Behar 5776 Volume XXIII Number 37

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

I argued in Covenant and Conversation Kedoshim that Judaism is more than an ethnicity. It is a call to holiness. In one sense, however, there is an important ethnic dimension to Judaism.

It is best captured in the 1980s joke about an advertising campaign in New York. Throughout the city there were giant posters with the slogan, "You have a friend in the Chase Manhattan Bank." Underneath one, an Israeli had scribbled the words, "But in Bank Leumi you have mishpochah." Jews are, and are conscious of being, a single extended family.

This is particularly evident in this week's parsha. Repeatedly we read of social legislation couched in the language of family: "When you buy or sell to your neighbour, let no one wrong his brother." (Lev. 25:14)

"If your brother becomes impoverished and sells some of his property, his near redeemer is to come to you and redeem what his brother sold." (25:25)

"If your brother is impoverished and indebted to you, you must support him; he must live with you like a foreign resident. Do not take interest or profit from him, but fear your G-d and let your brother live with you." (25:35-36)

"If your brother becomes impoverished and is sold to you, do not work him like a slave." (25: 39)

"Your brother" in these verses is not meant literally. At times it means "your relative", but mostly it means "your fellow Jew". This is a distinctive way of thinking about society and our obligations to others. Jews are not just citizens of the same nation or adherents of the same faith. We are members of the same extended family. We are -- biologically or electively -- children of Abraham and Sarah. For the most part, we share the same history. On the festivals we relive the same memories. We were forged in the same crucible of suffering. We are more than friends. We are mishpochah, family.

The concept of family is absolutely fundamental to Judaism. Consider the book of Genesis, the Torah's starting-point. It is not primarily about theology, doctrine, dogma. It is not a polemic against idolatry. It is about families: husbands and wives, parents and children, brothers and sisters.

At key moments in the Torah, G-d himself defines his relationship with the Israelites in terms of family. He tells Moses to say to Pharaoh in his name: "My child, my firstborn, Israel" (Ex. 4:22). When Moses wants to explain to the Israelites why they have a duty to be holy he says, "You are children of the Lord your G-d" (Deut. 14:1). If G-d is our parent, then we are all brothers and sisters. We are related by bonds that go to the very heart of who we are.

The prophets continued the metaphor. There is a lovely passage in Hosea in which the prophet describes G-d as a parent teaching a young child how to take its first faltering steps: "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son... It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms... To them I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek, and I bent down to feed them." (Hosea 11:1-4).

The same image is continued in rabbinic Judaism. In one of the most famous phrases of prayer, Rabbi Akiva used the words Avinu Malkenu, "Our Father, our King". That is a precise and deliberate expression. G-d is indeed our sovereign, our lawgiver and our judge, but before He is any of these things He is our parent and we are His children. That is why we believe divine compassion will always override strict justice.

This concept of Jews as an extended family is powerfully expressed in Maimonides' Laws of Charity: "The entire Jewish people and all those who attach themselves to them are like brothers, as [Deuteronomy 14:1] states: 'You are children of the Lord your G-d.' And if a brother will not show mercy to a brother, who will show mercy to them? To whom do the poor of Israel lift up their eyes? To the gentiles who hate them and pursue them? Their eyes are turned to their brethren alone." (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Gifts to the

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is dedicated in honor of
Dov Weiss & Shayndi Raice
On the occasion of their upcoming wedding!
Mazel tov!

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Poor, 10:2)

This sense of kinship, fraternity and the family bond, is at the heart of the idea of Kol Yisrael arevin zeh bazeh, "All Jews are responsible for one another." Or as Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai put it, "When one Jew is injured, all Jews feel the pain." (Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai to Ex. 19:6)

Why is Judaism built on this model of the family? Partly to tell us that G-d did not choose an elite of the righteous or a sect of the likeminded. He chose a family -- Abraham and Sarah's descendants -- extended through time. The family is the most powerful vehicle of continuity, and the kinds of changes Jews were expected to make to the world could not be achieved in a single generation. Hence the importance of the family as a place of education ("You shall teach these things repeatedly to your children...") and of handing the story on, especially on Pesach through the Seder service.

Another reason is that family feeling is the most primal and powerful moral bond. The scientist J. B. S. Haldane famously said, when asked whether he would jump into a river and risk his life to save his drowning brother, "No, but I would do so to save two brothers or eight cousins." The point he was making was that we share 50 per cent of our genes with our siblings, and an eighth with our cousins. Taking a risk to save them is a way of ensuring that our genes are passed on to the next generation. This principle, known as "kin selection", is the most basic form of human altruism. It is where the moral sense is born.

That is a key insight, not only of biology but also of political theory. Edmund Burke (1729-17972) famously said that "To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections. It is the first link in the series by which we proceed towards a love to our country, and to mankind." (Reflections on the French Revolution. The Harvard Classics. 1909 -- 14) Likewise Alexis de Tocqueville said, "As long as family feeling was kept alive, the opponent of oppression was never alone." (Democracy in America, Chapter XVII: Principal causes which tend to maintain the democratic republic in the United States)

Strong families are essential to free societies. Where families are strong, a sense of altruism exists that can be extended outward, from family to friends to neighbours to community and from there to the nation as a whole.

It was the sense of family that kept Jews linked in a web of mutual obligation despite the fact that they were scattered across the world. Does it still exist? Sometimes the divisions in the Jewish world go so deep, and the insults hurled by one group against another are so brutal that one could almost be persuaded that it does not. In the 1950s Martin Buber expressed the belief that the Jewish people in the traditional sense no longer existed. Knesset Yisrael, the covenantal people as a single entity before G-d, was no more. The divisions between Jews, religious and secular, orthodox and non-orthodox, Zionist and non-Zionist, had, he thought, fragmented the people beyond hope of repair.

Yet that conclusion is premature for precisely the reason that makes family so elemental a bond. Argue with your friend and tomorrow he may no longer be your friend, but argue with your brother and tomorrow he is still your brother. The book of Genesis is full of sibling rivalries but they do not all end the same way. The story of Cain and Abel ends with Abel dead. The story of Isaac and Ishmael ends with their standing together at Abraham's grave. The story of Esau and Jacob reaches a climax when, after a long separation, they meet, embrace and go their separate ways. The story of Joseph and his brothers begins with animosity but ends with forgiveness and reconciliation. Even the most dysfunctional families can eventually come together.

The Jewish people remains a family, often divided, always argumentative, but bound in a common bond of fate nonetheless. As our parsha reminds us, that person who has fallen is our brother or sister, and ours must be the hand that helps them rise again.

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"If your brother becomes destitute and is then sold to you, you shall not make him work like a slave" (Leviticus 25:39). If indeed Judaism gave the world the idea and ideal of freedom – "I am the Lord thy G-d who took thee out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage" (Exodus 20:2), how can we justify that our Bible accepts the institution of slavery and even legislates proper and improper treatment of slaves? Why didn't our Torah abolish slavery absolutely? If we compare the laws of the Hebrew slave as found in Mishpatim (Exodus 21:2-6) to the laws of the Hebrew slave as found in our reading of Behar (Leviticus 25:39-47), our analysis may lead to a revolutionary idea about how the Bible treated the "slave" altogether! At first blush, the two primary sources appear to be in conflict

with each other. The portion of Mishpatim explains that if one purchases a Hebrew slave, he may only be enslaved for six years after which he must be completely freed (Ex. 21:2). Secondly, the owner may provide the slave with a gentile servant as his wife, stipulating that the children will remain slaves of the owner after the Hebrew slave (father) is freed (Ex. 21:4).

And thirdly, if the Hebrew slave desires to remain in bondage longer than the six-year period – "Because he loves his master, his wife, his children" – he may continue to be enslaved until the Jubilee 50th year; however, he must first submit to having his ear pierced at the doorpost, so that the message of G-d's dominion ("Hear O Israel the Lord is our G-d, the Lord is one"), rather than human mastery, is not lost upon him (Ex. 21:5,6).

A very different picture seems to emerge from the passage in Behar. Here the Bible emphasizes the fact that we are not dealing with slavery as understood in ancient times, a specific social class of slaves who were captured in war or whose impoverishment caused them to be taken advantage of.

Rather, our Torah insists that no human being may ever be reduced to servitude, no matter his social or financial status.

At worst, he must be hired like a hired residential worker with you, and "he shall work with you until the jubilee 50th year. Because they [these hired residential workers] are [also no less than you,] my servants whom I have taken out of the land of Egypt; they may not be sold as one sells a slave. You shall not rule over them harshly; you must fear your G-d" (Lev. 25:43). You are not to have slaves, our text is proclaiming; you are merely to have hired residential workers! And upon examining our text in Behar, we find a number of interesting differences between this passage and the text in Exodus. First of all, in our portion there doesn't seem to be a time limit of six years; the length of time of employment would seem to depend upon the contract between employer and employee.

Second, this passage doesn't seem to mention anything about the employer providing a gentile servant as wife. And thirdly, our text does not ordain piercing of the ear for a longer stay of employment, and it does tell us in no uncertain terms that our Bible does not compromise with slavery! It only provides for hired residential workers.

The Talmud – which transmits the Oral Law, some of which emanated from Sinai and some of which is interpreted by the Sages (100 BCE – 800 CE) – teaches that each of these biblical passages is dealing with a different kind of "servant" (B.T. Kiddushin 14a): The first (in Mishpatim) is a criminal who must be rehabilitated, a thief who doesn't have the means to restore his theft to its proper owner. Such an individual is put "on sale" by the religious court, whose goal is to guide a family toward undertaking the responsibility of rehabilitation.

After all, the criminal is not a degenerate, his crime is not a "high risk" or sexual offense, and it is hoped that a proper family environment which provides nurture as well as gainful employment (with severance pay at the end of the six-year period) will put him back on his feet. He is not completely free since the religious court has ruled that he must be "sold," but one can forcefully argue that such a "familial environment/ halfway house" form of rehabilitation is far preferable to incarceration.

The family must receive compensation – in the form of the work performed by the servant as well as the children who will remain after he is freed – and the criminal himself must be taught how to live respectfully in a free society. And, if the thief does not trust himself to manage his affairs in an open society, he may voluntarily increase his period of incarceration-rehabilitation.

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

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

This week's Torah reading seems to emphasize that the granting of the Torah to Moshe, and through him to Israel generally, took place at the Mountain of Sinai. Since the Torah does not deal with incidental geographic details, this emphasis regarding the mountain bears study and analysis. Mountain climbing is a sport for the hardy of spirit and the physically fit. However most of us are perfectly content with our lives without attempting to scale cliffs. Yet, in a spiritual sense, the Torah seems to indicate that living a moral and observant Jewish lifestyle requires spiritual mountain climbing.

The Talmud teaches us that Mount Sinai was a rather modest mountain in height, as mountains go. It was chosen, so to speak, because it represented humility amongst its greater companions, such as the Alps and the Himalayas. Yet, it required effort, energy and purpose to be able to ascend it. In that respect it represents the Torah itself, which was given to Moshe on its summit.

Life is never smooth or easy – a flat plain,

simple to traverse. Rather, it is always an uphill climb that many times leaves us short of breath and doubtful of hope. We all know this to be true of our physical lives and it is doubly so regarding the spiritual component of our existence. There is a phrase in Yiddish that says: "It is hard and difficult to be a Jew." Well, like most Yiddish aphorisms, this one is certainly accurate and telling. The only problem is that, over the long run of history, it is obvious that it is much more difficult and harmful for us not to live proper Jewish lives.

The prophets always speak of Jewish redemption as being a formidable mountain that somehow will be flattened and made into a smooth and level plain. What appears to be formidable and forbidding, almost impossible to overcome, a gigantic mountain which blocks our view of the horizon, will somehow eventually be transformed and made accessible and comfortable. I think that that is a proper metaphor for Jewish life generally and for Torah lifeand values particularly.

It is a mountain to climb but once ascended it leads to smooth going and a level journey through life. The Talmud records for us that the temptations of life appear to the righteous as mountains, and that they stare in amazement at their ability to somehow overcome each obstacle. The wicked, evil temptation appears to be as thin as a single hair that can be easily dismissed.

However once engaged with that hair, one runs the danger of being inextricably shackled by it. So the Torah bids us all to be mountain climbers. We are to steel ourselves against the difficulties that living a Jewish life presents and realize that according to the effort will be the reward. There is no easy way or smooth path to a concentrated Jewish life. The example of Moshe climbing Mount Sinai remains the metaphor for all of us and for all Jewish life till eternity.

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

In this week's prophetic portion, Jeremiah prophesied about the destruction of the First Temple. G-d commands Jeremiah to leave Jerusalem and travel to Anatot to buy a field from his cousin Chananel (Jeremiah 32).

It can be suggested that when G-d told Jeremiah the Temple was doomed, Jeremiah clung on to the city. While he knew the word of G-d was true, his love for the Temple was so great that he felt that he did not want to leave. Part of him may have felt that by remaining nearby, he would be able to infuse his very life, his very spirit, his very breath, into the Temple to keep it standing.

Jeremiah obeyed G-d's word and leaves to buy a field. This truly was an act of faith for it showed that even in the midst of doom, one must always believe that the Jewish people will prevail. Jeremiah certainly did what he knew he had to do. Still, by leaving Jerusalem, he broke the umbilical cord between himself and the Temple, and the Temple was destroyed.

This interpretation was offered by Rav Yosef Dov ha-Levi Soloveitchik after the death of his wife Tonya. He explained how the circumstances of his wife's death corresponded to the Jeremiah story.

The Rav often spoke of his wife in the most romantic terms. He pointed out that she was his bayit, his home, his Temple. When doctors told the Rav that Tonya was terminally ill, he knew the prognosis was bleak. But like Jeremiah, he felt if he remained with her constantly he could keep her alive and infuse part of his being into her.

And so it was. For months, the Rav remained at his wife's side. He prayed, studied, and conducted his business there. One day, Tonya urged him to travel to New York to finalize a contribution made by a generous philanthropist to Yeshiva University, Rav Soloveitchik's yeshiva. The Rav hesitated, but in the end, the doctors assured him that Tonya was not in danger that day. He flew to New York and was successful in securing the gift. As he stepped off the plane in Boston, he was notified that Tonya had lapsed into a coma. Entering his wife's hospital room, the Rav found her unconscious. A short time later Tonya Soloveitchik died.

While it is true that none of us has the power to keep alive everything we love forever, our physical presence sometimes has the ability to comfort and heal. Staying close to the people and places we cherish helps infuse them with life. This Shabbat let us remain close to those we love. Let's resolve to connect ourselves powerfully to Eretz Yisrael and Jerusalem.

ENCYCLOPEDIA TALMUDIT

Destroying Produce During Shmittah

Translated for the Encyclopedia Talmudit
by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

The law to dispose (*Biur*-once a fruit or vegetable from the field has been consumed on the *Shmittah* year, one must remove as well all the fruits of that kind from the home) during "*Shiviit*" (the seventh year in the cycle where all fields must lie fallow) is derived from the sentence appearing in this week's portion "and for your animal and for the beast that is in your land shall

all its crop be to eat" 25; 7. What is the purpose of stating "the animal" which denotes the animal that is in your possession and then to state the beasts of the field? Certainly if a beast of the field may eat the fruit then certainly the animal that is in your possession may also?

To this our Rabbis (*Ramban*-who states that this is a Rabbinic law and not from the Torah) state that once there are no fruits left in the field, one also may not eat fruits from the house as well. In other words once the fruits of the fields have vanished or spoiled, people living in their homes must also stop eating them as well and dispose of them ("*biur*").

We mentioned above that one had to dispose of the food-How is this accomplished? There are those who state that it must be by fire (*Rambam)* similar to the way one disposes of the *Chametz* before Pesach. But the accepted opinion is that one takes out the fruits that is in the home and declares the fruit ownerless (*Hefker*). Once this is done the owner may then reacquire it and then eat it.

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

"When you enter the land that I (G-d) am giving you, and the land shall rest a Shabbos for G-d. Six years you shall seed your field and six years you shall prune your vine, and you shall gather its produce. And in the seventh year, a sabbatical of rest shall be for the land" (Vayikra 25:2-4). Chasam Sofer (Chidushay Chasam Sofer) asks why the Torah mentions the Sabbatical Year (25:2, "and the land shall rest") before the six years of working the land (25:3). After all, the cycle doesn't start with Sh'mita (the Sabbatical Year) followed by 6 years of work, but by working the land for six years followed by Sh'mita (as evidenced by Sh'mita being called "the seventh year" as well as by the 49th year being Sh'mita and the 50th being Yovel), mirroring the six days of creation/work followed by the day of rest, Shabbos. Why is the land resting mentioned before the six years of work if the work is done before the land rests?

Chasam Sofer suggests several answers. First (or at least quoted first in the Sefer) he says that once the nation entered the Promised Land, the land no longer produced things naturally. Rather than the produce growing based strictly on the laws of nature G-d set up and constantly maintains, once G-d's treasured nation was there, the land's production was the result of a direct spiritual pipeline from Above, similar to the physical manifestation of the Mun in the desert and the loaves of bread that, in the future, the land will produce (see Shabbos 30b). Therefore, the land did rest, from the physical "work" it had been doing before the nation entered the land, right away, even before the nation performed any manual labor those first six years. (This was followed by an even higher level of rest, a "Shabbos Shabbason," when the nation didn't work the land at all during the seventh year).

Later (in the Sefer), Chasam Sofer suggests that rather than 5:2 referring to the land resting every seventh year, it refers to "the people who live on the land" resting every seventh day. If they rest every Shabbos, they will merit being successful during the six years that they work the land.

Another suggestion he makes (quoted in the 2 volume "Likutim") is based on the land doing two types of "work," growing food for us to eat and "accepting those who sleep in the dirt," as we bury the dead in the ground. He says that in the future, when there is no more death, so the second type of "work" will no longer be done, the ground will still produce food. Since the laws of Sh'mita were said at Sinai, and after we accepted the Torah "the angel of death had no authority over us" (Avodah Zara 5a), at that point in time there would have been no death, and therefore no need for burial. Rather, "the land will rest" from this type of work. The only work that is applies would have been the six years of producing food, after which (during the seventh year) the land will rest from this type of work as well.

This suggestion is based on the assumption that when the verse says this was commanded "on Mt. Sinai" (25:1) it means during the first set of 40 days, before the sin of the golden calf (which brought death back). However, Ramban (25:1) says explicitly that it was taught during Moshe's last 40-day stay atop Mt. Sinai, which was after the angel of death could once again create the need for the land to accept dead bodies. Nevertheless, Chizkuni (25:3) says that this section was taught before its parallel in Parashas Mishpatim (Sh'mos 23:10-11), making it possible that it was in fact taught to Moshe before the sin of the golden calf. [This ends my quoting of Chasam Sofer's thoughts, and mine about them.]

Another possibility is based on Midrash HaGadol (at the end of the introduction to Parashas B'har) expounding upon the M'chilta (Yisro 2) regarding the importance of keeping Sh'mita in order to keep the land; "The Holy One, blessed is He, said to Moshe, 'go and say to Israel that I only brought them into the Land of Israel on the condition that they accept upon themselves the mitzvah of the seventh [year].' How do we know this? From the way the verses read regarding [Sh'mita], "and G-d spoke to Moshe at Mt. Sinai, speak to the Children of Israel, when they enter the land, and the land shall rest a Shabbos for G-d." It is the juxtaposition of keeping Sh'mita and entering the land that teaches us that if not for our fulfilling the mitzvah of Sh'mita we wouldn't have been given the Promised Land, a message that could have been lost if the six years of working the land was mentioned before the refraining from work in the seventh (rather than not working during Sh'mita following immediately after our

"entering the land").

Similarly, Moshav Z'kaynim says that if we don't keep Sh'mita (from a previous cycle), we will not be given the opportunity to "work the land" in upcoming cycles. This can be a result of becoming poor as a punishment for not keeping Sh'mita, thereby forcing to sell the land, or because we were exiled from the land for not keeping Sh'mita (see Midrash Tanchuma, B'har 1/2) or having to alternate years of working the land and letting it replenish itself (see Ramban on 25:3). Either way, the ability to be able to "work the land for six years" is contingent upon "letting the land rest in the seventh year," and since doing the former is contingent on doing the latter, the cause was placed before the consequence.

Malbim says that just as we are required to have our animals rest on Shabbos (see Sh'mos 20:10), the land is supposed to "rest" on Shabbos too. Although we aren't allowed to work the land on Shabbos anyway (or have others do it for us), because of the work done for six days (including watering and fertilizing it), the land still "works" (things grow) on Shabbos. In order to compensate for this, we give the land a year off every seven years, thereby having it rest the same number of days over a seven year period as it would have rested had it been able to rest one day every week. It can therefore be suggested that the introductory "and the land shall rest a Shabbos for G-d" is not referring to the seventh year, but the seventh day of the week; since the land should rest every Shabbos day (5:2), but can't, "you shall work the land for six years" (5:3) and refrain from working it the entire seventh year (5:4) instead.

[It should be noted, though, that working the land for six years and resting during the seventh being commanded before working for six days and resting on the seventh (Sh'mos 23:10-12) sort of undermines Malbim's approach. However, if the Sh'mita commandment in Vayikra came before the one in Sh'mos (as Chizkuni says), it was already established that the seventh year is compensation for all the lost seventh days. Besides, thematically, it makes more sense to put Shabbos (23:12) next to the holidays (23:14-17) and Sh'mita (23:10-11), when the poor can eat whatever the land produces (23:11) next to treating those less fortunate properly (23:6 and 23:9).]

Even though the commandment to rest on the seventh day (Sh'mos 20:8-11) also starts by telling us to keep Shabbos before mentioning the "six days of work" despite the six work days preceding the seventh day, the commandment can't start by saying "you shall work for six days" if the whole point is resting on the seventh. (As opposed to Sh'mita, where there is already an introductory "when you enter the land," so the "and you shall work the land for six years" can be part of the introduction rather than the beginning of the commandment.) Nevertheless, it can be suggested that just as we are supposed to keep Shabbos in mind the entire week, we should keep Sh'mita in mind the entire six years, as not working the land in the seventh year acknowledges that it is really G-d's land, not ours (see Vayikra 25:23), something we should keep in mind while working it for six years. And this might be enough of a reason to mention the land resting during the seventh year before mentioning the six years of work that precede it. I will take it a step further though, and suggest that as important as it is to keep this in mind every year (not just the seventh), it is that much more important to communicate this before the land was given to us.

"When you enter the land that I (G-d) am giving you," don't work the land those first six years thinking that it really belongs to you, whereby having to refrain from working it during the seventh year is perceived as something being taken away from you. Rather, know from the outset that "the land shall rest a Shabbos for G-d" in a few years, because it is really His land, something to keep in mind even during the "six years [that] you shall work the land."

RABBI SHLOMO WOLBE ZT"L

Bais Hamussar

The second half of this week's parsha deals with numerous laws that pertain to a fellow Jew who becomes impoverished. If you lend him money, "Do not take from him interest." If he sells himself to you as a slave, "You shall not work him with slave labor." If the situation is such that he sells himself as a slave to a Non-Jew, we must make an effort to extract him from his undesirable environment. As the Torah instructs us, "He shall have redemption; one of his brothers shall redeem him" (Vayikra 25:36, 39, 48).

The final two pesukim in the parsha seem to be totally out of place. There the Torah commands us not to make idols or erect statues and it exhorts us to observe Shabbos.

What do these mitzvos have anything to do with what was mentioned beforehand?

Rashi explains (ibid. 26:1) that these commandments are specifically directed to the Jew who sells himself to the gentile. When this slave observes his master's behavior, he should not look to imitate him. He should notsay, "Since my master engages in forbidden relationships, so will I. Since my master worships idols, so will I. Since my master desecrates the Shabbos, so will I." The Torah wrote a condensed book of the most basic prohibitions tailored specially for the Jew that finds himself in spiritually challenged circumstances.

Rav Wolbe (Shiurei Chumash) comments that the Torah does not give up on anybody. A Jew can never reach a situation of total spiritual despair. His situation could be so bleak that he even sold himself to chop wood and draw water for a house of idol worship (see Rashi 25:47). Nevertheless, the Torah reaches out

to him with a "Kitzur Shulchan Aruch" exhorting him to keep at least the basic tenets of Judaism.

The early twentieth century brought many Jews from Europe to America. At the time, America was a spiritual wasteland and many Jews lost any vestiges of Judaism. At that time the Chofetz Chaim wrote a condensed book of laws to aid his brethren in their newfound surroundings. Likewise, he wrote a special sefer geared specifically for those who had been drafted into the army for years on end and had limited access to anything religious.

It doesn't make any difference where the Jew finds himself for the Torah is always holding his hand and guiding him. Thus, there is no room or reason for despair since Hashem cares about every Jew even in the most depressing and bleak situations. So pick your chin up and smile, since the Creator of the world sees you, knows what you're going through, and is relating to you in your very situation!

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Esti Rosenberg
Head of the Midrasha for Women, Migdal Oz
Translated by Moshe Goldberg

"What does Shemitta have to do with Mount Sinai? In any case, weren't all of the mitzvot given at Sinai? The answer is that just as for Shemitta all of the general rules and details were given at Sinai, so they were all given at Sinai with all the general rules and the details." [Sifra Behar 1].

Rashi and the Ramban do not agree on the interpretation of this Midrash. Rashi explains that the Torah wants to teach us that even mitzvot which were given on the Plains of Moav were also given at Sinai. Based on the wording of the Midrash, the Ramban explains that the Torah wants to teach us that just as the mitzva of Shemitta was given at Sinai in two parts -- a general rule in the portion of Mishpatim, "In the seventh year you shall not harvest and you shall abandon the land, and let the poor people of your nation eat" [Shemot 23:11], followed by the details in this week's portion -- so the general rules and details of all the mitzvot were given at Sinai.

In observing the mitzvot, we are faced with a great challenge to be able to look at the general rules and the details as a single unit. The general rules of the mitzvot are good and bring us joy. The central concept of the mitzvot can lead us to a rich and deep life. The idea of Shabbat has been accepted throughout the world -- to rest one day a week, in order to gather our strength and rest from our daily burden. However, it is not enough to observe the essence of Shabbat. The concept takes its full shape only when we carefully observe all of its details. This includes all thirty-nine main categories of forbidden labor, including such fine details as using a "third vessel" to brew a cup of tea and (the "greatest challenge of them all") not to violate the prohibition of laundering when a spot suddenly appears on our clothing. The great general concept of Shabbat is expressed through dozens of details and halachot in our regular observance of the holy day and in our great care to observe all the details. And neither aspect can exist without the other. "Just as the general rules were given at Sinai, so were the details given at Sinai." For us to observe all of the details is a great challenge.

There are times when a Jew indeed makes a supreme effort to observe all the details. The soul of the man of halacha copes with the great challenge of being wary of every single detail, while on the other hand there is a spiritual danger from the other side. The general picture, the great spirit of the halacha, might well become lost and be forgotten in the effort not to forget any detail. It can happen that while observing the mitzva of Shemitta a person expends such a great effort in searching for the proper kashrut approval and in observing the minutest detail until it seems that no energy or desire is left over to fulfill the general goals of Shemitta -- social justice, placing the Holy One, Blessed be He, at the center of our activity, and providing the poor people with an opportunity to eat and drink. The great spirit of Shemitta can get lost in the search for detail.

However, the truth is as written above -- each aspect is not enough without the other one. The great challenge of religion is to strike a balance between the general and the particular. We must observe every single detail but we must also maintain our interest in the general concepts. We must observe each and every halacha while we continue to understand the spiritual value of the Torah of life.

The general concepts and the details were all given to us by a single shepherd, and they are all part of the same entity. Every mitzva has its own challenges. A great challenge goes with great privilege, we have ahead of us tremendous labor, together with an opportunity for a great future.

RABBI LABEL LAM

Dvar Torah

Hashem spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying: Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them: When you come into the land that I give you, the land shall observe a Sabbath rest for Hashem. For six years you may sow your field and for six years you may prune your vineyard and you may gather in its crop, but the seventh year shall be a complete rest for the land, a Sabbath for Hashem... (Vayikra 25:1-4)

What is the relationship between the "Sabbatical Year" and "Mount Sinai"? Just as the details of the Sabbatical were given on Mount Sinai so all the other Mitzvos and their particulars were given on

Mount Sinai. (Rashi)

You shall perform My decrees and observe My ordinances and perform them; then you shall dwell securely in the land. The land will give its fruit and you will eat your fill; you will dwell securely upon it. If you will say: "What will we eat in the seventh year? - Behold we will not sow and gather in our crops!" I will ordain My blessing for you in the sixth year and it will yield a crop sufficient for a three-year period. (Vayikra 25: 18-22)

Two questions are dominant here and they may occupy a bigger place in our minds than many of us are ready to admit. 1) What's the relevance of Mount Sinai to the observance of the Sabbatical Year or anything else for that matter? 2) What are we going to eat? It could be these two questions have a close relationship as well.

The idea of a Sabbatical is very appealing. Why wait fifty years for retirement. Take a full paid vacation every seventh year. The logistical question arises. "How do we pay for such a thing? How does the economy continue to function, especially in an agricultural society?" The answer is simple. Only 1/7th of the fields are to cease, in much the same way universities operate. Not every faculty member is off in a given year. Yet, surprisingly, the Torah prescribes that the Sabbatical is to be observed simultaneously. We are all meant to leave the fields fallow in the very same year.

The question persists: "What are we going to eat?" How are we to feed our families?" Here's a practical approach that you don't have to be Allen Greenspan to think of. Each of should put away a percentage of our crops every year in anticipation of the coming crunch. It may require foresight and self-discipline but it solves the pressing problem.

"No!" says the Torah. The solution is, "I will ordain My blessing for you in the sixth year and it will yield a crop sufficient for a three year period." Since we are not planting in the 7th the 8th year is also a problem but the 6th year will miraculously provide for the needs of the nation on the 6th, the 7th, and the 8th year. Wow!

How can anyone feel comfortable making such a mad request of an entire nation? If the promise is not delivered, how long would it take for the Torah to be discredited? That's right! Six years! No sooner than we would begin the honeymoon of our history in a new land then it would all be over. This is a program for economic and spiritual suicide. How could the Torah take such a massive risk in an area where there are such simple solutions, and why?

There was a biker going around a mountain curve when the road gave way and he found himself falling down to the ravine thousands of feet below. In the last moment, he managed to grab hold of a branch jutting from the side of the mountain. Barely holding on for his life he screamed for help but to no avail. Suddenly and miraculously a thunderous sound was heard echoing from the heavens. "Is that You, Lord?" inquired the man in desperation. "Yes!" boomed the voice. "Help me!" cried the man. "I can't hold on much longer! What should I do?" The heavenly reply, "Just let go of the branch!" Asks the man again: "Is there anybody else up there?"

Who would let go of that branch? Only an insane person or one who was certain that it was in fact The Almighty delivering the directive. To have the nerve to observe the Sabbatical Year requires being plugged into the historical reality of "Mount Sinai" in a sober way. Similarly, living the Sabbatical Year has the potential to reawaken and reaffirm the veracity of that national event. The Vilna Gaon writes, "The main function of the giving of the Torah is to inspire trust in Hashem." Therefore, every courageous little Mitzvah step we take, though thousands of miles and years from that place emanates from and beckons us back to Sinai.

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

This week's Parsha, 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.