



D'var on Parshiyot Behar/Bechukotai, May13, 2023

By William Foster

Shabbat Shalom.

My name is William Foster, and it is a joy to share some reflections with you on Parshat Behar.

1) Contrast

As we approach the end of the book of Vayikra, I am struck by a contrast.

The parshiyot we have been reading contain some of the most **powerful, personal, and direct** teachings in the Torah. Two weeks ago in **Parshat Kedoshin**, we read what is so often called **The Golden Rule**: we should

‘Love your neighbor as yourself’.

וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ

At the same time, to me, Vayikra seems more frequently to be filled with seemingly **anachronistic teachings** which require much deeper delving (or comfort with abstraction) to draw lessons that resonate today. For instance, in **Parshat Tzav**, we learn in great detail about the rituals of the burnt offering, homage offering, the offering of anointment, the sin offering, and the guilt offering.

2) What is Behar

So where does today's reading, Parshat Behar, fall on that continuum? When Steve Brown asked, I was eager to give today's 'drash because it seems to fall squarely in the first category and because of the substance of what is addressed. Behar is direct, powerful, and bold. Not only that, it directly addresses economic topics that are quite current. Most notably wealth inequality, debt repayment, and the charging of interest.

Let's quickly review some of this:

Behar discusses the obligations of the **Jubilee year – the Yovel** - the 50th year that follows 7 sabbatical cycles of seven years. The notion of the significance of a Jubilee follows us as society to this very day.

One of the founding symbols of America, **The Liberty Bell**, cast in 1752 and rung at the Declaration of our Independence, is engraved with a passage from parshat Behar:

Proclaim Liberty Throughout the Land

It is referencing the freedoms from debt and bondage during the Jubilee

Queen Elizabeth II liked the concept of the Jubilee so much that she celebrated six of them during her 70-year reign. I don't quite get the math on that and I know that they fulfilled the mitzvot associated with the yovel, but they were big deals.

So, what are some of the Yovel obligations:

- 1) **Land:** There is to be widespread land redistribution with. All transactions from the previous time period reversed and the land returned to its original owners.

What was sold shall remain with the purchaser until the Jubilee. Then it shall be released

וְאִם לֹא־מִצְאָה יָדוֹ דִּי הָשִׁיב לוֹ וְהִיָּה מִמְכָּרוֹ בְּיַד הַקֹּנֶה אֹתוֹ עַד שְׁנַת הַיּוֹבֵל וְיִצְאָל בְּיָבֵל וְשָׁב לְאִחָזְתוֹ: {ס}

- 2) **Servitude:** Similarly, people who were forced into servitude or slavery from poverty or debt and who has never been redeemed is to be freed during the yovel:

That person, along with any children, shall go free in the jubilee year

וְאִם־לֹא יִגָּאֵל בְּאֵלֶּה וְיִצְאָל בְּשְׁנַת הַיּוֹבֵל הוּא וּבָנָיו עִמּוֹ:

- 3) **Debts:** Finally, all debts are to be erased during the yovel, which builds on top of an obligation to forgive all debts every seventh year during the sabbatical, which we find later in parshat Re'eh:

In a moment in American history where the conversation about economic justice is amplified by great levels of wealth inequality, this is a radical agenda:

- Forgive loans
- End all forms of bondage into which the poor have fallen
- Redistribute all the land from the wealthy who have acquired it over the prior fifty years. (basically the only meaningful asset of the time)

C. Personal Interest

In my professional life, I manage a firm that advises many of the wealthiest philanthropists in the world and some of the most ambitious civil society leaders to pursue equity and justice. We help the greatest winners in our capitalist system to work with those addressing its most profound flaws.

Let us say that the work is . . . complex.

Does Behar capture my attention? Wow. As a person who wrestles with how to build a more just economic system, yes. As a man in his fiftieth year of life, my own Jubilee year, it weighs personally.

D. Questions

So now we must ask ourselves, is Behar laying out a specific economic policy platform that was or could be implemented? Our seventeen year old daughter Lucy actually gave a drash on Behar yesterday at Gann Academy and in discussing it together, one of her opening questions was: "Why would anyone give a loan if just a year or two later they wouldn't get their money back?". So let us explore these conundrums:

- 1) Could there be any kind of credit market? It's hard to imagine it.
- 2) Could anyone really buy or sell property? While one could imagine renting or leasing actually working, the yovel redistribution is quite hard to wrap your head around. Everyone gets the specific plot that their ancestors owned? What if you wanted to live somewhere else? What if some people had many children and others, none? How would this even apply to a society of immigrants like the United States. What seems to be part of a radical redistributive economic plan might begin to appear exceptionally conservative even reactionary.

Given this complexity, was this actually our people's practice? Is this what our ancestors practiced? Did our teachers across the centuries interpret these commandments in this straightforward way?

- 1) Authorities no less than Rashi and Maimonides say that it was not practiced – at least not after the destruction of the First Temple.
- 2) And even the notion of forgiving debts on the sabbatical has its work around: the pruzbul which allows debts to be sold to the Beit Din – essentially the local government - which is not required to forgive them in the sabbatical or shmita year. Intriguingly, the obligation for debt forgiveness is on individuals not the government. So, the Beit Din or governing authority becomes the instrument of maintaining debt – preventing debt forgiveness.

E. Deeper Meaning

So now the straightforward understanding of Behar seems less relevant. While twenty-somethings with whom I work may sigh, "Capitalism, am I right". Behar does not seem to offer a tactical blue print for economic justice.

So, the peshat of this parsha is not as useful as we might have hoped. Let me share three deeper concepts that can be found and intrigue me:

- 1) **The idea of ownership:** both land and the Israelites belong to God, no one else:

But the land must not be sold beyond reclaim, for the land is Mine; you are but strangers resident with Me.

וְהָאָרֶץ לֹא תִמְכַּר לְצַמְתָּת כִּי־לִי הָאָרֶץ כִּי־גֵרִים יְתוֹשְׁבִים אִתְּם עַמְדִּי:

For it is to Me that the Israelites are servants: they are My servants, whom I freed from the land of Egypt

כִּי־לִי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל עֲבָדִים עַבְדֵי הֵם אֲשֶׁר־הוֹצֵאתִי אֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

While the Parsha recognizes that wealthy people may have control of both land and, in this time, people, this is distinct from ownership as we frequently conceive it. Hashem is the ultimately owner. We build our activities on top of what God has created. This offer an understanding of wealth that is more akin to stewardship than ownership.

- 2) **Civic obligation:** The obligations in Behar are between people. They are not from the people to the priestly class or to the nation or anything that we would translate to government. They are from one person to another. A debt is forgiven. Land is returned. In fact, in later years, the Beit Din plays the role of finding practical ways for a community to circumvent these personal obligations.

Rabbi Samson Hirsch writes:

It is not communist coercion, nor the tax authorities of a government on earth, nor the specter of a Red revolution, but solely a sense of duty dictated by God that ties this bond of mutual support, free-willed but nonetheless so eternally strong.

3) **Sequence of Time:** Rabbit Sacks writes:

Much of human history has illustrated the fact that you can have freedom without equality (laissez-faire economics), or equality without freedom (communism, socialism), but not both. The powerful insight of the Torah is that you can have both, but not at the same time. Therefore, time itself has to become part of the solution.

F. Julius Rosenwald

I'd like to share, briefly the story of one of my personal heroes: Julius Rosenwald

- CEO of Sears Roebuck & Co., revolutionized it like the Amazon and Jeff Bezos of his time.
- On his birthday in 1912 gave a now famous speech called "Give While You Live"
- a. Partnered with Booker T Washington to fund and create over 5,000 schools across the South known as Rosenwald Schools
- b. By 1932 educating 35% of Black children in Jim Crow South and 27% of Black children in the US.
- c. Students included Maya Angelou & Congressman John Lewis
- d. Gave approximately \$2B in today's dollars
- e. Inspired Giving While Living Debate, The Gates' & Warren Buffett's Giving Pledge
- f. Rosenwald was heavily influenced by his Rabbi Emil Hirsch
- g. How old did he turn on that birthday? 50. It was his Jubilee year.

G. So what does this mean for us?

Let us think about that for a moment. What can we draw from the ideas that wealth is not truly owned. But freedom and exchange means that people will steward it and inequalities will develop. Yet, that we have deep personal obligations – not dependent on government – to redress inequality. And, that if there is a time of accumulation a time of redistribution should follow in sequence.

Many of us will not have the chance to give away \$2B but we can, of course, give. So, I will share one particular thought inspired by Rabbi Buchdahl of the Central Park Synagogue.

In her drash on Behar, last year, a Shemita year, Rabbi Buchdahl suggested that giving, particularly giving to alleviate debt was appropriate:

There can be no liberty without a basic measure of economic stability. That debt is a form of subjugation.

In the U.S. almost two thirds of bankruptcies are precipitated by medical debt. And while the consequences are devastating to patient families, the repayment rates are so low to hospitals that the medical institutions sell this debt for a few cents on the dollar.

A nonprofit called RIP Medical Debt will actually enable any regular donor to retire \$10,000 of medical debt for only \$100.

H. Closing

So, in closing, I will leave us all with words Mike Diamond, Adam Yauch, and Adam Horowitz three Jewish American philosophers who formed a band named the Beastie Boys

In the refrain to one of their 1992 tracks they sing that there is a:

Time for livin; and a time for givin

Thank you and Shabbat Shalom.