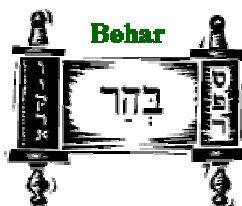




Around the Shabbat Table

**Shabbat Behar 5765
May 2005**



This week's writer: Barbara Kessel, BJE Director of Administration, author of Suddenly Jewish: Jews Raised as Gentiles Discover their Jewish Roots (Brandeis University Press)

Shalom!

Introduction

This week's Torah portion, "Behar" ("on the mountain") takes its name from its first verse, "And God spoke to Moses on Mt. (behar) Sinai, saying...." This portion is relatively short, and during non-leap years is read together with the following portion, "Bechukotai," which is also relatively short. In only 57 verses, Behar covers a lot of territory: the sabbatical year; the Jubilee year; the redemption of land; dealing with poverty; slavery; and, in the last two verses (!), idolatry, the Sabbath and the Temple.

Our portion begins with the mitzvah of the *shemitta* (sabbatical) year, referring to a cycle of seven years, at the end of which, in the seventh year, Israelites are commanded to let the land lie fallow. God promises that even though we do not plant or harvest in that year, there will always be enough to eat. In Year Fifty, after seven cycles of seven years, we are to announce the Jubilee year by blowing a shofar on Yom Kippur. During the Jubilee year, all property is returned to its original owner, and all slaves are set free. If someone has become so impoverished that he has to sell his land, the Torah tells the man's family to try to buy back that land for the poor relative as soon as possible, so that family property stays intact and within the boundaries of the original Twelve Tribes. Jews are to take care of one another. They are forbidden to charge one another interest, nor are they permitted to speak harshly to each other.

If a Jew is so poor that he must sell himself as a laborer, his Jewish master may not overwork him or give him humiliating tasks, like helping the master on with his boots.

His children need not work for the master; they are free but must be cared for by the Jewish master. If a Jew sells himself to a non-Jewish master, his family must make every effort to pay off his debts and buy him back for a fair price. In any event, he is to be set free in the Jubilee year.

Jews are forbidden to fashion idols. They are to observe the Sabbath and respect the temple.

Rashi, the eleventh century French commentator (and vintner!), seeking a stream of logic tying together the sequence of laws in our portion, suggests that it is all about the consequences of greed and lack of faith. If someone is too greedy or insecure to trust that God will reward him for not sowing and harvesting in the seventh year, he will be punished with poverty and will have to sell his possessions. If he still does not observe the law, he will lose his property and eventually his house and ultimately will have to borrow money. If he still does not observe the laws, he will have to sell himself into bondage to earn money and, at worst, will have to sell himself to an idol-worshiper, leaving himself vulnerable to his master's influence. The final verse of Behar is, "My Sabbaths shall you observe and My Temple shall you revere – I am God."



Questions for your Family's Discussion

1. During the sabbatical year, an agricultural society is required to cease all farming activity for one year, and trust that they will have enough food to see them through. Why is this commandment considered one of the most difficult in the entire Torah? How does it reinforce the idea that the land belongs to God?
2. The Jubilee year begins on Rosh HaShanah of the fiftieth year, but it is proclaimed ten days later on Yom Kippur by a blast of the shofar. What might be the relationship between the Day of Repentance and the Jubilee year? If you took a year off school or work, how might you spend that time?
3. Verse 17 forbids us to injure one another with hurtful words. The Talmud (Tractate Bava Metzia page 58b) goes so far as to assert that to make someone go pale with embarrassment in front of others is tantamount to murder. How so? Is this an exaggeration? Why would the Talmud make such an extreme statement?



Texts to Wrestle With

1. “And God spoke to Moses on Mt. Sinai, saying.” (Leviticus 25:1) Why is this verse here? Hasn’t the *entire* Torah been given on Mt. Sinai until this point? Why remind us now, as we discuss the sabbatical year?
2. “Do not give (lend) him money at interest and do not give food for interest. I am The Lord Your God who took you out of the land of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan, to be your God” (Leviticus 25: 37-38). Why does the second sentence follow the first – what has charging interest to your fellow Jew have to do with God’s liberating us and giving us a country?
3. “For six years you shall sow your field...But the seventh year shall be a complete rest for the land, a Sabbath for God; your field you shall not sow and your vineyard you shall not prune” (25:3-4). Remind you of anything? In what way does the sabbatical year resemble the weekly Sabbath? What are the practical implications of each in terms of ecology and re-energizing? What might the Torah mean by the phrase, “a Sabbath for God?”

Towards an Action Agenda

1. Much is made in this week’s portion of the idea of mutual responsibility. Community members are expected to support one another. If you’re in the metro New York area, contact the Metropolitan Council on Jewish Poverty to find out where *your* local Council is, so that you can volunteer some time or funds. Click on www.metcouncil.org or call 212-453-9500.
2. In the Book of Genesis, Abraham is shown to excel in the mitzvah of hospitality. Tradition has it that when his guests wanted to thank him for their meal, he insisted that they thank God, the real Provider, instead. The sabbatical year reminds us that the land is ours on loan from God. Grow a tomato patch in your yard, or make a huge batch of soup. Give away ten percent or more. Experience what it is like to partner with God in the creative process -- His gift to us.



Shabbat Shalom

Please join together in learning with other families by sharing your family's discussions and ideas by posting them on our web site. Simply press the “reply” button on your e mail program and respond with your thoughts and ideas.

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