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Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

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Covenant & Conversation

As 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."[1] 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 God, 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 God 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

[1] Rabbi Sacks wrote this essay in April 2012. The headline he mentions can be found here: https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-17883101

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 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 God 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 God that is mankind. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt"l © 2025 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The book of Vayikra, which contains so many detailed commandments and minute details of ritual within it, concludes with a broad view and general description of Jewish faith. It restates the original premise of Bereshith, that the earth and its inhabitants belong to God and are free agents as to the limits that God has imposed upon them. The basic premise is that “the earth belongs to Me.” All of the various laws of agriculture that apply in the Land of Israel are based on this simple declaration of the sovereignty of God over the domain where humans temporarily reside.

We storm about asserting our ownership and build for ourselves palaces as though we will be their eternal tenants. It is this false assessment of the true nature of life that leads to painful disagreements and dysfunction in families, communities and even in the relationship between countries and national entities. The power of self-grandeur unfortunately knows no bounds in the human psyche. The prophet mocks the Pharaoh of Egypt who evidently thought that he created and controlled the Nile River. Our world is witness to tyrants who made and make themselves gods and ascribe to themselves the power to dominate the lives of millions, and to threaten the destruction of millions of others, who do not bow to their inflated will. The truth is that the closer one is able to come to godliness, so to speak, that person will become more humble and recognize his or her true place and space in this world. And that is the secret of attaining humility and which is ascribed to our great teacher Moshe.,

The Torah also limits the control we have over of the lives of others. The Lord informed the Jewish people that they are His servants. People have somehow convinced themselves that they truly are entitled to control the lives of others. Perhaps this arises from the necessity of parents to raise their

children to adulthood. Yet the economic system that currently governs our lives allows little room for consideration of the needs of others. Human lives are unfortunately secondary to the almighty bottom- line and this affects the entire balance of society generally. If we realize that we are all only God's servants, that humbling effect should make life easier to deal with. The realization of the limits of human power is one of the basic lessons of Judaism. Of course human beings are able to accomplish great things and this is the story of the advancement of human civilization throughout the millennia of history. It is the balance of this aspiration and the human drive for greatness coupled with the humble realization of our limitations, which the Torah wishes us to achieve. Care and concern for others, an appreciation of God's ownership of the earth and a belief in the guardianship of God over the land and its people are the key ingredients, in the Torah's view, of the Jewish future. And that is a basic understanding of the lesson that the Torah and this week's pasha teaches us.

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

The Mitzva of Confession

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

The obligation to verbally confess applies in a number of situations. Perhaps the best-known type of *vidui* is the one that is part of the process of *teshuvah* (repentance), when people confess and express their regret for a particular sin they have committed. Another *vidui* is recited by an individual offering a Torah-mandated sacrifice for a particular sin, or by an individual who is being subjected to punishment by a rabbinic court for a particular sin. *Vidui* is also relevant to sins in general. This includes the *Kohen Gadol* reciting a confession for the nation on Yom Kippur, an individual reciting the traditional confession on Yom Kippur, or a person on the brink of death reciting a final confession.

As part of *teshuvah*, a person must recite *vidui* for any transgression he or she has committed. This applies whether the transgression was of a positive or negative commandment, and whether the sin was performed willingly or unwillingly.

Essentially, the *mitzvot* of *vidui* and *teshuvah* are interconnected; for there is no *vidui* if there is no *teshuvah*. For if someone confesses his sins but does not resolve to avoid repeating them, he is like someone who immerses for purity while holding a dead (and thus impure) animal in his hand (*tovel ve-sheretz be-yado*). *Vidui* is necessary for the completion of *teshuvah*. Though a person who regrets his sins in his heart is deemed completely righteous, he still needs to confess verbally in order to finish doing the mitzva of *teshuvah*. First, he stops sinning, resolves not to sin again and stops thinking about it, and regrets having sinned. Then he says *vidui*, giving voice to what he has already thought. Nevertheless, if he is unable to verbalize the *vidui*, he should at least think it.

In Tanach, we find two types of *vidui*. One type is personal. Examples of this are the confessions of Kayin, King David, and Achan. The second type is collective. This can either be recited by an individual on behalf of the entire community (as did Moshe and Ezra the Scribe), or by the entire Jewish people collectively.

As we said above, our Sages stress that if someone has sinned and recites the *vidui* but continues to sin, he is like someone who immerses in a mikvah while holding an impure animal. It makes no difference how many bodies of water he immerses in – he is still impure. However, once he throws away the dead animal and immerses in a kosher mikvah, he is instantly purified.

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"A man shall not torment his fellow, and you shall fear your G-d; I am Hashem, your G-d." (Vayikra 25:17) Rashi comments that the Torah here is proscribing speaking hurtful words to someone, and also giving improper advice, that is more to benefit the adviser than the recipient. If you will say, "Who will know?" for that I say, "you shall fear your G-d." What is strange about this comment, though, is that giving bad advice has already be prohibited by the Torah, a few weeks ago in Parshas Kedoshim.

There it says not to place a stumbling block before a blind man, which Rashi explains to mean giving bad advice to someone who is "blind" in the matter. If you give him advice which will hurt him you are liable. And, there too, if you will say, "Who will know?" for that I say, "you shall fear your G-d." With an almost identical explanation, why would the Torah have need for two verses to say the same thing?

R' Dovid Pardo z"l, an 18th Century rabbi and scholar from Italy, asks this same question in his work, "Maskil L'Dovid," (Venice 1760.) He wonders why Rashi would provide the same explanation for this prohibition as the one he gave regarding the stumbling block. The Maskil L'Dovid gives an insightful answer which fits perfectly with the words of Rashi, and the different nuances in each posuk.

It is true that the posuk in Kedoshim warns us not to give bad advice to another, as Rashi says, "Do not give bad advice, don't say, "Sell this field inexpensively," and you will buy it from him." That is the prohibition against outright advice, and you are warned that even if it sounds innocent, Hashem knows what is in your heart.

Here, though, the message is different; it is more subtle. This verse forbids making others feel bad with our words. Chazal give the example of reminding a Baal Teshuva of his former deeds. It is this that Rashi refers to. Here, his words flow through a new concept. "Do not hurt your fellow with words, not to belittle him, and convey poor advice, which suits the adviser."

What he refers to, says the Maskil L'Dovid, is that when you remind someone of their flaws, they feel they will never overcome their past. They despair of being accepted, and they go back to their old ways. They wonder what the point would be of trying to improve, as it is a hopeless task. The other person might look better in comparison, but Hashem isn't fooled. He knows what is in your heart, so don't do this.

By putting people down, we mislead them into thinking they aren't valuable and precious to Hashem. By dousing their spirits, we crush their dreams and erode their potential. Your words have the power to inspire and build; don't desecrate them by using them to insult and destroy.

A young man from a religious family moved out and lived with an irreligious cousin. Eventually, he became engaged to a non-Jewish woman. He went to tell his parents, and spent Shabbos with them, mostly smoking and being on his phone. On Shabbos afternoon, his father asked if he wished to come to a shiur from R' Ahron Leib Shteinman z"l. Surprisingly, he agreed.

After the shiur, they spoke to R' Shteinman and related the current situation. R' Shteinman asked the fellow whether he'd ever considered Teshuva. "A few times over the years, but it only lasted a few minutes," came the reply. "And for those minutes," smiled the sage, "you were in a place where even true tzaddikim can't go. I envy you for that."

They left, but these words haunted the boy. R' Ahron Leib didn't condemn him or discard him. The words he spoke conveyed love and appreciation. Soon, the boy broke his engagement and ultimately became fully Torah-observant again. All because of a few warm words. (To find out why he agreed to go to the shiur, e-mail info@jewishspeechwriter.com and ask for the rest of the story.)

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"You shall count for yourself seven cycles of sabbatical years, seven years, seven times; the years of the seven cycles of sabbatical years shall be for you forty-nine years." (Leviticus 25:8) The biblical portions in the book of Leviticus – Tazria, Metzora, Emor and Behar – seem to be almost fixated on the commandment to count, the commandment of sefira. Barely two chapters ago we were commanded: "And you shall count for yourselves – from the day following the rest day [the first day of the festival of Passover], from the day when you bring the omer of the waving – seven weeks…until the day after the seventh week you shall count fifty days." (Leviticus 23:15–16)

The Bible has commanded us to count each day of the seven weeks between the festivals of Passover and Shavuot, until the fiftieth day. And now in this portion of Behar the Bible is commanding us to count the seven cycles of the sabbatical years (seven times seven or forty-nine years) until the fiftieth year, the jubilee year. Clearly, there is a significant parallel between these two commandments of counting. In a similar way, both men and women (zav and zavah as well as nidah) are commanded to count seven days, after which – on the eighth day – they undergo ritual immersion and purity. All of these "countings" must in some way be related.

The count from Passover to Shavuot is – at least from a clear biblical perspective – the count from freedom from slavery into the desert to our entry into Israel and Jerusalem. Yes, on Passover we left Egypt and Egyptian enslavement; however, we only got as far as the desert, with all of the uncertainties of the desert and all of the alien and difficult climatic and agricultural conditions of the desert. It is specifically Shavuot which is biblically defined as the festival of the first fruits, which could be brought to the holy Temple in Jerusalem only once we arrived at the place of our inheritance (Lev. 23:17). The Bible underscores the relationship between Shavuot and Jerusalem when it discusses the special declaration to be made by the Israelite upon bringing the fruits to the Temple altar (Deut. 26:1, 2).

Passover is therefore our freedom from Egypt and slavery; Shavuot is our entry into Israel and Jerusalem, replete with the holy Temple. This idea is even further deepened by the text of the Haggada during the Passover Seder. The Mishna (in Arvei Pesaḥim) teaches that the central part of our retelling of the exodus from Egypt is an explication of the very verses which the individual must read when he brings the first fruits; we are to explicate around the Seder table "from 'Arami oved avi' [An Aramean tried to destroy my forefather] until the end of that portion" (Deut. 26:5–10). However, we do not explicate the entire speech; the Haggada neglects to include the last two verses of the declaration of the one who brings the first fruits. The Haggada quotes: "An Aramean tried to destroy my forefather; he descended to Egypt…became great, strong and numerous. The Egyptians… afflicted us…we cried out to the Lord our God who heard our voice, saw our affliction, and took us out of Egypt with a strong hand…with signs and with wonders." (Deuteronomy 26:5–8)

However, the final two verses, "He brought us to this place, and He gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey; and now behold I have bought the first fruit of the earth that you have given me, O Lord"

(Ibid 26:9, 10), are deleted by the author of the Haggadah.

I heard it said in the name of a great Talmudic giant of the last century that the reason for this deletion is that our entry into the Land of Israel is only destination and not destiny. I would respectfully maintain that the very opposite is the case. Our sojourn in Egypt and even our escape from Egypt were very much directed by God and were part and parcel of Jewish fate. Our entry into Israel, our establishment of our holy Temple in Jerusalem and our ability to influence the world to accept a God of morality and peace through the teachings of the holy Temple are very much dependent upon our own desires and actions. It is the desert which was a temporary destination; Israel and Jerusalem are the Jewish destiny of being a light unto the nations of the world.

That is why the Bible commands, "And you shall sanctify the fiftieth year" within the context of our counting of the sabbatical years leading up to the jubilee. And the very word jubilee is either identified with the word for shofar or ram's horn – the instrument used as our call to repentance – or from the Hebrew 'yovel' which means "he (the nation) shall lead" the entire world back to God. The very jubilee year is biblically defined as a declaration of universal freedom and the return of every individual to his homestead, obvious expressions of redemption.

This march of national freedom from Egyptian slavery to security in our own land from which we must realize our mission to bring peace to the world is expressed by counting, or sefira. The Hebrew s-p-r also means to tell, to recount, to clarify – which is the real commandment of the Seder night of sipur yetziat mitzrayim. The same root s-p-r also appears in the biblical description of the throne of the divine at the time of the revelation at Sinai, which is like "the white of the sapphire (sappir) and the purity of the heavens" (Ex. 24:10). From this linguistic perspective, it becomes necessary to understand the commandment to count – sefira – as a commandment to become pure and to move closer to the throne of the Almighty. Since there is no redemption without repentance and purification, we now understand why Shavuot is also the time when we receive the Torah from God – our road map to purity and redemption – and why Shavuot is truly the festival of our destiny. We now also understand why mystical and Hassidic literature refers to the emanations of the divine in this world as sefirot.

Postscript: Lag Ba'Omer – The Mystery Holiday

One of the strangest and most puzzling of the festivals of the Jewish Calendar is Lag Ba'Omer, the thirty-third day of the counting of the Omer, which brings in its wake a respite from the mourning period between Passover and Shavuot; wedding celebrations abound, and the heavens are ablaze all night with the bonfires for which the youngsters have been collecting wood since the conclusion of Passover. Rabbi Yosef Karo's Code of Jewish Law (mid-sixteenth century) comments that "we are accustomed to call the day, the celebration of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai"; in Israel an abundance of prayers are recited and candles lit at the site of his holy grave (Meron in the Galilee, not far from Safed), and it is said that "he departed [from the physical world] on that day and also that he left the cave on that day" (Orach Chayim 493:7). Apparently, the origin of the festival is shrouded in mystery, and the true reason for its having turned into a day of weddings and bonfires is not really known. Perhaps if we analyze the cave experience of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai as well as attempt to understand the uniqueness of his teaching, we may succeed in solving the riddle of the significance of Lag Ba'Omer.

A chilling historical episode is recorded in the Talmud: Rav Yehuda, Rav Yose and Rav Shimon Bar Yohai were sitting together and discussing the Roman Empire. Rav Yehuda declared, "How magnificent are the accomplishments of that nation. They established marketplaces, bridges and bathhouses." Rav Yose was silent. Rav Shimon Bar Yohai was critical. "They established marketplaces to make room for the prostitutes, bathhouses to spoil themselves with pleasures, and bridges in order to collect taxes and tolls."

When the conversation was overheard and told to the Roman authorities, Rav Yehuda was rewarded for his praise with an official appointment, Rav Yose was castigated for his silence with exile to Zippori, and Rav Shimon was punished for his indictment with the death penalty hanging over his head as a consequence. The great sage escaped with his son to hide out in a cave, where they miraculously subsisted on carobs and water (a carob tree and a well miraculously sprang up to their aid), and devoted twelve years to the exclusive study of the secrets of the Torah.

Upon being informed that the Caesar had died and the death decree had been canceled, father and son exited from the cave. They immediately encountered a Jewish farmer plowing and planting, and cried out in disbelief: "How can you forsake the eternal world and occupy yourself with momentary pursuits?" A blazing fire came forth from their eyes, and a voice came down from heaven, thundering "Did you leave the cave to destroy My world?" and they returned to the cave. At the conclusion of another year they left the cave again, this time, seeing an elderly Jew running late Friday afternoon with two myrtle twigs. Upon discovering that the twigs were meant to adorn his Sabbath table, one symbolizing the command to "Observe the Sabbath to keep it holy" and the other symbolizing the command to "Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy"' they were comforted in their reentry into society. (Shabbat 33b)

What new truth did Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai learn from the elderly Jew at the time of his second exit from the cave? I would submit that the initial cave experience of total immersion in sanctity and Torah study merely served to intensify Rabbi Shimon's neo-platonic division of the world into the two divergent planes of the holy and the secular, the spiritual and the material, with his denigration of everything that was physical; hence his negative attitude toward Rome and his disgust at the agricultural pursuit of the farmer. Rabbi Shimon would certainly have championed a "kollel" way of life for one's entire life – cloistering oneself in the House of Study and shutting out the world at large – as the only sincere way to save the divine.

The elderly Jew taught Rabbi Shimon that the sanctity of the Sabbath is meant to express the possibility – and challenge – of endowing the secular with the imprint of the holy, of transforming the very physical matter into the higher form of the spirit; after all, is not a Sabbath meal replete with zmirot, words of Torah and family harmony, a truly religious experience, and does not the sanctity of the Sabbath demonstrate the necessity of the spiritual penetrating, refining and uplifting the physical? Indeed, Rabbi Kook taught that the world is not divided into two distinct realms – the holy and the secular – but rather it is divided into two fluid and ready-to-combine entities, each of which has its ultimate source in the divine: the holy and the not-yet-holy, the religious and the not-yet-religious.

We have been given two commands, to observe the Sabbath on the Sabbath day and to remember the Sabbath – or to prepare for the Sabbath – during the other days of the week. Insofar as the possibility exists of plowing and planting in order to produce myrtle twigs for the Sabbath table, as long as the experience of plowing takes into account the biblical prohibition against using an ox and an ass together (which will cause the animals undue effort and pain), as long as the act of planting includes the prohibition of setting into the ground diverse seeds which would pervert the proper structure and order of nature, and as long as the farmer sets aside a portion of his land to be worked on by the poor and gives proper tithes to those who have no means of earning a livelihood – then the very acts of planting and plowing become acts of spirituality.

I would submit that Lag Ba'Omer is the day when Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai left the cave for the second time and encountered the old man running with the two myrtle twigs just before sundown on Friday.

The message he learned is actually provided by the continuation of the Talmudic story.

Rav Shimon Bar Yohai then said: "Since a miracle occurred (and I was saved from death at the hands of the Romans) I ought to establish some kind of improvement…" [when our ancestor Jacob emerged whole from his encounter with Esau, the progenitor of Rome, the Bible informs us that he encamped at the face of the city (Gen. 33) which Rav interprets to mean that he minted coins for them (similar to tax money)], Shmuel interprets it to mean he established market places for them, and Rav Yohanan interpreted it to mean he established bathhouses for them. (Shabbat 33b, 34)

Ultimately, the Gemara concludes that he purified a parcel of land which others had treated as ritually impure. Clearly, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai suddenly realizes that the societal materialistic improvements established by Rome were not evil in themselves; indeed, they were the very same improvements effectuated earlier by our forefather Jacob. Every aspect of the material world can potentially be sanctified, depending upon how it is used. And one's greatest task in this world is purifying an area which had hitherto been considered to be defiled!

I do not believe that I am moving too far afield when I remind you that the myrtle twig of the old man is the same myrtle which – in the form of a wreath – was the imperial symbol of Rome, worn as a crown by the victorious emperors. The Torah must find the way of sanctifying the world, of sanctifying Rome, of bringing our morality to the mightiest powers on earth. The area which is actually impure and waiting to be purified is Rome itself, symbolized by the myrtle twigs used in the service of the Sabbath, witness to the fact that the entire world must be claimed by the God who created it!

Finally, what Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai learned on that fateful and glorious Sabbath eve when he left the cave for the second time caused him to disagree with his arch-disputant Rabbi Yehuda concerning the interpretation of a biblical verse we usually read on the Sabbath immediately before Lag Ba'Omer: "If you will keep My statutes (and the millennium shall arrive)…I shall cause wild beasts to cease from the land" (Lev. 26:6). Rav Yehuda understands this to mean that wild beasts will be removed from the land, whereas Rav Shimon interprets the words to teach that the wildness of the beasts will cease to be in existence (Sifra 2:1); and Rav Shimon uses as his proof text the Psalm, "A Song for the Sabbath" (Ps. 92:1), the day when we attempt to sanctify every materialistic aspect of life, from wine to books to song.

I believe that the Sabbath has taught Rabbi Shimon that there is no absolute physicality, or even absolute evil, in this world; every object, thought or experience has the potential to be sanctified, to be endowed with the holy.

Sexual immorality can destroy the world, and marital sexual intimacy can join two individuals as one and create new life. Fire can destroy lives, and the kindling fire of Sabbath peace can point the way toward love, harmony and redemption. If indeed Lag Ba'Omer

is the anniversary of Rabbi Shimon's second exit from the cave, can there be any better way of celebrating such a milestone and honoring the memory of such a great Jewish sage than by the celebration of weddings of sanctity (kiddushin) and bonfires of warmth, friendships and songs dedicated to Israel, Torah and God?

And is it not critical that during our count from Passover – redemption promised – to Shavuot – redemption realized – from the prohibition of any form of leavening to the bringing of two challot into the holy Temple, from the commitment of the Paschal sacrifice to the revelation of the 613 Commandments, we mark Lag Ba'Omer, which teaches us that sanctity is derived not from the destruction of the material but rather from the uplifting (and redemption) of the material. *The above article appears in Rabbi Riskin's book Vayikra: Sacrifice, Sanctity & Silence, part of his Torah Lights series of commentaries on the weekly parsha, published by Maggid and available for purchase* at bit.ly/RiskinVayikra.

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

Connecting Sentences

At the end of Parashat Behar, following a series of statements involving the increased poverty of an individual, we find an unusual set of p'sukim, sentences. The conclusion of the deterioration of the individual because of his poverty eventually would lead to his becoming a Jewish slave, either to a Jewish owner or worse, to a non-Jew. His relatives were cautioned to redeem him from slavery to avoid his being influenced by idol-worshipping. The final p'sukim of this section discuss his eventual freedom in the Jubilee year, even should his relatives fail to redeem him. Yet there are other words which seem disconnected to his redemption or to the words of the next section of the Torah which follows.

The Torah states: "He (the slave) shall be with him (the purchaser) like a laborer hired by the year; he (the purchaser) shall not subjugate him through hard labor in your sight. If he has not been redeemed by these [means], then he shall go out in the Yovel (Jubilee) year, he and his children with him. For the B'nei Yisrael are slaves to Me, they are My slaves, whom I have taken out of the land of Egypt – I am Hashem, your Elokim. You shall not make idols for yourselves, and you shall not erect for yourselves a statue or a pillar, and in your land, you shall not emplace a flooring stone upon which to prostrate oneself – for I am Hashem, your Elokim. My Sabbaths shall you observe, and My Sanctuary shall you revere – I am Hashem."

HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that this last case is referring to a person who, in desperation, sells himself to a non-Jew who has accepted the framework of the Torah and denounced idol worship or worse, to a non-Jew who has not accepted the Torah and worships idols. The Torah does not sanction such a sale, preferring that he sell himself as a Jewish slave to a fellow Jew. Here, the requirement of the slave's family or even a Jewish stranger is to redeem him from this slavery as quickly as possible. HaRav Hirsch explains that we are concerned that the slave's new environment makes it "almost impossible that he and his family do not become estranged from the duties of Judaism." One might argue that the slave put himself into this position by selling himself to the non-Jew, but we are to assume that this was only as a last resort, and we had a responsibility to offer him a job or purchase him as a Jewish slave in order to ensure that he would not face the consequences of ownership by an idol worshipper. "For the B'nei Yisrael are slaves to Me, they are My slaves (servants), whom I have taken out of the land of Egypt."

HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that we can learn two things from the laws concerning the sale of a Jewish slave to a non-Jew: (1) The non-Jew must purchase the slave based on the years left until the next Jubilee year, and (2) it is incumbent on the slave's relatives or even anyone within the community to redeem him from this slavery as early as possible. There are two reasons for this second requirement: (1) "For the B'nei Yisrael are slaves to Me … whom I have taken out of the land of Egypt," and I do not give permission to sell them to other nations, and (2) "they are My slaves, … for I am Hashem, your Elokim," and I can command that they be redeemed so they will not become impure in the houses of idol worshippers.

The command to not make idols follows directly from the concept of freeing a slave who had sold himself to a non-Jew. It is clear that if Hashem commanded the entire nation to redeem this slave from an idol worshipper because Hashem did not want this slave to be influenced by that environment, all the more so did Hashem command that he should not bring that influence into his own home. The Ramban ties this concept to the next commandment mentioned in the last p'sukim: "You shall not make idols for yourselves, and you shall not erect for yourselves a statue or a pillar, and in your land, you shall not emplace a flooring stone upon which to prostrate oneself – for I am Hashem, your Elokim. My Sabbaths shall you observe, and My Sanctuary shall you revere –I am Hashem." The Ramban says that the pasuk is referring to the man who sold himself to a non-Jew as a slave. He explains that the man might say, "Since my master worships idols, I will also worship them; since my master is immoral, I, too, will be dissolute; since my master does not observe the Sabbath, I will also profane the Sabbath." Therefore, the Torah cautions against these actions.

The Torah stated, “My Sabbaths shall you observe, and My Sanctuary shall you revere – I am Hashem.” The Ramban ties this pasuk also to the poor man who sold himself as a slave to a non-Jew, idol worshipper. Torat Kohanim explains that this was commanded here because the Laws of Shabbat can be said to hint at all the Laws of the Torah. HaRav Hirsch ties Shabbat and the Temple to the command against making an idol: The Jubilee year is a demonstration of Hashem’s gifts of well-being to the nation. “The idols … are the heathen gods looked at from the point of view of their being hostile powers which are opposed to the happiness of human beings.” Hirsch explains that the gods, the idols, and the worshipping stones were not our guides to be looked at and worshipped, “but Shabbat and the Temple are the institutions towards which your careful attention is to be concentrated.”

We have seen how a series of what appears to be disjointed sentences are really one theme, the relationship that the B’nei Yisrael must concentrate on even in difficult times, that special relationship between Hashem and His People. We have seen that even when a man becomes so desperate that he sells himself as a slave to an idol-worshipping non-Jew, he must not allow himself to be influenced by his master to desert his real Master. We have seen that his family, his relatives, and even any fellow Jew must redeem him as soon as possible so that he does not succumb to that influence. We have been reminded that we serve Hashem because He took us out of Egypt where we served Man so that we can now serve Hashem. We learned that this slave must not make an idol, a statue, or any symbol or representation of another god. We have seen that this would lead to abandoning the Shabbat and the Temple, and their message to the Jewish People of Hashem’s gifts to us.

May we understand the message of these few sentences and understand that Hashem wants us to benefit from His gifts. May we see that other gods are interested in their own benefits and are in opposition to Man. May we rejoice in Hashem’s Shabbat, and may we soon rejoice in His Temple once again. *© 2025 Rabbi D. Levin*

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

The blessings in the portion of Behukotai reach toward their crescendo with the words "and I will walk among you and will be your God, 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 God among us is a necessary prerequisite for the world to be ethical. After all, in bringing God 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 God, there can be individuals who live very ethical lives. Yet, for the world at large to be ethical, God's presence is critical. Without God, 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 God's laws is inviolate and can never be altered.

God'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 God, 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 God. If you feel God, then even in difficult times, when it might seem that God is acting kindly, you still sense the closeness of the Divine.

From a mystical perspective, connecting with God makes God fully one. The masters of Kabbalah argue that God above is separated from the part of God which is in each of us. In this approach, the inner Godliness we all possess intrinsically yearns to reunite with God above, like a lover seeking out the beloved. The Kabbalists argue that only when the image of God in all of humankind fuses with the God above, does God, 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, God, 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 Hebrrew 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.*