

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

seventh year, servitude to pay off debt becomes unnecessary. A person can choose to remain a slave, but even that choice is overridden by the Yovel when the person gets back the property they sold and can rely on it to maintain themselves. Behar makes it a mitzvah to buy someone's release from slavery and places limits on the nature of the work the slave can be compelled to do.

In many ways Parashat Behar is the blueprint for all economic justice initiatives, and for that we Jews can be proud. But it must be pointed out that most of the above is reserved for one's fellow Israelites. Disturbingly, the Torah does permit Israelites to maintain perpetual ownership of non-Israelite slaves, transfer them (like any other property) to another owner, and work them in ways that would be forbidden for Israelite slaves.

One might conclude therefore that the Torah is Israelite-supremacist, but I think a more accurate reading is that the Torah acknowledges and works within the limits of what can be expected of individuals or societies. Just as the Torah expects there to be wealth gaps, it also expects there to be empathy gaps.

Study after study shows that we are "wired" to be more generous with those with whom we feel the greatest connection: people who we know personally and people who look like those we know, people who we know have our backs or people who look like they would. Although we are naturally altruistic, our frontal lobe makes us more conservative and deliberate about what we share and with whom. It should be no surprise that the societies with the most extensive social safety nets tend to be those that are most homogeneous.

So the Torah does **not** base its expectations of generosity on our collective humanity. Without feelings of empathy, people do not comply willingly with the command to be generous; they must be compelled to share either by guilt and public shaming or by force. And research also shows that negative stimuli trigger people to be even less generous. Pushing people beyond the limits of their natural empathy can, therefore, lead to a complete disintegration of fundamental social bonds. This may help us understand better why different communities and countries react differently to the call to accept and settle refugees.

But the Torah's answer is not, as some would claim, to therefore just "take care of your own." Although we are only required to be generous toward those for whom we feel empathy, the Torah pushes us to expand the boundaries of our empathy. It wants strangers among us to be given the opportunity and responsibility to comply with the social contract, and it wants us to go out of our way to see the other as individuals and find the ways they are like us. As the Rambam states in the Mishneh Torah, Laws of Indentured Servants, 9:8: "The children of Abraham, our father—and they are Israel, to whom the Holy One, blessed be He, has provided the goodness of Torah and commanded us righteous judgments and statutes—they are compassionate to all."



TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Behar

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Annual (Leviticus 25:1-26:2): Etz Hayim p. 738; Hertz p. 531
 Triennial (Leviticus 25:1-28): Etz Hayim p. 742; Hertz p. 535
 Haftarah (Jeremiah 32:6-27): Etz Hayim p. 759; Hertz p. 539

D'var Torah: Generosity & Its Limits

Rabbi Andy Shapiro Katz, CY Director of North American Engagement

In Parashat Behar, the Torah presents a strikingly progressive socio-economic vision, where every seven years (*Shmita*) debts are forgiven, and every fifty years (*Yovel*) land ownership reverts back to its original egalitarian distribution. All of this reminds us that God is the one true owner of the earth and its resources, the one true source of blessing and abundance.

But this vision, though progressive, is not communist. The Torah recognizes that a whole host of factors - talent, effort, wisdom, luck - will cause some to succeed and others to fail. We are free to make choices about how and where we invest our labors and to benefit or lose as a result. And we generally get to keep what we get, use it for what we want, and share it with whomever we wish.

The Torah both expects, and permits, resource inequality to emerge (Devarim 15:11), but it contends with this unfortunate reality through a combination of limited required wealth redistribution and encouragement to be generous. We must leave the corners of our field for the poor to harvest (Vayikra 19:9), give a fixed percentage each year of our income (Devarim 14:28-29), and give tzedaka when we are asked (Devarim 15:7-10). But despite all of this, resource inequality will force some to eventually sell their most fundamental possessions - their property, their labor, and eventually their freedom (Vayikra 25:39-42).

The Torah permits us both to become slaves and own them, but it seeks to place limits on the institution and the inevitable exploitation. The initial period of servitude can last no more than six years. Since all debts are forgiven in the

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D'var Haftarah: Praying Our Truth

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Yirmiyahu (Jeremiah) is not cast as a prophet of optimism. He is the ultimate prophet of the destruction and fall of Judea and the First Temple. Even when his message was intended as one of encouragement, there was a sense that his words were also tinged with despair. In this week's haftarah, however, Yirmiyahu is charged with presenting the people with a message which implied that despite the impending doom which hung over nation, there was still hope of future restoration. When God gives Yirmiyahu the sign which he is to present to the people, he replies with a prayer of praise to God. In this prayer he describes God, in part, as: "the great and mighty God (*HaE-I hagadol hagibor*)" (32:18)

You might have noticed that Yirmiyahu's description of God hones close to the words we pray at the beginning of the Amidah – the standing prayer which is so integral to Jewish worship. There, we describe God as: "the great, the mighty and awesome God (*HaE-I, hagadol hagibor v'hanora*), based on Moshe's description of God (Devarim 10:17). While Yirmiyahu's words were probably intended simply as praise to God, some sages from the period of the Talmud noticed a discrepancy between Moshe's description and that of Yirmiyahu: "Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said: Why were they called men of the Great Assembly [who purportedly fashioned the words of the Amidah]? Because they restored the crown of the divine attributes to its ancient completeness. [For] Moshe had come and said: The great God and mighty, and the awesome God. Then Yirmiyahu came and said: Foreigners are destroying His (God's) Temple. Where then, are His awesome deeds? As a result, Yirmiyahu omitted [the attribute] 'awesome'. Daniel came and said: Foreigners are enslaving His (God's) children. Where are His mighty deeds? Therefore, he omitted the word 'mighty'. But they (the Men of the Great Assembly) came and said: On the contrary! Therein lie His mighty deeds that He suppresses His wrath, that He extends long-suffering to the wicked. Therein lie His awesome powers: For but for the fear of Him, how could one [single] nation persist among the [many] nations! But how could [the earlier] Rabbis (Yirmiyahu and Daniel are thought of as sages) abolish something established by Moshe? Rabbi Eleazar said: Since they knew that the Holy One, blessed be He, insists on truth, they would not ascribe false [things] to Him." (Yoma 69b)

It is clear from this anecdote that the sages took the truth of their relationship with God very seriously in the face of the reality that they lived. Their lively discussion offers us a window into what our prayer experience should look like since we struggle with similar questions. There will be times when our experience will reflect that of Moshe, while there will be times when we might feel like Yirmiyahu or Daniel. The important thing to remember about Jewish prayer is that it must reflect the truth of our lived experience.

Parashat Behar Self-Study

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Some formative social-economic laws are found in this parashah. What would society look like if they were observed as the Torah commands them?

- 1) During the Sabbatical year (*Shmita*) we are forbidden to work the land. However, the land will naturally produce fruits, which anyone may eat, including the servants, paid workers, sojourners, and animals (25:1-7). What does the list of benefactors tell you about the nature of the Sabbatical year?
- 2) In the 50th "Jubilee" year (*Yovel*) land goes back to its original owner, so practically one cannot buy land, only lease it, based on the number of years left until the Jubilee year. The Torah warns twice against dealing dishonestly with your fellow person (25:14-17). Presumably, everyone knew when the Jubilee year will take place, so in what aspects might one be dishonest?
- 3) If a person becomes impoverished and is forced to sell his field, his relative may redeem (buy back) the field prior to the Jubilee year (25:25-28). Is the motivation economic or ideological? What would be the reasoning for each of these?
- 4) Houses sold in a walled town can be redeemed up to a year from the time of sale, otherwise, the sale is permanent (25:29-34) However, Levite houses and fields around them are eternally redeemable, for that is their holding. Why do you think that the Levites got different rules?
- 5) If a person is forced to sell himself into slavery (25:39-43), his master is warned not engage him in *parekh* work (slave labor?) What do you think might be included in *parekh* labor? (Note, the Israelites in Egypt worked in *parekh*) Why do you think restrictions are put on the type of labor the master is allowed to demand?

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