

Drasha for Behar-Behukotai

Rabbi Haim Shalom

This week we read the last two Torah portions of Leviticus, Behar and Behukotai. One of the commandments from the first of these portions (Parashat Behar) reads:

ויקרא כה:לח

אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לָתֵת לָכֶם אֶת
אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן לְהִיּוֹת לָכֶם לְאֱלֹהִים:

Translation:

I am the Eternal, your God, Who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan to be for you God.

So, according to this verse or at least the traditional interpretation of this verse as given by Rashi, the whole point of leaving Egypt is so that we can get to the Land of Israel. This verse, and the Torah as a whole understands life in the Land of Israel as the assumed norm for all the laws it gives.

For the Torah, the story of the Exodus from Egypt is not just about freedom from slavery, but the first step to reaching Israel where a society of our own can be founded.

When Rabbi Stein and I discussed what I should talk about he mentioned that people might be interested in the personal element of moving to Israel – this incredible country which so many Jews feel attached to, but not so many, who grew up in the US or England get to call home. Among English speaking Jews, living in Israel is not a “normal choice” – and a fair few native born Israelis think I am pretty crazy for moving here too. Moving here and then choosing to be a Reform Rabbi here, in Israel, not exactly known for its warm embrace of Reform Judaism? Well I am clearly one sandwich short of a picnic. But what we see from this verse and this parasha, is that living in Israel is “meant to be” the norm, it is the default understanding of Jewish life.

The Talmud uses this verse to stake out a claim that all Jews should live in Israel and to leave Israel is actually forbidden.

A famous passage from Masechet Ketubot (which is meant to deal with Marriage contracts – you could say in this section they are looking at the marriage contract between G-d and the Jewish people) brings the voice of an anonymous Rabbi from an earlier generation:

A Person should always live in the land of Israel, even in a city, the majority of whom are Star Worshippers, and should not live outside of the land even in a city the majority of which are Jewish, even the Upper West Side. (That last point may not have been in the original Talmud text). And it doesn't matter how pretty the place is – even if it is as beautiful as Rochester New York. And even if they have rabbis as wise as Rabbi Stein and Rabbi Tulik!

(Back to the actual Talmud quote): For one who lives in the land of Israel is as one who has a god, and all those who live outside the land are as if they have no God. As it is written:

“to give you the land of Canaan to be for you God.”

They bring proof of this position that outside the land one is like an idol-worshipper from the story of King David, when he is set to go abroad and it is referred to as “worshipping other gods (1 Samuel 26:19)”.

But the beauty of the Jewish tradition is that it never talks with only one voice. Immediately after the anonymous Rabbi extols the virtue of living in Israel, the opposite view is propounded. Rav Yehuda, one of the leading voices of his generation claims the exact opposite – one that moves from Babylon to Israel has transgressed. He brings proof from the book of Jeremiah where the Jewish people are

told to stay in Babylon until G-d shall bring us forth. The passage which follows has become the bedrock of Ultra-Orthodox anti-Zionism. 3 oaths are mentioned which, the Talmud claims, the Jewish people have taken upon ourselves – not to disobey the nations who rule over us, not to rebel against the exile which is G-d's punishment for us and not to rise up as a wall to move to the land of Israel. Extreme elements of the Ultra-Orthodox world see Zionism as a breaking of these three oaths and the State of Israel as illegitimate.

So – within the Jewish world – both the belief that this is the only place to live, and that the establishment of Israel as a modern state is a grave sin are legitimate positions. It stands to reasons that many of the positions in between will be equally as legitimate.

There is no one correct way to approach Israel. The Torah reflects a Reality in which the Israelites understood their place in Israel as “The Norm”, but it does not mean it has to be for all time. The original Zionist movement saw a return to Israel as a kind of normalisation of the Jewish people. For me, moving to Israel was about the Judaisation of my life. I grew up in a pretty standard Reform Jewish family. Maybe not so standard. I can trace my Reform credentials back to the first Reform Synagogue in the United Kingdom, founded in 1840. But my upbringing was probably quite similar to one that the young people

growing up at Brith Kodesh might receive. Because of wonderful rabbis, like Rabbi Stein and Rabbi Kulik, and a fantastic youth group experience, similar to that provided by NFTY, I came to realise that I LOVED being Jewish. But that did not translate into a clear and uncomplicated religious belief. I was not, am not, perhaps, a pure believer. I find the concept of G-d difficult, requiring metaphor and analogy to become meaningful. I do not live feeling G-d's presence. As such, religious belief was not enough for me to make me motivated to infuse my whole life with Jewishness. Instead a slightly different idea inspired me – what if a whole country was run with Jewishness as its foundational basis. Like any other country in the world, it needs to deal with modern issues, political issues scientific issues. How do we combat global warming? How do we act in a pandemic? How do we elect a government? How do we teach people how to drive? (We are better at some of these than others). But what if the whole society had Jewish culture as its underpinning?

I grew up in England. Every kid in England can quote you some Shakespeare:

“But Soft – what light through yonder window breaks,

‘Tis the East and Juliet is the sun,

Arise fair sun and kill the envious moon,

For she is already sick and pale with grief

That thou, her maid

Art far more fair than she.”

None of my three kids will be able to quote Shakespeare in the original, and a little bit of me is sad about that. But when they get on a bus in Jerusalem (which by the way has an excellent public transport system because we understand that publicly funded public transport is the best way to de-incentivise car-ownership and to create fairer and more equal transport outcomes), each one of them will read part of a verse from the Torah : מפני שיבה תקום Before the silver haired, you shall rise. Or in plane English. Get up out of your seat for an elderly person.

We read this verse a couple of weeks ago in Parashat Kedoshim.

Why am I here in Israel (as well as being a bit mad) – because this is where Torah verses are put on buses to remind kids to stand for their elders.

This is where my kids will soon be correcting my Hebrew mistakes, even though I did rabbinical school and they’re in grade school.

This is where those same kids know more Purim songs than I do because that’s all they learn for two weeks every February.

This is where my kids won’t know who Harry and Meghan are but they will know who David and Jonathan are.

That’s not necessarily good or bad, but it is very Jewish.

In Israel, Jewishness is the fabric of society, not a choice we make. That has repercussions for all elements of Israeli society. It means we don't have to sacrifice our values to promote Jewish continuity (it will take care of itself), we don't need to worry about some of the issues that the Jewish community in America worries about which can make us seem insular and inhospitable. No-one "marries out" in Israel. If one assimilates here, it can only ever be into the majority culture – Jewish culture. But it can go the other way as well. People can become obsessed about preserving the Jewish character of the only Jewish state, even though ironically this is the only place where we don't NEED to preserve it – it will organically preserve itself. And we can romanticise those who cling to an imagined Jewish past as we often do with the Ultra Orthodox community. The majority secular culture essentially has allowed the Ultra Orthodox community to live as an autonomous unit. The price of that autonomy was shown last week in the terrible tragedy at Meron where 45 people were crushed to death. In a country which prides itself on looking after its citizens, a tragedy was allowed to happen because we considered some of those citizens not part of the population who "we" the regular Israelis needed to look after. Somehow, we considered it ok that "their" leaders would look after "their" public. This is not ok. I am as

responsible for my Hareidi brethren and sistren as much as I am for any other citizen. And I have let them down.

Another of the verses from parashat Behar states:

ויקרא כה:לו

אַל תִּקַּח מֵאִתּוֹ נֶשֶׁךְ וְתִרְבִּית וְיִרְאֵת מֵאֱלֹהֶיךָ וְחֵי אָחִיךָ עִמָּךְ:

You shall not take interest from him and you shall fear G-d, and your brother lives with you.

This verse is quoted in one of the most famous conversations in the Talmud. Two people are in a desert and have just enough water for one. What should they do. The first answer is that they should both drink half (and probably die). The second is that the owner of the bottle should drink. One should first ensure one's own safety and then worry about others.

What does this show – apart from that our tradition encourages us to disagree even in matters of life and death. It shows us that there will always be huge disagreements. We will disagree about Israel and its proper course. We will disagree about the Palestinians and the occupation. We will disagree about issues of religion and state, how the western Wall should be run. We will disagree about the place of Diaspora Jews in the running of Israel. But : “ וְחֵי אָחִיךָ עִמָּךְ “ – your brother (or sister) shall live with you. We are all

brothers and sisters. Whether we be in Jerusalem, where it is the middle of the night, or in Rochester where Shabbat is just coming in. We are each other's family. Shabbat Shalom.