

The bedside TORAH

wisdom, visions, and dreams



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remind us that only implements—like hammers, *kebanim*, and sacrifices—lack blemishes. And only in them is a blemish a disqualification. For the rest of us, struggling to be decent, loving, and good, blemishes and disabilities are the catalysts that force us to wrestle with our own fears and inadequacies, and to grow.

BE-HAR/On the Mountain

Leviticus 25:1–26:2

Be-Har begins with an entire chapter dealing with use and ownership of land, the rights and obligations of landowners, and the process of selling and mortgaging real estate. It also contains laws both about indebtedness and becoming an indentured servant as a way of repaying debts through work. The chapter also establishes the remarkable practice of Shemittah (sabbatical year), allowing the land to lie fallow every seven years, and the Yovel (Jubilee year), adding an additional cycle of rest every half century.

Providing coherence to these practices is God's assertion that "the land is Mine; you are but strangers resident with Me." Since God is the land's only true owner, our task is to maintain the land on behalf of its true owner. As a sign of God's dominion, the people are commanded to "proclaim liberty throughout the land, and to all the inhabitants thereof."



BE-HUKKOTAI/In My Statutes

Leviticus 26:3–27:34

This parashah constitutes an epilogue to the Holiness Code, hence to the entire Book of Leviticus. Composed of neither legal nor ritual language, instead Be-Hukkotai expands on the blessings that are experienced by the community that adheres to the teachings just concluded, the curses which emerge for those who violate these teachings, and a final conclusion.

The blessings for the observant community include peace and prosperity, a bountiful population, and victory over the nation's enemies. The blessings conclude with an affirmation of the covenant binding God and

the Jews, and the eternity of that covenant: "I will establish my abode in your midst, and I will not spurn you. I will be ever present in your midst: I will be your God, and you shall be My people."

The curses follow, an escalating outpouring of ever more dire consequences. Each cycle of disobedience unleashes a heightened cycle of consequences—military defeat, disease, ravages of wild beasts, famine, death, and exile. At its height, however, the cycle is broken by hope and love: "Yet, even then, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them or spurn them so as to destroy them, annulling My covenant with them: for I the Lord am their God."

After this powerful conclusion, chapter 27 appears like an appendix, dealing with the important (from a priestly perspective) issue of funding the sanctuary, its services, and its clergy.

The book ends with an affirmation: "These are the commandments that the Lord gave Moses for the Israelite people on Mount Sinai."



Parashat Be-Har/Be-Hukkotai/On the Mountain/
In My Statutes
Take 1

Redeeming a Land

One of the central paradoxes of Jewish history is that the Jewish People were landless through most of our history, yet we were always profoundly aware of our link to *Eretz Yisrael*. Perhaps because we did not live in a place we could call our own, the intense love between Jews and our homeland permeated our prayers, our Torah, and our hearts.

Today's Torah portion speaks directly to the centrality of *Eretz Yisrael* in Jewish thought and deed. God instructs the Jewish People, "You must provide for the *ge'ulah*, redemption, of the land."

What does it mean to bring *redemption* to a land? It might make sense to use tangible terms—*irrigate* the land, *fertilize* the land, even *cultivate* the land. Those are terms a farmer can act on and recognize. But how does one redeem a land?

According to most biblical commentators, this verse is understood as mandating a loving Jewish presence in *Eretz Yisrael*. The Land is referred to as an *abuzzab*, a holding—given to the Jewish People as God's part of

our *brit*, our covenantal relationship. Our ancestors agreed to serve only God, and God agreed to maintain a unique relationship with the Jewish People. That relationship was given form in the detailed legislation of the Torah and the Talmud as a way of shaping and cultivating the reciprocal obligations between God and the Jews.

The one place in the world where the Jewish People could act on every part of our *brit* was within the Land of Israel. Only there could all the laws and practices of Judaism receive their full articulation, because, in the words of Rabbi Ovadiah Sforno, "outside of the Land [of Israel] there is no sabbatical year, nor a jubilee year." The many agricultural *mitzvot*—of leaving gleanings for the poor, of offering first fruits, and others—were operative only within the Land of Israel.

There, in *Eretz Yisrael*, the Jew could most directly encounter God and sanctity.

What was true in the past is true today as well. There is a special quality to *Eretz Yisrael* that, for Jews, exists nowhere else in the world. In the words of the Talmud, "the air of the Land of Israel makes one wise."

Our generation is uniquely blessed. While Jews have prayed facing Jerusalem for thousands of years, while our ancestors longed for the messianic future as a time when Jews could freely live as Jews in our homeland, we have seen the establishment of a Jewish state—a thriving democracy and a world center for Jews and Jewish expression—in our own time.

Unlike our great-grandparents, we can travel to Israel's holy sites any time we choose. Unlike the Jews of the past, we can learn our sacred language, Hebrew, from people who speak it on a daily basis. We can contribute to the liberation of Jewish people who have left lands of oppression and suffering to be reunited with our people and our history.

We can redeem the land. In our day, that might mean bringing our own growing ecological awareness to the renewal of Israel's streams and rivers and forests, spreading the word of the value of recycling to a crowded nation still delighting in the proliferation of plastic bags. It might mean aiding our fellow Jews in Israel in their quest for social justice and religious freedom for all, regardless of ethnicity, skin color, gender, or denomination. It might mean doing what we can to work for a just and enduring peace.

Provide for the redemption of the land. Why not begin to provide for that redemption today?



*Parashat Be-Har/Be-Hukkotai/On the Mountain/
In My Statutes
Take 2*

Proclaim Liberty, but What Kind?

Puritans and colonial Americans viewed themselves as the modern embodiment of ancient Israel. Like the Israelites, they saw themselves as fleeing from an oppressive Pharaoh, journeying into the wilderness in pursuit of freedom and the establishment of a religious and democratic society. It's no coincidence, then, that on the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia, the Hebrew Bible proclaims its ancient ideal: "Proclaim liberty throughout the land, and to all the inhabitants thereof." Like the ancient Jews, the colonial Americans saw their mission as one of proclaiming liberty.

What kind of liberty did the colonists spread, and what kind of liberty does the biblical passage intend?

Various cultures understand freedom differently; in the former Soviet Union, freedom theoretically implied relief from unemployment and homelessness. In America, those basic human needs are not considered freedoms at all, but rather privileges that too many Americans don't get to enjoy. On the other hand, Americans theoretically believe that freedom permits uninhibited expression of personal opinion and the right to practice one's religion unchallenged. In China, those values do not comprise freedom; instead they are considered subversive.

Within Jewish traditions, Rashi understands freedom to imply the ability to reside anywhere. He adds that freedom precludes living under the authority of others.

One cannot, he claims, be truly free unless one is able to choose where to live. Do the homeless in our major cities have that freedom? Can they choose where to live? What of recent college graduates, so saddled with untenable debts that they are unable to purchase a home? What about members of racial or ethnic minorities who are victimized in certain neighborhoods? What of the freedom of gay men and lesbians to live freely where they choose without fear of intimidation or assault?

Our elderly refrain from leaving their homes at night. Women are frequently the victims of rape or robbery on American streets and college campuses. Is a society where so many must worry about where they live truly free?

Rashi's second standard is equally intriguing: freedom from subjugation to the authority of others. This standard is necessarily more subjective: Whether we identify with those in power is a question of personal judgment. Do our politicians act based on our needs? Are we represented by the corporations that make boardroom decisions establishing the contours of our lives? Or by the press? Or by the scholars who advise those in power or who mold the thought and culture of the rest of us?

Clearly, no society is completely free. Our dual birthright—as Jews and as Americans—encourages us to struggle to increase our freedoms, so that a previous generation's aspirations advances the next generation's rights.

As Jews, our call to freedom emerges naturally from our relationship to God. Freed from human bondage in Egypt, we recognize that freedom is the corollary to divine service. In the words of the Talmud, we are *God's* "servants, and therefore not the servants of servants."

In a world of social justice and spiritual depth, Jewish notions of freedom can thrive, the freedom to assume our rightful place in a world sanctified and at peace.



*Parashat Be-Har/Be-Hukkotai/On the Mountain/
In My Statutes
Take 3*

Between a Mountain and a Field

At its outset, today's Torah portion states, "The Lord spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai" and then commences a detailed exposition of the laws of the *Shemittah*, the seventh year, in which the land must lie fallow as testimony to God's exclusive ownership of all.

Since this is the climax of all priestly rules for the conduct of Jewish worship in the biblical period, we would expect something a little more ethereal, a little grander and loftier as a summary of all that came before. After all, this is God's timeless message to the Jewish people. Is the most

important part of that message really to leave our fields alone once in a while?

That same question occurred to the rabbis of antiquity. In the *Midrash Sifra*, an ancient commentary to the Book of Leviticus, the rabbis open by asking, “What is the connection between Sinai and *Shemittah*?” Consider all the commandments given at Sinai, not just this one. So why does *Shemittah* merit the honor of its position as conclusion of all the priestly rules? What’s so special about *Shemittah*?

The *Sifra* responds to its own question by asserting that the juxtaposition of *Shemittah* here teaches that “all commandments originated at Sinai.” Rashi and the Ramban both concur with that judgment.

But it is possible to go beyond that reading, to see something more essential in *Shemittah* that singles it out for this place of honor. After all, any other commandment could have demonstrated the same point, that all *mitzvot* originate in the meeting of God and the Jewish people, in the sacred dialogue that unfolded in the Torah and the Talmud and in our own day as well. So if any *mitzvah* could have demonstrated that point, what is so special about *Shemittah*? What is the unique link between *Shemittah* and Sinai, between a vacant field and a mountain?

To respond to that question, we must first look at the function of the sabbatical year. The Israelite farmer planted and worked the field in accordance with the practices of Judaism; for example, by leaving the corners of the field for the poor to glean, and bringing tithes to Jerusalem. As idyllic as a people at home in their land might be, there was a danger as well. Jews living freely in their own homeland could well begin to think of the land as theirs by right. It would be a small step to assert that since the land responds to human labor, it is ultimately a tool for humans to use as they see fit.

Once every seven years, the *mitzvah* of *Shemittah* arrives to remind us that while we may cultivate the earth, ultimately the land is not to be owned by any human being. We may borrow land as we borrow utensils and material things, but ultimately we must return all to the cycles of nature. We as a species are part of that natural cycle, and thus are permanently linked to the limitations and rules imposed on the world. Through the institution of *Shemittah*, the Torah records God’s sacred truth that “the land is Mine; you are but strangers resident with Me.”

The Ramban clarifies that verse by paraphrasing it as “don’t think that you are so essential.” The world is not a plaything for human beings, and the vast array of organic and living things serves a purpose

higher than that of human whim. Together with humanity, the rest of the cosmos is a living, interlocking symphony to our Creator. We are the tenants, but God is the only *baal ha-bayit*.

Distracted by the brilliance of human achievement, and deafened by the clatter of our own insolent self-absorption, we can too easily forget that we are part of an order we neither made nor sustain. A little lower than the angels, yes, but still a long way from being masters of the universe, human beings are trapped in illusion if we consider ourselves or our species to be the measure of all things.

Only by linking our own destiny to the transcendent, by aligning ourselves to a divine living force, by shaping our deeds into a song of praise and gratitude, can human beings escape the despair of our mortality and fallibility. Focusing on our own needs and desires, we will always be disappointed in the world and ourselves. But if we lift our eyes to a higher vision, if we set our feet on a more tested path, we can soar above our plight, as on eagles’ wings.

In the words of the *Sifra*, “it is enough for the servant to be like the Master.” By making ourselves godly, we partake of God’s fullness: “When it is God’s, then it is ours.”