

**Portion of Behar-Bechukotai**  
*Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality*  
**From Rav Binny**

*One of the important rules in any educational process is to be in touch with where your students really are. During one particular class at Isralight, it became obvious that the topic we were studying was pushing someone's buttons. We were discussing the underpinnings of the mitzvah of respect for one's parents, and the challenges of developing a healthy and meaningful relationship between parents and children, when I noticed one of the students' eyes were watering. Clearly, he was struggling with the discussion on some level.*

*After the class, I invited him in to my office for a chat. This fellow was a very successful businessman in his late forties, who had decided to finally take a break from work to explore his relationship with his Jewish identity. He was married, with two children, and as far as I knew, his family was in good health, and so was his marriage.*

*Sometimes, a person in the midst of such a journey of discovery may be struggling with how time had passed by and why they had not yet met the right person, or managed to 'make it' in life, but clearly this was not the case here. This fellow was very much in love with his wife, had achieved great success in business, and was the proud parent of two healthy children, well on their way to great things in life. So I was curious as to what was causing him such obvious pain.*

*In the midst of our discussion, eyes brimming with tears, he confided:*

*"You know, thirty years ago, I set for myself a number of goals. I grew up in a very poor home, and I was determined that my children should never have to struggle like I did.*

*"I worked night and day to build up our business, so that I would have something real to pass on to my children. But I spent so much time living up to the responsibility I thought I had as their father, I missed the opportunity to be their parent.*

*"Last year, in the midst of a negotiation to merge our company, and finally realize my dream to create an entity of substance I could pass on to my children, I ended up missing my son's College Graduation. I spent so much time achieving my goal; I missed the purpose of the whole exercise. And now I sit here wondering, where did all the time go? And how could I have gotten so caught up?"*

Where does all our time go? Do you ever find yourself looking back at all the well-intentioned goals and dreams you set for yourself just yesterday, and wonder how you got so pre-occupied, so caught up in life, that the reason for living seems to have gotten lost?

This week's double portion, **Behar-Bechukotai** provides a fascinating insight into both the mechanism for this challenge, as well as the solution it necessitates.

The first portion, **Behar**, begins with a description of a mitzvah most Jews have lost touch with: The Sabbatical year, known as *Shemittah*. Every seventh year, after six years of work, the land is meant to lie fallow. Additionally, after seven such cycles of seven years, in the fiftieth year, known as the *Yovel*, or Jubilee year, not only is the land not plowed and the fields not sown, but all land reverts to its original tribal ownership, all slaves are set free, and all debts are null and void. The theme, in fact, of this portion is very much about the land of Israel, its ownership, and the Sabbatical cycle.

The second of these two portions, which we read together this week, seems to center around a very different theme: reward and punishment. **Bechukotai** describes in great detail the rewards we will merit as a people in the event that we adhere to the system Hashem (G-d) gives us, as well as the dire consequences that will befall us should we not heed the word of G-d. Indeed, the verses contained herein are some of the most painful and difficult verses in the entire Torah.

Is there a connection between these two seemingly divergent topics? What does the Sabbatical year have to do with the theme of reward and punishment, which follows it in the Bible?

Even more challenging, when reading the description of what will happen to us as a people in the event we choose not to adhere to the system Hashem (G- d) gives us; one wonders what would cause such a difficult response? Exile, death by the sword, pestilence, famine; all these and more are the lot of the Jewish people should we depart from who we are meant to be... What could be the cause of such painful and tragic circumstances? Is there a specific catalyst, which would cause us to be: *'scattered amongst the nations, vanquished by the sword, our land destroyed and our cities slain'*? (Leviticus 26:33)

The Torah, in the opening verse of **Bechukotai**, prefaces the entire list of punishments that may befall us with the straightforward admonition:

*"Im' Be'Chukotai Te'Leichu, Ve'Et Mitzvotai Tishmoru..."*

*"If you will follow my statutes, and keep my commandments (mitzvot)..."*

Then you will reap rewards, which the verses then describe. The implication of this section is that all of this tragedy will befall us if we do not adhere to G- d's Commandments.

**Rashi** suggests that the opening premise of this entire litany is that there are specific issues the Torah is speaking of here. Indeed, when the Torah says *"If you will follow my statutes"*, it cannot be referring to a general imperative to adhere to the mitzvot Hashem gives us, because that is the very next verse in the Torah: *"...Ve'Et Mitzvotai Tishmoru..."* (*"And keep my commandments..."*).

What then, is the issue over which we may be exiled and destroyed? Incredibly, **Rashi** suggests that the issue is to be “*Ameilim Ba’Torah*” (26:3 in Rashi) ‘To toil over the study of Torah...’

Of all the commandments one would expect the Torah to suggest as imperative, to the extent that a lack of performance would result in exile and destruction, is *this* what would cause such an ongoing tragedy as exile? And incidentally, to quote Rashi precisely, it is not that Jews are not learning Torah, it is that they are not “*Ameilim*”, they do not *toil* over it. There is no blood, sweat and tears over Torah study. One wonders, is this really the mitzvah most essential to living in the land of Israel such that its neglect results in such terrible circumstances?

This supposition, however, is not so simple, because later the Torah seems to be very clear as to the cause of such a terrible spate of events:

“*Az Tirtzeh Ha’Aretz Et Shabtotiha’...*” *Then will the land be appeased for its Sabbatical years...*” (26:34)

Clearly, it is the failure to observe the mitzvah of the *Shemittah* cycle that incurs exile with all its terrible implications. So why does Rashi suggest otherwise? Even stranger, Rashi himself in the very next verse (26:35) calculates the seventy years of the Babylonian exile as being the consequence of the seventy *Shemittah* cycles neglected by the Jewish people during the first Temple period, a clear indication that this exile was the result of the failure to observe the mitzvah of *Shemittah*! So which is it? What is the Torah suggesting as the cause of exile, failure to toil in Torah study, or a lack of observance of the Sabbatical year?

More puzzling, though, is why either of these seemingly less significant transgressions would be the cause of such terrible hardships for the Jewish people? What was so significant about the *Shemittah* cycle that made it so crucial in the eyes of the Torah?

And to further complicate matters, the Talmud (**Nedarim** 81a) suggests what seems like an entirely different possibility as being the cause of the Babylonian exile. According to the Talmud, we were exiled to Babylon, and lost the First Temple, not because we neglected the *Shemittah* cycle, nor because we did not toil in the study of Torah, but rather because *we did not make the blessing over the mitzvah of Torah study (Birchat HaTorah)* before we studied! Can you imagine? The Temple destroyed, hundreds of thousands of Jews dead or sold into slavery, and the entire people exiled into the darkest empire the world had ever known for seventy years, all because *we forgot to make a blessing* before learning Torah? What gives? What lesson or message are we meant to glean from this puzzling proposition?

In truth, in order to understand this issue we need to understand what the *Shemittah* cycle is all about. What does it mean that every seven years the land needs to rest? Does the soil need a break? Are the trees in the orchards tired and harried? There are those who suggest this as a clever agricultural system, suggesting that when the soil is left to lie

fallow for a period, it is rejuvenated, and that somehow this process results in better long-term bounty as the land yields, in the long run, more produce. However, even if this were the case, it is only because Hashem created the land to function in that fashion, which leaves us with the same question: what is the purpose of this system?

Obviously, the land does not ‘need a break’; we do. Perhaps the question is not why the land lies fallow for a year. Rather, the issue is, what do *we* do with such a year? The goal of this year was not for the land to rest, it was for the people to study Torah. Indeed, commenting on the verse:

*“Ve’Shavta Ha’Aretz Shabbat LaHashem”* ,  
*“And the land shall rest its rest for G-d”*, (25:2)

Rashi suggests: *“Le’Shem Hashem”* *“For G-d’s name”*. In other words, the purpose of this year was for the entire Jewish people to take the opportunity to get back to basics, and re-discover, even rejuvenate, their relationship with G-d.

It is interesting, in fact, to note, that throughout this portion and its description of the sabbatical cycle, the word *Shemita* is not used. Rather, the phrase of choice is *Shabbat*. Repeatedly, the Torah expresses this concept as a year of Shabbat. And what indeed, is Shabbat all about?

Way back in Genesis, on the seventh day, when Hashem ‘rests’, the Torah enjoins us:

*“Six days a week shall you work, and do all of your labors. And on the seventh day, it will be Shabbat for Hashem”* (Exodus 20:9-10).

Obviously, G-d does not need a break. The purpose of Shabbat was never for G-d; it was, rather, for us. Many people misinterpret the afore-mentioned verse to mean we have six days a week to do as we please, to do as it were, all of our ‘work’, but on the seventh day we have to desist from all this and rest.

I remember, a number of years back, discussing the meaning of Shabbat with a group of Yeshiva High School students, all of whom had grown up in traditional homes, with a traditional Jewish (Yeshivah) education. At the beginning of the discussion, I asked all of them to write anonymously on a piece of paper the word they felt most reflected their perception of Shabbat. I expected words like ‘rest’, ‘peace’, ‘tranquility’, and the like. I was astonished to discover that the single word most of them had chosen was the word *‘don’t’*. Unfortunately, that is how many people see Shabbat. A long list of ‘don’ts’: Don’t drive your car, and don’t listen to the radio, and don’t turn on the lights, and don’t use (G-d forbid!) the computer... And of course, who would want a relationship with a day like that?

In truth, however, that is not at all what Shabbat is about. That list of ‘don’ts’ is simply a vehicle to discovering what Shabbat is meant to be.

There is an experience that stands out in my mind as expressing this idea.

*One Friday afternoon I got a call from a fellow who had been on one of my tours of the Old City of Jerusalem, though he had not yet been on the Isralight program. He was passing through on a visit, and of course I invited him for Shabbat. As it turned out, he said he would love to come for lunch the next day, but could not make it for dinner as he had previous obligations in Tel-Aviv.*

*He was a little hesitant, however, not being sure how I would feel about him driving to our house for Shabbat lunch. ( Many authorities maintain that while one should not be the instrument for someone, as an example, driving on Shabbat (I would not have wanted him to drive especially to be with me...), in the event a person is driving anyway, better a drive to a Shabbat meal than to a movie theater....) I assured him I had no problem with how he chose to arrive, and so the next day found him sitting at our Shabbat table.*

*In the middle of our Shabbat meal, the phone started to ring. Now, understand, the phone does not normally ring in our home as most of the people we know realize we don't answer the phone on Shabbat. But every once in a while, someone gets a wrong number, or maybe someone in America gets mixed up with the time zones and the phone rings. I figure anyone who really needs to reach me will figure out another way to get a hold of me, and so I ignored the phone. I was actually in the middle of a really deep conversation with our eldest daughter, Maayan, who was then about five, and barely noticed the phone.*

*After a few rings, however, I noticed our guest had very much noticed the call, and after a few rings offered to answer it for us. I replied that it was quite all right, and he needn't bother. For some inexplicable reason, whoever was calling wasn't getting the message, and the phone continued to ring. And again, this fellow offered to get the phone.*

*"I really don't mind", he said.*

*And despite the fact that I smiled and told him there was no need, he continued to look back and forth between us and the phone, clearly struggling with his need to answer the phone. All of which was quite fascinating to me, especially as he knew with absolute certainty that the call couldn't possibly be for him!*

*You see, six days a week the phone rules me. But on the seventh day, I demonstrate that the phone is not my master, I am its.*

What does that verse in Exodus, the core of the Ten Commandments, really mean? For six days, says G-d, I give you a world; what will you do with it? How will the world become a better place this week for your having been there? For six days we labor and toil, and demonstrate that we are truly partners with G-d. But on the seventh day we take a break. Because we need to take some time to consider what those six days are all about.

We often become so immersed in our six days of labor; we forget the point of the whole exercise. Who and what are we expending all this energy for? What is the goal of all our efforts? Shabbat is, as **Abraham Joshua Heschel** put it so beautifully, *A Palace in Time*; a window through which we slow down and consider the purpose behind all of the work we are so caught up in. It is an opportunity to take the time to appreciate what a gift life really is. And it gives us the moment we need to re-consider just why we have been given this incredible gift, as well as what we choose to do about it.

On Shabbat we are given a window of time to consider whether we have lived up to the challenge the past week was, and how we hope to grab hold of the opportunity the coming week represents. It is the check and the balance to the danger of forgetting what it is really all about, and why we are expending all this energy to begin with. I have met people who are amazed by the ritual we take for granted every week. Every Friday night over a cup of fine wine, and two beautiful, freshly baked Challahs, my wife and I take a moment to inhale the beauty of our lives.

There is a beautiful tradition in Judaism, every Friday night to bless one's children. What does this mean? What is a blessing? Think about it. You pick up a piece of bread and make a blessing thanking G-d for bringing forth bread from the earth. Do we really believe G-d, Hashem, needs our blessings? Obviously, the blessing, again, is not for G-d, it is for us. Just like Shabbat, and just like the Sabbatical year. The blessing is an opportunity to consider what a gift it is to have those two freshly baked challot on our table. We walk into our supermarkets and throw our wonder-bread into our shopping carts, but the blessing over bread reminds us to consider just how many people in the world wish they could do that. The blessing reminds us of how many hungry people there are in the world, and what a gift the bread on our table truly is.

So if we take the time to bless, in other words, to appreciate, our bread, how could we miss the opportunity to bless, or appreciate, our children?

There is a Chassidic custom to actually bless each child by their full name, appreciating who they really are. And as each of our children come over and bend their heads for that blessing I have an awesome, incredible moment, with which to appreciate all that our children are, and all I hope for them to be, please G-d. All the gifts they bring into our lives, and all the dreams they have come to represent. And of course, this is really just a vehicle to practice the same exercise on every human being.

In fact, there is a beautiful blessing we say in the Grace after meals blessing all who sit with us at the same table. Because if you can take a moment to appreciate the gift that comes into your life in the form of a slice of bread, how can you miss the opportunity to do the same for every human being? And by the way, imagine what an incredible place this world could be if we all practiced this thought process every time we met another human being...

And the reason we have this tradition specifically on Shabbat, is because that is what Shabbat is all about, an opportunity to appreciate what a gift life really is, and to consider as well what the purpose of that gift is meant to be.

And that is precisely the goal of the *Shemita* year. What Shabbat does for the individual and the family, *Shemita* does for the nation. (Which may be why it only applies in the land of Israel, because a nation is only truly a nation in its own land...)

The seventh year in the Jewish cycle is not meant to be a year off; it is actually supposed to be a year on. During this year, the entire people put down their ploughs and their sickles, allowing everyone to share of the bounty of the land freely. There is no rush to make the harvest, no pressure to plant before the sun grows cold, no bending under the weight of the burden of life.

In this year, people leave the threshing floor and the fields, and come instead to the study halls and the synagogues, opting instead to take some time to appreciate what six years of hard labor have really been about.

People during this year were meant to ask themselves some challenging questions: was my time these past years well spent? Do I remember what all this is really supposed to be about? Have I mastered life, or has life mastered me?

The *Shemita* year was meant to be a year of introspection, a year of exploration. Truly, it is a year of Torah. Because what really is Torah?

When we place the Torah back in the ark, we sing a beautiful verse:

*“Etz Chaim Hi’ La’Machazikim Bah, Ve’Tomcheha’ Me’ushar...”*

*“It is a tree of life to them that hold fast to it, and all of its supporters are happy...”*

Torah is the gift of life, because it contains the secrets to living a life of meaning and purpose, which is what happiness is really all about: the feeling that we are here for a reason, and that we make a difference; the idea that there is a purpose to who we are and all that we do.

Perhaps this is the underlying meaning of the comments we began our discussions with. One need not assume the Talmud’s (and Rashi’s) statement of the Jewish people neglecting *Shemita* for seventy years is literal. (It would be challenging to imagine that the entire Jewish people, such a short time after receiving the Torah at Sinai, completely forgot and neglected an entire tenet of the Torah, though it is certainly possible.)

Perhaps tradition is suggesting an issue, rather than an event. If *Shemita* represents the opportunity to consider why we are here and what life is all about, as well as the chance to re-connect with G-d and remember where it all comes from, then perhaps the neglect of this theme is what Rashi is really referring to.

And of course, this would explain how this seemingly innocuous mitzvah is linked to the pain of exile as described in our portion of **Bechukotai**. Because when we lose sight of why are we here, then we eventually lose the privilege of being here in the first place. Not as a punishment, but rather as a consequence. The consequence of not taking the time to re-evaluate our relationship with G-d, and our understanding of the gift of life that we are given, inevitably results in a series of events culminating in a loss of the relationship we have not only with G-d, but with the land he gave us as well. All of which results in the exile we read of in this week's portion.

And of course, this explains why Rashi expresses this all as being the consequence of a lack of toil in Torah study, which is what *Shemittah*, and indeed both of this week's Torah portions are really all about. This also may be the understanding of the Talmud's suggestion regarding the Jewish people's not making the blessing before Torah study, which is all about the appreciation that a blessing represents. Do we, in the end, appreciate what a gift the opportunity of Torah study represents?

Most importantly, this is exactly the challenge we are experiencing today as a people, and perhaps as a world. Perhaps we have lost touch with what life is really all about. Perhaps we need to re-connect with the beauty of appreciating everything, and everyone, and re-discover the incredible joy of meaning in all that we do and all that we are.

May Hashem bless us all to begin that journey of exploration tonight, and every Friday night, around the beauty of the Shabbat table, in the light of the Shabbat candles, and with the glow of the smiles of those we are with, while we explore, again, this week, the beauty of all that life can be.

Shabbat Shalom,

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