



Parshas Behar-Bechukosai

For the week ending 22 Iyar 5759
7 - 8 May 1999

Overview

BEHAR

The Torah prohibits normal farming of the Land of Israel every seven years. This "Shabbos" for the land is called shemita. (5754 was a shemita year in Israel.) After every seventh shemita, the fiftieth year, yovel (jubilee), is announced with the sound of the shofar on Yom Kippur. This was also a year for the land to lie fallow. Hashem promises to provide a bumper crop prior to the shemita and yovel years to sustain the Jewish People. In the year of yovel, all land is returned to its original division from the time of Joshua, and all Jewish indentured servants are freed, even if they have not completed their six years of work. A Jewish indentured servant may not be given any demeaning, unnecessary or excessively difficult work, and may not be sold in the public market. The price of his labor must be calculated according to the amount of time remaining until he will automatically become free. The price of land is similarly calculated. Should anyone sell his ancestral land, he has the right to redeem it after two years. If a house in a walled city is sold, the right of redemption is limited to the first year after the sale. The Levites' cities belong to them forever. The Jewish People are forbidden to take advantage of one another by lending or borrowing with interest. Family members should redeem any relative who was sold as an indentured servant as a result of impoverishment.

BECHOKOSAI

The Torah promises prosperity for the Jewish People if they follow Hashem's commandments. However, if they fail to live up to the responsibility of being the Chosen People, then chilling punishments will result. The Torah details the harsh historical process that will fall upon them when Divine protection is removed. These punishments, whose purpose is to bring the Jewish People to repent, will be in seven stages, each more severe than the last. Sefer Vayikra, the Book of Leviticus, concludes with the details of erachin – the process by which someone vows to give the Beis Hamikdash the equivalent monetary value of a person, an animal, or property.

Insights

CLEAR AS A BELL

"Proclaim freedom throughout the land for all its inhabitants" (25:10)

On July 8, 1776, a chime that changed the world rang out from the tower of Independence Hall in Pennsylvania. The Liberty Bell summoned citizens to hear the first public reading of the Declaration of Independence by Colonel John Nixon.

Some twenty years earlier the Pennsylvania Assembly had ordered the making of the Bell to commemorate the 50-year anniversary of William Penn's 1701 Charter of Privileges.

The bell was inscribed with a verse from this week's parsha: "Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof." As the bell was to commemorate the "jubilee" (from the Hebrew yovel) of Penn's Charter, this quotation from the Bible was considered apt, since the preceding line is "And you shall sanctify the fiftieth year."

One of the most famous aspects of the Liberty Bell is its crack.

When the Bell was hung for its trial ringing on March 10, 1753, Isaac Norris wrote: "I had the mortification to hear that it was cracked...by a stroke of the clapper."

The bell was melted down and recast. An ounce and a half of copper per pound was added in an attempt to make the new bell less brittle.

On March 29, 1753, the new bell was raised into the belfry. Nobody was too happy with the way it sounded. "It seems that they have added too much copper."

This second bell also cracked. This crack grew and grew until finally, on Washington's Birthday in 1846, it rendered the Bell "un-ringable." To this day, on the Fourth of July, the Liberty Bell is "rung" by being tapped symbolically.

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If you think about it, it's amazing that a famous symbol should be something so imperfect. More — its very imperfection is part of its fame.

Sometimes, when we look at our lives, it's easy to be become despondent. The clock seems to tick faster every minute. There is so much to achieve, and we have done so little. More and more what seemed minor imperfections in ourselves now appear to us as major character flaws. Will we ever dominate our negative drives? Will we ever free ourselves from the knee-jerk reactions of our lower selves and take the wheel of our lives in accordance with the wishes of the Creator? It's easy to despair...

Maybe it's not by chance that it should be that a cracked bell "proclaim freedom throughout the land." We're not perfect. All of us have our cracks. But even the most flawed of us, even those whose merits do not ring out like a bell, have the potential to proclaim freedom — real freedom. For real freedom is when we control our impulses rather than them controlling us. We can only achieve that freedom, however, if we are prepared to engrave deeply the words of the Torah on our hearts. The Torah can make an impression even on the hardest heart of iron. Even the least sensitive and the most forlorn of us will find that, if we are prepared to engrave the Torah's words of liberty on our iron hearts, we will hear freedom proclaimed like a bell throughout our lives.

DAY OF THE LAND

"I will make the Land desolate and your foes who dwell upon it will be desolate... Then will the land be appeased for its sabbaticals during all the years of desolation, while you are in the land of your foes; then the land will rest and it will appease for its sabbaticals..." (26:32/35)

When the Jewish People fail to keep the laws of *shemita* and *yovel* — the Land of Israel's years of rest — they are sent into exile. If they do not let the land rest during their presence, it will rest during their absence. Seventy violated Sabbatical years before and during the First *Beis Hamikdash* era resulted in seventy years of Babylonian exile.

Prior to the Roman exile, Josephus Flavius testified to the abundance in *Eretz Yisrael*: "*For it is an extremely fertile land, a land of pastures and many varieties of trees... The entire land is planted by her inhabitants and not one stretch of earth is left uncared for. Because the Land is blessed with such goodness, the cities of the Galilee and numerous villages are densely populated. Even the smallest of villages boasts of at least 15,000 inhabitants.*"

In 1260, the Ramban (Nachmanides), writing to his son from *Eretz Yisrael*, gave a very different picture: "*What shall I tell you concerning the condition of the Land... She is greatly forsaken and her desolation is great... That of greater holiness is more desolate than that of lesser holiness. Jerusalem is most desolate and destroyed.*"

Six centuries later, in 1867, Mark Twain found the Land in similar condition: "*A desolate land whose soil,*

though more than sufficiently rich, produces only thorn bush and thistle — a silent mourning expanse. There exists here a state of neglect that even the imagination is incapable of granting the possibility of beauty of life and productivity. We arrived in peace to Mount Tabor...we did not see a soul during the entire journey...everywhere we went there was no tree or shrub..." And Twain wrote: "*The Land of Israel dwells in sackcloth and ashes. The spell of a curse hovers over her, which has blighted her fields and imprisoned the might of her power with shackles.*" Twain saw the desolation as so great that he wrote: "*The Land of Israel is a wasteland...The Land of Israel is no longer to be considered part of the actual world..."*

Compare this quasi-post-nuclear scene with the Torah's dire warning:

"And the foreigner who will come from a distant land — when they see the plagues of the Land and the illnesses with which Hashem has inflicted it; sulfur and salt, a conflagration of the entire Land, it cannot be sown and it cannot sprout, and no grass shall rise up on it...And all the nations will say 'For what reason did Hashem do so to this Land?' " (Devarim 29:21)

For centuries, the Christian church tried to make mileage out of the above verse, claiming that the desolation of the Land of Israel was proof that G-d had rejected the Jewish People. However, the Ramban points out that the desolation of the Land is really a blessing in disguise. In this week's parsha, the Torah says "*I will make the Land desolate, and your foes who dwell upon it will be desolate...*" During all our exiles, our Land will not accept our enemies. It will refuse to be fertile, so that no other nation may settle in it. An army may conquer territory, but to establish a permanent settlement requires the co-operation of the Land.

Maharsha writes: "*As long as Israel does not dwell on its Land, the Land does not give her fruits as she is accustomed. When she will begin to flower again, however, and give of her fruits, this is a clear sign that the end — the time of the Redemption — is approaching, when all of Israel will return to its Land.*"

Eretz Yisrael is like a faithful wife told that her husband languishes in a foreign jail from which he will never return. Nevertheless, she waits for him, accepting no suitor in his place, convinced that one day, he will return.

When we read of Mark Twain's description of the Land of Israel, it's difficult for us to believe that he could be speaking of the *Eretz Yisrael* that we know today, a land blooming and blossoming. Exported Israeli fruit, vegetables and flowers grace tables around the world. Israeli agricultural experts are sent to developing countries. The desert which "*is no longer to be considered part of the actual world*" has become a most beautiful garden.

Sources:

Day Of The Land - Talmud Shabbos 33a, Josephus Flavius - "The Jewish Wars"; Ramban "Letter to his Son" 1260; Mark Twain "The Innocents Abroad or the New Pilgrim's Progress" 1867

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Haftorah: Yirmiyahu 16:19 - 17:14

The weekly Torah portion describes the mishap to befall Israel if they do not heed the Torah: the Haftarah predicts the calamity shortly before it actually occurred. The reason for G-d's wrath is basically the worship of idols and the lack of trust in the G-d of Israel. The passage also contrasts the misfortune of one who does not have full belief and trust in G-d to the success and bliss of the one who does.

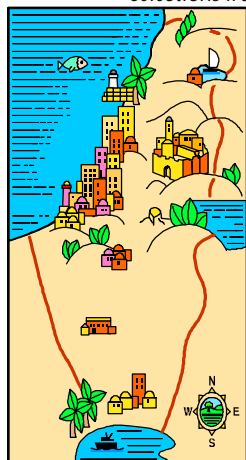
ONE ORIGIN

As mentioned, the causes of the first exile were idol-worship and lack of trust in G-d. Both evolve from the same basis — failure to believe in G-d's Unity and Omnipotence. The belief in G-d's Omnipotence means He is the sole true existence and is constantly sustaining the existence of the creation. G-d has complete control; nothing happens without His will or power. Consequently, there is no place for worshipping elements of the creation as the pagans do, even though these icons symbolize certain powers through which G-d sustains the world.

This belief brings us to the second concept, the concept of trust, as this belief should bring us to have complete trust in G-d's ability to help us in times of need.

LOVE OF THE LAND

Selections from classical Torah sources which express the special relationship between the People of Israel and Eretz Yisrael



ASHDOD

One of the five major Philistine cities, Ashdod was the site of the temple of the idol Dagan, where the Holy Ark was brought after its capture from the vanquished Israelites. In Shmuel I (5:1-8) there is a description of the disgrace visited upon the idol, and the suffering of the city's inhabitants, as punishment for their treatment of the Ark.

This perennial thorn in the side of Israel was the object of many prophetic curses, and was finally conquered by King Uzzia of Judea (Divrei Hayamim II 26:6).

Modern Ashdod, established in 1957, has one of the country's major ports and is a growing city with a large immigrant population, religious communities and yeshivot, alongside some large industries.