

Parashiyot Behar-Bekhukotai 5780

This Shabbat's Torah reading is a double portion: *Behar* and *Bekhukotai*. *Har* means mountain, and the opening verse of that *parasha* says that G!d spoke to Moses "on Mount Sinai" (*Behar Sinai*) and then goes on to speak about the sabbatical laws concerning the land of Israel that our ancestors were to observe once they crossed the Jordan River and entered the Promised Land. One of the underlying ideas is that though we live on the land, the land does not belong to us. All creation belongs to G!d and we must treat the land well that is entrusted to us. Part of that is giving the land a Shabbat every seven years and then a Jubilee year on the 50th year i.e. after seven cycles of seven years. The word "Jubilee" comes from the Hebrew word "*Yovel*." (Very often when a word or name from Hebrew makes its way into English, the "Y" sound in Hebrew becomes a "J" sound in English. For example *Ya'akov* becomes Jacob, *Yosef* becomes Joseph, and *Yovel* becomes Jubilee.) The word *Yovel* has a couple of meanings. It means both a *shofar* and the sound of the *shofar*. Why is this? It's because the Jubilee year i.e. the 50th year would be proclaimed throughout the land of Israel with the sounding of the *Yovel*, the *shofar* throughout the land. On what day of the 50th year would this occur? On the tenth day of the seventh month, which is the tenth day of Tishrei, better known as Yom Kippur.

There was another major point related to the *Yovel* and that was that whoever had lost the land apportioned to them due to poverty or debt would have the land restored to them during the *Yovel* year. Someone who had sold themselves into slavery because of debt would be freed. In this way there would not be a class of people permanently impoverished and the gap between the rich and poor would be reduced and kept under some semblance of control from growing from generation to generation.

Another side-effect was to foster an atmosphere of all of the inhabitants in the land being part of one people together. This was likewise fostered by the laws that one could not glean their crops completely, but had to leave the edges of their fields for the poor, the widowed, the orphaned, and the stranger. Growing out of this is the principle expressed in the Talmud (Shevuot 39a) that "all Jews are responsible for one another" (*kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh*). If someone had to sell themselves into slavery, their relatives were to redeem them by covering their debts. In the Middle Ages and later if Jews were kidnapped by non-Jews, the Jewish community as a whole took it upon itself to pay the ransoms to free their fellow Jews.

We see this same sense of solidarity in Israel today. When an Israeli is kidnapped or imprisoned, the country will go to great lengths to save the kidnapped or imprisoned person. Sometimes Israel will do prisoner exchanges of a couple of Israelis for dozens or hundreds of Palestinians for example.

I don't know if anyone has watched the Israeli television series, *Fauda*, which is available on Netflix, but in the third season which recently became available, you see this principle of going to enormous lengths to free kidnapped Israelis playing out.

Kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh. We are responsible for one another. There's a tight-knittedness that you feel in Israeli society that you don't feel here in the United States to the same degree, not even in the Jewish community. Maybe that's because the existence of the entire state has never felt completely secure – there's almost always been one crisis or another. I don't want to diminish the divisions in Israeli society and paint it to be a utopia which it most definitely isn't. Maybe I idealize it because I no longer live there and don't feel the tensions in the society in the same way from a distance as when one is there. But then again, maybe I idealized it when I was living there too. But I was not alone in that. There were many people I would meet there, of my parents' generation particularly, who were very idealistic about Israel. One quick anecdote: my neighbors in Jerusalem during my last two years there were a couple who were older than my parents. The wife had made *aliyah* with Golda Meir from Milwaukee and had been the private secretary of Chaim Weitzman, the first president of Israel, and the husband had been a much-loved radio journalist in Israel, especially during the Second World War and the War of Independence.

Back to the Torah portions. As I said above, part of *Behar* is concerned with the fate of the poor, that they not be permanently impoverished. I think the way a society treats its poor and underprivileged says an enormous amount about that society. How compassionate is it? How much does it do to try to diminish the gap between the rich and the poor? What programs are in place to try to help poor people get an education or training so that they can raise themselves out of poverty? How responsible does a society feel for its less fortunate members? Is it left to the whims and generosity of private citizens, or does the society as a whole feel responsible? What dignity or indignities do poor people experience? The Torah is very clear about it. In the Torah's view it's the society's responsibility - meaning that each member of society is responsible, not

just generous philanthropists. That's why the word in Hebrew for "charity," *tzedaka*, comes from a root that means "justice" *tzedek*.

Bekbukotai is the last portion of the book of Leviticus. The word means essentially "My laws" coming from the opening verse that "If you follow My laws and faithfully observe My Mitzvot"... (such and such will happen). This last portion contains the blessings that will naturally flow as a consequence of following G!d's laws and commandments, and the consequences of *not* living in accord with those laws and commandments.

We stand over three thousand years away from the Torah's description of the revelation at Mt. Sinai. Who at Sinai could have imagined our world today? We may be even more distant from the future we can't imagine than our ancestors were from us. What are the demands of the moment? What do we need to hear to strengthen ourselves, to find support in our tradition? What does the Torah portion have to teach us today? That is always the question and the challenge to which our rabbis throughout the ages rose magnificently. They would find the passage in every portion that would speak to the moment.

We end the reading of each book of the Torah with the congregation chanting the following phrase: *Khazak Khazak V'nitkhazek!!* "Be strong, be strong, and we shall be strengthened." These are words that very much speak to us right now. We are in a situation that demands strength, perseverance and patience. So far we have exhibited it to a great degree. I hope that we find courage and strength in our tradition. Personally, I find our prayer services providing a vital sense of continuity and community, even though they lack the intimacy of being in the chapel. They mitigate the feeling of isolation. I am grateful to all who participate. And to those whom we don't see, I also want to wish you *Khazak, Khazak, V'nitkhazek* (be strong, be strong, and together we will be strengthened). Shabbat Shalom.

Rabbi Mark Elber