

United We Stand

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Parshas Behar

17th of Iyar 5784

The Parsha's Path

And you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land for all its inhabitants... (25:10)

This week's Parsha details the laws of *shemittah* and *yovel*, when we are obligated to cease working the land of Israel, remit any unpaid loans, and, during *yovel* (every fiftieth year), return all land to its original owners and free all Hebrew slaves.

What is the reason for all of these laws? Furthermore, why are they stated immediately following the concluding events of last week's Parsha, namely, the story of the son of a mixed marriage who blasphemed G-d while fighting with a fellow Jew? Finally, while during the Yovel year we proclaim freedom for slaves, what does the verse mean that we proclaim liberty *for all its inhabitants*?

Many commentators point out the parallels between *shemittah* and shabbos, explaining that, like shabbos, *shemittah* is a time for cessation of creative and material pursuits, allowing us to refocus on what life is really all about; growing closer to G-d. It also forces debtors to transcend their pursuit of profit and exercise compassion by forgiving outstanding debts, while giving borrowers a chance to start fresh without being overburdened by dire financial straits. Yovel achieves these aims on steroids; by freeing those destitute individuals who sold themselves into servitude and restoring land to their original owners, it both requires the wealthy to take a step back from the rat race while restoring the impoverished to their former financial position. While the Torah generally allows for a capitalist system, it recognizes that such a system unchecked can allow for money to supplant G-d and for rampant inequality and oppression. Shemittah and yovel are a major part of the answer to these problems.

A close reading of the story of the blasphemer from last week's parsha suggests that his crime did not emerge in a vacuum; the midrash draws our attention to its parallels with the story of Moshe when he first emerged from Pharaoh's palace as a young man. Rabbi Fohrman points out that besides for the fact that both stories involved a fight with an Egyptian man, and, according to the midrash, Moshe similarly invoked G-d's name to kill the Egyptian who was striking a Jew, when Moshe subsequently sees two Jews fighting the same rare

word-root is used to describe their fight and the fight involving the blasphemer. Furthermore, both Moshe and the blasphemer are described as "going out" without specifying where they went from. These parallels may have led another midrash to explain the backstory behind what led the blasphemer to do what he did. According to the midrash, since the blasphemer's mother was from the tribe of Dan and his father wasn't Jewish, he tried to pitch his tent with the tribe of Dan. The people of Dan told him that since tribal affiliation follows the father, he had no place among them and had to leave. They went to Moshe's court, where Moshe ruled in favor of the tribe of Dan.

Rabbi Fohrman suggests that the midrash is bridging out the deeper meaning of the parallel between Moshe and the blasphemer. Moshe, like the blasphemer, was coming to the Jewish people as sort of an outsider, having been raised in an Egyptian home but rejecting it. However, upon trying his best to defend his people upon seeing them attacked, he was confronted with rejection, and even the threat of being reported. When trying to break up a fight between Jews, he was scorned for killing the Egyptian. Moshe had to run away to the care of Yisro, the first person to call him not an Egyptian, but just a "man," until he would ultimately and reluctantly rejoin to lead his people. The blasphemer similarly found himself without a place in the Jewish community, which ultimately, inevitably, led to conflict. With nobody to come to his aid, he desperately descended to the ultimate crime: blaspheming G-d for putting himself in his seemingly impossible situation.

Rabbi Mark Glass, in an article for the Lehrhaus, points out that the culpability of the people for not coming to the blasphemer's aid may be indicated by the requirement (24:14) that all those who heard the blasphemer lean their hands on his head, a requirement we generally find by sacrifices of atonement. This seems to indicate that they all bore some kind of culpability for what happened. He also points out that the story of the blasphemer (verses 14-23) have a clear chiasmic structure, with the one exception to the parallels being verses 15 and 22, respectively, the former of which delineates the punishment for blasphemy and the latter which requires "the same standard for stranger and citizen alike," perhaps further underscoring the imperative to treat all Jews and integral parts of the community.

In light of this idea, perhaps shemittah and yovel are presented as an antidote to the tragic tale of the blasphemer. Rabbi Fohrman suggests that by reminding us not to get caught up in our own pursuits and that ultimately everything belongs to G-d, *shemittah and yovel* can help us recognize that every Jew has an equal place in G-d's society; just as the land reverts to its ancestral heritage and slaves go free, we have no entitlements above anyone else just because of our backgrounds or station in life. This should mobilize us to stand up for those on the margins of our community and make sure everyone has a place.

Perhaps this is the message of "proclaim liberty for all its inhabitants." Rabbi Moshe Shternbuch explains that by letting go of our self-centered pursuits, *yovel* enables us all to be truly free. By letting go of the trappings that enslave us in a narrow perspective of self and community, we become free to see ourselves and all those around us as equal parts of G-d's community, and ennobled to share that community with all our fellow Jews. That is true freedom.

Deeper Meanings

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Rav Yaakov Neuburger (Torahweb) writes how Rav Arye Leib Baksht, zt"l, in his sefer *Kol Aryeh*, recounted the following personal episode:

Rav Arye Leib was a student in the Mir Yeshiva during the Holocaust and eventually moved to America, where he became a Rosh Yeshiva in Detroit. Somewhere along the way, he and his family moved into the first floor of a house. The experience was highly uncomfortable: they could not call or answer the phone at late hours, they had to keep their children quiet, and they had to constantly be cognizant of the noise they made as they moved around. They did have the convenience of quick repairs and such; that came with the nature of the package. The landlord lived above them.

Finally, they moved into their own apartment, but Rav Baksht retained a message he would repeat throughout his life: The Landlord lives above you.

Rav Baksht used this specifically to explain a Seforno on this week's Parsha. Seforno notes that the laws of Shemita, Yovel, and so many other laws involving the land of Eretz Yisrael indicate that the people living there don't really have autonomy over the land. Thus, Seforno suggests that the pasuk we say in Hallel, *The heavens are G-d's, and the Earth he gave to people,* does not include Eretz Yisrael. When it comes to Eretz Yisrael, The Landlord lives above you. There is a much more

powerful and evident presence of G-d, which is great for getting prayers answered but not so great if you want to cross Him. We will be celebrating Yom Yerushalayim next Friday, a day which celebrates a moment in history where we got a clear glimpse of G-d's reign over Eretz Yisrael. But equally important is our recognition that "with great power comes great responsibility."

While this message is particularly relevant to Eretz Yisrael, where the Landlord's presence is more evident, the Landlord lives with us wherever we are. Especially during this time when we find ourselves constantly at home and our relationship with G-d is more private than communal, it is more important than ever to be cognizant that the Landlord's living right upstairs. As the Tochacha and, by extension, Jewish history demonstrates, the Landlord expects a lot from us, and we have a tremendous responsibility to be worthy tenants.

Goal of the week

Do one thing to help a Jew(s) at the margins of your community.

This week's bulletin is dedicated for a Refuah Sheleima for Shaindel Temma bas Rochel Zlotta, Masha Sarah bas Teiviah Leah, Reuven ben Golda, Ephraim Melech ben Teilah, Gavriel Margoliot Ben Malka, and all those injured by the war and acts of terror, as well as for the safe return of all the hostages and soldiers. Please have them in mind in your Tefillos.

Have A Great Shabbos !!

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