

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Behar-Bechukotai)

Many years ago, while teaching an adult education class, it was 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 into 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.

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.

"So 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 having to miss my son's College Graduation. I spent so much time achieving my goal, that 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?

The two portions being read separately in Israel (*Behar*) but as a double portion overseas, (*Behar-Bechukotai*) which provide 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 *Shemitah*. 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, 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, 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 notes that 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?

Stranger still, the Torah itself describes the cause of such a terrible spate of events:

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

Clearly, it is the failure to observe the mitzvah of the *Shemithah* 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 *Shemithah* 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 *Shemithah*! So which is it? What is the Torah suggesting as the cause of exile, failure to toil in Jewish study, or a lack of observance of the Sabbatical year?

And why would either of these seemingly less significant transgressions be the cause of such terrible hardships for the Jewish people?

Obviously, we need to understand what the Sabbatical (*Shemithah*) 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. The question is what *we* do with such a year? 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 to note that throughout this portion and its description of the sabbatical cycle, the word *Shemitah* 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?

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.

On Shabbat we are given a window of time; It is the check and balance to the danger of forgetting what it is really all about, and why we are expending all this energy to begin with.

Every Friday night over a cup of fine wine, and two beautiful, freshly baked Challot, we take a moment to inhale the beauty of our lives.

And that is precisely the goal of the *Shemitah* (the sabbatical) year. What Shabbat does for the individual and the family, *Shemitah* does for the nation.

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 Jewish 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 Shemitah 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 why 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 we are 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, results in our taking it for granted. And once we lose our relationship with the land, we eventually lose the land as well.

So often it seems we have lost touch with what life is really all about. We need, perhaps, to re-discover the incredible joy of meaning in all that we do and all that we are. Perhaps Shabbat is the first step on the road back to making life more meaningful, and reconnecting with why we are here, who we are all meant to be....

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

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