

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

If indeed Judaism gave the world the idea and the ideal of freedom-"I am the Lord thy G-d who took thee out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage"-how can we justify the fact that our Bible accepts the institution of slavery and even legislates proper and improper treatment of slaves? Why did not our Torah abolish slavery absolutely? And this leads to an even more basic question: is the legislated Biblical morality a minimal expression of the expected conduct in interpersonal relationships, or is it the ideal and maximal expression? Is our legal system the floor or the ceiling of the Temple meant to connect all of humanity as one?

If we compare the laws of the Hebrew slave as found in Mishpatim (Exodus 21:2-6) to the laws of the Hebrew slave as found in our Biblical reading of Behar (Leviticus 25:39-47), our analysis may lead to a meaningful answer to our questions.

At first blush, the two primary sources appear to be in conflict with each other. The portion of Mishpatim tells us 1. that if one purchases a Hebrew slave, he may only be enslaved for six years; he must be completely freed at the advent of the seventh year (Exodus 21:2). 2. This passage permits the owner to provide the slave with a Gentile servant as his wife during his period of enslavement, stipulating that the children of this union will remain the Gentile slaves of the owner after the Hebrew slave (father) is freed (Exodus 21:4). And 3. If the Hebrew slave desires to remain in bondage longer than the six-year period-"because he loves his master, his wife, his children"-he may continue to be enslaved "forever" according to the literal meaning of the text, or until the Jubilee fiftieth year, according to our Talmudic Sages; however, he must first submit to having his ear pierced at the doorpost of the mezuzah, so that the message of G-ds dominion (Hear O Israel the Lord is our G-d, the Lord is one), rather than human mastery, is not lost upon him (Exodus 21:5,6).

**This issue of Toras Aish is dedicated
in honor of
Akiva Weiss & Nataly Battash
in honor of their wedding!
Mazel Tov!**

We're soooo excited for youze guyze!

A very different picture seems to emerge from the passage in Behar. Here the Bible emphasizes the fact that we are not dealing with slavery as it was understood in ancient times: "If your brother has come upon unfortunate circumstances and is sold to you, you may not enslave him with the servitude of a slave; he must be like a hired residential worker with you, and he shall work with you until the Jubilee fiftieth year. Because they (these hired residential workers) are (also no less than you) My servants whom I have taken out of the land of Egypt, they may not be sold as one sells a slave (in the larger, Gentile society surrounding the Israelites). You shall not rule over them harshly; you must fear your G-d" (Leviticus 39-43). You are not to have slaves, our text is proclaiming; you are merely to have hired residential workers!

And then if one examines the second text which we are analyzing, the literal words from the passage of Behar, 1. there doesn't seem to be a time limit of six years; the length of time of employment would seem to be dependant upon the contract between employer and employee. 2. this passage doesn't seem to mention anything about the employer providing a Gentile servant as wife, 3. nor does it ordain any piercing of the ear for a longer stay of employment. It does tell us in no uncertain terms that our Bible is not compromising with slavery! It only provides for hired residential workers.

The Talmud, -- which transmits the Oral Law, some of which emanated from Sinai and some of which was interpreted and extracted by the religio- leadership of our people-teaches that each of these Biblical passages is dealing with a different kind of "servant" (B.T. Kidushin 14a): the first (in Mishpatim) is a criminal who must be rehabilitated, a thief who doesn't have the means to restore his theft to its proper owner. Such an individual is put "on sale" by the Religious Court, which is seeking a family to undertake the responsibility of rehabilitation. After all, the criminal is not a degenerate, his crime is not a "high risk" or sexual offense, and it is hoped that a proper family environment which provides nurture as well as gainful employment (with severance pay at the end of the six year period) will put him back on his feet. He is not completely free since the Religious Court has ruled that he must be "sold", but one can forcefully argue that such a "familial environment, half-way house" form of rehabilitation is far preferable to jail incarceration. The family must

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receive compensation- and this in the form of the work performed by the servant as well as the children who will remain after he is freed-and the criminal himself must be taught how to live respectfully in a free society.

The second passage in Behar is dealing with a very different situation, wherein an individual cannot find gainful employment and he is freely willing to sell the work of his hands. The Bible is here emphasizing that there is absolutely no room for slavery in such a case; the person may only be seen as a hired, residential laborer, who himself may choose the duration of his contract, and his "person" is not "owned" in any way by his employer. Hence he can not be "given" a wife, and of course any children he may father are his children and not his employer's children!

There may also be a second way of viewing these two passages. Rav Nahum Rabinowitz, Dean of Yeshivat Birkat Moshe, suggests in a far reaching article (published in the second volume of Edah) that slavery, as well as polygamy, under went serious revision within Jewish Law. There were many concepts which our Torah felt could only be introduced in stages, ideas which even the Israelite world was not ready to accept at the time of the Sinai Revelation. The first passage in Mishpatim comes at the very dawn of Jewish history, still utilizing the term eved (slave or servant), but transforming its significance profoundly; it places a time limit for the service of rehabilitating "criminal" and impresses upon him the value of freedom by piercing the ear of one who wishes to remain beyond the legislated time! The second passage is taught after Israel has begun to come of age, has learned the laws of the Sabbatical year and Jubilee freedom, and is therefore ready to hear that slavery is abolished and a hired residential worker-who dare not be treated in a servile manner-has taken its place.

This development is likewise true in the case of a Gentile slave. The Bible provides for such a status in the verses immediately following our passage of analysis (Lev. 25:43 ff); after all, one may be farsighted if he is one step beyond his generation, but he becomes a fool once he takes that second step. Remember that a Gentile slave is the first stage in conversion to Judaism, since a Gentile slave must be circumcised (if male), go to mikveh for ritual immersion,

and accept all the commandments except the positive commands determined by time. And in the immortal words of Maimonides (the end of the Laws of Gentile Slaves).

"It is (Biblically) permitted to treat a Gentile Slave servilely and despite the fact that this is the law, traits of piety and ways of wisdom ordain that a person be compassionate and pursue righteousness... The (employer) must feed (the Gentile slave) with all the food and drink (that he feeds to himself). He may not treat him with scorn or speak to him with excessive shouting or anger. He must speak to him calmly and always listen to his complaint. 'Is it not true that the one who made me, made him, and prepared us all from one womb?' And so it is said... 'The Almighty shows compassion to all of his creatures, and anyone of His creatures who shows compassion shall receive compassion" ©2006 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

After the long warning about what will happen to us if we don't live (and appreciate) the Torah lifestyle, we are told that ultimately G-d will never forsake us, remembering the covenant He has with our forefathers, Avraham, Yitzchok and Yaakov (Vayikra 26:42-44). Usually, the name Yaakov has four letters (yud-ayin-kuf-vais), but here it is spelled with five (yud-ayin-kuf-vuv-vais). Rashi tells us that this is one of five instances where Yaakov's name has an extra "vuv," corresponding to the five times that the name Eliyahu is spelled without a "vuv" (and therefore pronounced "Elijah"); "Yaakov took a letter from Eliyahu's name as collateral [to ensure] that he (Eliyahu) will come and inform us of when his (Yaakov's) sons will be redeemed."

Although a very uplifting message, it seems kind of odd that Yaakov would have to (figuratively) take part of Eliyahu's name to make sure that he would fulfill his task of letting us know that the redemption is about to occur. It's almost like a pre-emptive shooting of the messenger; Eliyahu is not the "redeemer," G-d is. Nor is Eliyahu the human agent through which the redemption will come about; we know that it will be a descendant of King David, Moshiach ben Dovid, that will do the actual redeeming. If anything, it should be a letter from *his* name that Yaakov takes. All Eliyahu will do (as Rashi indicates) is announce that Moshiach is about to appear. Why is Yaakov taking anything as collateral from Eliyahu?

Interestingly enough, the Midrash that is quoted as being Rashi's source has a not-so-subtle difference, explaining that the reason there are five times where Yaakov's name has an extra "vuv" and Eliyahu is missing one is "to teach [us] that Eliyahu will come and redeem the descendants of Yaakov." If Eliyahu is going

to do the actual redeeming (or even part of it), we can understand why Yaakov is making sure he does it. But if Moshiach is really the one doing it, how can the Midrash say it is Eliyahu? And why, if this is Rashi's source that Yaakov took a letter from Eliyahu as collateral, does he alter the role of Eliyahu from "redeemer" to "reporter," especially if merely reporting what will happen has no bearing on what actually happens?

One of the five verses where Eliyahu is missing the "vuv" (and the verse quoted by the Midrash as the textual source that Eliyahu will redeem Yaakov's descendants) is from Malachi (3:23): "Behold I am sending you the prophet Elijah, before the great and awesome day of G-d arrives." While Rashi understands this as being Eliyahu's announcing that Moshiach is about to come (see Eruvin 43b), others (see Radak) explain that much destruction will occur on that "great and awesome day," and only those that had returned to G-d will be spared. Eliyahu was sent earlier specifically to help facilitate repentance, so that they can avoid being destroyed. The Mahari Kra even calls this an act of "redemption," since it will allow them to survive. Therefore, Yaakov wanted to encourage Eliyahu to come, since he will be an active participant in the redemption, saving those that he helps bring back to G-d.

The Talmud (Sanhedrin 97b-98a) discusses the preconditions needed before Moshiach comes. Teshuvah, repentance, is mentioned most prominently, including whether it is the entire nation that repents or only individuals. Which leaves us with a bit of a conundrum. Which comes first, people doing teshuvah-thereby bringing Moshiach-at which point Eliyahu will come to announce his imminent arrival, or Eliyahu doing outreach to bring people back to G-d, thereby bringing Moshiach. Will Eliyahu come only when Moshiach is already a "done deal," or will he come even before it has been determined that Moshiach will come? If the "announcement" was not an integral part of the process, we can say that he will only come knowing that Moshiach is right behind him, and will use the time between his announcement and the actual arrival to try saving as many as he can by helping them do teshuvah. But there is another possibility.

Teshuvah cannot occur overnight. It must be a gradual change, as the individual (and/or community) grows, and becomes ready for the next step of the teshuvah process. But when will Eliyahu come to tell us that Moshiach is on his way? Is it only when we have already done the necessary teshuvah? Is it when we are close enough that that Eliyahu can tell us Moshiach is coming, allowing us enough time to reach the necessary level by the time he arrives? Or is the announcement itself, that Moshiach is almost here, enough of a "push" to put us over the top?

If Eliyahu doesn't wait until we are already there, he risks sharing the good news of his arrival despite the possibility that we won't actually get there. By the same token, if he waits until we *are* already there, he risks our regressing before Moshiach's actual arrival, thus pushing back his arrival despite the announcement having already being made. On the other hand, if the announcement itself will accelerate the teshuvah process, how much earlier should the announcement be made? Can Eliyahu risk announcing it too early? Can he risk announcing it too late? Even if there is no risk in announcing it even after we are ready for Moshiach (because the announcement itself will ensure that we move closer to G-d), should it have been delayed just to play it safe?

Perhaps this is what Rashi is alluding to by saying that Yaakov took the "vuv" from Eliyahu's name as collateral. If the announcement of Moshiach's arrival will help facilitate that arrival, Yaakov wanted to make sure that Eliyahu will make that announcement, and do it sooner rather than later.

Let's do our part, so that Eliyahu can come and do his. © 2006 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

In today's second portion, Bekhukotai, we read the tokheha-the curse, in which a series of punishments that will be meted out if the Jewish people do not follow the dictates of the Torah. This section actually follows a series of blessings if the Jews adhere to the Torah.

But it is strange because the length of the curses is longer than that of the blessings. Why are the blessings outnumbered by almost three to one? Several answers have been offered.

Ibn Ezra suggests that while the blessings are in fewer sentences, they are actually more numerous as they, unlike the curses, are written in general categories. In this sense, they are far more encompassing.

Biur (Naftali Hertz Weisel) takes a different approach. The blessings, he argues, are more dominant as they come upon us all at once in their full measure. This is not the case with the curses. The Torah insists that they will come about gradually as they are testimony to G-d's reluctance to punish His people. Indeed, a quick review of the text indicates that the reproofs are arranged in four couplets, increasing in severity. They begin with sickness and then continue on with famine, siege and exile. Each of these couplets begins with the words "if you will not harken unto Me [G-d]," indicating how each step follows a further rejection of G-d's Torah. (Leviticus 26:14, 18, 23, 27)

Another thought comes to mind. Perhaps, in fact, the curses are longer because the Torah speaks in the language of people. If one does not feel well, he

often delineates the specific hurt. The language used runs something like "my stomach hurts" or "my head aches" or "I have pain in my legs." In contrast, when one feels well, one never says "my stomach is in perfect order" or "my head is functioning well" or "my legs are moving just perfectly today." Rather, one very generally says "I'm feeling well." In other words, we do not emphasize the good that we receive the way we acknowledge the struggles that we face.

For this reason, the Torah, reflecting the thinking of human beings, speaks at length of the curses. As human beings accentuate their suffering, so too does the Torah in great specificity delineate the curses. The blessings are written in brief because people speak of the positive of life in abbreviated terms.

Especially on the eve of the anniversary of the liberation of Jerusalem, we should remember not only the difficult moments of life, but the blessings which we too often take for granted. © 2006 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

DR. AVIGDOR BONCHEK

What's Bothering Rashi?

This week we again have a double parsha reading. We chose a verse from Bechukotai. This parsha deals with the blessing that we merit when we keep the mitzvot and the curse (Tochacha) which will befall Israel if they (we) don't follow the Torah's path. The greatest blessing is the blessing of peace, as Rashi points out:

"And I will give peace in the Land and you will lie down and no one will make you tremble; and I will rid every evil beast out of the Land; neither shall a sword pass through your Land." (Leviticus 26:6)

"And I will give peace in the Land"-RASHI: "Maybe you will say 'there is food; there is drink, but if there is no peace there is nothing!' It therefore says after everything else, 'And I will give peace in the Land.' From this we learn that peace is equivalent to everything. And so it says (in Isaiah 45:7), 'He makes peace and He created everything.'"

What prompted Rashi's comment?

An Answer: The verses before this one state that there will be much produce and the people will live securely in the Land. What need is there for the additional blessing of peace?

This additional blessing of peace, Rashi (and the Midrash) see as evidence that even if you have everything but do not have peace, then in reality you have nothing. Either because all you have could be lost in war, or because all you have is not enjoyable if you do not have peace.

But how does Rashi derive that "peace is equivalent to everything" from the verse he quotes?

There is another problem with this comment. Let us look at it first. Rashi says: And so it says (in Isaiah 45:7), "He makes peace and He created everything." The commentaries point out that there is no verse as Rashi quotes. The similar verse, which is in Isaiah, actually says "He fashioned light and He created darkness; He fashioned peace and He made evil." It doesn't say, as Rashi says, "He fashioned peace and He made everything." What Rashi has quoted are not the words from Isaiah, but what we say daily in the morning prayers, the first of the blessings before the Shema. But Rashi seems to say his quote is from the Scriptures when he says, "And so it says..."

In addition to this apparent "misquote" on Rashi's part, another question is that according to the verse it does not say "everything." So how can we learn from the verse as it is, "He fashioned peace and He made evil," that peace is equivalent to everything?

How can we understand Rashi?

An Answer: Some commentaries suggest that the text we have in Rashi was not his original words. He did in fact quote the verse as it says, "He fashioned peace and He made evil." But then we have our second question above: the verse does not say "everything," so how can we learn from it that peace is equivalent to everything?

An Answer: Just as light is parallel to darkness (the first half of this phrase), so peace is parallel to evil (the second part). Evil means everything that is evil, thus peace means everything that is good.

The concept of peace and the longing for peace are central to the Jewish experience. In every generation, as it says in the Pesach Haggadah, we are threatened by our many enemies. This certainly contributed to our longing for the illusive peace. But the emphasis on peace in Judaism came long before our war-ridden history. As the quotes below testify: The Grace After Meals ends, "May Hashem bless His people with Shalom."

The Shemoneh Esrai prayer ends with, "He makes Peace on high, may He make peace on us and on all Israel." The Kaddish ends the same way. The Priests' blessing ends with "Shalom." The final word in the Mishnah (the Oral Law) is "Shalom." The last word in the morning prayers is "Shalom." (Ashkenaz version) The last Mishnah in Eiduyot says that Eliyahu's sole purpose in coming before Mashiach is to make peace.

Another Question: Why do we need a special blessing for peace when the Torah includes, "you will live securely in your Land... and no sword will pass through your Land"? Isn't that peace?

An Answer: The Ramban explains the peace in our verse as, "There will be peace among you and you will not fight one man with his brother." This is not peace from our external enemies; rather, peace from internal fights and disagreements.

I dare say this is a blessing to which we would all say "Amen." And so may it be OUR will. © 2006 Dr. A. Bonchek and Aish.org

RABBI LEVI COOPER

G-d – Teacher of Torah

The study of our sacred traditions is central to Jewish life. From the earliest times in our history as a nation, Joshua was instructed to be engaged day and night in Torah study (Joshua 1:8). It comes as no surprise that the central Shema prayer includes the injunction to learn and teach Torah (Deuteronomy 6:6-7).

As with so many Jewish deeds, the study of Torah should be a conscious enterprise, where students of Torah are aware that they are not merely garnering knowledge from books. Though Torah study has a commonality with academic pursuits, it strives for more - when delving into the texts of our heritage we hope to forge lasting connections with our traditions and infuse our existence with meaning and purpose.

With this insight we can appreciate why Torah study should be undertaken only once we have focused our thoughts by reciting a blessing. In this vein, the Talmud asks (B. Berachot 11b): What is the blessing that should be recited before the study of Torah?

The first response offered is a blessing that concludes: "Who has sanctified us with His commandments and has commanded us to be engrossed with the words of Torah." Though this rendition parallels other benedictions recited before fulfilling mitzvot (commandments), it concludes with an insightful phrase that reflects how occupied with Torah we should be - it is insufficient to leisurely peruse Torah while dozing in a comfortable armchair. This blessing signals the lofty goal of delving into the sacred texts of our tradition, personally involving ourselves in their every turn of phrase.

The Talmud continues reporting that another sage would conclude the above blessing with the words: "Now sweeten, Lord, our G-d, the words of Your Torah in our mouths and in the mouths of Your nation, the House of Israel. And may we be - we, and our descendants, and the descendants of Your nation, the House of Israel, all of us - amongst those who know Your name and who engross themselves with your Torah."

In this blessing we have a unique request. Before performing no other mitzva do we express the hope that future generations will be doing as we are about to do. Continuity is a concern that draws attention from Jewish leadership across the board. Communal resources are often channeled to bolster the chances of our children continuing in our path. Yet only with regard to the study of Torah do our sages mandate a prayer for continuity.

This blessing concludes with the enchanting words: "Blessed are you, G-d, who teaches Torah to His nation, Israel." Is G-d really the teacher of Torah today? Perhaps it would be more appropriate to thank G-d for providing talented educators who teach Torah?

We have here an interesting paradigm. Those whom we know as teachers are not the real educators; they are transmitters, and more importantly, facilitators. The true educator is G-d, who speaks through the voice of Torah.

To be sure, it is challenging to hear this voice, and often it is challenging for teachers to let this voice be heard. Torah teachers, however, do not aim to teach their version of Torah; they hope to faithfully convey G-d's message.

Clearly this is an impossible task, for everything in this world is tainted by subjectivity. Yet the challenge remains for the human teacher to be an objective mouthpiece for the Divine teacher. Thus, when we walk into a Torah lecture - as a student or as a teacher - we hope to encounter that still, silent voice of the Divine Torah teacher who educates His people.

The talmudic passage continues citing another version of the blessing: "Who chose us from amongst all the nations, and gave us His Torah." Here, too, we see that the Torah we study is not the earthly teacher's Torah, but the Torah of the Almighty. It is this gift of Torah that delineates the contours of our distinct mission in this world.

The Talmud continues stating that this benediction is "the best of the blessings," but does not elaborate on what gives this blessing its preferred status.

One commentator proposes that this blessing praises G-d while referring to the Torah and the Jewish People. This star-studded line-up - G-d, Torah and Jewish People - gives the blessing its distinction (Rashi, 11th century, France).

Perhaps we could suggest that the eminence of this blessing is connected with the captivating words that conclude the benediction: "Blessed are You, G-d, who gives the Torah." The present tense usage - "gives" - cries out: Was not the Torah given long ago at Sinai? One commentator points out that Torah continues to be given, as G-d grants fresh understandings when we delve into our sacred texts (Taz, 17th century, Poland). Once again we have the sense that G-d continues to actively teach Torah.

Indeed, the Talmud tells us that there is no beit midrash (study hall) that does not have a new approach to our tradition (T. Sota 7:9 and parallels). In fact, one version of this statement declares that every beit midrash has a daily innovative insight (Y. Sota 18d).

Faced with these different proposals for the appropriate blessing before the study of Torah, the passage concludes: "Therefore, you are to recite them all."

This is an appealing, normative ruling that is paralleled elsewhere in the Talmud (B. Sota 40a). The sages discuss the appropriate congregational response to the leader's modim (giving thanks) prayer in the repetition of the silent Amida.

Five suggestions are proffered, whereby the passage concludes with the ruling: "Therefore, we are to recite them all." Indeed, normative practice in all communities is to respond with a compilation of suggested responses, albeit with minor differences from the language presented in the Talmud. Likewise, all the proposed blessings upon the Torah are recited daily, notwithstanding minor changes.

Thus, we pray for all the elements included in the unique blessings recited before we embark on the conscious pursuit of Torah study. We strive to be absorbed in sweet Torah study that will be continued by our children, learning from the Divine teacher who continues to grant us innovative insights into our tradition, and all this while we endeavor to fulfill our mission in this world.

Rabbi Levi Cooper is Director of Advanced Programs at Pardes. His column appears weekly in the Jerusalem Post "Upfront" Magazine. Each column analyses a passage from the first tractate, of the Talmud, Brachot, citing classic commentators and adding an innovative perspective to these timeless texts. © 2006 Rabbi L Cooper. Rabbi Levi Cooper is Director of Advanced Programs at Pardes. His column appears weekly in the Jerusalem Post "Upfront" Magazine. Each column analyses a passage from the first tractate, of the Talmud, Brachot, citing classic commentators and adding an innovative perspective to these timeless texts.

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Amnon Bazak

In the final verses of the harsh passage of rebuke, the Torah describes the final stages of the troubles that will befall the nation of Yisrael if they do not follow G-d's path and ignore His commandments. The fact that the end will be good is because of two covenants that the Almighty made with the nation. The first one to be mentioned is the covenant with the forefathers:

"And I will remember my covenant with Yaacov, and also my covenant with Yitzchak, and I will also remember my covenant with Avraham, and I will remember the land" [Vayikra 26:42]. The second covenant is the one made with the nation of Yisrael when they left Egypt: "And I will remember for them the covenant with the elderly ones, when I took them out of the land of Egypt in front of the eyes of the other nations, in order to be a G-d for them" [26:45]. What is the relationship between these two covenants, and why are they both necessary?

Evidently the two covenants stem from two different viewpoints which are at the heart of the two

parts of the Torah portion, the land and the nation. The first section, which describes the reward to be expected for observing the mitzvot, begins by relating to the land. "And the land will give its produce... And you shall dwell in security in your land, and I will provide peace in the land... And I will remove the wild animals from the land, and no sword will pass through your land" [26:5-6]. The passage then moves on to the nation. "And I will put my Tabernacle in your midst and my soul will not be disgusted with you. And I will pass through you and I will be your G-d, and you will be a nation for me." [26:11-12]. The same pattern is true of the second part of the portion, the rebuke, which describes the process of punishment that will overcome the nation of Yisrael, finally reaching the high point with two main and final punishments. The first is related to dwelling in the land: "And I will spread you out among the nations, and I will send the sword after you and your cities will be destroyed" [26:33]. This will fulfill the goal with respect to the land: "Then the land will rest for its Shabbat... All the days of its desolation it will rest, since it did not rest during Shabbat when you dwelt on it." [26:34-35]. The second punishment is directly related to the people: "And you will be lost among the nations, and the land of your enemies will devour you. Those who remain among you will shrivel from their sins in the lands of your enemies." [26:38-39]. This harsh punishment will also lead to a specific goal. "Then, perhaps their stubborn hearts will surrender, and then they will be absolved of their sin." [26:41].

This should then be followed by the next stage, renewal of the links between the Almighty, Yisrael, and the land. The renewal will take place as a result of the earlier covenants between the Almighty and the nation of Yisrael throughout the generations. The covenant with the forefathers is mainly concerned with the land: "And the land will be left alone by them, and it will rest for its Shabbat" [26:43]. This is reasonable in that each of the forefathers was given a promise that the land would be given to their descendants (Avraham: "To your offspring I will give this land" [Bereishit 12:7]; Yitzchak: "I will give all of these lands to your offspring" [26:4];

Yaacov: "I will give it to you, and to your offspring after you I will give the land" [35:12]). In contrast, the original covenant is in essence concerned with the link between the Almighty and His nation. "And I will remember for them the covenant with the earlier ones, when I took them out of the land of Egypt in front of the eyes of the other nations, in order to be a G-d for them." It is mentioned at this point to explain that in spite of everything, "while they were in their enemy's land I did not despise them and I was not disgusted by them such that I would destroy them and breach my covenant with them, for I am their G-d" [26:44].



"Let the Land Be Redeemed"-In Acco!

by Rabbi Yosef Stern,

Head of the Acco Hesder Yeshiva

The Torah portion of Behar is well suited to the period between the holiday of freedom and the day of the giving of the Torah, between Yom Haatzmaut and Yom Yerushalayim. The main theme of the portion is redemption. According to the simplest interpretation, redemption is the act of returning the land to its original owners if for some reason it has been taken from them. The original owner of all the land, of course, is the Almighty, the King of Kings, as is written, "For the land is mine" [Vayikra 25:23]. Once every seven years, the King takes possession of the land, and it is given a chance to rest in accordance with His orders. The land then becomes similar to its King, revealing His royal properties in the world, and its fruits and produce are holy. By His will the Almighty commanded the nation of Yisrael to take possession of Eretz Yisrael. This is the meaning of the command, "The land shall not be sold permanently" [Vayikra 25:23], both on a personal and a national level.

In his commentary on the Sefer Hamitzvot, the Ramban explains, based on the Talmud Yerushalmi, that it is prohibited to sell land to a Gentile (Mitzva 227). Based on the above verse, the sages disagree whether a Gentile has the power to countermand the law of Ma'aser by taking possession of a portion of the land. One opinion is that "the land shall not be sold permanently," and therefore the sale does not take effect, while the other rabbi feels that the sale takes effect but it is prohibited. In addition, the words of the Ramban are well known: "We have been commanded to take possession of the land... We should not leave it in the hands of any other of the nations or let it become desolate..." [Additions to the Mitzvot, Mitzva 4].

Here in the city of Acco, the capital of the Gallil, the words of the Ramban can be heard emanating from every stone and from every road. Five thousand years of history in Acco look on in amazement, asking if Israel will be able to maintain its Jewish majority, or if this will be the first city in the country to be transferred to another nation or to become desolate, as a result of our apathy. Acco is the meeting point between the sea and the land. According to the Midrash, this is the source of its name, from the Hebrew "ad ko"-come to this point and no further, after the world was flooded in the time of Enosh. Since that time, Acco has achieved sanctity as the gateway to Eretz Yisrael. It is almost certain that the city has the status of having been surrounded by a wall during the time of Yehoshua. Throughout our history, the most prominent sages passed through its gates: the masters of the Mishna and the Talmud, Rambam, Ramban, Or Hachaim, Rabbi Nachman, and the Ramchal (Rabbi Chaim Moshe Luzzato). Rabbi Luzzato settled in the city, and his synagogue can be

seen in the old city of Acco. All of these sages call out to us from the alleys of the old city: "Let the land be redeemed" [Vayikra 25:24].

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftorah

This week's haftorah teaches us a profound lesson in trust and faith in Hashem. The prophet Yirmiyahu introduces the haftorah by proclaiming, "Hashem is my strength, my stronghold, my refuge in the day of trouble." Yirmiyahu proceeds and admonishes the Jewish people for pursuing foreign avenues and engaging in strange practices for security. He warns them that they are subject to forfeiting their wealth and possessions because of their public involvement in idolatry.

He then delivers a crushing blow in the name of Hashem and says, "And you will forsake your land which you are to blame for mistreating the inheritance I gave you and you will be enslaved to your enemies in a foreign land." (17:4) This is the dreadful prophecy about their pending exile from their precious homeland, Eretz Yisroel. Yet, Yirmiyahu devotes his attention to one specific detail as the cause of their exile. He immediately follows with serious reprimand about trust and says, "Cursed is the person who trusts in man...and turns his heart away from Hashem... Blessed is the person who trusts in Hashem." The juxtaposition of these words suggests that the Jewish exile was caused by lack of trust. Apparently, the previous criticism of mistreating the land related to this fault. Rashi develops this and explains that the admonition referred to their failure to properly observe Shmita laws. Yirmiyahu chastised them for mistreating their inheritance by refusing to return it to its true owner during Shmita.

This explanation requires serious reflection. Although the mitzvah of Shmita is undoubtedly significant, it seems to be treated with extreme severity. The prophet equates lack of Shmita observance with total lack of faith in Hashem. This suggests that one who does not properly adhere to Shmita laws has no trust and faith in Hashem!? This is difficult to digest after considering the severe demands of Shmita. During that year, one may not exert any effort towards his personal sustenance and livelihood. Hashem demands that one place his total faith and trust in Him. If one does not achieve this lofty level and fails to display total faith can he be compared to an agnostic possessing no faith?

We can raise similar concern regarding the repercussions of profiting from Shmita fruit. In addition to Shmita's agricultural prohibition one is prohibited from engaging in any profitable transaction with fruit grown during the Shmita year. The Talmud predicts the severe hardships one will endure for violating this prohibition. His first repercussion will be his sale of all

his fields and possessions. This process could continue and include the sale of his home and eventually even result in the sale of his daughter as a maid servant. (see Kiddushin 20a) These punishments seem extremely severe relative to their offense. There are many grave sins whose consequences are trivial in comparison to those of Shmita violations. What establishes Shmita so significant as to warrant these responses?

We can shed light on this entire subject through the Malbim's classic commentary on this week's haftorah. He explains that the prophet discusses three approaches to one's faith in Hashem. Yirmiyahu showers praise and blessing upon one who places his total trust in Hashem. Although this person undoubtedly involves himself in securing his sustenance he realizes that Hashem is ultimately his true provider. A second prevalent attitude comes from those of dual allegiance, who place their trust in Hashem and in their personal efforts. Although this is certainly not a supreme form of service and doesn't receive words of praise it is nonetheless acceptable. There exists yet a third attitude amongst some, one that is totally unacceptable and condemned by the prophet. Yirmiyahu curses one who places total trust in his personal involvement without even including Hashem as a factor in the equation. This person totally disregards Hashem's involvement and believes that he obtains success and fortune exclusively through personal efforts.

These insightful words place the mitzvah of Shmita in its proper perspective. Every seventh year Hashem reminds us that He is constantly involved in our lives and sustenance. Hashem facilitates this recognition by restricting us from personal involvement in our livelihood for an entire year. One who adheres to Shmita's restrictions clearly demonstrates his total faith in Hashem as his provider. However, one who violates Shmita's laws shows his total belief and trust in his personal efforts. Hashem absolutely banned these efforts during that year and will undoubtedly have no part in helping them bear fruits. Such activity reflects a defiant attitude that Hashem need not be involved for one to succeed. He expresses to all that irrespective of Hashem's approval or involvement these efforts will nevertheless produce as usual.

This totally unacceptable attitude inevitably engages Hashem in a clear demonstration that all sustenance and provisions are ultimately His doing. Hashem's response to such misguided individuals will be to gradually force them to sell their possessions in exchange for basic sustenance. This process helps them realize that all possessions come from Hashem and that He is their sole provider. A similar response will be given to the Jewish people when they display this defiant attitude. Hashem will remind them that He controls their lives and not themselves. Their failure to observe Shmita laws will cause them to forfeit their

privilege of living in Eretz Yisroel, the land of Divine Providence. Conceivably whoever merits to live in Eretz Yisroel should sense Hashem's closeness and direct involvement in every step of their lives. If the entire nation fails to recognize this reality it truly has nothing to gain from dwelling in the king's palace. Hashem will therefore banish the people from His presence until they recognize and learn to appreciate His active role in their lives.

If we could only internalize this lesson our lives would be so much better. May we soon merit to return to our father's table with His full return to His people in the nearest future. © 2006 Rabbi D. Siegel and torah.org

RABBI ZEV ITZKOWITZ

A Byte of Torah

“If, however, a person doesn't have a redeemer, and he accrues enough wealth to be able to redeem it himself. Then he shall calculate the number of years in which it was sold ... If he did not manage to gain the means to retrieve it, [then] that which he sold shall remain with the buyer until the Jubilee. It is then released by the Jubilee, and he can return to his hereditary land.” (Leviticus 25:26-28)

These verses can be understood simply. A person falls upon hard times and finds that he must sell some of his land inheritance. His relative is given the opportunity to redeem it for him. If there is no one who can redeem it for him, then if he acquires enough money, he can redeem it himself. If not, then the land will revert back, automatically, to its original owner with the Jubilee (Abarbanel).

These verses can, however, be understood as an allusion to the future. The "person" in question is Hashem (Midrash Tanchuma). His children, Israel, have been "sold". However, they should never, even for a moment, give up hope, for, in any event, they will be redeemed. Hashem will examine His children. If through their deeds, etc., they are meritorious, Hashem will then hasten to bring the Messiah, at which time all the Children of Israel will return to their Land. If, however, they have not accrued sufficient merit, then at the appointed time, the 'Jubilee', they will, nevertheless, be redeemed and will return to their land (Or HaChayim).

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Happy Lag Ba'Omer!



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