Parashat Behar-Bechukotai
By Rabbi Michael Schwab
May 16, 2015

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.’” 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.

Rabbi Michael Schwab is co-rabbi of North Suburban Synagogue Beth El in Highland Park, Illinois. He holds a B.A. in history and Judaic studies from Rutgers University and attended the Jewish Theological Seminary’s Rabbinical School. During a year spent studying in Israel, he participated in the Melton Senior Educators Fellowship of Hebrew University for Diaspora Educators. Rabbi Schwab is the immediate past president of the Chicago Rabbinical Assembly, serves on the executive board of the Chicago Board of Rabbis, the board of the Schechter Day School, several Federation committees the National Council of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee and is an AJWS Chicago Global Justice Fellow. He has a wife and four children and is passionate about Judaism, Israel and social justice. Michael can be reached at mschwab@nssbethel.org.

---


©2015 American Jewish World Service

To subscribe to this publication, please visit www.ajws.org/dvartzedek.

AJWS is committed to a pluralistic view of Judaism and honors the broadest spectrum of interpretation of our texts and traditions. The statements made and views expressed in this commentary are solely the responsibility of the author.