very foundation of our understanding of the two halves of Sefer Vayikra. Should we conclude that Sefer Vayikra is simply a 'random' collection of mitzvot?

[The solution that we are about to suggest is based on a rather amazing shiur that I heard many years ago from Rav Yoel Bin Nun, where he uncovers a chiastic structure that ties together Sefer Shmot and Vayikra.]

To answer the above questions, we must first 're-examine' each of the parshiot (mentioned above) to determine where each of these 'out of place' parshiot really **does** belong.

As we do so, a very interesting pattern will emerge - that form the basis of a chiastic structure. [If you've never heard of chiastic structure before don't worry, it will be explained as the shiur progresses.]

WHERE DO THEY BELONG?

Let's begin with the first topics in chapter 24, for it is quite easy to identify where these two mitzvot do 'belong'.

THE NER TAMID (24:1-4)

As we noted above, these four psukim (describing the mitzva to light the **menora** with olive oil) are almost an exact repetition of the first two psukim of Parshat Tetzaveh! [See and compare with Shmot 27:20-21.] Hence, this parshia 'belongs' in **Parshat Tetzaveh**.

THE LECHEM HA-PANIM (24:5-9)

This parshia describes how Bnei Yisrael were to prepare the **lechem ha-panim** [show bread] - that were to be placed on a weekly basis on the **shulchan** [the Table located inside the mishkan].

Even though this is the first time that we find the details of this mitzva in Chumash, the general mitzva to put lechem ha-panim on the **shulchan** was already mentioned in Parshat **Teruma** (see Shmot 25:30). Hence, we conclude that this 'parshia' could have been recorded in Parshat Teruma, together with all the other mitzvot concerning how to build the **shulchan**.

THE MEKALLEL - The 'blasphemer' (24:10-23)

Even though this parshia begins with a story (see 24:10-12), this short narrative leads directly into a small set of civil laws ('bein adam le-chaveiro') relating to capital punishment (see 24:13-22). Furthermore, as your review 24:17-22, note how they are almost identical with Shmot 21:12,23-25 (i.e. Parshat Mishpatim).

For example, note how Shmot 21:24 is identical to Vayikra

24:20. -"ayin tachat ayin, shein tachat shein ..." ["an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth..."]

Hence, we conclude that the mekallel parshia 'belongs' in Parshat **Mishpatim**.

THE LAWS of SHMITTA & YOVEL (25:1-25:54)

As we explained above, the opening pasuk of this parshia states that these mitzvot concerning shmitta & yovel were given to Moshe Rabbeinu at Har Sinai. However, in Sefer Shmot, we find many other laws that were given to Moshe Rabbeinu on Har Sinai, and they were all recorded in Parshat Mishpatim. In fact, in that very same Parsha, the basic laws of shmitta" were already mentioned:

"Six years you shall sow your Land and gather your produce and the seventh year..." (see Shmot 23:10-11).

Therefore, we conclude that this entire unit of the laws of shmitta & yovel belongs in Parshat Mishpatim, together with all of the other mitzvot that were given to Moshe on **Har Sinai**.

The 'MINI-DIBROT' (25:55-26:2)

As we explained above, these three psukim at the very end of Parshat Behar 'echo' the first four Commandments. If so, then we can conclude that these psukim 'belong' in Parshat **Yitro** (see Shmot 20:1-9).

A BACKWARD 'BACK TO SHMOT'

In case you have yet to notice, not only do all of these parshiot (from chapters 21 thru 25) thematically belong in Sefer Shmot, they progress in **backward** order, from Tetzaveh, to Teruma, to Mishpatim, to Yitro!

Even though this order may seem to be simply coincidental, the next chapter in Vayikra (i.e. the TOCHACHA in chapter 26) provides us with enough 'circumstantial evidence' to suggest that this pattern may be intentional!

Let's take a look:

THE TOCHACHA (26:3-46)

The 'tochacha' explains the reward (or punishment) that Bnei Yisrael receive should they obey (or disobey) God's laws. This tochacha constitutes an integral part of the covenant (brit) between God and Bnei Yisrael that was agreed upon at Har Sinai (see Devarim 28:69).

[Note that the final pasuk (26:46) is not only parallel to Devarim 28:69, but also includes the phrase 'beino u-bein Bnei Yisrael', which also implies a covenant (based on Shmot 31:15-17)!]

Even though this covenant is detailed in Parshat Bechukotai, recall how its basic principles were first recorded in Parshat **Yitro** in the Torah's account of the events that took place at **ma'amad Har Sinai**:

"And now, if you shall listen to Me and keep My covenant faithfully, then..." (Shmot 19:5-6, see also Shmot 24:4-7)
[Compare carefully with Vayikra 26:3,12,23!]

Therefore, even though this parshia is thematically consistent with the theme of the second half of Sefer Vayikra (compare chapter 26 with 18:25-29), nonetheless, it was given to Bnei Yisrael on Har Sinai. Hence, it could easily have been included in Parshat **Yitro**, most probably in chapter 19 (prior to the Ten Commandments).

[Note also that the 'dibbur' that began in 25:1 includes chapter 26 and is summarized by the final pasuk of the tochacha (26:46). See also Chizkuni on Shmot 24:7 & Ibn Ezra on Vayikra 25:1. where they explain that this tochacha was actually read at Har Sinai at Ma'amad Har Sinai!]

WORKING 'BACKWARDS'

Let's summarize all of these 'parshiot' that we have discussed (from the end of Sefer Vayikra) that seem to 'belong' in Sefer Shmot. [Working backwards,] we assign a letter to each 'parshia' for future reference.

(A) - THE TOCHACHA (26:3-46)

(B) The 'MINI-DIBROT' (25:55-26:2)

(C) The laws of SHMITTA & YOVEL (25:1-25:54)

(D) Parshat "ha-MEKALLEL" (24:10-23) - The 'Blasphemer'.

(E) THE MENORA AND SHULCHAN (24:1-9)

And there's more! Let's continue working backwards from chapter 24 to chapter 23, showing how this pattern continues! We'll continue using the letters of the alphabet for 'headers' as well:

(F) PARSHAT HA-MO'ADIM (23:1-44) - The **holidays** in Emor

As we explained in last week's shiur, the Torah presents the mo'adim together with the laws of Shabbat. Even though these laws relate thematically to the theme of **kedusha** in the second half of Vayikra, they also relate to the laws of Shabbat that conclude the parshiot concerning the **mishkan**. [See Shmot 31:12-17 & 35:2-3.]

Note the obvious textual similarities:

* "sheshet yamim ta'aseh melacha, u-vayom ha-shvi'i..."

[Vayikra 23:3- Compare with Shmot 35:2!].

* "ach et shabtotai tishmoru..."

ki ani Hashem **mekadishchem**"

[See Shmot 31:13/ compare with 23:3,39.]

Therefore, 'parshat ha-mo'adim' (chapter 23) in Sefer Vayikra could have been recorded in Parshat **Ki-Tisa** as well, together with the laws of Shabbat.

(G) ANIMALS THAT CANNOT BE KORBANOT (22:17-33)

In this parshia we find the prohibition of offering an animal with a blemish, or an animal less than eight days old.

Surely, this mitzva could have been recorded just as well in Parshat **Vayikra** (i.e. in the first half of the Sefer), for it discusses the various types of animals which one can offer for a korban (see 1:2).

(H) KEDUSHAT KOHANIM (21:1-22:16)

Parshat Emor opens with laws that explain when a kohen CAN and CANNOT become "tamey" (ritually impure by coming into contact with a dead person).

Even though these laws thematically relate to the second half of Vayikra (for they govern the daily life of the kohanim OUTSIDE the mishkan), nonetheless the mitzvot that follow (21:16-22:16) should have been recorded in Parshat TZAV, for they concern who can and cannot eat the meat of the korbanot.

In summary, even though each of the above parshiot may be thematically related in one form or other to the theme of the second half of Vayikra, nonetheless each parshia could also have been recorded either in the second half of Sefer Shmot (or early in Sefer Vayikra) as well!

Using the letters noted above, the following table summarizes these special parshiot, noting where each 'misplaced parsha' really belongs.:

PARSHA OUT OF PLACE	WHERE IT BELONGS...
(A) THE TOCHACHA	YITRO (pre dibrot)
(B) THE MINI-DIBROT	YITRO (the dibrot)
(C) SHMITTA AND YOVEL	YITRO/MISHPATIM (post dibrot)
(D) MEKALLEL & mishpatim	MISHPATIM
(E) MENORA AND SHULCHAN	TRUMA /TETZAVEH
(F) MO'ADIM IN EMOR	KI TISA/ VAYAKHEL (shabbat)
(G) ANIMALS FIT TO OFFER	VAYIKRA
(H) KEDUSHAT KOHANIM	TZAV

Study this table carefully, noting the correlation between where these parshiot 'belong' and the order of the Parshiot in Sefer Shmot [and the beginning of Vayikra].

THE CHIASTIC STRUCTURE OF SHMOT & VAYIKRA

This literary style is known as a chiastic structure (A-B-C-B-A), a literary tool which emphasizes unity of theme and accentuates a central point (C).

To uncover the significance of a chiastic structure, it is usually critical to identify its central point. To do so in our case, we must first summarize the basic units of mitzvot (in Sefer Shmot) which Bnei Yisrael receive from the time of their arrival at Har Sinai:

- (A) BRIT - prior to Matan Torah (perek 19 & parallel in perek 24)
- (B) DIBROT - the Ten Commandments (20:1-14)
- (C) MITZVOT - immediately after the dibrot (20:19-23)
- (D) MISHPATIM - the civil laws in Parshat Mishpatim (21->23)
- (E) TZIVUI HA-MISHKAN - Parshiot Truma/Tetzaveh (25->31)
- (F) SHABBAT (31:12-18 followed by 35:1-3)

[In the further iyun section, we discuss why we skip chet ha-egel (32-34) in this structure.]

- (G) LAWS OF THE KORBAN YACHID (Vayikra 1->5)
- (H) LAWS FOR THE KOHANIM - serving in the mishkan (6->7)
- (I) THE SHCHINA ON THE MISHKAN:

The dedication ceremony of the mishkan (8->10);
laws governing proper entry (11->15);
the yearly 're-dedication' ceremony on Yom Kippur (16->17)

AND ITS AFFECT ON THE NATION

Kedushat ha-AM ve-haARETZ

climaxing with "KDOSHIM TIHYU"

Using the chart below [I hope your word processor is able to format it, if not try to format it by yourself], note how each of these units corresponds in REVERSE ORDER with the problematic concluding parshiot of Sefer Vayikra (that were discussed above)!

The following chart illustrates this structure:

A) Brit - before Matan Torah

B) Dibrot

- C) Mitzvot - after Matan Torah
 - D) Mishpatim - civil laws
 - E) Tzivui Hamishkan
 - F) Shabbat
 - G) Korbanot of the individual
 - H) Kohanim - how to offer
 - /* Shchina on mishkan
 - I) Its dedication etc.
 - /* Shchina in the Camp proper behavior, etc.
 - H) Kohanim - who can't offer
 - G) Korbanot - what can't be a korban
 - F) Mo'adim
 - E) Menora & Shulchan
 - D) Mishpatim in aftermath of the Mekallel incident
 - C) Mitzvot at Har Sinai, shmitta & yovel (Behar)

B) Dibrot (first 4)

A) Brit - Tochachat Bechukotai

Note how the above chart identifies a chiastic structure (symbolized by ABCDEFGH-I-HGFEDCBA) that connects together all of the mitzvot given to Bnei Yisrael in Midbar Sinai from the time of their arrival at Har Sinai.

It should come at no surprise that at the thematic center of this structure - (letter 'I') - lies the dual theme of Sefer Vayikra - i.e., its two sections:

- (1) the SHCHINA dwelling on the mishkan, and
- (2) its subsequent effect on the nation.

As we explained in our previous shiurim, this model reflects the impact of the intense level of the kedusha in the mishkan on the spiritual character of the entire Nation in all realms of daily life.

Furthermore, this 'central point' ties back to the basic theme of **ma'amad Har Sinai** in Sefer Shmot, which just so happens to be the opening 'bookend' of the chiastic structure (A). Recall how Bnei Yisrael first entered into a covenant before they received the Torah at Har Sinai. Note once again the wording of God's original proposal:

"And if you listen to Me and keep my **covenant**... then you shall be for Me, a - **mamlechet kohanim ve-goy kadosh** - a kingdom of **priests** and a **holy nation**" (see Shmot 19:5-6).

The achievement is this goal - to become God's special nation -as detailed in 'bookends' of this structure (letters A), is manifest with the dwelling of God's Shchina in the mishkan (I) -at the center of this structure; and is achieved by the fulfillment of God's mitzvot of kedusha - as detailed throughout this entire unit of Sefer Shmot& Vayikra.

In essence, the covenant of Har Sinai, the climax of Sefer Shmot, is fulfilled when Bnei Yisrael follow the mitzvot of Sefer Vayikra! By keeping the mitzvot of both halves of Sefer Vayikra, we become a **mamlechet kohanim ve-goy kadosh** (Shmot 19:6) - the ultimate goal and purpose of **brit Har Sinai**.

BRIT SINAI & KEDOSHIM TIHYU

The thematic significance of this chiastic structure is strengthened by its closing 'book-end'. Just as **brit Sinai** - the covenant at Har Sinai - is the **opening** parsha, the details of that covenant - the tochacha of Bechukotai - constitutes its **closing** parsha.

In that covenant, we find yet another aspect of this 'two-sided' deal. The tochacha explains how the Promised Land will serve as God's agent to reward Bnei Yisrael, should they be faithful to His covenant, while the Land will punish (and ultimately kick them out) should they go astray.

Finally, note (from this chiastic structure) how the mitzvot of Sefer Vayikra [GHI]- that were given from the *ohel mo'ed* (see 1:1) are surrounded by mitzvot that were given "be-**Har Sinai**" [ABCDEF]. Considering that the entire purpose of the mishkan was to serve as a vehicle to perpetuate the fundamentals of Ma'amad Har Sinai, this unique structure beautifully reflects the eternal goal of the Jewish nation.

shabbat shalom
menachem

=====FOR FURTHER IYUN=====

A. As you may have noticed, during the entire shiur we have purposely 'neglected' the location of parshat 'erchin' (perek 27) at the end of Sefer Vayikra. This topic will be dealt with *iy'H* in next week's shiur. [See also Ibn Ezra 27:1.]

B. Most all of the commentators deal with the question: Why does Parshat Behar open by mentioning that this parsha was given on **Har Sinai**? See the commentary of Rashi and Ramban. [25:1 / "ma inyan shmitta etzel Har Sinai?"]

1. Explain the machloket between Rashi and Ramban.

2. How is their approach to this question different than the approach taken in the above shiur.

How is their approach to this question different than the approach taken in the above shiur? More specifically: Which fundamental question are they asking? How is it different from the fundamental question raised in the above shiur? Do these different approaches contradict each other, or do they complement one another?

C. A careful examination of the chiastic structure developed in the above shiur shows that the parshiot that we have conveniently 'left out' of our chart in both Seforim coincide with the narratives (i.e. chet ha-egel, Vayakhel, Pekudei, Shmini, the mekallel etc.). Thus, we can conclude that the structure focuses on the mitzvot and the covenant, but not on the ongoing story of Chumash. This makes sense, since it is logical to create a chiastic structure within a set of mitzvot, not in an ongoing narrative.

This provides an explanation why we skipped over chet ha-egel and its related mitzvot in our chart. [Recall that they were 'repeats' from Mishpatim because of chet ha-egel.]

PARSHAT BEHAR - SIGNIFICANT SUMMARIES

In Parshat Behar we find three 'summary psukim' that may appear to be superfluous. In the following 'mini-shiur' we attempt to explain their importance.

AN OVERVIEW OF PARSHAT BEHAR

Let's begin with a short outline of Parshat Behar, in order to identify where these three summary psukim are located, and their significance.

I. The LAWS SHMITTA & YOVEL

- A. The 'shmitta' cycle (25:1-7)
- B. The 'yovel cycle' & guidelines (25:8-22)
- * summary pasuk - reason for shmitta & yovel (25:23-24)

II. LAWS RELATING TO THE YOVEL CYCLE

- A. Helping your neighbor who had to sell his field
 - 1. one who sold his field to a Jew (25:25-28)
 - 2. one who sold his house (25:29-34)
 - 3. one who sold his field to a non-Jew (25:35-38)
- *summary pasuk - the reason (25:39)
- B. Helping our neighbor who had to sell himself
 - 1. as an 'eved' [servant] to a Jew (25:39-46)
 - 2. as an eved [servant] to a non-Jew (25:47-54)
- *summary pasuk - the reason (25:55).

This outline clarifies the progression of topics in the entire Parsha, showing how the laws of shmitta & yovel are followed by several applications of these laws. Even though the economic system created by the laws of 'yovel' was designed to protect the poor (from the rich), the Torah also commands that society must provide additional financial assistance for a neighbor in distress.

Pay attention as well to the summary psukim that delimit each unit. In our shiur, we will discuss their significance.

THIS LAND IS 'HIS' LAND

Let's begin with the first summary pasuk, which concludes the laws of yovel and explains their underlying reason:

"And the land shall not be sold [to anyone] forever, for the Land is Mine, for you are like **gerim ve-toshavim** [strangers and residents] with Me. Throughout - **eretz achuzatchem** - the land or your inheritance, you shall give the land redemption" (25:23-24).

Even though God has 'given' the land to Bnei Yisrael for their inheritance, this statement highlights how the true ownership remains His. In other words, God remains sovereign, while He allows Bnei Yisrael the right to work the land as though it was theirs. To emphasize this 'arrangement', once every fifty years the land must return to God. [Sort of like a 'fifty year lease'.]

To appreciate the wording of this pasuk, let's compare it to a similar statement made by Avraham Avinu when he approached Bnei Chet to buy a burial plot. Note the textual parallels:

"And he spoke of Bnei Chet saying, I am a **ger ve-toshav** among you, please allow me to buy an **achuzat kever** [burial plot] from you" (Breishit 23:3-4).

Even though Avraham was a resident in the land, he was not the sovereign power; rather Bnei Chet were. As the land was not yet his, Avraham must purchase from them an **achuza** (note again parallel with 'eretz achuzatchem' in 25:24), a 'hold' in the land, even though Bnei Chet control it.

Therefore, when Bnei Yisrael receive the Torah at Har Sinai, as they prepare to conquer 'Eretz Canaan', these laws of yovel will help them appreciate the dialectic nature of their forthcoming sovereignty over the land. In relation to the surrounding nations, once Bnei Yisrael achieve conquest - they will become the sovereign power. However, in relation to God, they must constantly remember that the land still belongs to God. He has granted to them only towards the purpose that they become His nation. The laws of yovel, which affect the very nature of property

transactions during the entire fifty year shmitta and yovel cycle, will serve as a constant reminder that God has given them this land for a reason (and purpose).

This background can also help us understand what may be the underlying reason for the laws of 'teruma' - the small tithe that must be taken from the produce of land, and given to the kohen.

Just as the resident of any land must pay a property tax to the country's sovereign power, so too Bnei Yisrael must pay a 'tax' - i.e. **teruma** - to God, in recognition of His sovereignty over the land. Ultimately God gives this **teruma** to the kohanim (His servants), but note how the Torah emphasizes how there are two stages in this process. First, the teruma is given to God:

"And when you eat from the bread of the land, you shall lift up a **teruma** for **God**..." (see Bamidbar 15:17-21).

Then (and only afterward) God awards this teruma to the kohanim:

"And God told Aharon, behold I am giving you My **teruma** that I am keeping that Bnei Yisrael have set aside..." (see Bamidbar 18:8).

[This also explains why teruma must be eaten 'be-tahara', for the kohen is eating food given to him by God. In contrast, 'ma'aser rishon' the ten percent tithe given by the Yisrael to the Levite has no kedusha - for it serves as a direct payment for the services that shevet Levi renders to the nation.]

RELATED LAWS

After explaining the reason for yovel, the Torah continues with several related laws. As we noted in our outline, these laws divide into two distinct sections, each containing examples of when one is forced to sell either:

- 1) His field, or
- 2) Himself.

Each set of examples focuses on the need to lend assistance for those in financial distress, and is concluded with a special summary pasuk.

Let's see how each pasuk is special.

ERETZ CANAAN IS NOT FOR SALE

After the laws relating to how we must help someone who was forced to sell his own field, the Torah reminds us:

"I am the Lord your God who took you out of the land of Egypt to give you the **land of Canaan, lihiyot lachem le-Elokim** - to be your God" (see 25:38).

To appreciate this pasuk, we must return to our study of 'brit mila' (see Breishit 17:7-8), and the key phrase of that covenant: **lihiyot lachem le-Elokim** (see 17:7 & 17:8). Furthermore, it was specifically in that covenant that God promised **Eretz Canaan** to Avraham Avinu, and in that very same pasuk, the Torah refers to the land as an **achuza** (see 17:8).

Based on these parallels (compare them once again to Vayikra 25:38 & the word **achuza** in 25:25), we can conclude that this summary pasuk relates to brit mila. Let's explain why.

Recall how brit mila focused on the special close relationship between God and His nation, and how Eretz Canaan was to become the land where that relationship would achieve its highest potential. [The mitzva of brit mila serves as an 'ot' [a sign] to remind us of this covenant.]

As Eretz Canaan serves as a vehicle through which Bnei Yisrael can better develop this relationship, it is important that each person receives his 'fare share' of this land. Certainly, we would not want the ownership of the land to fall into the hands of a wealthy elite. The laws of yovel in chapter 25 help assure that every individual keeps his share of the land.

It also becomes everyone's responsibility to make sure that anyone who becomes less fortunate remains able to keep his portion in Eretz Canaan.

This explains the cases where one was forced to sell his

land, and its summary pasuk. Now we must proceed to the next section, which discusses cases where one was forced to sell himself.

WE ARE SERVANTS OF GOD, NOT MAN

Bamidbar 25:39-54 describes cases when someone becomes so poor that he must sell himself (not just his land) to his creditor; and how we are obligated to help him buy back his freedom. These psukim conclude with the following pasuk:

"For Bnei Yisrael are servants to Me, they are My servants whom I have taken them out of the land of Egypt, I am the Lord your God" (25:55).

Now, it becomes obvious why this summary pasuk focuses on servitude, rather than land. Servitude to a fellow man would take away from man's ability to be a servant of God. Therefore, the summary pasuk of this section relates directly back to the events of Yetziat Mitzrayim. [From this perspective, this summary pasuk can be understood as a 'flashback' to 'brit bein ha-btarim', for in that covenant, God had already foreseen the events of Yetziat Mitzrayim (see Breishit 15:13-18).]

Even though man is free and enjoys the right to own land and determine his own destiny; he must remember that his freedom is a gift from God, and hence it should be utilized to serve Him. But even those who have achieved freedom share the responsibility to assist those in financial crisis, in order that they too can remain 'free' to serve God.

shabbat shalom
menachem

PARSHAT BECHUKOTAI

THE CONCLUSION OF SEFER VAYIKRA

Considering that Sefer Vayikra is primarily a book of laws, it would certainly be appropriate to conclude those laws by explaining their reward - and that is exactly what we find in Parshat Bechukotai! Review Vayikra chapter 26 - better known as the '**tochacha**' - noting how it describes the reward (/or punishment) for keeping (/or defying) God's laws.

Hence, chapter 26 forms a fitting conclusion for the entire book. So why does Sefer Vayikra add one additional chapter (see chapter 27 /the laws of 'erchin') immediately afterward?

In this week's shiur we attempt to explain why.

INTRODUCTION

Let's begin by clarifying our opening question. Recall how Parshat Bechukotai (the last Parshat ha'shavua in Sefer Vayikra) contains two distinct sections:

- (1) the **tochacha** (chapter 26) -
Bnei Yisrael's reward [and/or punishment] should they obey [/or disobey] God's commandments;
- (2) The laws of '**erchin**' (chapter 27) -
A set of specific laws pertaining to the monetary evaluation of people or property dedicated to God.

Considering that Sefer Vayikra is a book that contains a collection of mitzvot, a '**tochacha**' would form an appropriate conclusion - for it outlines how God rewards (or punishes) Am Yisrael as a function of how they keep those mitzvot.

The first section of our shiur will explain how (and why) the **tochacha** should indeed be considered the conclusion of Sefer Vayikra. Afterward, we'll attempt to explain why the Torah may have 'added on' chapter 27 to form a significant 'epilogue'.

PART ONE - A PERFECT FINALE

Recall our explanation of how Sefer Vayikra divides into two distinct sections:

- A) **Kedushat mishkan** - chapters 1 -> 17.
focusing on laws pertaining to the mishkan, such as korbanot, tum'a & tahara, etc.
- B) **Kedushat ha-am ve-haaretz** - chapters 18 -> 25.
focusing on a wide range of laws of 'kedusha' outside the mishkan, to make Am Yisrael an '**am kadosh**'.

As you review both the 'positive' and 'negative' sides of the **tochacha**, note how the reward and punishment relates to **both** these sections, i.e. the mishkan and the Land:

- * On the positive side, should Bnei Yisrael **obey** the mitzvot, then:
 - B) "and I will put My **mishkan** in your midst..." (26:11)
 - A) "and the **land** shall give its produce..." (26:4).
- * On the negative side, should Bnei Yisrael **disobey** these laws, then:
 - A) "I will make your **mikdash** desolate..." (26:31)
 - B) "the **land** will not give its produce..." (26:20,34-35).

This only strengthens our claim that the **tochacha** should have been the last chapter of Sefer Vayikra! However, the best 'proof' is found in its 'final' pasuk.

THE FINAL PASUK -

Let's take a look at the final pasuk of the **tochacha**, to show how it relates to both halves of Sefer Vayikra:

"These are the **chukim & mishpatim**, and the **torot** which

God had given between Him and Bnei Yisrael on Har Sinai to Moshe" (26:46).

Clearly, this pasuk forms a summary of more than just the **tochacha** itself. Let's explain why.

Note how this final pasuk mentions two categories of mitzvot that we are already familiar with:

- 1) **chukim & mishpatim**, and
- 2) **torot**.

This implies that whatever **unit** this pasuk does summarize - it includes both 'chukim & mishpatim' **and** 'torot' (that were given to Moshe on Har Sinai). Hence, this pasuk must summarize more than the **tochacha**, for the **tochacha** itself does not contain "chukim & mishpatim", nor "torot".

Aware of this problem, many commentators attempt to identify the wider unit that is summarized in this pasuk. For example:

* Rashbam suggests that it summarizes both Parshiot Behar & Bechukotai, i.e. chapters 25 & 26. This is quite logical, for the laws of shmitta and yovel could be considered the "chukim & mishpatim". This also makes sense since both these chapters are included in the same 'dibbur' which began in 25:1.

However, Rashbam does not explain which laws in this unit fit under the category of torot.

Furthermore, recall our explanation in Parshat Tzav that a 'torah' implies a procedural type of law, e.g. 'torat ha-chatat' - how the kohen executes the chatat offering, etc. Within chapters 25 & 26, it is difficult to pinpoint any such 'procedural' law.

* Ibn Ezra claims that this pasuk summarizes not only Parshat Behar (i.e. Vayikra chapters 25 & 26), but also Parshat Mishpatim, i.e. **Sefer Shmot** chapters 21 - 23!

Ibn Ezra's interpretation is based on his understanding that the **tochacha** in Parshat Bechukotai is none other than the 'sefer ha-brit' mentioned in Shmot 24:7 [i.e. in the Torah's description of the ceremony at Ma'amad Har Sinai when Bnei Yisrael proclaimed 'na'aseh ve-nishma']. (See Ibn Ezra on Vayikra 25:1 and Shmot 24:7.)

However, it seems rather strange to find a summary pasuk for Parshat Mishpatim at the end of Sefer Vayikra!

* Ramban agrees with Ibn Ezra that this pasuk forms a summary of the mitzvot in Parshat Mishpatim as well. However, he reaches this conclusion from a different angle. Ramban claims that this parshia of the **tochacha** was actually given to Moshe Rabbeinu during his second set of forty days on Har Sinai, and serves as a 'replacement' covenant - to replace the conditions of the original na'aseh ve-nishma covenant (as described in Shmot 24:7). As such, this summary pasuk summarizes the mitzvot in Parshat Mishpatim as well. [See Ramban on 25:1, towards the end of his lengthy peirush to that pasuk. This complicated (but important) Ramban is based on his approach to the chronological order of Chumash, but it is beyond the scope of this shiur.]

In any case, our above question regarding Ibn Ezra's approach would apply to Ramban's as well.

* Rashi offers the 'widest' understanding of this summary pasuk. He claims that this finale pasuk summarizes not only the entire 'written law' of the entire Chumash, but also the entire 'oral law' as well!

It is interesting to note that from among all of the commentators, only Rashi deals with the problem of determining the precise meaning of "torot". Rashi solves the problem by quoting the Midrash that it refers to 'Torah she-bikhtav u-ba'al peh'. However, this interpretation is quite difficult for (according to simple pshat) the word 'eileh' [these] at the beginning of 26:46 summarizes what has been **written** thus far, and not what has not been written yet.

* Seforno follows a direction similar to Rashi, but appears to

be a bit more 'realistic'. He claims that this pasuk summarizes **all** of the mitzvot that were mentioned in Chumash thus far, i.e. **before** Parshat Bechukotai. However, Sefer is not very precise concerning exactly which mitzvot are summarized by this pasuk.

In our shiur, we will follow Sefer's 'lead' and show how this final pasuk may actually form a summary pasuk for all of the mitzvot found in Sefer Vayikra! Our approach will be based on identifying more specifically what the phrases chukim & mishpatim and torot (in 26:46) may be referring to.

A FITTING FINALE

Recall once again how Sefer Vayikra divides into two sections (see above), and how the second half of the Sefer begins in chapter 18 with a set of five psukim that form an introduction. [See 18:1-5 and our shiur on Parshat Acharei Mot.]

As you review those psukim, note how these psukim actually introduce an entire set of chukim u-mishpatim. For example:

"Observe My **mishpatim** and keep My **chukim** to follow them, I am the Lord your God. Keep My **chukim** & **mishpatim**..." (18:4-5. See also 18:26-30!).

Therefore, the phrase chukim ve-mishpatim in our 'finale pasuk' (26:46) could be understood as the summary of the **second** half of Sefer Vayikra (chapters 18->25), as it refers to the numerous chukim u-mishpatim that are recorded in that section.

Furthermore, note how often we have found this phrase in the second half of Vayikra: see 19:19 & 37, 20:8 & 22, and 25:18!

In a similar manner, the word torot could be considered a summary of the laws found in the **first** half of the Sefer. Recall how the word torah was used numerous times to describe the various procedures regarding korbanot. The most obvious example would be Parshat Tzav where the phrase '**zot torat...**' introduced each category of korbanot (see 6:2, 6:7, 6:18, 7:1, 7:11) and also formed its summary (see 7:37!).

However, this phrase was also found numerous times in Parshat Tazria/Metzora as well (see 12:7, 13:59, 14:2,32,45; and 15:32).

Furthermore, even though this phrase is not mentioned by the other mitzvot in this section, most of its laws are of a procedural nature and could easily fall under this category of torot. Certainly, the seven day 'milu'im' & 'yom ha-shmini' ceremonies (chapters 8 & 9) are procedures and hence could be understood as torot, as is the yearly 'avoda' of the kohen gadol on Yom Kippur (see chapter 16).

Hence, the word torot in 26:46 can be understood as a summary of the procedural laws found in the **first** half of Sefer Vayikra.

Thus, the final pasuk of the tochacha (26:46) becomes an almost 'perfect ending' for the entire sefer:

"These are the **chukim** & **mishpatim** [summarizes the second half - chapters 18 thru 25] and the **torot** [summarizes the first half - chapters 6 thru 17] which God had given between Him and Bnei Yisrael on Har Sinai to Moshe" (26:46).

The phrase chukim & mishpatim summarizes Part Two of Sefer Vayikra, while the word torot summarizes Part One!

THE TOCHACHA & SEFER SHMOT

Even though we have shown how this finale pasuk (26:46) forms a beautiful conclusion for Sefer Vayikra, it contains an additional phrase that explains why it could be considered a conclusion for the laws in **Sefer Shmot** as well. [If so, this would help us appreciate Ibn Ezra & Ramban's peirush as well, and the chiastic structure discussed in our shiur on Parshat Behar.]

Let's take a closer look at this finale pasuk, noting the second half of the pasuk:

"These are the chukim u-mishpatim, and the torot which God had given - **beino u-vein Bnei Yisrael** - between Himself and Bnei Yisrael, on **Har Sinai** through Moshe" (26:46).

This special phrase: 'beino u-vein Bnei Yisrael' may highlight the covenantal nature of the mitzvot of Sefer Vayikra. To explain why, we need only quote a pasuk that we are all familiar with from 'shabbos davening' [our sabbath prayers]. Note how the Torah uses an almost identical phrase as it describes how Shabbat should be considered a 'brit':

"Ve-shameru Bnei Yisrael et ha-shabbat... - to keep it as a day of rest for all generations - **brit olam** - an everlasting covenant - **beini u-vein Bnei Yisrael** - an eternal sign..." (see Shmot 31:16-17).

In fact, this very concept of brit is emphasized several times by the **tochacha** itself:

"... ve-hakimoti et **briti** itchem" (26:9)
 "... lehafrechem et **briti**" (26:15)
 "ve-zacharti et **briti** Yaakov ve-af et briti Yitzchak..." (26:42)
 "ve-zacharti lahem **brit** rishonim asher hotzeiti..." (26:45).

If this interpretation is correct, then we have found an additional thematic connection between the laws of kedusha in Sefer Vayikra and the purpose of Matan Torah as described at **brit Har Sinai**. As we have explained, the mitzvot of Sefer Vayikra function as a vehicle thru which the goal of **brit Sinai** - "ve-atem tiheyu li mamlechet kohanim ve-goy kadosh" - can be achieved. (See Shmot 19:4-6.)

[Once again, note how this thematic connection can also explain the chiastic structure that connected the laws in Sefer Shmot & Sefer Vayikra, as explained in our shiur on Parshat Behar.]

Hence, the phrase 'beino u-vein Bnei Yisrael' in this summary pasuk may emphasize how the mitzvot of Sefer Vayikra strengthen the covenant between God and Bnei Yisrael, as forged at Har Sinai, where Am Yisrael took upon themselves to become God's special nation.

THE TOCHACHA & SEFER BREISHIT

Thus far, we have shown how the **tochacha** forms a fitting conclusion for Sefer Vayikra, and thematically relates back to covenant at Har Sinai as described in Sefer Shmot. One could suggest that it may contain a certain element that thematically returns us to Sefer Breishit as well.

Recall our explanation of how Gan Eden represented an ideal environment in which man was capable of developing a close relationship with God. In that environment, man's reward for obeying God was a prosperous life in Gan Eden; while his punishment for disobeying God's commandment was death - i.e. his banishment from Gan Eden.

The two sides of the **tochacha** describe a similar environment for Am Yisrael living in Eretz Yisrael. Should they keep God's laws, Am Yisrael can enjoy a prosperous and secure existence in their land.

For example, 'im be-chukotai teilechu...', i.e. should you follow God's laws, then 've-achaltem le-sova be-artzechem' - you will enjoy prosperity in your land (see 25:3-6). - This would be in contrast to man's punishment when he was expelled from Gan Eden with the curse of 'be-ze'at apcha tochal lechem' (see Breishit 3:17-19).

Recall as well how God was 'mithalech' in Gan Eden (see Br.3:8). Similarly, He will now 'mithalech' in Eretz Yisrael together with His Nation: 'v'e-ithalachti betochachem, ve-hayiti lachem I-Elokim, ve-atem tihiyu li le-am' (see Vayikra 25:12).

On the other hand, should Bnei Yisrael not follow God's laws ('ve-im lo tishme'u..'), they will be faced with a troubled existence, culminating with their expulsion from the land (26:33), parallel to man's banishment from Gan Eden. (This parallel between Gan Eden and Eretz Yisrael was already introduced at the beginning of the second half of Sefer Vayikra- see 18:24-30).

[In this manner, the Midrashim that identify Gan Eden as Eretz Yisrael relate to more than its geographical location; rather they underscore a major biblical theme.]

PARSHAT 'ERCHIN' - WHY HERE?

We return now to our original question. If the final pasuk of the **tochacha** forms such an appropriate ending for Sefer Vayikra, why does the Torah place 'parshat erchin' immediately afterward (instead of beforehand in Sefer Vayikra)? After all, the laws of erchin, especially those relating to **yovel** (see 27:16-25), would have fit nicely within Parshat Behar, together with the other laws relating to **yovel**. [See Ramban on 27:1]

Furthermore, the laws relating to the dedication of objects to the Temple treasury could have been included much earlier in Sefer Vayikra, possibly in Parshat Vayikra together with other laws concerning voluntary offerings.

The simplest explanation is that the Torah did not want to conclude the Sefer on a 'sour note', i.e. with the **tochacha**, preferring instead to conclude with something more positive.

[Sort of like adding on a 'happy ending' by selecting a 'parshia' that could have been recorded earlier, and saving it for the conclusion.]

The Ibn Ezra offers an explanation based on 'sod', relating to the deeper meaning of 'bechor' and 'ma'aser' (see last Ibn Ezra in Vayikra).

Seforno differentiates between these mitzvot (in chapter 27) that are voluntary, and the mandatory mitzvot summarized in 26:46. Because those mitzvot constituted the essence of the **brit**, they were summarized separately. Once those mitzvot were completed in chapter 26, chapter 27 records the mitzvot of Har Sinai that were not part of that covenant. (See Seforno 26:46.)

One could suggest an alternative approach, by considering once again the overall structure of Sefer Vayikra.

Recall from our study of Parshat Vayikra that the first five chapters (i.e. the laws of 'korban yachid') were given to Moshe Rabbeinu from the ohel mo'ed (see 1:1), while the next two chapters (the torot of the korbanot in chapter 6-7) were given from Har Sinai (see 7:37-38). Furthermore, since the laws of Parshat Vayikra were given from the ohel mo'ed, they must have been given only **after** the **shechina** had returned to the mishkan on the **yom ha-shmini**, and hence after the story of the seven day 'milu'im' & 'yom ha-shmini' - as recorded in Vayikra chapters 8-10.

Therefore, it appears as though the laws in Parshat Vayikra were placed intentionally at the beginning of Sefer Vayikra, even though they chronologically belong in the middle of the Sefer.

Thus, we conclude that even though both the opening and concluding units of Sefer Vayikra belong within the sefer, the Torah records them as a 'header' and 'footer' instead.

The following chart reviews this structure:

CHAPTERS	TOPIC
=====	=====
* HEADER	
1->5	the laws of korban yachid (mitzvot)
6->7	I. TOROT of: [first section]
8->10	- how to bring korbanot
11->15	- how the milu'im were offered
16->17	- yoledet, metzora, zav, zava
	- how to enter kodesh kodashim
18->20	II. CHUKIM U-MISHPATIM [second section]
21->22	- kedushat ha-am
23->25	- kedushat kohanim
26	- kedushat zman u-makom
	TOCHACHA (& summary pasuk/ 26:46)
* FOOTER	
27	the laws of erchin (mitzvot)

Now we must explain why specifically these two parshiot were chosen to serve as the 'book-ends' of Sefer Vayikra?

SPECIAL 'BOOKENDS'

Parshat Vayikra and the parshia of erchin share a common

theme. They both deal with an individual dedicating an object to 'hek'desh'. Both also begin with cases where a person offers a voluntary gift (nedava): Parshat Vayikra begins with **ola** & **shlamim** while parshat erchin begins with the voluntary offering of the value of a person, animal, or field.

[Vayikra deals with korbanot actually offered on the mizbe'ach (kodshei mizbe'ach) while **erchin** deals with the value of objects which cannot be offered, their value is given instead to the 'general fund' of the Temple - 'kodshei bedek ha-bayit'.]

One could suggest that the Torah intentionally chose parshiot dealing with the offerings of an individual, primarily the voluntary offerings, to form the 'book-ends' of Sefer Vayikra for the following reason.

As we have seen, Sefer Vayikra focuses on the kedusha of the **mishkan** and of the **nation**. These lofty goals of the **Shchina** dwelling upon an entire nation can easily lead the individual to underestimate his own importance. Furthermore, the rigid detail of the mitzvot of Vayikra may lead one to believe that there is little room for self-initiated expression in his own relationship with God, as our covenantal obligations could be viewed as dry and technical.

To counter these possible misconceptions, the Torah may have placed these two parshiot at the opening and concluding sections of Sefer Vayikra - to stress these two important tenets of 'avodat Hashem'. Despite the centrality of the community, the individual cannot lose sight of the value and importance of his role as an integral part of the communal whole. Secondly, the rigidity of Halacha should not stifle personal expression. Rather, it should form the solid base from which the individual can develop an aspiring, dynamic, and personal relationship with God.

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===== FOR FURTHER IYUN

A. It should be noted that Abarbanel does raise this possibility that the final pasuk of the **tochacha** summarizes only chapter 26, and not larger unit. Note how this forces him to explain the phrases **chukim u-mishpatim** & **torot** in a very different manner.

B. WHEN WERE THE MITZVOT OF SEFER VAYIKRA GIVEN?

In our shiur, we explained that the **torot** mentioned in Parshat Tzav were given on Har Sinai. How about the **torot** in Tazria Metzora, or basically, how about the rest of the mitzvot of Sefer Vayikra - were they given from the ohel mo'ed or earlier when Moshe was on Har Sinai? The psukim do not tell us.

Based on the above shiur, we can suggest that most **all** of the mitzvot in Vayikra were actually given on Har Sinai, but are recorded in Sefer Vayikra for simply thematic reasons (i.e. 'torat kohanim'). Surely, Parshat Tzav states explicitly that its **torot** were given to Moshe on Har Sinai (7:37-8).

Therefore one can also assume that all of the **torot** mentioned in the Sefer were given on Har Sinai. In fact, this can explain Shmot 24:12 which states that Moshe went up to Har Sinai to receive the **torah** & **mitzva** - one could suggest that the **mitzva** refers to the laws of the **mishkan** which Moshe is about to receive that are recorded in the remainder of Sefer Shmot (see Shmot 25:1-4!). If so, then **torah** may refer to the **torot** (that relate to the **mishkan**). However, most of these **torot** are recorded in Sefer Vayikra and not in Sefer Shmot.

[**ha-torah** may also refer to the mitzvot of Sefer Devarim, but that is a topic for a different shiur. [note Devarim 1:5 and the word **torah** throughout that Sefer.]

In a similar manner one could understand that the **chukim u-mishpatim** recorded in Sefer Vayikra may also have been given to Moshe on Har Sinai. To support this, see Devarim 5:28 and its context, as well as Shmot 24:1-4.

Therefore the mention of Har Sinai in this final pasuk does not limit its interpretation to referring only to Behar/Bechukotai, rather strengthens its interpretation as a summary of the entire Sefer. It is also likely that certain other mitzvot that were given in reaction to events that occurred after 'hakamat ha-mishkan', i.e.

after Nadav and Avihu died etc.) may have been given from the **ohel mo'ed**, but there is no reason why we cannot understand that all the other mitzvot recorded in the sefer were first given to Moshe during his 40 days on Har Sinai. Except of course those mitzvot that were given directly to Aharon, which indicate that they were given from the **ohel mo'ed**, and the mitzvot that were given in response to a question that Moshe did not have the answer for.

C. A CHIASTIC STRUCTURE WITHIN SEFER VAYIKRA

In the above shiur, we have noted a connection between the opening and closing parshiot of Sefer Vayikra. This suggests a possibility of a chiastic structure within Sefer Vayikra itself. See if you can find this structure, noting how chapters 18 and 20 'surround' chapter 19, the connection between chapter 21 and chapter 16 in relation to the kohen gadol, chapters 22 and 11-15 in relation to **tum'a & tahara**, chapters 9-10 to chapter 23 in relation to cycles of 7 & 8, chapter 24 and chapter 8 in relation to the keilim of the mishkan, and chapters 6-7 and chapters 25-26 in relations to mitzvot given at **Har Sinai** (see finale psukim of both sections), 've-akmal'!

D. THE VALUE OF THE INDIVIDUAL

As we explained above, the "tochacha" in Parsha Bechukotei (chapter 26) would have been a most fitting conclusion for Sefer Vayikra. Nonetheless, Sefer Vayikra adds one additional chapter, detailing the laws of "erchin" - i.e. the 'monetary' assessment of various individuals - should their value be dedicated to God.

Even though these laws seem to be rather technical, from a certain perspective they do reflect the value of every individual. But what does that have to do with the conclusion of Sefer Vayikra? As Ramban points out (see middle of his commentary to 26:11), the "tochacha" describes 'reward and punishment' at the national level. In other words, it promises prosperity in relation to the land's agriculture, political stability, security, and military success (see 26:1-11). On the 'down side' - it describes primarily national calamities should Bnei Yisrael not keep God's laws. On the other hand, God does not promise every individual (in this world) reward for his good deeds, or punishment for his sins.

There may be some thematic logic behind this distinction. As Bnei Yisrael were chosen to be 'nation' that will represent God among the nations of the world, we are judged as a nation; and rewarded as a nation. If we are successful in making a 'Name for God' by keeping His mitzvot properly, God will not only 'dwell in midst' (see 26:11-12), He will also provide us with material reward - that enables the nation to continue 'the good job'. On the other hand, should we embarrass God by our poor behavior as His special nation, God promises to consistently punish us, to various levels, until we finally 'learn our lesson' (see 26:14-- or even without repentance, should our situation becomes too pitiful (see Devarim 32:36).

[To support this point, note the phrase "l'einei ha'goyim" - in the eyes of the nations -in the finale pasuk (see 26:45 in its context), emphasizing the connection between God's covenant with the people of Israel and their influence on the rest of mankind.]

This thematic conclusion, however accurate, can lead to a very dangerous conclusion. If God's primary interest with His people is at the national level, then maybe the fate of each individual may not so be important [ask the early leaders of communism (like Stalin), if you know your history].

One could suggest, that it may be specifically for this reason that Sefer Vayikra chose specifically the laws of "erchin" - reflecting the value of each individual - as its conclusion, to 'balance' this possible misunderstanding of the "tochacha". Surely, the primary focus of the Bible is on the existence of Am Yisrael as a nation, but to truly act as God's special nation - the importance of every individual must not be under-emphasized.

E. THE CONCLUSION OF VAYIKRA & SHAVUOT

As many commentators point out, the "tochacha" relates directly to the covenant between God and Bnei Yisrael at Har

Sinai. [Note the tell-tale phrase: "beini u'bein Bnei Yisrael b'Har Sinai" in its concluding pasuk (see 26:46), as well as the parallel pasuk at the conclusion of the "tochacha" in Devarim (see Devarim 28:69 - "milvad ha'brit asher karat item b'chorev"). See also Chizkuni on Shmot 24:7!]

Even though all the mitzvot of the Torah are important, it seems that certain mitzvot, i.e. mitzvot of Parshat Behar in Vayikra chapter 25, were singled out to be part of the 'official covenant.

[Note that all the psukim from 25:1 thru 26:46 form a single unit, as they are introduced by the same dibur.]

One could offer a very 'zionistic' explanation for this, as the laws in chapter 25 deal the "kedusha" of the Land of Israel in regard to keeping the laws of "shemitta" & "yovel" (see 25:1-13). In other words, one of God's primary considerations of how God will (or will not) punish us, depends on how meticulously we keep the laws of the "shemitta" year. [Note as well 26:34.]

On the other hand, chapter 25 contains much more than the 'technical' laws of "shemitta". If you read that chapter carefully, you'll note how its primary topic is the consequences of the laws of "shemitta" - reflecting the Torah's desire that Bnei Yisrael fulfill every aspect of the laws of social justice.

For example, as soon as we mention the laws of Yovel, the Torah immediately reminds us not to use those laws as 'technical loophole' to make a tricky 'real-estate deal' (see 25:14-17)!

Then, the Torah explains why these laws are so important, as God reminds us that our purpose as a nation is to be humble servants of God, rather than a group of wealthy landlords exploiting poor serfs (see 25:23-24).

The clincher of this direction are in the following thirty some psukim (see 25:25-55), which describe our communal obligation to help our neighbors in financial distress, by lending them resources so they won't need to either sell their land or even themselves!

Thus, even though the first thirteen psukim seem to describe the technical laws of "shemitta" & "yovel", the remaining forty some psukim focus primarily on assuring social justice for the poor and needy. In fact, by quoting the Torah's brief reference to the laws of "shemitta" in Parshat Mishpatim, we find that the very purpose of these 'technical laws' is to ensure social justice:

"Six years thou shall sow thy land, and gather its produce, but the seventh year thou shall let it rest and lie fallow, that the poor of thy people may eat..." (Shmot 23:10-11)

[Note as well how social justice was a primary theme in most of the laws of Parshat Mishpatim as well.]

To provide additional support, I'd like to suggest that the Torah's reminder to keep God's "chukim u'mishpatim" in 25:18 may not be referring to the laws of "shemitta" but rather to the laws of Vayikra chapters 18 & 19, for the simple reason that the opening psukim of chapter 18 introduce exactly what God's "chukim u'mishpatim" are all about (see related TSC shiur on Parshat Acharei Mot). For those who don't remember, the intro in Vayikra 18:1-5 leads us to the conclusion that God's "chukim u'mishpatim" are none other than the laws of Parshat "Kedoshim Tihyu" (i.e. Vayikra chapter 19)!

If these observations are correct, then the thrust of God's covenant with His people at Har Sinai, and especially His promise of reward (or punishment) should we keep (or not keep) His mitzvot, relates primarily to the ability of Bnei Yisrael to create a society characterized by acts of social justice ("tzedek u'mishpat" - see Breishit 18:17-19!), thus setting an example for other nations to learn from (see Devarim 4:5-8).

Should we emphasize this direction, as we meticulously keep all of God's mitzvot, may we be worthy of God's promise of:

"And I will give peace in the land, and ye shall lie down, and none shall make you afraid; and I will cause evil beasts to cease out of the land, neither shall the sword go through your land. And ye shall chase your enemies, and they shall fall before you by the sword... and your enemies shall fall before you by the sword. And I will have respect unto you, and make you fruitful, and multiply you; and will establish My covenant with you!" (see Vayikra 26:6-9)

A Year of Shabbat or Shmitta? When Torah Mandates Conflict

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by Rabbi Dov Linzer (Posted on May 7, 2021)

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What happens when Torah directives are in conflict with one another, particularly within the same mitzvah?

The mitzvah of the shmitta year serves as a prime example of this conflict. When shmitta appears at the beginning of our parsha, it is referred to as a Shabbat. The text mandates a “*vi’shavta ha’aretz Shabbat la-Hashem*” (וְשִׁבְתָּה הָאָרֶץ שְׁבָת לְהַשֵּׁם): “The land shall keep a Shabbat to God.” Just as we work six days and rest on the seventh day, so we are also told to work the land for six years and give it rest on the seventh. We refrain from planting and harvesting, so that not only we, but the land itself, may observe this year as a Shabbat.

In contrast, in Shemot, the word we find referring to this year is not “Shabbat” but “*shmitta*,” release: “But the seventh year you shall release (*tishmetenah*) the land and let it be, that the poor of your people may eat” (Ex. 23:11). The mandate here is to release your control over the land and to allow the poor to eat from its produce, an idea that is completely absent from our parsha, with its focus on Shabbat.

We find the same emphasis on “*shmitta*” and the poor in Devarim. The Torah there adds another dimension to the shmitta year: the annulment of loans. The key word there is *shmitta* as well: “At the end of every seven years thou shalt make a release (*shmitta*). And this is the manner of the release: Every creditor that lends to his neighbour shall release it... because it is called the Lord’s release.”

The purpose of the Shabbat year is to allow the land to rest. The purpose of *shmitta* is to care for the poor. More than that: It is to create a world, once every seven years, in which there is no hierarchy of wealth. No one owes anyone else any money, no one owns the land, all eat from the land’s produce equally.

Both of those are beautiful ideas, and reflect different themes that people nowadays associate with *shmitta*. For some, it is a year to focus on our relationship to the land, what it means to stop working on it and to reflect on the fact that the land is God’s, and then to ask what lessons we should learn from this that we can apply to the other six years of the cycle. Alternatively, it is a Sabbatical year, what Israelis call a *shnat Shabbaton*. It is a year of stopping our normal activities and devoting ourselves to God and callings of a higher purpose.

Others, in contrast, focus on the message of social justice. It is a year that addresses the inequality of wealth, presenting us with an ideal society that should have an impact on shaping our real, lived society during the other six years.

These two concepts are both powerful ones, but when we reflect on them both, we will realize that they are actually in competition with one another. After all, if you are not working the land, the poor will not have much produce to eat. If the concern were solely for the poor, the Torah would have told us to work the land together with the poor and equally share its produce with them. Shabbat, then, undermines *shmitta*!

The rabbis recognized this conflict. The Talmud (Hullin 7a) states that when the Jews entered the land in the time of Ezra, they intentionally did not sanctify portions of the land. Why? So that the *shmitta* year would not be practiced there and the poor would be able to survive off the tithes and gleanings that they receive in a non-*shmitta* year when the land is being worked. In other words, the poor were better off without *shmitta*!

This teaching clearly acknowledges that these two Torah values—Shabbat and *shmittah*—collide with one another. And the solution is to maintain both. A Shabbat will be observed in most of the land, and the values of *shmitta* (without the *shmitta* practice itself) will be

observed in the rest.

Much later, in the years before the founding of the State of Israel, Rav Kook faced a similar challenge. How should shmitta now be observed in the Land of Israel? How will the people be able to survive if they are not working the land and harvesting its produce? In response to this challenge, he laid out three possible approaches: (1) to recognize the sanctity of the land, and accept that no solution is possible; (2) to rule that nowadays the land has no sanctity so shmitta does not apply; or (3) to rule that the land has sanctity, but that this can be temporarily removed through the temporary sale of the land to a non-Jew.

Of these three options, he said that we must choose the third. The first is no solution at all, and the second is a complete rejection of the sanctity of shmitta (and the land itself). Only the third recognizes the sanctity of the year, and offers a path, at the same time, for providing for the poor.

Shmitta presents us with a challenge. Do we focus on the more “religious” part of its identity or on the part that focuses on society and people? The answer, of course, is both. While these values might conflict, it is our responsibility to embrace them both and to find a way in which we can actualize both of them in our shmitta observance and in our lives.

This is how the rabbis have always worked. When there’s a conflict between two values, they do not allow the more “religiously-oriented” aspects of a mitzvah to override those aspects that demand our attending to the needs of our fellow human beings. Both are equal parts of our religious obligations, and we might be called on at times to find creative solutions to ensure that our obligations to our fellow man and woman be preserved, protected, and embraced. It is on us to answer this call.

About Rabbi Dov Linzer

Rabbi Dov Linzer is the President and Rosh HaYeshiva YCT Rabbinical School. An acclaimed Torah and halakhic scholar, Rabbi Linzer serves a religious guide to the yeshiva’s current rabbinical students and its over 150 rabbis serving in the field. In 2019, Rabbi Linzer became YCT’s president, assuming the institutional leadership of YCT in addition to its Torah leadership. Rabbi Linzer has been a leading rabbinic voice in the Modern Orthodox community for over 25 years. He has published over 100 teshuvot (responsa) and scholarly Torah articles, and answers hundreds of questions each year from rabbis in the field. He hosts a number of highly popular podcasts and videocasts, including Joy of Text and Igros Moshe A to Z, in addition to his daf yomi podcast covering all of shas. In 2012, he was the convener of the Modern Orthodox Siyyum HaShas.