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Parshat Behar

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By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

It is probably the most famous Biblical verse in American History. Each year thousands of people come to see its bold raised lettering prominently encircling the rim of the revered icon of our country's independence. Many visitors hardly notice the verse. Instead, their gaze is transfixed upon another, much less divine symbol that bears the painful message of that sacred verse. But the large crack they come to see has no inherent meaning. It is only the result of the constant resounding of the words that are sacredly enshrined on its oxidized metal. Those words are from this week's portion, "proclaim liberty throughout the land and to all its inhabitants thereof" (Leviticus 25:10).

Truth be told, however, those words refer not to a revolution or liberation, they refer to the mitzvah of Yovel — Jubilee. Every 50 years, all Jewish servants, whether employed for only a six-year period or on an extended docket, and even those who desire to remain as servants to their masters, are freed. They return home to their families, and their careers of indenturage are over.

But the verse is confusing. It says, "Proclaim liberty throughout the land and to all its inhabitants thereof." Isn't the Torah referring to the freedom of slaves and the servants? Isn't that a proclamation of freedom for only a select few? Why would the Torah use the words "and to all its inhabitants," when only some of its inhabitants are going free? The masters and employers were never slaves. They are not going free. Or are they?

It was a cold and blustery day and Rabbi Isser Zalman Melzer, the dean of the Eitz Chaim Yeshiva in Jerusalem, was returning home from a long day in the Yeshiva. Accompanied by his nephew, Reb Dovid Finkel, who normally walked him home, Rabbi Melzer began to ascend the steps to his Jerusalem apartment. Suddenly, Reb Isser Zalman stopped and retreated down the old staircase as if he had forgotten something. As he reached the street, he began to wander aimlessly back and forth, in thought. His nephew began to question the strange actions of the Torah sage. "Did Reb Isser Zalman forget something?" "Why didn't he enter the home?" The winds began to blow, and despite the chill Reb Isser Zalman walked back and forth outside his home. About 15 minutes passed and once again, Rabbi Melzer walked slowly up the stairs, waited, and then headed back down. His nephew could not contain himself, "Please, Rebbe," he pleaded. "What's the matter?" Reb Isser Zalman just shrugged and said, "Just wait a few more moments. Please." "But, uncle, it's getting cold. Please answer me. What are you waiting for?" Rabbi Melzer realized that he could no longer keep his motivations to himself. "I'll explain. As I walked up the steps I heard the young woman who comes once a week to help with the housework in the kitchen. She was mopping the floor and singing while she mopped. I knew that if I were to walk in she would have become embarrassed and stopped her singing. The singing helps her through her work, and I did not want to make her work any bit harder, let alone deny her the joy of her singing. Despite the cold, I decided to wait outside until she finishes her work and her song. Then I'll go in."

The Torah uses a very significant expression this week that synthesizes the true meaning of ownership and servitude. "Proclaim liberty throughout the land and to all its inhabitants thereof." When one employs he is also indebted to his employee. In addition to the paycheck he is responsible for the workers feelings, working conditions and welfare. He is responsible to provide a safe environment, suitable provisions, and above all *mentchlechkeit*. And when Yovel arrives and the workers and servants return home, they are not the only ones going free. A great burden is lifted from the shoulders of the master. Freedom is declared for all the inhabitants of the land. The servants are not the only ones who are "home free." As we used to say in the heat of the game of ring-o-lee-vio, we are, "home free — all."

Positive Peer Pressure

by Rabbi Dr. Benji Levy

Peer pressure is generally viewed as a negative concept – a phenomenon that encourages people to be led almost blindly by a need to fit in with the crowd and to be liked. It is most often identified with bad or even dangerous behaviour. Although it is generally associated with adolescents, in connection with issues such as body image, substance abuse and bullying, in essence it exists at every age and in every community. With the exponential spread of social media and technology, the channels through which peer pressure can be experienced are spreading, the scope of peer pressure is growing, and its negative influences are intensifying. But to view peer pressure as purely negative is to see only the harmful outcome of a neutral phenomenon. The fact is that peer pressure can yield very positive results.

In the Torah's description of the Jubilee year, the nation is forced to let the land lie fallow and to free all Jewish servants.

And you shall sanctify the fiftieth year, and proclaim freedom (for slaves) throughout the land for all who live on it. It shall be a Jubilee for you and you shall return, each man to his property, and you shall return, each man to his family. This fiftieth year shall be a Jubilee for you, you shall not sow, nor shall you reap its aftergrowth or pick (its grapes) that you had set aside (for yourself). For it is Jubilee. It shall be holy for you; you shall eat its produce from the field (*Lev. 25:10-12*).

The underlying rationale for this command is to remind us that God is the One running the show, and that man is but a sacred trustee of the Land of Israel, and of basic human rights such as freedom (*Sefer HaChinnuch*, mitzva 328). This mitzva ennobles one with Divine purpose and a sense of humility. At the same time, it enables one to reflect on everyday morals, ethics and individual accountability. Interestingly, this momentous occasion is heralded by the blowing of a shofar (*Lev. 25:9*). The obvious question is why? What is the significance, at this particular moment, of the shofar?

To let one's land lie fallow after years of working it is a tremendously difficult task that requires a high level of faith. Similarly, to let one's servants free after they have become a crucial part of one's daily schedule is challenging and demanding. In this difficult moment the blowing of the shofar presents an unexpected voice of support and comfort. At the moment the Jubilee begins, when each person steps outside to blow their shofar, they are immediately bombarded by numerous other shofar blasts from their surrounding neighbors. This sense of communal unity and combined dedication to God offers solace and support – a true feeling of being together in the same boat: 'The distress of the masses is comforting [for the individual]' (*Sefer HaChinnuch*, mitzva 331). In biblical times, the sounding of the shofar was a mechanism for announcing something to the world. Whilst the Jubilee task was extremely difficult to implement, it was reassuring to realise that everyone was experiencing the same struggle together.

Often in life we are faced with challenges that seem insurmountable. Whilst we may feel that we are the only ones in the world who can understand the extent of our challenges, in truth, 'There is nothing new under the sun' (*Ecclesiastes 1:9*). There is comfort in the notion that there are other people who have braved, are braving and will brave similar burdens. The concept of peer pressure, so often seen through a lens of negativity, can actually in appropriate contexts be harnessed in a positive direction. This is perhaps most commonly expressed in our generation through the myriad of support groups being started daily through social media channels like Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp. Furthermore, many revolutionary movements have begun simply because a few individuals shared a vision and dreamed in the same direction. In order to truly harness the positivity that can be found within the context of peer support, it is important to seek and build networks of people who share similar values, who will help foster and reinforce that which is important to us, and who will share our angst in moments of trial.

The primordial sound of the shofar awakens the heart of man, serving as a piercing reminder that we are never alone – neither in our triumphs, nor our tribulations. The voice of the shofar fosters within us a sense of camaraderie that serves to transform the potentially negative peer pressure into the comfort of peer support.

Listen To The Land

by Rabbi Shaul Rosenblatt

This week's portion speaks about land and its ownership. Which reminds me of a beautiful story:

Two wealthy Jewish men lived in a town in Eastern Europe. They were great friends, but one day they entered into a dispute over a small piece of land. Each one felt that it belonged to him and slowly, over time, the issue came between them.

For men as wealthy as they, it was such an insignificant piece of land, but each was insistent that it belonged to him, and the dispute grew more and more unpleasant. After a while, they no longer talked to each other, and eventually they became bitter enemies.

Although neither wished to do so, members of the community convinced them to go the rabbi and have him resolve the argument. Each one presented his case and the rabbi listened carefully.

Then the rabbi asked if he could go and see the land in question. When they got there, it was clear that the land was virtually worthless in relation to each of their portfolios. The rabbi said that he could not decide who was right and in a case like this, the best thing was to ask the land itself. Both thought he was crazy as they watched him put his ear to the ground and listen carefully. He stood up nodding knowingly.

"The land has resolved this issue for us," he explained. Each was eager to hear. "The land told me," said the rabbi, "that you think it belongs to you and you think it belongs to you. The truth of the matter is, however, that one day soon, both of you will actually belong to it."

Perspective is so important in life. We can so easily become carried away on a tide of pettiness and lose all sense of our true priorities. Land is never more important than friendship, in the same way that money is never more important than a spouse, nor work more important than children. It's a sobering thought that one day every one of us will 'belong' to the earth. With that in mind, ask yourself if those things which are frustrating you right now are really all that important. Business is not going well; your house is falling apart; people aren't respecting you. Will any of these things really matter in five, let alone 50 years? Life is too precious and too fleeting to waste on pettiness.

Hold Him Up

by Shoshanna Dresner

Mark was walking home from school when he noticed that the boy ahead of him had tripped and dropped all the books and belongings that he was carrying. Mark knelt down and helped the boy, Bill, pick up the scattered items. As they spoke, Mark discovered that Bill was having trouble with many areas of his life.

They stayed in contact over the future years. Before graduation, Bill called over Mark and reminded him of the day that they met. "I was on the way to end my life," he explained. "I was clearing out my locker, I didn't want to leave a mess for anyone. After we had spent that time talking and laughing, I realized what I would be missing should I go. You didn't just pick up my books.... You saved my life."

We are told in this week's Torah portion that "If your brother becomes poor, and his hand falters when he is with you, then you should support him". (Vayikra 25:35).

The phrase "and his hand falters" expresses a hold that is in the process of weakening. It stresses that we are commanded to help people BEFORE they fall.

Maimonides explains that this is the highest level of charity. To support someone BEFORE the decline. Don't wait for them to hit rock bottom. Aid them be able to sustain themselves, and not need the help at all!

But this applies to more than finances.

We need to support people before they fall emotionally too. Notice signs, struggles, moods. Send regular messages to people to check up on how they are doing, or to call them.

To not wait until someone cries out for help.

When "his hand falters", hold him up!

“Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them: When you come into the land that I give you, the land shall observe a Sabbath rest for Hashem” (25:2)

What is the connection regarding the laws that conclude the previous parsha, regarding payment for personal damages, and the laws that begin this parsha, the laws of Shemittah? The Tzror HaMor writes that just as we are obligated to honor other people, we are obligated to honor Eretz Yisrael. We have an overarching obligation to honor Hashem and included in this requirement is the honor of our fellow Jews and of Eretz Yisrael. This is one explanation for the ancient custom of writing Hashem's name as three yuds, rather than two as is done today. The three yuds serve as a reminder of the three types of respect that we must always remember, each of which begins with a yud: Hashem, Yisrael, Yerushalayim.

You shall sound a broken blast on the shofar, in the seventh month, on the tenth of the month; on the Day of Atonement you shall sound the shofar throughout your land” (25:9)

The word "shevii" is spelled without a yud. This uncommon spelling can be read as "saveia," which means "satisfied." The Baal HaTurim explains that this is a hint to the fact that the seventh month referred to in the posuk, Tishrei, is a month satiated with mitzvos. With Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, Sukkos and Shemini Atzeres, Tishrei has more mitzvos than any other month. Our attitude toward Tishrei should be that we should look forward to the opportunity that we will have when that time comes again. That is why a mere mention of the month of Tishrei is immediately associated with its many mitzvos. Any opportunity to do a mitzva that is not common is something that we should anticipate and appreciate. We should appreciate the mitzvos that we do daily as well, but we should have a special feeling for those mitzvos that we can only do infrequently.

“And each of you shall not wrong his fellow Jew, and you shall fear your G-d, for I am Hashem, your G-d” (25:17)

This posuk tells us of the prohibition against insulting a fellow Jew, which is one of the 613 mitzvos. The Gemara in Bava Metzia 59a discusses the power of the prayers of one who is insulted and subsequently cries out to Hashem. Rabbeinu Bachya explains that the prayers of such a person are so potent because his heart is broken and he feels that he has nowhere to turn. He cries out to Hashem with all of his heart and with full concentration. This is why his prayers are heard even more than those of a regular person. We must be extremely careful not to insult a fellow Jew. In addition, to do so is dangerous because Hashem responds swiftly to the prayers of those who are insulted and will inflict punishment upon the offender.

“If your brother becomes impoverished and his means falter in your proximity, you shall strengthen him - proselyte or resident - so that he can live with you” (25:35)

Rashi comments that one should help his fellow while he is starting to fall and should not wait until he completely crashes. Rashi likens this to stabilizing a fallen donkey. When its packages are sliding off, one person can steady the animal alone. But once the animal falls to the ground, it takes many people working together to help it up. The sefer Zichron Meir writes that these guidelines also apply to helping with spiritual matters. One should not wait until a person gets completely frustrated and not wait until he falls all the way down. When one sees that a friend is starting to go down and is suffering a small setback, he should try to support him and fix his troubles right away. This also applies on an individual level. When a person makes a mistake and does something wrong, he should repent and correct his mistake right away before it gets out of hand. It is much easier to correct a character flaw or a tendency to do something wrong early before it becomes second nature to a person and rooted in his character.

“You shall not make idols for yourselves, nor shall you set up a statue or a monument for yourselves. And in your land you shall not place a pavement stone on which to prostrate yourselves, for I am Hashem, your G-d” (26:1)

Rashi on this posuk quotes the Toras Kohanim: "These pesukim are addressed to one who sells himself as a slave to a gentile. He should not say: Since my master serves idols and engages in illicit relationships, I too will act like him. Since my master desecrates Shabbos, I too will act like him. Therefore, these pesukim were written." The Torah goes out of its way to tell us that when one finds himself in a difficult situation, he should not give in to temptation. The Torah acknowledges the human mentality to feel this way but warns us against falling into this trap. The Chofetz Chaim says that if regarding someone who is forced to sell himself and put himself in a tough position where it will be difficult to keep Torah and mitzvos due to poverty, the Torah tells us that he must be careful to do so anyway, certainly, we cannot use a difficult situation which we place ourselves in voluntarily as an excuse to take mitzvos lightly. There is another lesson that we can learn from this midrash. The fact that people stumble in certain areas of Torah observance should not cause them to feel that they can just throw in the towel completely and give everything up. Such a person should realize that he will be rewarded for that which he does and recognize that he has the ability to use what he does do as a springboard to fix what he does wrong and to do teshuva. It is not good to have an all-or-nothing approach to Torah and mitzvos. Even if a person does a little bit at a time, it will eventually add up and he can grow slowly.

by Rabbi Mayer Friedman

Cheating is Forbidden — Honesty is the Best

By Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Behar contains the Torah's prohibition against cheating: "When you make a sale to your fellow or when you buy from the hand of your fellow, do not victimize one another (*Al tonu ish es achiv*)." [Vayikra 25:14] Rashi explains that "*Al To'nu*" refers to deception regarding monetary matters.

It is not a coincidence that this prohibition against cheating immediately follows the section of the Sabbatical year requirements. If there is one lesson that emerges from the parsha of *Shemittah*, it is that the *Ribono shel Olam* provides man with his livelihood needs. In the seventh year, farmers (and in Biblical times the economy was almost totally agrarian) were asked to stop working for an entire year, and they were somehow supposed to survive. How can they do that?

The answer is that the *Ribono shel Olam* promises that He will take care of them. The takeaway lesson of the parsha of *Shmittah* is that the Almighty provides our *parnassa*, and in the seventh year a person can in fact not work, not plant, not harvest, and yet survive – and according to the Torah he will do even more than survive!

If we believed that with all our hearts and souls, we would never be tempted to cheat. Why do we cheat? We cheat so that we can make a couple of extra dollars. However, if we fully internalized the idea that a person's income is determined by the Almighty each Rosh HaShannah, and whatever we are destined to get will come our way and not a penny more, we would have no reason to cheat and try to deceitfully make those couple of extra dollars! This idea is sometimes very hard for people to accept in practice.

I read a very interesting story about Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky, *zt"l*. As we have mentioned countless times, Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky exemplified and personified what it means to be an honest person. It is no coincidence that he named his *sefer* on Chumash Emes L'Yaakov. This is what he preached, and this is what he practiced.

One of Rav Yaakov's sons was Rav Noson Kamenetsky. Rav Noson wanted to trace his family's roots and went to visit the little *Litvishe* European town in which Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky had been the Rav. While he was there, he discovered a very interesting historical fact: Even though much of Lithuanian Jewry was wiped out during the Shoah, to a large extent, the Jews of that particular city survived the war and escaped the Nazi Holocaust.

Rav Noson Kamenetsky went to the mayor of the town and asked him if he could explain how the Jews of this town were successful in saving their lives. The mayor said, "I can tell you exactly why the Jews escaped." He said that before the war, the fellow who eventually became the mayor was the postmaster of the town. He would have a test for the clergy members of that town – both Jews and non-Jews. The test was that when they would come in to buy postage, he would purposely give them more change than they deserved, and he would see whether they would return the money or not. That was his acid test of what type of people he was dealing with.

He did this three times with Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky. Each time he gave Rav Yaakov more money than he was entitled to in change, Rav Yaakov would always return the money. This postmaster was so impressed with Rav Yaakov, who was the head of the Jewish community, that when years later he was mayor of the town – any time he became aware of a German action which would have wiped out the Jews, he would notify the Jews and they would go hide in the forest or wherever, and that is how the Jews of the city were saved.

When Rav Noson Kamenetsky returned to America from his trip to Europe, he asked his father if he had any recollection of the post office, if he remembered the postmaster, and if he recalled these incidents. Rav Yaakov said that he did not remember the particular story about being tested, but all he remembered was that the postmaster in town did not know how to count.

You Can Take the Jew Out of Egypt

By Sheldon Stern

The Baal Shem Tov said that everything one sees and hears is sent as a message from Hashem. Well, right now Jews throughout the world are being told that Israel is practicing genocide against the poor, oppressed, Palestinian people. Clearly that's not true so does that mean that this noise is not intended for us? Not so fast. What the goyim are actually saying is as follows: "For the last 80 years the Jews have played the victim card. Sure, there were many that were killed in WWII. But so were the French, British you get the point. And twenty million Russians were lost, but do we hear a peep from them? No, it's just those whining Jews who control the media in order to play on the world's heartstrings. And now that the shoe is on the other foot we see their true colors. The Israelis are doing to the helpless, innocents in Gaza what they accused the Germans of doing to them. Not only that but the Jews throughout the world support them." So is that true? Of course not, but I had you going for a minute. So what are we to take from this anti-Israel, anti-Semitic calumny? Surprisingly, our Parsha provides the answer.

Chapter 25 speaks about a Jew who is forced by economic hardship to sell himself into servitude. Verse 25:43 makes the point that his master may not rule over him ruthlessly. The Torah's expression is telling, "Al Tirdu Bifarech" Don't subjugate him Bifarech. We were introduced to this word in Parshas Shemos where we're told that the Egyptians enslaved our ancestors Bifarech. One Midrash states that Paroah played on our 'Bnei Yisroel's sense of civic pride and offered them the opportunity to prove their loyalty to the fatherland by building Pison and Ramses. According to this Pshat, Bifarech means with Peh Rach a soft mouth. He was a con artist. Another Midrash gives us insight into Paroah's nefarious motives i.e he forced the men to perform women's tasks and vice versa. Finally, there's a Midrash which teaches that the Jews were given substandard materials and the two cities were built over weak foundations so that whatever work they accomplished would be quickly undone. Think how you'd feel if you spent six months putting up a five story building only to find it in ruins because of a gust of wind. The last two Midrashim speak to Paroah's true intent. He wanted to break the Jews psychologically so that the thought of escape would be the furthest thing from their minds. When our Posuk uses the same term it clearly doesn't convey the same meaning. No rational person would buy a slave and then systematically break his will. No, he wants human chattel who energetically and enthusiastically performs all his assigned tasks. So Rashi explains that Al Tirdu Bifarech means, "Don't give your servant tasks that you wouldn't do." In other words, don't make him feel like he's a slave for in fact he's a Jew just like you, but at this moment he's down on his luck. This again falls under the rubric of Veahavta Lirayecha Kamocha.

So now we can explain what can be gleaned from the invective spewed against Israel. It's human nature to change when circumstances in one's life changes. Moreover, if someone hits it big it's understandable, and justifiable if he then adopts the trappings of success. What the Torah is warning against is using that success to make others feel inferior. That the nations accuse Israel of barbarism is projection on their part. They assume that since Israel has an advanced army it stands to reason that they'll incinerate their enemies. But this isn't the way of the Torah. Still, because of the possibility that Israel, during these hostilities, and each and every one of us, in our daily lives, will forget this essential demand of the Torah, i.e to follow's Hillel's version of the Golden Rule, Hashem has the nations clamoring against us.

With this background, we can now address an obvious difficulty. The first Rashi in Bereishis quotes R. Yitzchok positing that the Torah should have begun with the first Mitzvah, Kiddush Hachodesh. Our immediate reaction is that such a suggestion is nonsensical. It follows logically that if Bereishis is the beginning, we should start with the Creation. Fine, but then why, when addressing the people at Sinai, does Hashem "laud" Himself as the G-d who took the Jews out of Egypt? Let Him say that He's the One who Created the Universe. So a simple answer is that Hashem was speaking to people, who, less than two months hence, had been miraculously freed from the crucible called Mitzrayim. For those hearty individuals, the Exodus was real and would lead to a sincere desire to accept whatever that G-d requested. Fine, but it's now over 3,000 years later, few can relate to Yetzias Mitzrayim, so why does the Torah require us to mention that freedom from bondage twice a day in Shema. And why, on Pesach, are we expected to view ourselves as if we were personally redeemed? So again, the answer comes from Bifarech. Your alter Zeides and Sabas were slaves in Egypt, so don't mistreat a slave, whether Jewish or Canaanite. Don't look down at a convert, because we all come from converts. And these are only Mosholim. There are any number of people who are struggling, or, even worse, believe that they're struggling. About 40 years ago, a pharmacist I know got into financial difficulties. As is too often the case, they were of his own doing. It's a long story which I won't tell, but here's the "interrer shir" (I'm trying to impress Dr. Reich). This fellow confided in me that he felt compelled to keep up with his brother who owned, wait for it, his own yacht. But no matter the cause, we must remain sympathetic to those who are suffering, and by no means laud our bounty over them. Yes, Hashem knows that He created the Heavens and the Earth and how impressive that is, but His focus is on the Exodus and the ensuing Revelation. And that's perhaps what R. Yitzchok was alluding to in that first Rashi. The world began, in earnest, when the Jewish people, as a nation, accepted the Torah.

And we can take this one step further. The commentators explain that one loses the opportunity to continue counting Sefira if he misses a day. This is because counting the Omer is viewed as a single Mitzvah rather than 49 separate Mitzvos. But why is that so? So now we return to Parshas Bereishis and note that when describing the sixth day of Creation, the Torah calls it Yom Hashishi. The Gemara tells us that the "Heh" alludes to a different Shishi i.e. the sixth of Sivan the day in which the Jews accepted the Torah. This then establishes a link between Yetzias Mitzrayim and Kabbalos Torah. There had to be the former to get to the latter but had there only been the Exodus and the Jews not fulfill their end of the bargain the world would have reverted to utter chaos. An this is in line with our thesis that the world really began with the events of Yetzias Mitzrayim. Had our antecedents missed a day of the 49 leading up to the Revelation, they would've been unfit to receive the Torah and so we too, can't be connected to that Mitzvah unless we keep it throughout. But, seemingly we can challenge this. For many, the centerpiece of the Seder (other than the food of course) is singing Dayeinu. Now the point of this song is that the Jews had to recognize and praise Hashem for every step of the process. It would follow that each day of the Omer should be a separate Mitzvah in which we thank Hashem for allowing us to get one step closer to Sinai, to work on one more character trait as exemplified by the Sefiros. So we can answer as follows. There are two distinct dynamics at work here. When we count Sefira it's with the resolute determination that we will return to Sinai and renew our bond with the Torah. Dayeinu represents something completely different. Yes, we all want have hopes and dreams, but for many they aren't realized. Dayeinu is telling those Jews not to be disheartened. Maybe you didn't get the whole nine yards, but whatever you did accomplish is yours and it's yours forever. So cherish it. Hashem knows what's best for all of us and so if we trust in Him, ultimately this trust will be rewarded.