

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

The first time, in Vayikra 25:25, our fellow has been forced to sell his or her land holdings. The second time, in VaYikra 25:35, our fellow has somehow come under our power. The third time, VaYikra 25:39, our fellow has been sold to us as a kind of indentured servant. And the fourth time, VaYikra 25:47, our fellow has become an indentured servant to a resident alien - someone who is not part a member of the extended Israelite family.

A careful reader of text, Vayikra Rabba, the midrashic anthology of Leviticus, explains: "There are eight names for a poor person: *ani*, *evyon*, *misken*, *rash*, *dal*, *dach*, *mach*, *helech*...*Mach* [trampled upon] because he is lowly before everyone, like a kind of lowest threshold." (Vayikra Rabba 34:6) The "mach" is one who has dropped below some kind of poverty threshold such that others gain power over them, and can trample them. There is more to do here than just give a little *tzedaka* or leave the corners of your fields un-harvested.

The Torah commands us to redeem our fellow's lost holdings, returning that which provides financial security, and we are forbidden to take accrued interest on the support we give. They are not to become our slaves, nor are we to let them become slaves to others.

The medieval French commentator, Rashi (1040-1105 CE), explains that when one is faced with a fellow who has fallen on hard times: "You shall support him: Do not allow him to fall down and collapse altogether, in which case it would be difficult to pick him up again [from his dire poverty]. Rather, "support him" while his hand is still faltering [for then it is easier to help him out of his trouble]. To what can this be compared? To a load on a donkey-while it is still on the donkey, one person can grasp it and hold it in place. Once it falls to the ground, however, [even] five people cannot pick it up."

Rashi tasks us with building relationships where we are attuned to the needs and struggles of those around us, including ourselves. When your friend comes to you, desperate for a job, you are to give her a fair job with a fair wage, treat her with kindness and not take advantage of her position. It is your obligation to strengthen her as she falters and to pick her up before she sinks too low.

This week, guided by both our parasha and *Sefirat HaOmer*, we should reflect on the foundation of the relationships we have built with those around us. Are we able to know when our family and friends need a strengthening hand? Are they able to know when we need a strengthening hand? If the answer is no, we must open a channel of connection. And if the answer is yes, we should reinforce the channel of connection with expressions of gratitude.

בְּזַקְעַק וּבְזַקְעַק - Be strong, be strong, and we shall be strengthened.



TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Behar & Behukkotai Shabbat Mevarekhim Hahodesh

May 12, 2018 | 27 Iyyar 5778

Annual | Leviticus 25:1-27:34 (Etz Hayim p. 738-757; Hertz p. 531-550)

Triennial | Leviticus 25:39-26:46 (Etz Hayim p. 744-753; Hertz p. 536-539, 542-547)

Haftarah | Jeremiah 16:19-17:14 (Etz Hayim p. 762-765; Hertz p. 551-553)

D'var Torah: Channels of Connection

Rachel Schwartz, Conservative Yeshiva Student & Lishma Fellow

This week, we find ourselves in the sixth week of *Sefirat HaOmer*, the seven-week period between Passover and Shavuot when we, like Bnai Yisrael at Mt. Sinai, prepare ourselves to receive the Torah. We look inwards and examine the ways we manifest Godliness in the world, each week guided by a different kabbalistic *sefirah* - or divine emanation. This week's *sefirah* is *yesod* - the foundation - the manifestation of creating channels of connection.

This joint Torah portion this week, Behar-Behukkotai, marks the end of the book of Leviticus with laws governing ownership of land and of people. We are also reminded to walk in the way of God's rules and mitzvot and are told of the blessings we will receive if we follow God, or the curses that will fall upon us if we do not. What can we learn from it about building channels of connection?

Imagine a close friend comes to you in despair: She lost her job and has been unable to pay her bills. She offers to do any job you need, in the hopes of getting back on her feet. What do you do?

The Torah refers to this situation as "וְכִי־יָמַךְ אֶת־ךָ" - *v'chi yamuch achicha*. The root of *yamuch*, the letters *mem*, *vav*, *chaf*, is found only in this Torah portion, where it appears four times. What it actually means, and how that relates to other kinds of poverty, may give us some insight.

D'var Haftarah: Trappings of Leadership

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Jeremiah is hard on his nation. He recognizes their sins and has the foresight to understand the repercussions of his people's wrongheadedness. Still, it is hard to convince his fellows of the implications of their tragic ways. The more he tries, the deeper they become mired in their wrongdoing and false beliefs. Finally, in exasperation, Jeremiah lets loose with a remark of frightening implications: "The sin of Judah is written with a stylus of iron, engraved with a hard point, on the tablet of their heart and upon the heart of their altar." (17:1) Jeremiah has informed them that their cause is lost because their sinful nature is marked indelibly upon their hearts, rendering any attempt to alter their negative state impossible.

This is an existentially untenable thought. It does not allow for change or forgiveness. Taken at face value, Jeremiah's statement has sealed the fate of his fellows. Once tainted, there is no coming clean. This disturbing thought presented an opportunity for a fantastic midrashic dialogue between God and Israel over this seemingly hopeless condition: "When Israel stood before God for judgment, they said before Him: 'Master of the Universe, the heavens and earth testify against us regarding our sins... God replied: 'I shall remove them' [namely, God will disregard their testimony.] Israel responded: 'But still, our name is associated with disloyalty to You.' To which God answered: 'I will give you a new name.' Again, Israel said: 'But, You will remember!' God retorted: 'I will forget your earlier sins.' Israel answers: 'In Your heart, you will remember.' God responds: 'I will not take it to heart'. Israel responded [with the verse from out haftarah]: 'But it is written before You, as it is written: The guilt of Judah is written with a stylus of iron.' God responds: 'Things that are written can also be erased and since I (God) wrote it, I can also erase it! As it is written: 'In those days and at that time, declared the Lord, the sins of Israel shall be sought and there shall be none.' (Jeremiah 50:20)" (adapted from Midrash Tanaim 32:1 Hoffman ed. pp. 180-1)

This midrash responds directly to the quandary presented by Jeremiah's statement. In this midrash, God realized that it is not tenable to leave human beings with an inability to repent, change, and be forgiven - no matter what their stage in life. The God of the midrash countermands the words of Jeremiah and ensures us that this possibility always exists. There is always room to come clean and become new.

For Discussion: What is the consequence for an individual who believes that they can never truly be forgiven? What is the consequence for society?

Parashat Behar & Behukkotai Self-Study

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

This week is yet another double *parasha* that will bring us to the end of the book of Vayikra. The Parasha opens with laws pertaining to the land, followed by the rewards that we will receive if we observe the Mitzvot, and the horrors that will befall us if we fail to observe them.

- 1) Every 7th year is a Sabbatical year during which the land [of Israel] observes a Shabbat (25:1-7). The Torah stresses that for 6 years we will work in our fields and vineyard, however, in the 7th year the land has a sabbatical. Why do you think that the Torah speaks about 'your fields and vineyards', but not about 'your land'?
- 2) If a person is sold into servitude because of economic distress, it is for a limited time (25:39-42). Why, according to the Torah, can a person not be sold indefinitely as a slave?
- 3) Following the instructions that are intended to limit our ownership and use of others as slaves, we are told not to create any idols in our land. What is it about idols (and idol worship) that might link them to the previous topic?
- 4) Chapter 26, the penultimate chapter of the book of Vayikra, is a long chapter containing the rewards and punishments for observing/not observing the Mitzvot. Why do you think that it was placed at this point of the book?
- 5) In 26:4 we are told that as a reward, God will give the rain in its appropriate time. What does this teach us about rain (and seasons) in the Land of Israel? When God's giving is done at the right time, it creates more giving. How do we see that in the verse, and (based on what we saw in the beginning of chapter 25) what does it teach us about the concept of land?

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