

Parashat Behar-Bechukotai:

We are all responsible for one another, Kulanu acherim zeh l'zeh

The Torah presents stories and laws to us that sometimes feel a bit distant, but upon examination are so relevant they can stop us in our tracks.

I had that experience some time ago when examining verses towards the end of Leviticus. Bear with me while I present these verses to you. Here they are:

25:1 The LORD spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai:

2 Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: When you enter the land that I assign to you, the land shall observe a sabbath of the LORD.

3 Six years you may sow your field and six years you may prune your vineyard and gather in the yield.

4 But in the seventh year the land shall have a sabbath of complete rest, a sabbath of the LORD: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard.

5 You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your untrimmed vines; it shall be a year of complete rest for the land.

6 But you may eat whatever the land during its sabbath will produce -- you, your male and female slaves, the hired and bound laborers who live with you,

7 and your cattle and the beasts in your land may eat all its yield.

8 You shall count off seven weeks of years -- seven times seven years -- so that the period of seven weeks of years gives you a total of forty-nine years.

9 Then you shall sound the horn loud; in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month -- the Day of Atonement -- you shall have the horn sounded throughout your land

10 and you shall hallow the fiftieth year. You shall proclaim release throughout the land for all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: each of you shall return to his holding and each of you shall return to his family.

11 That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you: you shall not sow, neither shall you reap the aftergrowth or harvest the untrimmed vines,

12 for it is a jubilee. It shall be holy to you: you may only eat the growth direct from the field.

13 In this year of jubilee, each of you shall return to his holding.

14 When you sell property to your neighbor, or buy any from your neighbor, you shall not wrong one another.

15 In buying from your neighbor, you shall deduct only for the number of years since the jubilee; and in selling to you, he shall charge you only for the remaining crop years:

16 the more such years, the higher the price you pay; the fewer such years, the lower the price; for what he is selling you is a number of harvests.

17 Do not wrong one another, but fear your God; for I the LORD am your God.

The first five verses instruct us to allow the fields to remain fallow in the seventh year. The fields and the earth receive a sabbath, a rest, a complete year of rest.

What does this say to us?

These remarkable verses teach us to care for the land. This is not the first time either! Back in Genesis 2 verse 15, the Divine placed Adam, the first man, in the Garden of Eden, **לְעִבְדָּהּ וּלְשָׁמְרָהּ** - often translated as to till it and tend it, but *l'avdah* is from *avodah*, to work or to serve, and *l'shamrah* is from *shamor*, to guard, to keep. So Adam was placed in the garden to work/serve it, and to guard and keep it. This message is consistent with allowing the fields to have a year-long sabbath, to rest. Ultimately, the message, by extension, teaches us to care for and guard our earth. For two reasons: one, the earth provides sustenance to us; second, the earth is God's creation, and we are to have respect for it.

A few verses later the jubilee is defined as the fiftieth year, and here too, it is a sabbath for the land. But wait, there's more! In the jubilee year there is the instruction to return to one's holding. What this means is that in the jubilee year, all tribal lands which had been sold – and therefore, borders changed, are to return to their original borders, and all slaves are to go free to their tribal holdings.

Why would borders change? Most often because a crop failed, famine, lack of rain, pestilence, and so forth. This could require the owner to sell the property – property in biblical times were assigned to those within the tribe. The property could be sold to someone in another tribe. Therefore, based on the years remaining until the jubilee, the price of property would naturally be adjusted. The closer to the jubilee, the less the amount. As the jubilee arrived, the land would return to the original tribes and hence also, their owners, descendants, and certainly, to the tribe.

This is remarkable! Our biblical text, the Torah, intended for no Israelite to remain indentured, or in debt. The biblical instruction made sure that no Israelite remained enslaved. We are all children of God, we are all God's creation. The Israelite laws of the Jubilee year illustrate in stunning detail the vision of a social framework.

We say this in Hebrew, *Kulanu acherim zeh l'zeh*, **We are all responsible for one another.**

One last point here is that for one who did not have a tribal holding – we might ask, who would that be? The answer is, those who are not Israelites. In the Jubilee, only the Israelite slaves would be freed and return to their lands.

This is uncomfortable, and true. As far as our biblical text went in treating others fairly, and our text does describe a very progressive process for its time – it's perspective of enslavement of people other than us is glaring in its treatment of others. This is instructive about who we have been, who we are, and who we want to be. The disparity of each, the difference between who we have been, and who we are, and who we are and who we want to be, gives us not just space to reflect, but also a place to grow, really a mandate to grow, not just as Jews, but as humans. This reminds us that we are members of our earth's human community.

So many things we have covered from less than 20 verses of Torah text. This text gives us a framework to think about our relationship to the earth, and change our behavior of how we treat her. We must respect God's creation, and care for it. I remember traveling with my parents as a small child, and how horrified I was when I looked out the car window and saw people throw their trash out the car window. We have come a long way since then, but we have so much farther to go.

We must respect God's creation. That includes our fellow humans. The second part of the text reminds us that we are, yes, caretakers on the land, and though it be bought and sold, ultimately, the earth and everything on it belongs to our Creator. We are simply temporary dwellers here.

Third, our biblical ancestors took enslavement of Israelites seriously and with a humane and progressive approach, but alas, the treatment of those not of our tribe was as though they were property, like animals. This legacy remains, and slavery is happening in our world, even today. As Ellen Frankel, in her book, *The Five Books of Miriam* wrote, "long after Christianity had abandoned much of Jewish law, this "peculiar institution" of slavery remained in the legal inventory of Western cultural institutions. How quickly we forget where we came from."

The fight for resources, including sustenance, land upon which it grows, and freedom are amongst the greatest things we fight over. We tend to fight those with whom we are close, either family, and/or proximity. There is much we must do to overcome this. I believe that we must learn to see ourselves in the other. This ultimately is what it means to work for peace. When the other is no longer the stranger, we will care for them as though they were our brothers, our sisters, our family.

We have a teaching: “So great is peace that, even if Israel worship idols yet peace reigns among them, God says: I cannot, as it were, wield power over them, because peace prevails there.” – Genesis Rabbah

May we work toward peace, in our homes, in our lands, in our world. May we be blessed with peace.

Shabbat shalom,
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