Behar-Bechukosai 5786 Volume XXXIII Number 28

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"L

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 God . . . 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 God.

The terms of the passage are clear. Slavery is wrong. It is an assault on the human condition. To be "in the image of God" is to be summoned to a life of freedom. The very idea of the sovereignty of God means that He alone has claim to the service of mankind. Those who are God'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 God 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 God 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, God did not ask of the Israelites that they suddenly abandon everything they had become used to in Egypt. "God refrained from prescribing what the people by their natural disposition would be incapable of obeying." But surely God 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 God 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, God 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. God's greatness lay in taking the risk of creating a being, homo sapiens, capable of choice and responsibility - of obeying God freely.

God 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, 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. 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 realised 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. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt"l* *© 2026 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"And you shall sanctify the fiftieth year…it shall be a jubilee…" (Leviticus 25:10) Is the jubilee year an Israel concept or a world concept?

I believe the answer lies in a proper understanding of the portion of Behar, but requires an introduction from the very earliest verses of the Bible. Our "Book of Books" is universal in its scope, vision and ethos, opening as it does with the majestic words, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." The biblical reach goes far beyond Israel and the Jew; our God is God of the universe, and He has created the human being – not only Jew – in His own divine image.

Neither Adam nor Noah was ready to accept the divine morality of the freedom and the inviolability of the human being, or to subject themselves to the personal discipline and delayed gratification necessary for the structuring of a truly moral world. The delicious fruit and tantalizing wine of the moment were too tempting for each of them.

The Bible continues, and from the three sons of

Noah – Shem, Ham and Yafet – are derived the seventy nations of the world. They build a city and a tower whose top extends to the heavens in order to make for themselves a (grandiose) name; God confounds their materialistic and selfish goals by making "babble" of their speech so that they do not understand – and so cannot communicate with each other – and scatters them all over the face of the entire earth.

God then elects Abram, establishing a covenant with this first Jew, whereby He guarantees him progeny (which will never be destroyed) and the land of Israel (to which Israel will ultimately return). God makes Abram into an eternal nation.

However, God has not chosen Abram to the exclusion of the world. Much the opposite, God changes Abram's name to Abraham, from "exalted father" (Av ram) to "father of a multitude of nations" (Av hamon goyim) (Gen. 17:4, 5). Even before the name change, God charges Abraham with the divine mission that "through you shall be blessed all the families of the earth" (Gen. 12:3), since Abraham must found a "holy nation and kingdom of priest-teachers who will lead the world to morality, peace and redemption. Israel must become God's entrance-way into the world.

It should not come as a surprise to find that the Bible views Israel as a mirror of – and eventually a model for – the entire world; Israel is the heart, conscience and reflection of the world, as well as the means for the repair (tikkun) of the world. So if the three sons of Noah fathered the seventy nations of the world, it makes sense that the three patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – fathered the seventy souls who came down to Egypt and formed the Jewish nation (Ex. 1:5). Jacob's dream ladder is rooted in the earth with its "top extending to the heavens" (Gen. 28:12), and the Midrash on virtually all of the verses of this dream sequence identify the place of dreams as Mount Moriah, Jerusalem and the ladder as being the holy Temple, paralleling the ladder and the temple with the tower-ziggurat of Babel. When the Jews are not worthy, they too will be exiled and scattered to all four corners of the world, just as God scattered the babbling nations all over the face of the earth. Eventually the city of Jerusalem and the holy Temple-tower in its midst will serve as a tikkun (repair) for the Tower of Babel, when its Torah of peace will spread to the west, the east, the north and the south, when all nations rush to it and become united not for the sole reason of self-aggrandizement, but rather for the sake of service to God: "Then shall I transform for the nations one clear speech for all of them to call on the name of the Lord, to serve Him shoulder to shoulder." (Zefaniah 3:9)

Nowhere is our function as a model for the world more clearly expressed than in the portion of Behar, where the land of Israel is set up to be worked for six years, granted a sabbatical (both the land and its owners) on the seventh, and when all debts are likewise to be rescinded. After the seventh sabbatical, the fiftieth year becomes the jubilee: "And you shall sanctify the fiftieth year, and declare freedom for the land and all of its inhabitants; it shall be a jubilee for you, when every person shall return to his/her homestead, family and family estate…" (Leviticus 25:10)

The jubilee reflects our national dream – and mission – for world redemption; "the land" in the verse just cited may well refer to the entire land which God created together with the heavens, and on which all of humanity must be free and secure.

The founding fathers of Israel – like David Ben-Gurion – may not have been observant Jews, they may not even have consciously believed in God, but they did believe in the necessity for the Jewish homeland, and they shared in the biblical vision of our mission to the world. They understood the necessity of the land of Israel for the future of the Jewish people and of the necessity of Israel's Ten Commandments for the future of the world. They were idealists, who were profoundly committed to an ideal greater than they were and were selfless in their pursuit of this ideal.

Even though the Agranat Commission did not find her responsible for the failures at the beginning of the Yom Kippur War, Golda Meir resigned nonetheless, deeply disappointed in herself because she believed she had disappointed her nation. Israel for them – and for the Bible – is Jewish past and Jewish future, but is also a reflection of the world, a cosmos-in-miniature, whose origins and whose destiny is inextricably bound up with a vision of unusual salvation in a jubilee of peace and freedom for all. *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*.* *© 2026 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN ZT"L

Wein Online

The 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 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 God while Judaism was a Godly 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. *© 2010 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit*

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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. *© 2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit*

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

Temurah, Exchange

We have previously discussed the concept of donating the value of a person to the Temple. At that time, we saw that there were basically two factors in determining "value" – age and gender. But there are other things which we might consecrate to the Temple that do not fit into these categories. We may wish to dedicate an animal, land, or a house to the Temple, so the Torah now presents us with the process for determining the value of the animal or land. With an animal, there may need to be a temurah, an exchange. There are factors which make this exchange forbidden.

The Torah states: "If it is the kind of animal that one can bring as an offering to Hashem, whatever he may give of it to Hashem shall be holy. He shall not exchange it nor substitute it, whether good for bad or bad for good; but if he does substitute one animal for another

animal, then it and its substitute shall be holy. And if it is any impure animal from which they may not bring an offering to Hashem, then he shall stand the animal before the Kohein. The Kohein shall evaluate it, whether good or bad; like the Kohein's evaluation so shall it be. But I he redeems it, he must add a fifth to the valuation. If a man consecrates his house to be holy to Hashem, the Kohein shall evaluate it, whether good or bad; as the Kohein shall evaluate it, so shall it remain. If the one who sanctified it will redeem his house, he shall add a fifth of the money-valuation onto the money of valuation, and it shall be his. If a man consecrates a field from his ancestral heritage to Hashem, the valuation shall be according to its seeding: an area seeded by a chomer of barley for fifty silver shekels. If he consecrates his field from the Yovel (50th) year, the Kohein shall calculate the money for him according to the remaining years until the Yovel year, and it shall be subtracted from the valuation. And if one who consecrated it shall redeem the field, he shall add a fifth of the money-valuation onto the money of valuation, and it shall be his. But if he does not redeem the field, and if he had sold to another man, it cannot be redeemed anymore. Then, when the field goes out in the Yovel, it will be holy to Hashem, like a segregated field; his ancestral heritage shall become the Kohein's. But if he will sanctify to Hashem a field of his acquisition, that is not of the field of his ancestral heritage, then the Kohein shall calculate for him the sum of the valuation until the Yovel year; and he shall pay the valuation of that day, it is holy to Hashem. In the Yovel year the field shall return to the original owner from whom he acquired it; to him who has it as ancestral heritage of the land. Every valuation shall be in the shekel of the Sanctuary; that shekel shall be twenty geirah."

When discussing an animal that is fit as an offering in the Temple, the Torah indicates that it is improper to substitute a different animal in its place. This does not matter whether one is exchanging a "good animal in place of a bad one" or the opposite. Rashi suggests that this means that one may not substitute for an animal that is a designated animal, even if it has a blemish which would disqualify it as an offering. This is true if one designated a specific animal for the offering and it became unfit. It cannot be brought in the Temple for an offering, yet it maintains its original sanctification. If one appoints an animal in its place, a temurah, both animals are sanctified even though the Torah forbid one to do so. But there is more to our understanding of this case that needs to be discussed.

The first case of the sentences deals with dedicating a part of an animal. Rashi explains that if he wished to dedicate a foot as an olah or chatat-offering, the animal must be sold, since one may not offer a part of an animal as a sacrifice. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin points out that the one who wishes to dedicate only a part of the animal as an olah or chatat-offering, must find someone who is required to bring an olah or chatat, and then sells the entire animal to him. The money from that sale is not holy except for the value of that part which was dedicated. When an entire animal is dedicated to the Temple, one may not substitute a different animal in its place, even if the exchange would raise the value of the offering. HaRav Sorotzkin explains that the dedication was made at a problematic time with the hope that this dedication would bring him closer to Hashem. When the difficulties are over, the person may have second thoughts about the dedication and may seek a way to cancel his donation. If he were to find that he could substitute an animal, he might wish to replace his designated animal with a new, but less valuable offering. For that reason, the Torah forbade exchanging the animal.

HaRav Hirsch explains what he sees as the basis for the laws concerning the temurah, the exchanged animal. By the sentence "He shall not exchange it nor substitute it, whether good for bad or bad for good," the Torah unequivocally forbids also the exchange of a sanctified animal with a blemish for an unsanctified perfect animal, and even in that case, if it is nevertheless done, the temurah is effective and the sanctified animal remains sanctified and the unsanctified becomes equally sanctified. In later verses, the Torah actually prescribes redemption for a sanctified animal with a blemish, which according to the Law, need not be made by money or its equivalent, but can be done by giving an animal which is fit for an offering, besides a sanctified animal that has become unfit for an offering, and declares 'this one becomes unsanctified on this one,' the unfit animal transfers its sanctified status to the other, and becomes unsanctified." This exchange appears to make possible what the Torah has just prohibited. Hirsch points out that the difference is the wording of the exchange. In the first case, it appears that the exchanged animal is consecrated to effect the exchange. In the second, permitted case, it is the sanctified animal which is desanctified and its sanctity placed onto the unsanctified animal. In the first case, "an animal destined for sacrifice by an act of dedication can in no way be altered from that destination as long as it is fit for it. Should it become unfit for it by a blemish, then, as it had received this destination by a completely free-willed act, an equally free-willed act can transfer this destination for which it has now become unfit to another animal which is fit."

Hirsch's explanation applies to us also. One seeking atonement for his sins through a sacrificed animal, has become unfit, unsanctified to the Will of Hashem. This offering transfers the sanctity of the animal onto the sinner's unfit self. In a way, he becomes the sanctified person he was before his sin. Without the ability to bring sacrifices today, may our acts of Teshuvah bring us again to our sanctified relationship with Hashem. *© 2026 Rabbi D. Levin*

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"And his sale shall remain in the hand of the buyer until the Jubilee year, then go out in the Jubilee and [he shall] return to his holdings." (Vayikra 22:23) When Hashem gave the land of Canaan to the Jewish People, He divided it up through a miraculous lottery. Each family and person got their specific plots of land with which they were to make their livelihoods. Some were better farming lands, while others had natural resources, but each Tribe and family had its area.

If a person fell on hard times and was unable to support himself, he might sell some or all of his land for money. In doing so, however, Hashem built guidelines into the Torah so that this not be a permanent sale. Essentially, the "sale" of the land would be a ground lease, and the buyer was purchasing the rights to use the land for a certain amount of time. It would be calculated how many seasons of planting and harvesting there were until the Yovel, the Jubilee year when lands would revert to their original owners.

Not only this, but the seller had the right to redeem the sale at any point by paying the buyer the cash value of the years he had leased the land for. While he may have had to sell his property, it was not a "final" sale, and there were options for him to get it back.

This applied to fields, but when it came to a home within a walled city, the law is different. There, one who sold a home in a walled city had the right to purchase it back within a year, but after that, the sale was final. There was no more redemption available for him.

Practically speaking, the Chizkuni explains that people might not want to "buy" a house which was more of a rental, as there was always the possibility of its rent being raised. He also expresses a difference that a house in a walled city was clearly not meant for agriculture, and the laws of Yovel only applied to such lands. A house in an unwalled city was more commonly considered like farmland and would revert. Perhaps there, as well, the idea of permanence was only tied to the home that was not part of a farm.

The applicable laws here teach us some very important lessons about our lives and livelihoods. When it comes to farmland, which people consider to be their lifeline for sustenance, as this is their "business," the Torah shows there is no permanence. The acquisitions we make are merely for a limited time, just as our time on earth is not forever.

We use this time to support ourselves for now, but should never consider ourselves permanent dwellers on earth. This is underscored by the fact that the original owner always had the chance to reclaim what was his. We should not get too comfortable.

Instead, we are able to use this time to build our real homes, those in the Next World, which are built through the Torah and mitzvos we study and perform. Those are truly ours, and are represented by the homes in walled cities. Once again, the Torah shows us that Hashem's thoughts are not those of Man, and we should work to align our ways with His, so we reap a bountiful harvest at the end.

A wealthy traveler made a stop in Radin to visit the Chofetz Chaim. Upon arrival there, he noted the humble state of the sage's home. He asked the Chofetz Chaim why he did not live in a more comfortable fashion.

The Chofetz Chaim replied, "Tell me, I see you here with just a suitcase. Where is all of your furniture?" The man was confused. "But I don't live here, I'm only passing through Radin. My furniture is back at my real home."

The Chofetz Chaim smiled. "This isn't my real home either. I'm just passing through Earth for a short time. My real home is in Shomayim with Hashem. That's where I keep my furniture." © 2026 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

RABBI YITZCHAK ZWEIG

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

About a month ago I wrote a column about healthy eating (Nourish and Flourish) that seemed to strike a chord with readers, and many wrote back – including therapists and psychiatrists – describing the challenges of getting people focused on healthy eating.

Being overweight for a good portion of my life, I have more than little experience grappling with these issues. Several years ago – before GLP-1 drugs were all the rage – my personal physician was encouraging me to try them. In his words, it was medicine's first "magic bullet" for dealing with obesity and he had been prescribing those medications to his diabetic patients for twenty years, so he felt they were both safe and effective.

In fact, he said they worked so well that he regularly had to refuse to prescribe them to patients with healthy BMIs who were just trying to lose a few pounds to fit into their bathing suits. He also mentioned a fascinating phenomenon; the GLP-1 drugs were so effective at appetite suppression that some of his older patients with serious weight issues didn't want to take them because, in their words, "Eating is the only real pleasure I have left in my life."

Of course, in the last five years, medicine's "magic bullet for obesity" has become a national and international obsession. A friend of mine described going to dinner with someone taking Wegovy: "First they pored over the menu like it is a Talmudic tractate, carefully weighing all their options. Then, after 15 minutes of looking at every single item on the menu, they finally ordered the fish. When it arrived, they took a Lego brick sized bite out of it and decided that they would take the rest home."

He continued, "By the time we left I had eaten my appetizer, my steak, half of their fish, and two

complete bread baskets. The only reason I didn't have dessert was because contemplating desserts made her feel 'nauseous.' It was like spending $300 to observe someone lose their interest in life."

My friend's complaint is a true sign of the times. After all, there is nothing more peak-21st-century than being genuinely annoyed that you did not enjoy your night out because a restaurant's offer of experiencing "unlimited luxury dining" was thwarted by a tiny needle your dinner companion stuck herself with yesterday.

Modern food is specifically engineered to entice; companies (and restaurants) add huge amounts of salt, sugar, fat, and even aroma enhancers like liquid smoke to enhance flavors. Because humans were created with the ability to enjoy food, this has fueled eating for enjoyment, not merely need. Even though dogs also seem to enjoy their food, they're primarily engineered to inhale as many calories as possible as quickly as possible. By contrast, humans have four to five times more taste buds than dogs who are far less picky eaters (which might explain why you see them try to eat lizards when they have – presumably tastier – kibble at home).

Eating is a complicated mix of biology, psychology, and environment, and several of these drivers can easily cause one to veer into overeating if left unchecked. Here are some of the most well-known reasons people eat:

Biological Hunger (Fuel & Survival): This is the "legitimate" reason. Your body needs energy, nutrients, and blood sugar stability to thrive. Unfortunately, modern food preparation (high-calorie, ultra-palatable foods) can override these signals. You may still feel "hungry" even when your caloric needs are met.

Emotional Regulation: People eat to cope with stress, boredom, anxiety, loneliness, or even to reward themselves. Food – especially sugar and fat – can temporarily boost moods via dopamine. This creates a feedback loop: emotional distress leads to overeating, which leads to temporary pleasure and distraction until it passes or you feel guilty for the overindulgence and the emotional distress returns. Rinse and repeat.

Habit & Conditioning: Eating becomes tied to routines like popcorn at a movie, dessert after dinner, or snacking while working. Unconscious eating during the "trigger" (time, place, activity) drives the eating – even without hunger.

Social & Cultural Influence: Meals are social glue; a synagogue kiddush (light meal after Shabbat morning services), holiday meals, family gatherings, and other celebrations. Overeating can happen because meals last longer, or because eating becomes a social activity during these gatherings.

But there is another element to eating, one that is hardly ever discussed.

It is quite remarkable that almost every one of the terms for food in the Torah has to do with struggle, violence, or war. The Hebrew word for bread – lechem – has the same root word as that of war – lochem. Other words for food in the Torah include tzeida, mazon, and teref, whose root words translate respectively to hunt, weaponry, and tear apart.

Eating as a metaphor for conquest is also ubiquitous in English and at this point we hardly notice it ("she'll eat him up alive"). But it is also entirely possible that part of the reason that 95% of Americans are not vegetarians isn't just because steak tastes so much better than lettuce; there may very well be an element of being empowered and emotionally satisfied by the concept of eating something that "gave its life for me." There's a certain sense of self-sufficiency and self-worth tied to the ability to consume another living being.

It wasn't meant to be this way. This universal disharmony was not part of the original plan for creation. In fact, in the Garden of Eden Adam was not permitted to kill animals for food. Mankind was only meant to eat vegetation! On the day of his creation God said to Adam, "Behold I have given you every seed-bearing plant and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit […] all plant vegetation shall be food" (Genesis 1:29-30).

It wasn't until the times of Noah – after the flood – that man was given permission to kill animals for food: "Every moving that lives shall be food for you, like the plant vegetation, I have (now) given you everything […]" (Genesis 9:3).

After Adam and Eve consciously disconnected themselves from the Almighty by sinning in the Garden of Eden, they became disconnected from the essence of who they were: their divine souls. From then on man has struggled to justify his existence. This is why Adam's punishment was that he would have to justify his existence by laboring to earn his keep, "only by the sweat of your brow will you eat bread" (Genesis 3:19).

This lifelong struggle is why the Torah terms food as a form of battle – a battle for existence. Eating validated one's life and, in a sense, became a victory over nature.

This week we read two Torah portions, Behar and Bechukotai. Interestingly, in both portions we find a relationship between feeling secure and eating.

In the portion of Behar we find: "And the land will give its fruit, and you will eat to satisfaction, and you will dwell securely upon it" (Leviticus 25:19). The sages point out that the blessing of eating to satisfaction is that during the time of blessings in the Land of Israel they will eat even a little bit and be satisfied (see Rashi ad loc). In other words, it's not just a physical security, it's also a psychological and an economic security. It's a period of calm, sufficiency, and trust.

In the portion of Bechukotai we similarly find: "And you will eat your bread to satisfaction, and you will dwell securely in your land" (Leviticus 26:5).

There are, of course, subtle differences. In Behar this promise is tied to shemitta observance – keeping the laws of the sabbatical year. In Bechukotai

this promise is linked to following in the ways of the Almighty and His statutes.

The key though is that Land of Israel is presented as the place where this higher satisfaction becomes possible. In the Holy Land a Jew feels rooted, connected to God, and secure in his existence. Therefore, he does not need food, wealth, or material things to prove that he exists. He can eat a little and be satisfied.

This is because true satisfaction is dependent on security. When a person feels secure in his existence, he can eat to live rather than live to eat. The Torah therefore links satisfaction with dwelling securely in the land. In truth, these are two separate blessings. Abundance is an external blessing. Being satisfied with little is an internal blessing. The deeper blessing is not only having more, but needing less. This is the blessing of harmony.

It is interesting to note that prior to Adam and Eve's sin in the Garden of Eden even the animals were vegetarians. In fact, in Messianic times, when the world has once again achieved universal harmony, this is how the prophet Isiah describes that harmony: "The wolf shall live peacefully with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the baby goat; and the calf and the young lion lie together; and a little child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox" (Isiah 11:6-7).

At the end of days, the world will become fully cognizant of the unity of the Almighty and all of creation. Only then will creation be in total harmony and everything will return to how it was intended. May it be the will of the Almighty to arrive there speedily in our days. *© 2026 Rabbi Y. Zweig & shabbatshalom.org*

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

Toil Trouble

The portion of Bechukosai begins quite simply. Hashem tells us: "If you will walk in My ordinances and observe My commandments and perform them. Then I will provide your rains in their time, and the land will give its produce and the tree of the field will give its fruit" (Leviticus 26:3-4) Rashi the premier commentary on the Torah, has a mission to define the simple explanation of the verse. He rarely deviates from the simple pshat (explanation), unless he prefaces his remarks by stating his intention to do so. In this instance Rashi explains the concept of "walking in My ordinances" not as mitzvah observance or following in the Ways of the Almighty. Rather, Rashi explains walking in G-d's ways as toiling in Torah study. Rashi explains his commentary: One might think that this [verse] denotes the fulfillment of the commandments; but when Scripture follows by stating and you shall keep My commandments and do them, it is plain that in this passage there is mentioned the fulfillment of the commands. How then must I explain 'Im Bechukosai Teleichu?'" As an admonition that you should study the Torah laboriously.

Clearly when Rashi translates the words, he seems to deviate from the simple meaning. Instead of explaining, "If you go in my path, he states, If you will toil in Torah." Walking in Hashem's path may mean many things. Surely many of them can be simply understood from those words. But toiling in Torah does not seem to be one of them.

In a very popular day school, the Morah was reviewing the meaning of the prayers with her young charges. "Children," she asked in her melodious voice, "Who knows what Shema Yisrael means?"

The hands shot up and waved frantically. "I know! I know!" came muffled shouts from the youngsters who each had their siddurim opened to the proper pages. "It means 'Hear O Israel!'"

"Wonderful!" responded the young teacher. "And who knows what Baruch Atah Hashem means?"

Again the students raised their hands in excitement. "It means 'blessed are You Hashem!'"

"Good," she exclaimed. "Good. Now for a hard one. Who knows the meaning of Amen?"

There was a moment of silence and then little Joey raised his hand! "That's simple every time it says Amen in the Siddur the translation appears right next to it!"

"It is," asked the Morah.

"Sure," said Joey. "Everyone knows that Amen means Cong." (In many siddurim, you will see the following at the end of a blessing: "Cong. -- (Heb) Amen.")

I learned the Rashi and learned a lesson. Sometimes we read words and we translate from Hebrew to English. We nod our heads as if it makes sense, and we don?t give pause to think about the true meaning of what we have just said. Often, however, even in the simplest form the mere translation of words does not constitute the actual meaning of a verse. Indeed the Hebrew Im Bchukosai Talaichu translates word by word as "If you will walk in My ordinances" but when learning Torah we must do more than merely look at the words and then translate. We must delve deeper. We must analyze seemingly redundant phrases. We must get to the depth of the true meaning of the words. Indeed, we must toil in Torah! *© 2018 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky & torah.org*