



A number of months ago – I met with a group of Jewish political leaders in Teaneck. We discussed how I could help them in their important work on behalf of our town. During the course of our discussion, the name of an African American Town Council Member - who was not part of the conversation – came up. After the meeting, I reached out to her. At the time, she did not respond.

After the tragic shooting at a Tops supermarket in Buffalo last Saturday, I called Town Councilwoman Gervonn Romney Rice again. This time, she answered. On behalf of Rinat and the Jewish community, I voiced how terrible and unacceptable the Buffalo attack was. We know something of the fear that members of her community felt this week. We notice. I offered our support to her. No American should be afraid to walk the aisles of a supermarket. She thanked me for the call – she expressed how much it meant to her. It is not just rabbis who can make such calls. We all have neighbors, friends, co-workers, and people we meet in local shops who are suffering this week. Make a call. Take a moment to tell them that you notice. Remember – how you felt three years ago after Pittsburgh and Poway – remember how meaningful a stranger’s voice of support was then. Be that voice now.

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The first Rashi in Parshat Behar is pretty famous. Let’s see if you can finish this sentence:

Mah Inyan ... Etzel ....

“What is the connection between Shmita and Har Sinai?”

The phrase with which the Malbim ends his commentary on our parsha is also pretty famous – appearing in *pirkei avot* 5:23 - but most people don’t know that the Malbim uses it here. I will not test you on this one.

Lephum Tzaara Agra – “According to the pain is the reward”

Rashi’s question is a bit of an introduction to Parshat Behar. He takes a step back from the meaning of the pasuk – to ask about the context and function of the law itself. It is a literary – as opposed to a legal – question. His answer: Just as Shemita was given at Har Sinai – so too were all the laws given at Har Sinai.

The Malbim use the phrase *lefum tzaara agra* to explain the last words of the parsha – *et shabtotai tishmoru v’et mikdashi tirau*. Based on the *midrash torat kohanim* – he describes the experience of the *eved ivri* – a Jewish bondservant - who is sold to a gentile. He might say, look at my master – he doesn’t keep shabbat – he worships idolatry – I will do the same. Therefore, the Torah specifically instructs him regarding Shabbat and *avodat hashem*. Just because a

person is in a difficult situation does not mean that Hashem does not call upon him or her to live a life of *mitzvot*. Hashem specifically instructs the *eved ivri* – *et shabtotai tishmoru v'et mikdashi tirau* – yes it is difficult – but according to the difficulty is the reward.

Two questions – based upon the beginning and end of our parsha:

1. If all the mitzvot were given at *har sinai*, why was *shemita* selected to teach this lesson?
2. Everyone experiences troubles - *tzarot*, why was the *eved ivri* selected to communicate the lesson – *lefum tzaara agra*?

A Rashi at the end of our parsha provides a clue. Rashi argues that the laws of *parshat behar* are points along the trajectory of a specific individual. Together, they form his story. A person begins by cutting corners on *shemita* – Rashi doesn't tell us that he violates these laws – but that he is *chashud al hashviit* – he is suspected of doing so. Why? *chamad mammon* – greed. This leads to a cycle of spiritual decline that culminates in his selling himself into slavery to a gentile. Rashi's backstory to our parsha makes the Malbim's message more vivid. It is not simply that it is difficult for the *eved ivri* to perform *mitzvot* in the home of a gentile master. Rather, it is difficult to imagine him turning around his story from such a nadir. Yet, the Torah communicates that even such moments there is hope. This story doesn't need to descend further – the *chashud al hashviit* / *eved ivri* story can be turned around. Hashem calls upon us to improve – to live a life of *mitzvot* – even the *eved ivri hanimkar l'akum* is not dropped from the Torah's panoramic vision of Jewish existence.

Why of all *mitzvot* is *shemita* selected? Why of all suffering Jews is the *eved ivri* chosen? It is because these details are part of a story. It is not simply the mitzvah that is taught to us. Parshat Behar weaves a narrative with mitzvot in which the whole is greater than the parts. The mitzvah of *shemita* communicates a faith mindset (or lack thereof) – the *eved ivri* experiences a unique feeling of despair which comes with a certain guilty estrangement. These emotional coordinates can be plotted on a life map. Here's my chiddush – the *mitzvot* of *parshat behar* are not alone in this - all the *mitzvot* given at *har sinai* form a story. Mitzvot are not random – disassociated – directives. They come together to create a whole in our lives. Each mitzvah is a brush stroke of paint with which we can create a rich landscape of *avodat hashem*. Parshat Behar teaches us the value of being conscious of this.

As we live and learn within a framework of Torah life – as we prepare for Shavuot – there is a critical lesson here for us to draw. Our mitzvot connect to one another. We compose a story with the mitzvot.

Do not get lost in the trees and fail to create your forest. Think and speak about the bigger picture – the lessons that mitzvot create. Share these lessons with your children and grandchildren. Share them with your neighbors. We have something of great value that can help others.