



DVAR TZEDEK

Parashat Behar-Bechukotai

By Rabbi Michael Schwab

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One of the greatest enterprises of Judaism is to express theological beliefs and ethical concepts through concrete actions that can have enduring impacts on the world. Since the times of the Torah, and up to the present day, Jews have done this through our system of *mitzvot* (commandments) and *halachah* (law).

In one of this week's Torah portions, *Behar*, we find a great illustration of how the powerful connection between religious law and tangible ethical action can benefit the world. The Torah tells us, "Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them, 'When you come to the land which I give you, then shall the *land* keep a Sabbath to the Lord.'"¹ Using the paradigm of God's original creation of the universe as the foundation, this law states that not only will *people* have a Sabbath and "rest," so too shall the land.

Further, this *Shmitah*, as it is called, is to occur every seven years culminating in the Jubilee year, which is celebrated at the completion of the seventh cycle. During the Jubilee year debts are forgiven, land is returned to its original ancestral owners and, as in the other *shmitah* years, the land lies fallow and its natural produce is shared by all.

This joyous and religiously ordained time period, reminiscent of God's creation of the world, gives birth and expression to powerful laws aimed at creating a just and equitable human society. We learn from the Torah that to be in a sanctified relationship with God we must treat our fellow human beings as the sacred creations of God.

In fact, according to the rabbis, the very rationale for the ethical standards expressed in these laws is embedded in a traditional Jewish understanding of how God relates to us as his creations. As the Torah states regarding *Shmitah* and Jubilee, "... for the land is Mine. You are but temporary residents with Me." The rabbis take this verse to mean that the spiritual/ethical rationale underlying both the *Shmitah* years and the year of the Jubilee is that everyone and everything is a creation of God. Not only does this mean that nothing is ultimately owned by individuals, but also in a more positive sense, that we are all equally valuable and have equal claim to the world's natural resources. The Torah acknowledges that the imperfection of human life does not always allow for this radical equity to be realized in practice, but every fifty years we must do our best to set the balances straight. For the equality of all souls was the ideal with which the world was originally created.

Further proof of this connection between the religious law of Jubilee and the ethical equality of human beings is that immediately following the statement quoted above, the Torah continues, "If your kinsman is in straits and has to sell his part of his holding ... in the Jubilee year it shall be released and he shall return to his holding." This verse begins a sub-section of the laws that demand that we treat the most vulnerable in our society justly and with compassion.

The fact that the Torah goes from Jubilee to economic justice implies a direct connection between the two. As the great Biblical commentator Nehama Liebowitz wrote, "It is a year of equality and rest, in which the soul reaches out towards divine justice, towards God Who sustains the living creatures with loving kindness. There is no private

¹ Leviticus 25:2

property and no punctilious privilege but the peace of God reigns over all in which there is the breath of life.”² Thus, for the Torah there is a powerful link between the religious belief in God and the ethical imperative to care for others and seek equality in the world.

In *Parashat Behar*, we are reminded that the Torah demands that we approach the treatment of our fellow human beings with an ethical sacredness that every creation of God deserves. If we believe that the world was created by God for the purpose of providing each one of us with the blessing of life, it is easy to see how important it is to recognize the dignity of others, wherever they live and whomever they are.

Since, according to the traditional Jewish calendar, this year is actually the *Shmitah* year, it is the perfect year to deepen our commitments to take action in order to bring greater justice and equality into the world. Through the fulfillment of such *mitzvot* we bring the religious and the ethical together in powerful tangible acts that change the world.



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² Nehama Liebowitz, *Studies in Vayikra* (Jerusalem: Haomanim Press), p. 515

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