

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

### Virtual Beit Medrash

STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA HARAV MOSHEH LICHTENSTEIN SHLIT"A

*Translated by Kaeren Fish*

**P**arashat Bechokotai begins with the description of an ideal situation: "If (im) you follow My statutes... I shall give your rains at their proper times... and you will dwell securely in your land... and I shall lead you upright" (Vayikra 26:3-13). This situation is not only good and desirable; it is, in fact, complete and perfect. Immediately afterwards, the Torah describes the opposite reality: a situation in which the Jewish people are not fulfilling the Torah, and G-d responds accordingly: "And if (ve-im) you do not obey Me... and you despise My statutes and your souls loathe My judgments... and if you walk crookedly with Me..." (23:14 ff.).

The previous parasha, Behar, begins with the commandment of shemitta (the sabbatical year) -- a mitzva which, more than any other, expresses faith in G-d. In an agricultural society, refraining from working the land for an entire year requires enormous faith and spiritual strength. Its fulfillment reflects a situation in which the people of Israel are living in their land, with faith in their G-d, carrying out His commandments-even those that are most difficult to maintain.

However, in parashat Behar, too, we find the Torah describing an acute deterioration: "When (ki) your brother grows poor and he sells some of his possession... And when a person sells a house that is located in a walled city... And when (ve-khi) your brother who dwells with you grows poor, and sells himself to you... And when a stranger who resides in your midst grows rich, and your brother grows poor beside him, and sells himself to the stranger who resides with you..." (25:25-55). Rashi (ad loc.) explains, citing Chazal, that the reason for the decline in the economic situation of so many amongst Bnei Yisrael is the failure to observe the mitzva of shemitta. The fortunes of the nation rise or fall depending on the way in which society conducts its economic activity and the manner in which it treats its poor.

There is a fundamental linguistic difference between the two descriptions of the difficult situation faced by Am Yisrael. In parashat Bechokotai, the Torah formulates its propositions in the conditional: "If you

despise My statutes... if you walk crookedly with Me." In other words, it is entirely possible for such a situation to come about, but by no means necessary or unavoidable. Am Yisrael can choose to observe G-d's commandments and thereby prevent the realization of the horrifying descriptions in the parasha.

In parashat Behar, in contrast, we find repeated use of the word "ve-khi," meant here in the sense of "when." The Torah hints to us that the situation described in parashat Behar is inevitable: as an owner of property, man will almost certainly deteriorate morally to the point where he will cause harm to the weaker elements of society in order to protect his own property. The way in which we conduct our economic activity necessarily leads to the impoverishment of some members of society-"when your brother grows poor"-with all of its ramifications. It is a tragic trap, ingrained in man's nature, leading to social disintegration.

The Torah warns us not to reach such a situation. This requires very close scrutiny and constant attention to the way in which we live our lives. We must regard the economic and social system, too, as matters of holiness- as a set of laws pertaining to our relationship with G-d no less than to our social relations. We must adapt our behavior in these spheres, too, to the directions and commandments of the Torah.

The haftara of parashat Behar carries a note of consolation: "For so says G-d... houses and fields and vineyards shall again be purchased in this land" (Yirmiyahu 32:15). The day will come when Bnei Yisrael will once again be able to live in the land, and it will once again be possible to live a full life in accordance with G-d's Torah, and the nation will again be able to establish an ideal social order, as described at the beginning of the parasha.

May it be G-d's will that we merit to live a life of holiness in all spheres and in all senses.

RABBI BEREL WEIN

### Wein Online

**T**he double parsha of this week has, so to speak, bookends to it. It begins with the statement that the Torah was given to us at Sinai and that all of its commandments and not only the commandment of shemitta-the sabbatical year-are of Divine origin as given to Moshe on Mount Sinai.

The book of Vayikra concludes with the tochacha-the uncanny forecast of the troubles that will

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befall Israel as it strays away from its godly mission and the values and standards of behavior of the Torah. The ways of the Lord are hidden from us and often we are unable to see the causes of our difficulties, troubles and persecutions.

The severity of the tochacha shocks and bewilders us. Any explanation, let alone justification, of such hideous events always fall short of the mark. And, therefore, we are left with the thought expressed at the beginning of the parsha that the decrees of Sinai somehow bind all of us throughout our existence. The ongoing mystery of Jewish survival and existence is part and parcel of the entire package of the Torah that was delivered to us at Sinai.

Both the microcosm and the macrocosm of Jewish life are derived from Sinai and from the Torah. There is no other logical way to view the story of the Jews and of Israel except through the prism of Torah and Sinai. We find ourselves unable to comprehend the causes of Jewish suffering but we can certainly testify to the fact that the Torah predicted all of this with minute detail and that it came to pass in our history.

The entire thrust of the debate and the difference between traditional Judaism and other groups of non-conforming Jews is regarding the divinity of the Torah from Sinai. This is the principle that all of traditional Judaism rests upon. Without it the entire jumble of laws, commandments, customs and traditions becomes almost meaningless.

All of the Sinai deniers have eventually caused assimilation, conversion, intermarriage and terrible difficulties for themselves and other Jews. A man-made Judaism will never be able to stand the challenges and overcome the vicissitudes of time and place that always arise.

I recall the famous quip that Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch used in replying to the Bishop of Frankfurt as to why Hirsch's Jews would not join so many other Jews in the nineteenth century in converting to Christianity. Hirsch stated to the Bishop that the difference between us (Christianity and Judaism) was that Christianity was a man made religion used to describe G-d while Judaism was a G-dly given religion used to describe humans.

In its most simplistic form, this statement really sums up the essence of Judaism-its commandments and goals. The revelation to Israel on Sinai, the granting

of the Torah, the observance of its values and laws are the keys to Jewish survival. They enable us to overcome the dire tochacha and continue forward bearing the message and hope of Sinai to all of humanity at all times and in all places and situations.

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**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 or she 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

curse. 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. © 2010 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.

**RABBI DOV KRAMER**

## Taking a Closer Look

“**A**nd if you'll say, 'what will we eat in the seventh year, for we have not seeded nor have we gathered our produce.' And I (G-d) will command My blessing for you in the sixth year, and it will make [enough] produce [to last] three years" (Vayikra 25:20-21). This promise was made in 2448 (before G-d moved the venue of His communication with Moshe from Mt. Sinai to the Mishkan). This year (5770), a vineyard (Hararei Kedem) won two gold medals and a silver medal at a wine competition; the prize-winning wines were made from grapes grown in the sixth year of the past Shemita cycle, a year (5767) in which the owner (Ariel Ben-Sheetrit) says his vineyard produced three times the usual quantity of grapes ([www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/137172](http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/137172)). At first glance, this sounds pretty amazing. Having worked in the media for more than two decades, I have a fair amount of skepticism about the accuracy of details in news stories (and I'm not in a position to verify these for myself). Nevertheless, working with the details provided in this story, a few thoughts came to mind.

First of all, the general consensus is that when there is no "Yovel" (Jubilee year) the prohibition against working the land during the seventh year is not a biblical prohibition, but a rabbinic one (see Rambam, Hilchos Shemita v'Yovel 9:2). Does the biblical promise of triple the amount of produce apply even when the obligation to observe Shemita is not a biblical obligation? The Sema (Sefer Meiras Aynaim, the commentary of Rabbi Yehoshua Falk, a student of the Ramuh, on the Choshen Mishpat section of the Shulchan Aruch, 67:2) says that the blessing only applies when the obligation to keep Shemita is biblical, while the Chazon Ish (Shevi'is 18:4) disagrees. (My thanks to Rabbi Micha Berger for pointing me towards these sources). It would be tempting to suggest that since the Chazon Ish lived (for the final decades of his life) in the Land of Israel, the "reality" of whether or not the blessing would be fulfilled was affected by his being the premiere halachic authority in Israel (whereas Rabbi Falk lived in the Ukraine, 300 years earlier), but I am not that bold. The Chazon Ish himself wrote that the blessing is not arbitrary; it either applies to all of the land or to none of it (he describes the blessing as a promise that is only fulfilled if we are worthy of its fulfillment). Interestingly,

whether or not the blessing applies nowadays was apparently part of the discussion when determining if "heter mechira" was a viable option. Although the Chazon Ish wrote that we must do all we can through natural means ("hishtadlus") to ensure that there is enough food to eat during Shemita, and then, after we do all we can, the blessing can occur, he was opposed to the "heter mechira."

Another factor to keep in mind is what the Torah means by the three-year blessing. If we can't work the land during the seventh year, there is only one "lost" year of crops, so all the sixth year would need to produce to compensate for the (lost) seventh year is double its normal output, not triple. Rashi (25:21) says that the "three years" do not mean three full years, but parts of three calendar years, i.e. the second half of the sixth year, the entire seventh year, and the first half of the eighth year. The Sifra (Behar 4:6) understands the blessing to have a dual meaning (see Raavad). When it is only the seventh year that needs to be compensated for, the "three years" refers to the parts of the three years that the output of the sixth year must be used for; the actual output is only double its norm. However, since the 50th year ("Yovel") has the same prohibitions against working the land as the seventh/forty-ninth year, there are two years worth of crops that must be compensated for. In those instances, the sixth/forty-eighth year will produce triple its normal output, enough to cover three full calendar years (corresponding to the "seventh, eighth and ninth" years of the seven year cycle). Being that 5769 was not "Yovel," and it was only in 5768 that Ben-Sheetrit did not work his vineyard, it is interesting that its output in 5767 was triple its normal output, not double.

On the other hand, had his vineyard produced "only" twice its normal output, would anyone have taken notice? Would Ben-Sheetrit have mentioned it in his acceptance speech, expounding upon Rashi's commentary to explain how producing double was a fulfillment of the biblical promise? There is much tension in Israel between those that insist that no work be done on the land during Shemita and those that rely on the "heter mechira." Ben Sheetrit acknowledged that he was under a lot of pressure to not keep Shemita, but decided to keep it anyway. If G-d wanted us to stop and take notice that someone who resisted such pressure was rewarded (there are other unique aspects to his vineyard too), tripling his output was likely much more effective than "just" doubling it.

"[G-d] is standing behind our wall, observing from the windows, glancing through the lattices" (Shir HaShirim 2:9). Even in times of "hester panim," when G-d's face is hidden, His involvement with the world and His creations is evident. Even if the biblical blessing only applies when the laws of Shemita are biblically mandated, or apply equally to all of the land (or none of it), blessing Hararei Kedem with a triple output was an

effective way of catching our attention. © 2010 Rabbi D. Kramer

**RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## Shabbat Shalom

“**A**nd the Lord spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai saying, '... when you enter the land which I am giving to you, the land must rest a Sabbath year unto the Lord...' (Lev. 25:1)

The classical interpreter, Rashi (France 1040-1105), asks, "Why does the Bible specifically link the laws of the Sabbatical year to the revelation on Mount Sinai?" After all, all of the 613 commandments were given at Sinai, not only those pertaining to the Sabbatical year. He answers (based on a Midrash in *Torat Kohanim*) that just as the general rules and specifically deduced details of the Sabbatical laws were given at Sinai, so too, the general rules and specifically deduced details of all of the commandments were given at Sinai.

But his answer only further begs the question. If all the commandments were given with all their details on Mount Sinai, why does the Bible only mention this in the context of the Sabbatical laws?

Furthermore, I would question the very premise of Rashi's answer. Were the details of all of the commandments in fact given at Sinai? We have previously explained that there is a distinction between the initial tablets of the Revelation - which Moses smashed - and the second tablets, which endured. Indeed, the Midrash suggests a fundamental distinction between the "substantive essence of Torah" in each of these revelations. The first tablets revealed a Torah which was solely the work of G-d, written by the Lord - a Divine product of His hands (as it were). The Israelites played no role in the formation of this Torah and they could not claim any scintilla of ownership over it. Therefore, it was doomed to fail as indeed happened with the worship of the Golden Calf only forty days after that Revelation.

The second tablets, however, are revealed with the introductory words, "The Lord said to Moses, 'You are to fashion (p'sal lekha) the two tablets of stone...' (Exodus 34:1). In this second revelation; you, Moses, representing the leadership of the Israelites throughout the generations, are to have a hand in the formation of the tablets. This Revelation will leave room for an Oral Law, replete with interpretations, decrees and enactments of the Rabbis in every generation.

The word "p'sal" literally means to fashion in stone or to sculpt, but the Pri Zaddik (Rabbenu Zadok of Lublin) ingeniously reads this word as a derivative of "pasul," which means "legally invalid." He explains that this time, you, the halakhic leadership of Israel, will be invested in My Torah and will be empowered to help complete it; determining what is and what is not halakhically proper. This "partnership" between

humanity and G-d in Torah is expressed in the Oral Law with thirteen hermeneutic principles of interpretational methodology and Responsa literature that deals with the challenges and opportunities emanating from changing times and new scientific discoveries. Thus, the Torah can relate to organ transplants, in-vitro fertilization, and vehicles which allow the infirm to get to the Synagogue on Shabbat. This dynamic secures the ability of Torah to remain our guide throughout the generations.

But if this is the case, then not every detail of each law can hark back to the first Revelation at Sinai. Jewish law is dependent on the Oral Law interpretations of the religio-legal authorities of each generation!

I believe that we can explain the special linkage of the laws of the Sabbatical year to Sinai by referring to a passage in the Talmud (B.T. *Menahot* 29b). Our Talmudic Sages picture Moses at the summit of Sinai or, better still, in the supernal heavens, watching the Almighty adding the finishing touches to the crowns on various letters of the Bible.

When the greatest of prophets inquires as to their significance, G-d responds that in the future, a great scholar called Rabbi Akiva will derive many laws from each crown. G-d enables Moses to go forward in time and enter Rabbi Akiva's academy. As Moses listens to Rabbi Akiva's Torah lecture, he is shocked and devastated to discover that he barely understands what the sage is saying! But Moses is relieved and comforted when one of the students asks the rabbi the source of his explanations, and Rabbi Akiva answers that it is "a law given to Moses at Sinai."

I believe that this Talmudic passage is telling us that Sinai - in the initial Revelation- provided us with the goal of G-d's Torah to develop "a Kingdom of priest-teachers and a holy nation;" to influence the world in ways of righteous compassion, justice and morality. The twin purposes of Torah are the formation of a sacred nation (*Kedoshim Tihyu*, Ramban ad loc), which does what is righteous and good (Rambam, *Laws of Neighbors*). The Revelation at Sinai set down the basic rules and even provided the verses to be interpreted and expanded by Torah scholars of every generation; the source of every expansion and interpretation of the law harks back to the ideals and method of implementing them, which was Moses' prophetic vision at Sinai.

The laws of the Sabbatical year and the Jubilee express a magnificent view of a world order in which every individual is returned to his ancestral land and homestead, debts are rescinded and freedom reigns supreme. This is the goal of Jewish law, the messianic dream of perfecting society; this is the picture with which Maimonides concludes his *Mishneh Torah* legal compendium, because he understands that this is the purpose of our law and the true mission of Israel. And the Scroll of Ruth demonstrates how the agricultural

laws created such a society which supported its poor in dignity.

If we fail in the laws of the Sabbatical year and the Jubilee, we will not be worthy of owning the land or living on it, so it will be taken away from us. And if we fail to make the values of a Sabbatical year relevant to an industrial society as well, we will be losing the indelible connection between the practical laws we keep and the spirit of those laws as enunciated at Sinai. This is the force behind the eternal words of Rashi and the Midrash: "Just as the general rules as well as the specifically deduced details of the Sabbatical laws were given at Sinai, so were the general rules as well as the specifically deduced details of all of the commandments given at Sinai." The Sabbatical laws and Jubilee stand out as the model for perfecting society. © 2010 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

**CHIEF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS**

## Covenant & Conversation

I want, in this study, to look at one of Judaism's most distinctive and least understood characteristics—the chronological imagination. The modern world was shaped by four revolutions: the English, the American, the French and the Russian. Two—the English and American—were inspired by the Hebrew Bible which in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, because of the Reformation and the invention of printing, became widely available for the first time. The French and Russian revolutions, by contrast, were inspired by philosophy: the French by the work of Jean Jacques Rousseau, the Russian by the writings of Karl Marx.

Their histories are markedly different. In England and America, revolution brought war, but led to a gradual growth of civil liberties, human rights, representative government and eventually democracy. The French and Russian revolutions began with dreams of utopia and ended in a nightmare of hell. Both gave rise to terror and bloodshed and the repression of human rights.

What is the difference between philosophy and the political vision at the heart of Tenakh? The answer lies in their different understandings of time.

The sedra of Behar sets out a revolutionary template for a society of justice, freedom and human dignity. At its core is the idea of the Jubilee, whose words ("Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof") are engraved on one of the great symbols of freedom, the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia. One of its provisions is the release of slaves: "If your brother becomes impoverished and is sold to you, do not work him like a slave. He shall be with you like an employee or a resident. He shall serve you only until the jubilee year and then he and his children shall be free to leave you and return to their family and to the hereditary land of their ancestors. For they are My servants whom I brought out of the land of

Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves. Do not subjugate them through hard labour— you shall fear your G-d... For the children of Israel are servants to Me: they are My servants whom I brought out of the land of Egypt—I am the Lord your G-d."

The terms of the passage are clear. Slavery is wrong. It is an assault on the human condition. To be "in the image of G-d" is to be summoned to a life of freedom. The very idea of the sovereignty of G-d means that He alone has claim to the service of mankind. Those who are G-d's servants may not be slaves to anyone else. At this distance of time it is hard to recapture the radicalism of this idea, overturning as it did the very foundations of religion in ancient times. The early civilizations—Mesopotamia, Egypt— were based on hierarchies of power which were seen to inhere in the very nature of the cosmos. Just as there were (so it was believed) ranks and gradations among the heavenly bodies, so there were on earth. The great religious rituals and monuments were designed to mirror and endorse these hierarchies. In this respect Karl Marx was right. Religion in antiquity was the robe of sanctity concealing the naked brutality of power. It canonized the status quo.

At the heart of Israel was an idea almost unthinkable to the ancient mind: that G-d intervenes in history to liberate slaves—that the supreme Power is on the side of the powerless. It is no accident that Israel was born as a nation under conditions of slavery. It has carried throughout history the memory of those years—the bread of affliction and the bitter herbs of servitude—because the people of Israel serves as an eternal reminder to itself and the world of the moral necessity of liberty and the vigilance needed to protect it. The free G-d desires the free worship of free human beings.

Yet the Torah does not abolish slavery. That is the paradox at the heart of Behar. To be sure it was limited and humanized. Every seventh day, slaves were granted rest and a taste of freedom. In the seventh year Israelite slaves were set free. If they chose otherwise they were released in the Jubilee year. During their years of service they were to be treated like employees. They were not to be subjected to back-breaking or spirit-crushing labour. Everything dehumanizing about slavery was forbidden. Yet slavery itself was not banned. Why not? If it was wrong, it should have been annulled. Why did the Torah allow a fundamentally flawed institution to continue?

It was Moses Maimonides in *The Guide for the Perplexed* who explained the need for time in social transformation. All processes in nature, he argued, are gradual. The foetus develops slowly in the womb. Stage by stage a child becomes mature. And what applies to individuals applies to nations and civilizations: "It is impossible to go suddenly from one extreme to the other. It is therefore, according to the nature of man, impossible for him suddenly to discontinue everything to which he has been accustomed."

Accordingly, G-d did not ask of the Israelites that they suddenly abandon everything they had become used to in Egypt. "G-d refrained from prescribing what the people by their natural disposition would be incapable of obeying." But surely G-d can do anything, including changing human nature. Why then did He not simply transform the Israelites, making them capable immediately of the highest virtue? Maimonides' answer is simple: "I do not say this because I believe that it is difficult for G-d to change the nature of every individual person. On the contrary, it is possible and it is in His power... but it has never been His will to do it, and it never will be. If it were part of His will to change the nature of any person, the mission of the prophets and the giving of the Torah would have been superfluous."

In miracles, G-d changes nature but never human nature. Were He to do so, the entire project of the Torah-the free worship of free human beings- would have been rendered null and void. There is no greatness in programming a million computers to obey instructions. G-d's greatness lay in taking the risk of creating a being, homo sapiens, capable of choice and responsibility- of obeying G-d freely.

G-d wanted mankind to abolish slavery but by their own choice, and that takes time. Ancient economies were dependent on slavery. The particular form dealt with in Behar (slavery through poverty) was the functional equivalent of what is today called "workfare", i.e. welfare benefit in return for work. Slavery as such was not abolished in Britain and America until the nineteenth century, and in America not without a civil war. The challenge to which Torah legislation was an answer is: how can one create a social structure in which, of their own accord, people will eventually come to see slavery as wrong and freely choose to abandon it?

The answer lay in a single deft stroke: to change slavery from an ontological condition ("what am I?") to a temporary circumstance. No Israelite was allowed to be or see himself as a slave. He or she might be reduced to slavery for a period of time, but this was a passing plight, not an identity. Compare the account given by Aristotle: "By analogy, [the difference between animals and human beings] must necessarily apply to mankind as a whole. Therefore all men who differ from one another by as much as the soul differs from the body or man from a wild beast... these people are slaves by nature, and it is better for them to be subject to this kind of control, as it is better for the other creatures I have mentioned [i.e. domesticated animals]. For a man who is able to belong to another person is by nature a slave..." (Politics 1.5)

For Aristotle, slavery is an ontological condition, a fact of birth. Some are born to rule, others to be ruled. This is precisely the worldview to which Torah is opposed. The entire complex of biblical legislation is designed to ensure that neither the slave nor his owner should ever see slavery as a permanent condition. A

slave should be treated "like an employee or a resident," in other words, with the respect due to a free human being. In this way the Torah ensured that, although slavery could not be abolished overnight, it would eventually be. And so it happened.

There are profound differences between philosophy and Judaism, and one lies in their respective understandings of time. For Plato and his heirs, philosophy is about the truth that is timeless (or for Hegel and Marx, about "historical inevitability"). Judaism is about truths (like human freedom) that are realized in and through time. That is the difference between what I call the logical and chronological imaginations. The logical imagination yields truth as system. The chronological imagination yields truth as story (a story is a sequence of events extended through time). Revolutions based on philosophical systems fail- because change in human affairs takes time, and philosophy is incapable of understanding the human dimension of time. The inevitable result is that (in Rousseau's famous phrase) they "force men to be free"-a contradiction in terms, and the reality of life under Soviet Communism. Revolutions based on Tenakh succeed, because they go with the grain of human nature, recognizing that it takes time for people to change. The Torah did not abolish slavery but it set in motion a process that would lead people to come of their own accord to the conclusion that it was wrong. How it did so is one of the wonders of history. © 2010 Chief Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and torah.org

#### **RABBI DOVID SIEGEL**

## **Haftorah**

**T**his 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. © 2010 Rabbi D. Siegel & torah.org

**RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY**

## Survival of the Yiddest

In the second of the two portions that we read this week, we learn of both the blessings that we will receive upon obeying G-d's commands and the converse, known as the Tochacha, the curses. The Tochacha contains a prescient forecast of the unimaginable curses that, with clarity, foretold the horrors that were destined to befall our people in its wanderings in exile.

In the words of the Tochacha you can hear the echoes of the inquisition, the cruelty of the Crusades, and the horrors of the Holocaust through the stern admonitions predicted centuries earlier by the Almighty's voice and vision. And it's all in this week's portion. One of those curses is a bit cryptic, and the juxtaposition of two parts of this particular verse needs explanation as well. "And I will scatter you among the

nations, and will unsheathe a sword after you..." (Leviticus 26:33).

Previously, the Torah tells us that "I will bring a sword upon you, that shall avenge my covenant; and when you are gathered together inside your cities, I will send the pestilence among you; and you shall be delivered into the hand of the enemy" (ibid v. 25). In this verse, however, Hashem is not saying that he shall smite us; rather he will scatter us throughout the world and then unsheathe a sword against us. An unsheathed sword is a terrible thing. However, in this instance, the Torah does not say that the sword will strike us. It uses a term that means "I will empty my scabbard against you," however, "unsheathing a sword" depicts more a threat than an action. To what is that alluding?

Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau, former Chief Rabbi of Israel, tells the following haunting story: Ed Koch, during his tenure as Mayor of New York City, hosted Rabbi Lau at a reception in City Hall. During the reception, the Mayor called the Rabbi to the side and looked him in the eye. "You know, I am also a survivor," he said.

Rabbi Lau was taken aback. He knew that Mr. Koch was born in New York, as Ed Katz. He was a soldier in World War II but he was not a survivor. But Rabbi Lau did not argue. Instead he looked right back at him and waited for an explanation.

Mr. Koch saw the Rabbi's skeptical look and continued, "Don't be surprised. As I told you," he reiterated, "I am also a survivor."

Koch paused and continued. "Let me explain. A number of years ago, I was part of an international delegation of mayors to Berlin. During our stay there, we were shown artifacts from the Nazi era in Germany that were preserved as documentation. One of the items they showed us was the huge globe that Hitler kept in his office. On it were many numbers written in black marker. We asked the guide, 'What do those numbers mean?' The guide explained: 'On September 1, 1939, Hitler ordered his staff to write the amount of Jews in each of those countries. Albania had one Jew.'

"Imagine!" Interjected Koch. "One Jew! Hitler wrote it down! He did not care! He would go after that one Jew. The globe had the number 500,000 boldly written over Palestine. America had the number six million written stretching from New York to California." Then the Mayor raised his voice.

"I was one of them! I was one of those numbers. Ed Koch from the Bronx was on Hitler's list. If we would not have stopped the Nazi beast, I would have been lost like the other six million. So I am also a survivor."

In exhorting the horrors of the Tochacha, the Torah talks not only to victims of tragedy. It talks not only to those smitten by the sword. It tells us that even those who are "spread amongst the nations," should not be smug. They may not be smitten. But the sword is removed from its sheath. And even if we were not physically included in the wrath, we were not secure.

The sword left the sheath, and though we may have been unscathed. We are survivors. ©2010 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky and torah.org

#### RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

### Weekly Dvar

One of this week's Parshiot, Bechukotai, clearly states that good people will be rewarded, and bad people will be punished. But is that really true? Don't some people excel even though they're clearly evil? Don't good people sometimes suffer? Lastly, when the Torah describes these rewards and punishments it does so in the plural. Why?

There is a Gemara (Tractate Kiddushin 39b) that states that there is no reward for doing a mitzvah in this world, and that it all comes in the next world. What, then, is our Parsha referring to? Rabbi Avi Weiss offers that in this world reward and punishment only operate on a collective level. That is, when one does something positive, the larger community benefits. And when doing something negative, the community suffers. That would explain why our Parsha uses the plural in describing rewards and punishments. As for good people suffering and bad people enjoying, that has a lot to do with free will. For example, if we saw immediate dividends when giving charity, who wouldn't give?

It turns out that our faithful positive actions pay interest to our local communities, and ©2010 Rabbi S. Ressler & Lelamed, Inc.

#### RABBI SHLOMO KATZ

### Hama'ayan

“The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is Mine.” (25:23)

The Torah has already stated above (verse 13) that land which has been sold reverts to its original owner when the Yovel/Jubilee year comes. What does this verse add?

Ramban explains that this verse prohibits even agreeing to sell land in Eretz Yisrael in perpetuity. Although such a sale would not be effective because it violates a Torah law, the mere agreement to make such a sale is a sin. Why did the Torah prohibit making such an agreement? Because, writes Ramban, it is human nature that it will be easier to fulfill the mitzvah of returning the land at the Yovel if one accepts the fact from the outset that he will be obligated to return it.

R' Simcha Zissel Broide z"l (see below) adds: The lesson of this verse, as interpreted by Ramban, is that life is full of challenges, but a person must seek ways to lessen the challenges that he will inevitably face. Thus, the Torah challenges a person to return the land that he has purchased, and the Torah instructs a person to make it easier on himself by recognizing early on that this land will not be his forever. (Sahm Derech: Bereishit Vol. II, p. 282) ©2000 Rabbi S. Katz and Project Genesis, Inc.