

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**CHIEF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS**

### Covenant & Conversation

**A**s I was writing this essay a newspaper headline caught my eye. It read, "The UK's richest people have defied the double-dip recession to become even richer over the past year." Despite the fact that most people have become poorer, or at least seen their real income stay static, since the financial crisis of 2008. As the saying goes, "There's nothing surer: the rich get rich and the poor get poorer." It is to this phenomenon that the social legislation of Behar is addressed.

Leviticus 25 sets out a number of laws whose aim is to correct the tendency toward radical and ever-increasing inequality that result from the unfettered play of free market economics. So we have the sabbatical year in which debts were released, Hebrew slaves set free, the land lay fallow and its produce, not to be harvested, belonged to everyone. There was the Jubilee year in which, with some exceptions, ancestral land returned to its original owners. There was the command to help the needy: "If any of your fellow Israelites become poor and are unable to support themselves among you, help them as you would a foreigner and stranger, so they can continue to live among you." (25:35). And there was the obligation to treat slaves not slavishly but as "hired workers or temporary residents" (25:40).

As Heinrich Heine pointed out, "Moses did not want to abolish ownership of property; he wished, on the contrary, that everyone should possess something, so that no man might, because of poverty, be a slave with a slavish mind. Liberty was forever the ultimate thought of this great emancipator, and it still breathes and flames in all his laws which concern pauperism." (Israel Tabak, *Judaic Lore in Heine*, Johns Hopkins University Press reprints, 1979, 32.)

Despite the sheer antiquity of these laws, time and again they have inspired those wrestling with issues of liberty, equity and justice. The verse about the Jubilee Year, "Proclaim Liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof" (25:10) is inscribed on the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia. The international movement that began in the late 1990s and involved more than 40 nations, campaigning for cancellation of Third World debt was called Jubilee 2000 and was directly inspired by our parsha.

The approach of the Torah to economic policy is unusual. Clearly we can make no direct inference from laws given more than three thousand years ago, in an agricultural age and to a society consciously under the sovereignty of G-d, to the circumstances of the twenty-first century with its global economy and international corporations. Between ancient texts and contemporary application comes the whole careful process of tradition and interpretation (Torah shebe'al peh).

Nonetheless, there do seem to be some important parameters. Work-making a living, earning your daily bread-has dignity. A Psalm (128:2) states: "When you eat of the labour of your hands, you are happy and it shall be well with you." We say this every Saturday night at the start of the working week. Unlike aristocratic cultures such as that of ancient Greece, Judaism was never dismissive of work or the productive economy. It did not favour the creation of a leisured class. "Torah study without an occupation will in the end fail and lead to sin" (Avot 2:2).

Next, unless there are compelling reasons otherwise, one has a right to the fruits of one's labours. Judaism distrusts large government as an infringement of liberty. That is the core of the prophet Samuel's warning about monarchy: A king, he says, "will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants... He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves" (1 Sam. 8).

Judaism is the religion of a people born in slavery and longing for redemption; and the great assault of slavery against human dignity is that it deprives me of the ownership of the wealth I create. At the heart of the Hebrew Bible is the G-d who seeks the free worship of free human beings, and one of the most powerful defences of freedom is private property as the basis of economic independence. The ideal society envisaged by the prophets is one in which each person is able to sit "underneath his own vine and fig tree" (Micah 4:4).

The free economy uses the fuel of competition to sustain the fire of invention. Long before Adam Smith, Judaism had accepted the proposition that the greatest advances are often brought about through quite unspiritual drives. "I saw," says the author of Ecclesiastes, "that all labour and all achievement spring from man's envy of his neighbour". Or as the talmudic sages put it, "Were it not for the evil inclination, no one

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would build a house, marry a wife, have children, or engage in business." The rabbis even favoured the free market in their own sphere of Jewish education. An established teacher, they said, could not object to a rival setting up in competition. The reason they gave was, simply: "Jealousy among scholars increases wisdom."

The market economy is the best system we know for alleviating poverty through economic growth. In a single generation in recent years it has lifted 100 million Indians and 400 million Chinese from poverty, and the sages saw poverty as an assault on human dignity. Poverty is not a blessed or divinely ordained condition. It is, the rabbis said, 'a kind of death' and 'worse than fifty plagues'. They said, 'Nothing is harder to bear than poverty, because he who is crushed by poverty is like one to whom all the troubles of the world cling and upon whom all the curses of Deuteronomy have descended. If all other troubles were placed one side and poverty on the other, poverty would outweigh them all.'

However, the market economy is better at producing wealth than at distributing it equitably. The concentration of wealth in a few hands gives disproportion power to some at the cost of others. Today in Britain it is not unusual for top CEOs to earn at least 400 times as much as their employees. This has not produced economic growth or financial stability but the opposite. As I write these words, one of Margaret Thatcher's advisors, Ferdinand Mount, has just published a critique of the financial deregulation she introduced: *The New Few*. Equally impressive is the recent book by the South Korean economist Ha-Joon Chang, *23 Things they don't tell you about Capitalism*. This is not a critique of market economics, which he believes is still the best system there is. But, in his words, "it needs careful regulation and steering."

That is what the legislation contained in Behar represents. It tells us that an economic system must exist within a moral framework. It need not aim at economic equality but it must respect human dignity. No one should become permanently imprisoned in the chains of debt. No one should be deprived of a stake in the commonwealth, which in biblical times meant a share in the land. No one should be a slave to his or her employer. Everyone has the right-one day in seven, one year in seven-to respite from the endless pressures of

work. None of this means dismantling the market economy, but it may involve periodic redistribution.

At the heart of these laws is a profoundly humane vision of society. "No man is an island." We are responsible for one another and implicated in one another's fate. Those who are blessed by G-d with more than they need should share some of that surfeit with those who have less than they need. This, in Judaism, is not a matter of charity but of justice-that is what the word tzedakah means. We need some of this spirit in advanced economies today if we are not to see human misery and social unrest.

No one said it better than Isaiah in the first chapter of the book that bears his name: "Seek justice, encourage the oppressed, / Defend the cause of the fatherless, / Plead the case of the widow..."

Mankind was not created to serve markets. Markets were made to serve the image of G-d that is mankind. © 2012 Chief Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and torah.org

**RABBI BEREL WEIN**

## Wein Online

**T**he book of Vayikra opened on a very high and positive note. Moshe is the recipient of Divine revelation and serves as the High priest of the Mishkan during its first week of its dedication. His brother Aharon is appointed as the permanent High Priest and the children and the descendants of Aharon remain the special family of kohanim throughout the ages of Jewish history.

After the revelation at Sinai and the acceptance of the Torah by Israel, and the dedication of the Mishkan, the Jewish people are apparently at the zenith of their national and spiritual life. Yet this rosy future is not quite what will really occur. At the conclusion of the book of Vayikra, which we read in this week's parsha, a much more somber picture is portrayed.

Anyone cognizant of the story of the Jewish people over the centuries is well aware that all of the dire predictions that appear in this week's parsha are not hyperbole. A professor of Jewish studies once wryly commented to me that Jewish history was "all books and blood." That pretty much sums up the book of Vayikra as well.

Two of Aharon's sons are destroyed, many laws and strictures are bought down as the Torah of Sinai is fleshed out by G-d through Moshe, and the awful events that will befall the Jewish people - destruction, exile and agony, are all painfully described in this week's parsha. Thus the book of Vayikra becomes the true book of the Jewish story, in all of its glory and somber narrative.

What are we to make of all of this? That question has hovered over all of Jewish life in every location, generation and circumstance. Because of the inscrutable nature of G-d's direction of Jewish affairs, the question has never had an even halfheartedly satisfactory answer. The books, the laws, and the

commandments remain in the main to be mysterious as does the blood of Jewish history.

Because of this, Jewish history, aside from being composed of books and blood, is mainly composed of faith and belief. That is what the rabbis may have meant when they stated that the prophet announced the basic underpinning of all of the Torah - "the righteous person lives on faith." And faith is truly a difficult commodity to achieve and maintain.

The past century of Jewish life has challenged traditional Jewish faith greatly and dealt it mighty blows. For many Jews it no longer is a viable commodity in their arsenal of life's values. Yet it is obvious that it is the one and only value that can help us weather the uncertainties, contradictions, cruelties and dangers that make up current Jewish life.

The Torah itself charts no easy way to acquire faith - in fact, it has very little to say regarding the subject of faith itself. However, at the conclusion of the public reading of the book of Vayikra (as at the conclusion of all of the other books of the Torah as well) we rise and strengthen ourselves in our belief and faith. May it so be. © 2012 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com)

#### **RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## **Shabbat Shalom**

“**T**hey stood transfixed at the foot of the mountain" (Exodus 19:17).

There are two Sabbaths in the year in which the Biblical reading is downright frightening, casting a spell of gloom over the congregants. The first is this week's portion of Behukotai, (Leviticus 26: 14-46); the second is in the portion of Ki Tavo, (Deuteronomy 28:15-68). These include passages known as the "Curses" or "Chastisements," because they detail the horrific inflictions which the Israelites will suffer if they do not heed the laws of G-d's covenant. Jewish custom dictates that these verses are read in a whisper and at top speed. Usually the Torah reader himself takes this aliyah and in some congregations no one takes the aliyah at all (a practice of which I disapprove). Nevertheless, you can readily understand how a bleak curtain of despair descends upon the congregation when these particular portions are read.

The Talmud maintains that Ezra, the great scribe and lawgiver decreed that the calendar be worked out in such a way that the "Curses" of Behukotai be read shortly before the Festival of Shavuot and the "Curses" of Ki Tavo be read shortly before the Ten Days of Repentance, which begin with Rosh Hashanah. Why must we hear the "Curses" twice? And why should they precede the festivals of Shavuot and Rosh Hashanah, respectively?

In terms of the first question, the famed biblical commentator Nachmanides (Gerona, Spain, 1194 - Land of Israel, 1270) maintains that the "Curses" of Behukotai refer to the destruction of the First Temple and the concomitant 70-year exile to Babylon in its wake, and that the "Curses" of Ki Tavo refer to the destruction of the Second Temple and the resultant 2,000 year exile to all four corners of the globe.

In terms of why we are now reading the "Curses" of Behukotai shortly before the Festival of Shavuot, the answer seems to be very clear. Shavuot is, after all, the anniversary of our having received the Revelation at Sinai, which minimally consisted of the Ten Commandments, but according to most commentaries included all 613 Commandments as well as fundamental principles of the Oral Law. I would maintain that Ezra wanted the Jews to understand that the Divine Laws are not options which can be accepted if one wishes to accept them or rejected if one wishes to reject them. The laws that G-d commands us are just and necessary payment for the lives that He gives us and the national homeland that He has provided for us. Our continuity as individuals and as a nation depends upon our adherence to the Laws.

Indeed, the Sages of the Talmud describe Revelation in very graphic terms: "They stood transfixed at the foot of the mountain" (Exodus 19:17): Rav Avdimi bar Hama bar Hasa teaches that the Holy One Blessed be He forcedly held the mountain above them like a barrel [gigit] and said to them: 'If you accept the Torah, it will go well , and if not, here will be your grave site.'" (B.T. Shabbat 88a)

Hence we read the "Curses" shortly before Shavuot, in order to sharpen the bite which the Laws must have in order for Israel to become "A Kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation."

However, this raises yet another problem. Immediately after the Talmud's description of the mountain held over the heads of the nation, Rav Aha bar Yaakov declares "From here, one can bring a strong appeal against the Torah itself." Rashi explains this to mean that if G-d ever asks us why we did not observe the commandments, we can always reply that our acceptance was under duress and so we never really obligated ourselves. Moreover, this Aggadic description flies in the face of the basic biblical text, which has the Jews declare "We shall do and we shall obey" without any external pressures and even as a necessary condition for the covenant with G-d (Ex. 24:7,8).

I would submit that the Biblical "Curses" are not specific punishments which G-d sends after we commit transgressions in a quid pro quo manner. When G-d first elected Abraham to be a founder of a great nation, it was in order that he would "teach his family after him to guard the way of the Lord by doing acts of compassionate righteousness and moral justice" (Gen. 18:19). Our national task is to become a holy nation and

a kingdom of Priest-Teachers to the world -teaching the world morality. If we do not succeed in doing this - first by sanctifying ourselves and then by influencing the world - then the natural and necessary result will be that evil will consume humanity and the world will destroy itself. And the first victim of the wickedness that will reign supreme will be Israel, the fledgling nation which gave the world a prescription for morality to which it is not ready to adhere. If we do not keep G-d's laws and we do not emerge as a sacred nation, then the forces of darkness will, G-d forbid, shut out the light and our message of a G-d of love, compassion and peace will be dead forever.

In our present day world terror and Jihadism on the one hand versus morality and peace on the other, our need to read the "Curses" of Behukotai before the Festival of Shavuot is most compelling. © 2012 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

**RABBI DOV KRAMER**

## Taking a Closer Look

“**A**nd I will establish/fulfill My covenant with you” (Vayikra 26:9). The verb used to describe what G-d will do regarding His covenant with us can be understood as either "establish," i.e. set it up for the first time, or as "fulfill," i.e. satisfy the conditions/requirements of a previously established covenant. G-d "established" a covenant with Noach (both before-B'raishis 6:18--and after-ibid. 9:9--the flood, although some position the first one as a "fulfillment," see Ibn Ezra and Ramban on 6:18); Moshe told us that G-d will "fulfill" the covenant He made with our forefathers with us, their descendants, when we behave properly (D'varim 7:18). Being that Parashas B'chukosai discusses the consequences of either fulfilling our part of the covenant or failing to do so, it would seem that the verb in this verse would also be "fulfill;" the Torah is delineating how G-d will fulfill His part of the covenant. This is, in fact, how many commentators explain it (e.g. Chizkuni, S'fornu, Ralbag and Alshich). Rashi, on the other hand, explains these verses according to the Sifra, which understands the verb in our verse to be "establish;" the covenant referred to is a "new covenant, not like the first covenant that you nullified, but a new one that will not be nullified." Since the verses are describing what will happen when we fulfill our covenantal requirements, why did Chazal understand the verse as G-d telling us He will establish a new covenant rather than that He will fulfill the one already in place?

Maharal, Maskil L'Dovid and Devek Tov suggest that there is no need to mention a previous covenant, as we already know that G-d had established one with us at Sinai; therefore, this verse must be referring to a new covenant. However, the blessings and curses discussed are part of that original covenant made at Sinai (see Vayikra 26:46), a covenant that G-d

will never nullify (26:44); unless there's no reason to mention that these blessings are the fulfillment of G-d's part of the covenant, why can't it be what the verse is telling us? B'er Yitzchok says that fulfilling a previous commitment does not qualify as a "blessing," so can't be the message that these words are conveying. Nevertheless, the word "blessing" is not used by the Torah to describe these promises; even if we should consider them "blessings," since they are the details of the covenant between us and G-d, mentioning that G-d will keep his end of the agreement (without the expression having to add any additional promises) is appropriate here. Netziv points out that there is no need to mention that G-d will keep his end of the agreement if everything in the agreement is being spelled out; saying He will fulfill or establish His covenant must therefore refer to a different covenant than the one under discussion. If everything included in the covenant was mentioned explicitly, this would be true. However, the benefits of being part of a divine covenant are limitless, with every unique situation that arises bringing about a similarly unique divine response (whether it's protection from danger or fulfillment of a need); mentioning that G-d will fulfill His covenantal obligations covers all possibilities.

Some commentators (see Abarbanel, HaKesav v'HaKabala and Oznayim L'Torah) explain the verse to mean that we will now be worthy of having the covenant established on our own behalf, rather than just being beneficiaries of the covenant as a result of G-d's promises to our forefathers. Nevertheless, this wouldn't change the covenant itself, but would be a continuation (and fulfillment) of the original covenant-not the establishment of a "new" one. Additionally, if the point is that we would be worthy of the covenant in our own merits, why reference a previous nullification and that this covenant will not be nullified?

Malbim understands the word "establish/fulfill" to include being permanent, thereby necessitating it being a reference to the covenant described in Yirmiya (31:30-33, referenced by Rashi and Chazal). However, Yechezkel (16:60) describes a "permanent covenant" that will be established; if a covenant is described as being a "permanent" one despite using the same verb for "establish," non-permanent covenants must be able to be "established" as well.

Rabbeinu Bachye (26:13) is among the commentators who say that the blessings described in our Parasha were never completely fulfilled, and would only be fulfilled in the future. If Chazal knew that the blessings described in our Parasha refer to what will occur in Messianic times, then the covenant described must also refer to the covenant that will be in effect then, which is the one described by Yirmiyahu. Even if the context of the verses allowed the verb to be understood as either "fulfill" or "establish," since these promises will only be fulfilled when a "new" covenant will be enacted, this is how Chazal explained it.

Nevertheless, I would suggest that the context itself indicates that the verse is referring to a new covenant, not the one that was established at Sinai.

Although it would be appropriate to include that G-d will fulfill His covenant even within the description of how that very same covenant will be fulfilled, it would be more appropriate to do so either at the very beginning of the description ("I will fulfill my covenant with you, and here are some of the implications of My doing so") or at the very end. Why does G-d state that He will fulfill His covenant with us smack in the middle of the description of the blessings that are the result of that covenant? Additionally, a number of the blessings revolve around our physical sustenance. G-d will "give rain at its appropriate time, the land will give its produce, the trees of the field will give their fruit" (26:4). The bounty will be so plentiful that the time of threshing will reach the harvest of the vineyards, which in turn will reach the planting season (26:5). Other blessings are then described (26:6-9), followed by the mention that G-d will fulfill/establish His covenant with us. The verse then returns to a blessing regarding our sustenance, that we will have such a surplus that we will have to empty out the storage areas of the old crops to make room for the new crops. Why are the blessings about our food supply split into two sections, interrupted by other blessings? If the covenant is a new covenant, the description of the blessings that result from the first covenant must be completed before the blessings that result from a new covenant can be described.

As a result of our keeping the Torah G-d will provide us with much blessing; this is part of the covenant enacted at Sinai. But how will we react when things go so well? Will we forget about G-d (see D'varim 8:11-14), or use the bounty as a means of serving G-d even more? If it's the latter, G-d will establish a "new covenant," one that will never be nullified (by either side). This covenant includes not only having a full bounty, but not having to spend as much time working the crops, as we will have much left from the previous year, thereby enabling us to spend more time studying Torah and doing mitzvos. This will only occur in Messianic times, when the new covenant will be in effect, but the context of where the covenant is mentioned also indicates that it must be this "new covenant" that the verse is describing. © 2012 Rabbi D. Kramer

### MACHON ZOMET

## Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Mordechai Greenberg  
Rosh Yeshiva, Kerem B'Yavne

**T**he following is a prediction that was written more than three thousand and five hundred years ago: "And I will destroy your cities... and I will make the land desolate, and your enemies who dwell there will be desolate on it. And I will scatter you among the other

nations... And your land will be desolate." [Vayikra 26:31-33]. "And even so, when they are in the lands of their enemies, I will not eradicate them and annul my covenant with them" [26:44].

About seven hundred years ago, the Ramban wrote: "And your G-d will place these curses on your enemies and on your enemies who have pursued you' [Devarim 30:7] -- This is a hint of the two nations who pursued us constantly (Christianity and Islam). And the fact that it is written, 'your enemies will be desolate on it' is good news... for our land does not welcome our enemies... from the time that we left it the land has not accepted any other nation. They have all tried to settle on the land, but none of them has succeeded."

When the Ramban arrived in Eretz Yisrael he prayed on the Mount of Olives. Among other things, he explained the reason for the desolation:

"I compare you to a woman who gave birth to a child who died in her arms, so that her milk became a source of pain, and who therefore suckled puppies. But at the same time, those who lusted rejected you, and the enemies found you to be desolate. They will remember you from afar, and they will boast of possession of the holy city, saying, it was given to us as a heritage. But when they come to you and find all the desired traits, they flee as if from an imaginary enemy, and the fat and broad land will be abandoned. For these people are not suited to you, and you are not suited for them."

Two hundred years ago, Alphonse de Lamartine wrote: "Outside of the walls of Jerusalem we did not see any living creature and we did not hear any sounds of life. We found the area to be empty... A total silence engulfs the city, the king's roads and in the villages." [R. Katz, the Land of Controversy].

And here is what the American author Mark Twain wrote when he visited the land in 1847: "Palestine is desolate and unlovely... A desolation is here that not even imagination can grace with the pomp of life and action. We reached Mount Tabor safely... We never saw a human being on the whole route... There was hardly a tree or a shrub anywhere..." [The Innocents Abroad].

And now, here is a prophesy from more than two thousand years ago: "There can be no greater proof of the end of the exile than what is written, 'And as for you, the mountains of Yisrael, your branches will grow and you will bear fruits for My nation Yisrael, for they will soon arrive' [Yechezkel 36:8]." [Sanhedrin 98].

Here are some concrete numbers: In the year 5600 (1840) about six thousand Jews lived in Eretz Yisrael. At the time of the Balfour Declaration, there were about sixty thousand. When the State of Israel was established about six hundred thousand Jews lived in the land, and now we are more than six million.

Rabbi Yaacov Emden wrote the following in his Siddur, about three hundred years ago: "Who is so blind that he cannot see?... There is no other nation which

has been pursued as we have... All the other ancient nations are remembered no more, while we, who cling to G-d, remain alive... Could all of this be a chance occurrence? I swear that when I look at all of these wonders I see them as being greater than all the miracles and the wonders which the holy G-d performed for our ancestors in Egypt..."

### **Jerusalem: The Anticipation and the Miracle**

by Rabbi Shlomo Levy, Rosh Yeshivat Hesder Rishon Letzion

"Rabbi Yitzchak said: If a person tells you, 'I made an effort and I could not find the answer,' do not believe. 'I made no effort and I found the answer,' do not believe. 'I made an effort and I found,' believe it." [Megilla 6b]. Rabbi Yitzchak teaches us a very deep insight in the way the world works. The Ramchal (who died on the twenty-sixth of Iyar) wrote:

"The main foundation on which the entire edifice is built is that the divine will was for mankind to perfect himself together with everything that was created for his benefit, and that this activity itself would be to his merit and is its own reward. To his merit—because this means that he works hard and makes an effort to achieve perfection, and when he achieves the goal he will benefit from his own handiwork and from the fruits of his own labor. It is a reward, because in the end he will finally be perfect, and he will be able to enjoy the good for all eternity."

The Ramchal teaches us that the Creator, who is the epitome of good, wants to do good for His creatures. He could certainly provide good things for all without a need for any effort, but then there would be a basic fault in the good since it would be a free gift. Therefore, the main goal of the good is to make sure that whatever we achieve will be the consequences of our own labor. Then we will enjoy the fruits of our own efforts, which we achieved through labor and not as a free gift.

The expression, "If you make an effort, you will find!" is based on a built-in contradiction. An effort is labor performed for a specific purpose, while the essence of finding something is that it appears without any purposeful intention! But the words of the Ramchal put this expression into a new light. A person should make an effort, so that his spiritual achievements will be the result of his own efforts, but in the end the Holy One, Blessed be He, provides spiritual achievements that are above and beyond his initial worthiness and his amount of preparation. And that is the meaning of the phrase, "I made an effort and I found: believe it." After the effort and the unexpected find we can expose the foundation of perfect faith, which is neither thought nor emotion but rather the most basic revelation of the essence of the soul.

This week's Torah portion begins with the words, "If you follow My laws and observe My mitzvot..." [Vayikra 26:3]. Rashi explains, "'If you follow My laws'-

could this refer to performing the mitzvot? No, because that is explicitly noted in the verse. What then does 'to follow His laws' mean? You should labor with the Torah." We often get the feeling that processes in the world should proceed in a way we feel is best, but the Master of the World has other Divine plans. G-d's constant demand of us is to perform the labor of the Torah. The Torah gives us G-d's instructions of what to do in the world. It teaches us that there is a proper effort to be made and a specific course of action which is the only way that will lead us to the sudden find and the gift that awaits us because of our efforts. This is what shows us the path we should take. But in order to match our will to the will of G-d we must make a great effort to reveal the Shechina, the Divine presence. And then the Shechina will appear in the world.

Tomorrow is Yom Yerushalayim, the day when Jerusalem was liberated, and we were privileged to see the fulfillment of the phrase, "Let our eyes see Your return to Zion, with mercy" [Shemona Essrei]. After nineteen years during which the Western Wall was out of our reach the nation of Yisrael returned to it as a result of a large effort. And this was accompanied by a great miracle, a great surprise—the return to lost parts of our land, including our holiest city. Ever since that day, our faith grows steadily stronger and beats within the soul of the nation, and the revelation of the Shechina gains strength within the nation, based on the power of Jerusalem, which turns all of Yisrael into "chaverim" and joins together all sectors of the nation. We have not yet been privileged to rebuild the Temple, for which we wait every moment of every day, but as the Ramchal writes—every day we are redeemed a bit more, constantly getting closer to the full redemption, which will allow us to "mend the world within the Kingdom of Shadai."

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### **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. © 2012 Rabbi D. Siegel & torah.org

**RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER**

## Weekly Dvar

One of this week's Parshiot, Behar, relates that G-d spoke to Moshe (Moses) on Mount Sinai, saying that for six years you may plant your fields, but the seventh year is a Sabbath for the land. Why does the Torah specify that G-d is speaking on "Mount Sinai?"

The answer is because the Sabbatical year is one mitzvah which proves that only G-d could be the Author who gave the Torah on Mount Sinai, because it is there that He promises that the year before the



Sabbatical will provide enough crops for the next three years (25:20-21). No human being would ever write this law because it would be disproved within six years. The fact that G-d chose to display his control using this commandment also teaches us a lesson about our accomplishments. If G-d chooses to give us more (crops, money or otherwise), He can do so by having us win the lottery where it's obvious that He intervened, or he can make our companies and crops suddenly produce better where we can be tempted to take the credit for the increase. It's up to us to see the bigger picture, and recognize the value of G-d's commitment to those that appreciate Him. © 2012 Rabbi S. Ressler and LeLamed, Inc.

### RABBI AVI WEISS

## Shabbat Forshpeis

**T**he blessings in the portion of Behukotai reach toward their crescendo with the words "and I will walk among you and will be your G-d, and you shall be My people." (Leviticus 26:13) This penultimate gift that is promised is not a material one, it is rather a spiritual one that has extraordinary benefits.

Having G-d among us is a necessary prerequisite for the world to be ethical. After all, in bringing G-d back into the world, one makes a commitment to the ethical laws - the seven Noahide laws and their offshoots. (See Nachmanides, Genesis 34: 13) No doubt, even without G-d, there can be individuals who live very ethical lives. Yet, for the world at large to be ethical, G-d's presence is critical. Without G-d, ethics would be based on human reason which can be relative. Philosophies borne out of human reason can often emerge that declare ethical, what we certainly know to be unethical. But an ethical system based on G-d's laws is inviolate and can never be altered.

G-d's presence is also a crucial antidote to personal suffering. The price of living is that all of us, at one time or another, must suffer. The question is not why do we hurt; rather the question is, when feeling pain, do we sense the presence of G-d, a presence which makes even the difficult moments livable.

As we all know, sickness is part of the fabric of life.

This world is not made up of the sick and the well, but of the sick and the not yet sick. The worst part of sickness is being alone in sickness. How I remember



being wheeled into the hospital room for bypass surgery. At a particular moment, my loving family had no choice but to leave my side. As I was placed on the surgical table, I felt alone, so deeply alone. But right then I sensed the closeness of G-d. If you feel G-d, then even in difficult times, when it might seem that G-d is acting kindly, you still sense the closeness of the Divine.

From a mystical perspective, connecting with G-d makes G-d fully one. The masters of Kabbalah argue that G-d above is separated from the part of G-d which is in each of us. In this approach, the inner G-dliness we all possess intrinsically yearns to reunite with G-d above, like a lover seeking out the beloved. The Kabbalists argue that only when the image of G-d in all of humankind fuses with the G-d above, does G-d, as He is manifest in this world, become one. In the words of the prophet Zachariah, "on that day, the Lord will be one and his name will be one." (14:9) The implication is that until that point, G-d, as He is present in the world, is not yet one.

Too often it is the case that we measure blessings by material benefits. What the Torah suggests is that the highest blessing is Divine accompaniment, an accompaniment that guides us with a sense of our ethical mission and a feeling of love and spiritual comfort. © 2012 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.

### SHLOMO KATZ

## Hama'ayan

**“T**he 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 S. Katz and torah.org