Portion of Behar-Bechukotai

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

I once met a fellow who was born in Germany, but managed to get out in 1938 in the nick of time. Some people don't think of such a person as a survivor in the same way as someone who survived the death camps, but Shmuel (not his real name) lost his entire family; he was the only one who managed to get out. And after three years in Nazi Germany, he lived on the run for two more years before finally escaping to Cuba. It is a mitzvah to hear such people's stories in order to remember, and I asked him what made him realize it was time to get out, when the rest of his family could not see the writing on the wall.

It was a standard German-Jewish Holocaust story: 'it can't happen here' or 'the Jews have been through this before; we'll get through this as well'.... And to be honest, he wasn't overly concerned when Hitler came to power in 1933; he was a young man with his whole life ahead of him, and everyone around him was saying it wouldn't last, and that the Jews were the mainstay of the German economy, whom Hitler needed to get the country back on its feet. And he accepted all of this - until one sunny afternoon in Hamburg.

He could hear them before he could see them: loud laughter and yelling; a large crowd having a good time on one of the major avenues, and even a few passing policemen seemed to be enjoying a good time. He was in a motor vehicle and so thought he would be able to pass un-noticed, but someone spotted the driver and pulled all of them out of the car. A few seconds and a bloody nose later, he was on his hands and knees with a scrub-brush trying to erase words scrawled in red paint on the sidewalk.

Trying to avoid a beating, he scrubbed with enthusiasm while he took in the circumstances: they were in front of a German police station, and they were scrubbing a red Star of David that had been scrawled on the sidewalk. Had someone secretly scrawled the Star of David in an act of defiance? Or were the Germans taking pleasure in making Jews rub out their own symbol? All he knew was that he was determined to rub out the star as quickly as he could and get out of there. And all the while he was scrubbing, as the occasional boot came flying out of the crowd kicking one of them or one of the brushes, he kept thinking what a dumb thing it was for someone to scrawl a Star of David in such a place, and how easy it was for someone to act out their own private little act of defiance, without considering that someone else would have to pay the price.

The beginning of the Holocaust in Germany and Austria was like that: a mixture of what made sense, and what made no sense. And the Jews were constantly trying to make sense of it all. And all the while he was on his knees, surrounded by a crowd of jeering Germans he was able to scrub because it made sense: what else would German policemen do upon discovering such a piece of graffiti on the street in front of their station? So he scrubbed harder, trying to avoid the boots that came his way, determined to finish blotting out the Star of David and get home.

Finally, some time later, they were finished, and no trace was left of the red paint: the sidewalk was clean, and the people seemed to be satisfied. And then a German police officer with a big grin on his

face came out with a bucket full of... red paint, and forced one of the Jews to take a paintbrush and scrawl a new large Star of David on the pavement. And then he looked at all the Jews on their hands on knees, backs breaking from exhaustion, and screamed out "scrub!", as the crowd howled with delight. And in that moment, Shmuel knew: this was not about logic, and whatever would follow would not have to make sense. There was no purpose to their hatred; they just wanted to break the Jews. It was time to get out.

There is a powerful message hidden in this story, which may help us to understand an oft-overlooked mitzvah that appears in the first of this week's double portion *Behar-Bechukotai*.

The Torah tells us, regarding a Jewish indentured servant (*Eved Ivri*):

"Lo' tirdeh bo' be'pharech, ve'yareta' me'elokecha'."
"You shall not subjugate him in hard labour; you shall be in awe of your G-d."
(Leviticus (*Vayikra*) 25:43)

In other words, when a person either becomes impoverished or has stolen but has no means with which to repay what he has taken, he can 'sell' himself into servitude to work off his debt. In such an instance, the Torah prohibits his 'master' from working him in a fashion defined as *rediah be'pharech* or hard labour.

Rashi (25:43) explains this to mean any work which is unnecessary and given simply to break his spirit. One cannot tell such a servant to "boil water if one does not actually need it", or to "keep digging under this vine until I return."

And, Rashi adds, lest you think it would be permissible to ask such a servant to do something that is unnecessary (that which you are asking him to do just to keep him busy) as long as you *tell* him you do, in fact, need it, the Torah tells me: "*ve'yareta' me'elokecha" "you shall be in awe of your G-d.*" In other words, even if it is only in your heart, you still can't do it.

It is interesting to note that this particular mitzvah, along with a few others relating to the poor and the destitute, follow the topic that introduces our portion: the sabbatical year, known as *Shemitah*. Essentially, every seventh year, the farmers are meant to let the land lie fallow and literally 'let the land rest'. And there are a variety of laws that relate to this particular mitzvah: one cannot make commerce of the crops, nor work the land. This is the opportunity for each person to get back in touch with what all the hard work of the harvest was about in the first place.

So one wonders, what does this have to do with what type of tasks I am allowed to delegate to my indentured servant? What does the way I treat my servants have to do with letting the land lie fallow, something that actually has a lot of value in terms of allowing the land to rest and breathe and literally replenish its growth potential?

Indeed, it is interesting to note that despite the fact that the common term which most people use to refer to the sabbatical year: *Shemitah*, the Torah does not even mention the word *Shemitah* here, referring to this year instead as *"Shabbat Ha'aretz*", or '*The Sabbath of the land'*. What does Shabbat have to do with the agricultural value of letting the land lie fallow for a period of time?

Even more challenging is the fact that this very same mitzvah of not subjugating one's servant to cruel or unusual labor, seems to be repeated just three verses later:

"U've'acheichem B'nei Yisrael ish be'achiv lo' tirdu be'pharech."
"But with your brethren the children of Israel a man to his brother- you shall not subjugate him with hard labor." (Leviticus (*Vayikra*) 25:46)

Rashi notes this repetition and explains that this second verse comes to add that even a prince (king) or a President cannot similarly subjugate his charges, with un-necessary or 'busy' work, even though they are free men. Apparently, this mitzvah is important enough to warrant the attention of two separate verses; what is so significant about this particular issue? Is it yet one more example of the Torah's sensitivity to the individual, or is there something deeper involved here?

The concept of *Pharech* (hard labor) immediately recalls our enslavement in Egypt, when "*The Egyptians enslaved the Jewish people be'pharech, with hard labor*." (Exodus (*Shemot*) 1:13)

Rashi there explains the concept of Pherach as being:

" Avodah kasha' ha'me'pharechet et ha'guf u'mashbarto'."
"Hard labour that exhausts the body and breaks it." (1:13)

Which seems to be almost the antitheses of the type of labor we are referring to in our portion. What is backbreaking about boiling water un-necessarily? In fact, if the indentured servant had a choice, wouldn't he much prefer to boil water in the kitchen for no-one, rather than spend the entire day in the hot sun picking cotton (something the master is entitled to ask the slave to do)?

There is another explanation for this Egyptian *Pherach* type of labor, which seems to be at odds with Rashi's explanation, quoted by the Torah Temimah (from the Talmud in *Sotah* 11b): *"The Egyptians used to have the men do the women's work, and the women do the men's work."* Now, it is easy to understand how traditional men's work given to women could be a 'back-breaking' experience, especially in ancient Egypt when women did not do that sort of work. While today, the lines of traditional divisions of labor have become blurred, certainly three thousand years ago it was easy to define the different areas of responsibility. Men did not usually sew clothing or bake pita, and women did not generally wage war or plow fields. So it is easy to understand why it would be a 'back- breaking and exhausting' experience for a woman unaccustomed to such labor to plow fields all day.

But why would "women's work" given to men be a back-breaking experience? While it might be true that a man three thousand years ago on average might sew a sleeve that led into the collar (!), it would certainly not be a backbreaking experience. So what is this idea of *Pherach* labor all about?

And why does Rashi not give the Talmud's explanation for *Pherach* labor, instead explaining that the servitude we are talking about is *"Hard labour that exhausts the body and breaks it."* In theory one might assume that Rashi believes that the type of work the Talmud is discussing is in fact hard labor that exhausts the body and breaks it, but how is it exhausting for a man to be told to sew buttons, just because it is woman's work?

There are different understandings given for the nature of the 'hard labor' the Talmud in *Sotah* is speaking about. **Rav Avigdor Nevensahl** in his *Sichot le'sefer Vayikra* points out that when a person is not accustomed to a particular task, it becomes a tremendous burden.

I remember when we were first married, a button popped off one of my army shirts, and I was trying to thread the needle in order to sew the button back on. (In the army there is no-one there to help you mend your clothes, and it was one of those things you had to do every once in a while, so when my wife offered to sew the button back on, wanting to impress her, I proudly explained that I was perfectly capable of sewing it myself.

After watching me struggle and agonize with this needle and thread (there are few things in life more frustrating than a thick string of thread and a very tiny needle-eye...) for some time, my wife couldn't bear it anymore, got up, took the needle and threaded it in about the time it takes to say: 'get a life'!

And this is actually a very deep idea, because on a certain level, we all have different skills coupled with different personalities that make us want to do very different things. And if we are used to doing certain things more often than not, it is because those are the things that we are best suited to do. Indeed, the goal is actually to be happy with whatever we choose to do in life, because if we are happy with what we do it is a sure sign that we are doing what we are meant to be doing and fulfilling our purpose in life.

Conversely, it is precisely when we spend our time doing things that we perceive to have no purpose that we are truly drained of all our energy, because we derive our greatest energy from the enthusiasm of knowing we are fulfilling some great purpose. On a certain level, how much we are actually fulfilling some higher purpose is really in our own hands.

I recall once meeting a surgeon who was completely burnt out and miserable, because he had come to the conclusion that in the end, we all die anyway, so what is the point of saving one more person? I still remember his words because they so shocked me:

"If I have to say 'you're welcome ' to one more eighty year old person for saving their life, I'll lose it; ten hours on your feet only to head home exhausted and on call, so someone can eventually die in their sleep down the road? In the end, what's the point? "

Can you imagine? The opportunity to save someone's life became meaningless to this person and so it exhausted him. Yet, I also remember a close friend who was on a three- week program in Israel called *Volunteers for Israel*, describe with great enthusiasm how much he felt fulfilled by the opportunity to sort nuts and bolts or fold bandages all day long! I couldn't imagine having the energy to sort nuts and bolts for an *hour* much less an entire day, yet here was a professional on vacation, thrilled at the opportunity, all because to him, it had a purpose that made the long tedious hours worthwhile.

Just like the survivor scrubbing the streets of Germany, the greatest blow to the Jews in Egypt three thousand years ago, was the sudden realization that the Egyptians were not working them to advance Egyptian society or help the development of industry. If the women were building the pyramids, the Egyptians were not working them to produce, but simply to break them. They were not being asked to contribute; they were simply being broken down, piece by piece. And the idea that none of their efforts were truly valued was what finally broke them.

This may well be what lies behind the particular mitzvah of the indentured servant (the *Eved Ivri*). Don't make the mistake, says the Torah of thinking you have simply acquired a person to do your labor, rather, you have become a partner in rehabilitating someone and allowing him to successfully re-join society.

A person who is destitute or who is reduced to stealing for bread to such an extent that he has to sell himself into servitude, usually has very low self worth, to such an extent that he may even assume he is worthless. After all, isn't the first question we often ask upon meeting a new person: 'what do you do?' Imagine how challenging a question that is for someone who feels they have nothing to do, and nothing to contribute. And especially when considering how much value we as a society place on a person's net worth, it must be terribly painful to be in the position of a negative response to such a question.

So the Torah affords such a person the opportunity to work off his or her debt, and re-discover that indeed, every human being has value, and as such, we are not allowed to give such a person the type of work, which may in any way degrade him. Back- breaking work in the field is not the issue, if at the end of the day you can stand with pride and see the crops you helped bring in. Indeed, any combat soldier will readily express that the much more physically challenging time he spends on the front lines is much less psychologically exhausting than the endless hours of free time spent on the border 'just in case'.

And if my purpose is to give such a person the opportunity to rediscover his worth in society, then it goes without saying how destructive such 'busy work' can be.

Of course, this is why this topic is so closely connected to the sabbatical year which itself is specifically connected here to Shabbat and indeed referred to as 'The Shabbat of the land'.

The entire purpose of Shabbat is on one level to allow a person to slow down and reconnect with what his true goals and his ultimate purpose here on earth are all about. We become so immersed in plowing our 'fields' during the week, w forget why we need the crops in the first place. Are we living to eat, or eating to live?

Shabbat, with its magnificent focus on family and friends, and its distance from the distractions of our action-packed week, allows us the opportunity to re- discover our true worth as individuals, and to re-assess what we are attempting to accomplish in our lives.

It is interesting that Jewish law (*halachah*) based on the second verse prohibiting the subjugation of a fellow Jew (which Rashi suggests refers to a king and his subjects or servants...) actually relates this idea to any instance wherein I ask someone whose responsibility falls under my jurisdiction to perform a task considered meaningless or causing undue stress.

Just as it is prohibited to tell your servant to 'plow till I return' (as the hardship of not knowing when he is able to stop would be an undue stress on a person, similarly lacking purpose), it is prohibited to give such 'busy work' to anyone, be they a secretary or the building janitor. In fact, this was an issue that was a challenge in the army, as the question of when 'busy work' actually served the purpose of building men into a unit was often not so simple.

We are not only challenged to discover our own purpose and mission in life, but beyond that, we have the opportunity of becoming partners, even in the little tasks of every day, with everyone around us.

And what Shabbat is for the individual, Shemitah is for the nation. Imagine an entire country slowing down for en entire year and living off the crops of the previous year. Imagine having time to talk and debate, picnic, explore, study, and struggle with all the questions that so often get put aside for that rainy day.

I wonder if this is not why these portions always fall in between Yom Ha'Atzmaut, Israeli Independence Day when we declared Statehood, and Yom Yerushalayim, when we recaptured our beloved city of Jerusalem in 1967.

For fifteen years, between 1933 and 1947, we were a nation that had become, (to quote the verse in the second portion this week, *Bechukotai,) "a plague amongst our enemies"* (26:17). If ever a nation could be described as having fallen into a collective depression, it was the Jewish people of 1945. Wallowing in the ash heaps of Europe, with nowhere to be and nowhere to go, unwanted by the entire world, we were without purpose, like a ship floundering in a raging storm. And three years later, we were a people filled with the power of fulfilling our destiny and realizing a dream of two thousand years in the making.

Long ago, we discovered the importance of filling life with purpose, and three thousand years later, we are still challenged to stay in touch with that purpose, as individuals, as neighbors, and as a people, every Shabbat, and every moment.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rav Binny Freedman