



# The Marcos and Adina Katz YUTORAH IN PRINT

Behar 5774

## Are We Jewish Harry Potters?

Rabbi Josh Joseph

It was a magical day. Thunder. Lightening. Thick clouds obscuring your vision, making you wonder if what you were seeing was real. Fire. Earthquakes. And through it all, Hashem's voice boomed. A day for the ages! In his fascinating, though historically questionable Worlds in Collision, Immanuel Velikovsky cites numerous sources from other cultural teachings indicating volcanoes, floods, fires and plagues of vermin throughout the world during this period of time. Apparently, the local events of that particular place were reflected by global natural occurrences.

And the spot where it happened, as we are told in the first pasuk of the parsha, was Har Sinai. True, it is a place with many names, such as Chorev, Kadesh, etc (Shabbos 89a-b). According to R. Abahu, the actual name was Sinai and all the other appellations were merely nicknames based on what happened there that day. For example, it is called Chorev because churbah, or destruction, came to idolaters from that place. It is called Kadesh because the Jewish people were sanctified on that day.

However, according to R Yossi, the son of R Chanina, even before the momentous events at Har Sinai, the spot is it is referred to as Chorev (Shemos 3:1). Why, then, is it called Sinai?

Ibn Ezra (3:2) says that Sinai comes from its bushes, senaim; in fact, since the "burning bush" [sneh] episode took place here as well, this may have contributed to the Sinai tag as well. Interestingly, Ibn Ezra explains that the sneh was a dry, thorny bush, and those who inhabited places with many senaim would turn to Divine powers to bring rain and water to their lands. Thus, it was an appropriate place for Bnei Yisrael to be on that day, a place where they, in their dryness, would turn to Hashem for the flowing water, the gurgling spring that is the Torah.

Chazal offer a different reason for the designation of the name Sinai, namely, because it is a mountain on which hatred [sinah] fell upon idolaters. This is a curious reason

for an event that seems at first blush to be so wondrous, so positive. Sinah... hatred?! Rashi posits that the hatred emanated from Hashem toward the non-Jewish nations who had rejected His Torah. The Talmud (Avodah Zarah, 2b) notes that Hashem brought the Torah around to "every nation and every tongue, but none accepted it until He came to Klal Yisrael who received it." Hashem hated the nations for not striving to become better, to achieve more than their commonplace existence. In making this choice, they opted out of a closer relationship with Hashem, forgoing forever His holiness and uniqueness.

However, the Rambam in his Iggeret Teiman suggests that the sinah here refers to the nations' hatred and jealousy of Bnei Yisrael's new status and elevated relationship with Hashem. We are the "goody two shoes" to their "rebellious son," the Yakov Avinu to their Esav, or perhaps, the Harry Potter to their Draco Malfoy.

It does not quite seem fair: we are hated before we even start. More fittingly, it is the punishment in our parsha's tochacha, which says that if we do not follow Hashem's ways, only then will we be destroyed by our enemies. Yet despite this apparent lack of justice, the words do ring true: people don't seem to like us Jews very much, and it may often be based on jealousy. One need only read recent comments about the Israel lobby manipulating Washington's Iraq policy, or age old claims of Jews controlling the financial markets and media outlets to know the green of envy that can rear its ugly head in our direction.

Our lesson then, just days before our yearly kabbalas ha-Torah on Shavuot, is twofold: as with Rashi's interpretation of the Talmud, we must cherish the gifts we received and accepted, and Hashem's relationship with us as the chosen people. Yet, simultaneously, we must also be sensitive to what those gifts represent to others, and be wary of the hatred of other nations towards us, as Rambam suggests. It is easy to lose sight of the notion that

local events can have global significance, but we must learn to balance others' negative feelings with our perception

## Minority Rights

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

One of the most striking features of the torah is its emphasis on love of, and vigilance toward, the ger, the stranger:

*Do not oppress a stranger; you yourselves know how it feels to be strangers, because you were strangers in Egypt. (Ex. 23: 9)*

*For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the stranger residing among you, giving them food and clothing. You are to love those who are strangers, for you yourselves were strangers in Egypt. (Deut 10: 17-19)*

The sages went so far as to say that the Torah commands us in only one place to love our neighbour but in thirty six times to love the stranger (Baba Metsia 59b).

What is the definition of a stranger? Clearly the reference is to one who is not Jewish by birth. It could mean one of the original inhabitants of the land of Canaan. It could mean one of the "mixed multitude" who left Egypt with the Israelites. It might mean a foreigner who has entered the land seeking safety or a livelihood.

Whatever the case, immense significance is attached to the way the Israelites treat the stranger. This was what they were meant to have learned from their own experience of exile and suffering in Egypt. They were strangers. They were oppressed. Therefore they knew "how it feels to be a stranger." They were not to inflict on others what was once inflicted on them.

The sages held that the word ger might mean one of two things. One was a ger tzedek, a convert to Judaism who had accepted all its commands and obligations. The other was the ger toshav, the "resident alien", who had not adopted the religion of Israel but who lived in the land of Israel. Behar spells out the rights of such a person. Specifically:

*If any of your fellow Israelites become poor and are unable to support themselves among you, help them as you would a resident alien, so they can continue to live among you. (25: 35)*

There is, in other words, an obligation to support and sustain a resident alien. Not only does he or she have the right to live in the holy land, but they have the right to share in its welfare provisions. Recall that this is a very ancient law indeed, long before the sages formulated such

of good, to avoid incurring the jealousy of others, while striving for a closer connection to the "magic" of Hashem.

principles as "the ways of peace", obligating Jews to extend charity and care to non-Jews as well as Jews.

What then was a ger toshav? There are three views in the Talmud. According to Rabbi Meir it was anyone who took on himself not to worship idols. According to the sages, it was anyone who committed himself to keep the seven Noahide commands. A third view, more stringent, held that it was someone who had undertaken to keep all the commands of the Torah except one, the prohibition of meat not ritually slaughtered (Avodah Zarah 64b). The law follows the sages. A ger toshav is thus a non-Jew living in Israel who accepts the Noahide laws binding on everyone.

Ger toshav legislation is thus one of the earliest extant forms of minority rights. According to the Rambam there is an obligation on Jews in Israel to establish courts of law for resident aliens to allow them to settle their own disputes – or disputes they have with Jews – according to the provisions of Noahide law. The Rambam adds: "One should act toward resident aliens with the same respect and loving kindness as one would to a fellow Jew" (Hilkhot Melachim 10: 12).

The difference between this and later "ways of peace" legislation is that the ways of peace apply to non-Jews without regard to their beliefs or religious practice. They date from a time when Jews were a minority in a predominantly non-Jewish, non-monotheistic environment. "Ways of peace" are essentially pragmatic rules of what today we would call good community relations and active citizenship in a multi-ethnic and multicultural society. Ger toshav legislation cuts deeper. It is based not on pragmatism but religious principle. According to the Torah you don't have to be Jewish in a Jewish society and land to have many of the rights of citizenship. You simply have to be moral.

One biblical vignette portrays this with enormous power. King David has fallen in love and had an adulterous relationship with Batsheva, wife of a ger toshav, Uriah the Hittite. She becomes pregnant. Uriah meanwhile has been away from home as a soldier in Israel's army. David, afraid that Uriah will come home, see that his wife is pregnant, realise that she has committed adultery, and come to discover that the king is the guilty party, has Uriah brought

home. His pretext is that he wants to know how the battle is going. He then tells Uriah to go home and sleep with his wife before returning, so that he will later assume that he himself is the father of the child. The plan fails. This is what happens:

*So David sent this word to Joab: "Send me Uriah the Hittite." And Joab sent him to David. When Uriah came to him, David asked him how Joab was, how the soldiers were and how the war was going. Then David said to Uriah, "Go down to your house and wash your feet." So Uriah left the palace, and a gift from the king was sent after him. But Uriah slept at the entrance to the palace with all his master's servants and did not go down to his house.*

*David was told, "Uriah did not go home." So he asked Uriah, "Haven't you just come from a military campaign? Why didn't you go home?"*

## Coming Home

Rabbi Josh Hoffman

**P**arshas Behar presents the laws of Yovel, the fiftieth year in the agricultural cycle. One unique law of Yovel is that all masters must free their slaves. Although the law states that the slaves conclude their service on Rosh Hashanah, they do not leave their masters until the blowing of the shofar on Yom Kippur, another special mitzvah of Yovel. Interestingly, the Talmud seems to connect this mitzvah (sounding of the shofar during Yovel) with the mitzvah of blowing shofar on Rosh Hashanah, to the extent that the law regarding the minimal amount of required shofar blasts is derived from this association. Although there only seems to be a formal association between the two mitzvos, there is also a more intrinsic connection between them.

The Rabbis state that in between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur of the Yovel year, the slaves "sit as kings with crowns on their heads," while waiting for their release. Then, when the shofar is sounded on Yom Kippur, the slaves are freed from their masters' possession. Why is there a need for this interim period?

The Sefer ha-Chinuch writes that the purpose behind the mitzvah of blowing the shofar during Yovel is to strengthen the spirit of the slave owners, who must endure a great loss when they release their slaves. In addition, the Chinuch writes that the sounding of the shofar is also a message to the slaves, to prepare them to leave their beloved masters. Through this message, concludes the Chinuch, everyone will thus return to God. This statement of the Chinuch helps

*Uriah said to David, "The ark and Israel and Judah are staying in tents, and my commander Joab and my lord's men are camped in the open country. How could I go to my house to eat and drink and make love to my wife? As surely as you live, I will not do such a thing!" (2 Samuel 11: 6-11)*

Uriah's utter loyalty to the Jewish people, despite the fact that he is not himself Jewish, is contrasted with King David, who has stayed in Jerusalem, not been with the army, and instead had a relationship with another man's wife. The fact that Tanakh can tell such a story in which a resident alien is the moral hero, and David, Israel's greatest king, the wrongdoer, tells us much about the morality of Judaism.

Minority rights are the best test of a free and just society. Since the days of Moses they have been central to the vision of the kind of society God wants us to create in the land of Israel. How vital, therefore, that we take them seriously today.

explain the intrinsic connection between the sounding of the shofar on Yovel and on Rosh Hashanah, and also helps explain the necessity of the ten day period that the slave must endure before he attains complete freedom.

Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, of blessed memory, developed the idea of the Ramban (see commentary on Masseches Rosh Hashanah) that the sounding of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah is a form of prayer. The Rav explained that the shofar enables us to express that which cannot be articulated with words, as the inner essence of man is something that cannot be put into words. Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak ha-Kohen Kook explains (in Oros ha-Teshuvah) that the process of repentance begins with a return to oneself, to the unique soul implanted in each person by God. Before a person can renew his relationship with Hashem, he must have a sense of self with which he can begin that relationship. This is the function of Rosh Hashanah, as in order to get onto the path of repentance, one must first reawaken one's inner self, which is initiated by the unspoken sound of the shofar. Only then can one rectify and renew one's relationship with God through the process of repentance.

On Yovel everyone is called upon to return to Hashem. Even the slave is included in this process, but due to his years of servitude he is not able to be his own person and develop his inner-self. Therefore, before the slave can leave his master's land and return to his own, he needs a period of readjustment to realize that he was also born with a unique soul and that has a contribution to make in

life. Thus, he needs to spend ten days “with a crown on his head,” feeling like a king, before he can embark with the rest of the Jewish Nation on the ultimate goal of the Yovel

year - a return to God.

## Unexamined Piety

*Rabbi Yehuda Septimus*

In the midst of the Torah’s discussion concerning the festival cycle, immediately after the commandment concerning the Omer offering (a barley offering in the Temple which marks the beginning of the harvest and allows the use of that season’s grain), the following mandate is found:

Subtle personal interactions demand a discerning, God-fearing heart. So suggests Rashi in his comment on *onnaat devarim*-- wronging one’s friend with words. To the *pasuk* in the first of this week’s *parshiyot* from which Chazal derive this Torah prohibition-- “you shall not wrong one another” (*Vayikra*, 25:17), the Torah appends two seemingly superfluous clauses: “You shall fear your God, for I am Hashem, your God.” Quoting from *Sifra*, Rashi comments: “A person might say to himself, ‘who knows whether [through my words to my friend] I intended to harm him?’ Therefore the *pasuk* emphasizes, ‘And you shall fear your God.’ He who probes all thoughts knows.” He who reads our thoughts even when we lack the sensitivity or the will to do so ourselves holds us accountable for the motivations of our unexamined actions.

Beside providing a long list of theoretical ways a person might hurt another through his/her words-- in fact even through his/her body language -- the *Gemara* in *Bava Metzia* recounts a few vivid, real-life examples of *onnaat devarim*, wronging others with words. “If a person experiences suffering or disease or buries his children, one should not address the person with the words *Iyov*’s friends spoke to *Iyov*: “Is not fear [of God] your confidence, and your hope the integrity of your ways? Recall, now, who ever perished, being innocent?” (*Bava Metzia*, 58b). *Iyov*’s friends might have loved him dearly, might have wanted desperately to help him rise above his situation. But they nonetheless acted insensitively. Whether or not they were right in associating his suffering with sin (a matter of dispute among commentators) they committed a Torah transgression in merely intimating *Iyov*’s guilt.

The *gemara* relays yet another example of *onnaat devarim*. In the wake of his complicated adulterous sin with *Bat Sheva*, *David ha-Melekh* complained to God: “Master of the world, you know full well that had

they torn my flesh, my blood would not have poured forth to the earth [because my skin had turned white of embarrassment]. Moreover, when [the students of the *Beit Midrash*] are engaged in *negaim* and *ohalot* [i.e., in the most technical of halakhic analysis] they suddenly ask me, ‘*Dovid*, what is the death penalty for him who seduces a married woman?’ I reply to them, ‘He is executed by strangulation, yet has he a portion in the world to come. But he who publicly shames his neighbor has no portion in the world to come’ (*Bava Metzia* 59a). Although we tend to sympathize even less with *David*’s denigrators than with *Iyov*’s friends, we must remember who the *gemara* here criticizes-- those capable of the most intricate halakhic dialogue, the regular students of the *Beit Midrash*.

Are these people acting out of cold maliciousness? Their argument, we should recognize, is not foundationless. They feel offended that their spiritual leader, the one to whom the questions in the *Beit Midrash* are directed, should be tainted with sin. Their outrage is understandable. (Did they know, for example, that *David* had done *teshuvah* for his sin, and that that *teshuvah* had been accepted?) Yet *David*’s pointed rejoinder, putting a resounding and peremptory end to their character assassination, paired with the poignancy with which the *Gemara* portrays his anguish on their account, graphically illustrate the enormity of their sin.

What do these two accounts share in common? In both, the guilty parties engage in what could be regarded as morally justified, even if hurtful, words. They are guilty of what we might term “*frum*” *onnaat devarim*. Of course the *gemara* does not make sweeping assertions about any and all accusations. Nor is it always clear under what circumstances one who censures a friend hurts him/her unnecessarily and transgresses a Torah violation-- the usual scenario-- and when he/she embarks on a necessary protestation. Moreover, the way the objection is voiced plays even more of a role in determining its virtue than the circumstances which prompt it. Especially when it comes to *mitzvot bein adam la-chevero*, *mitzvot* between one human being and another, the Torah rarely speaks in absolutes. But



the unmitigated, harsh portrayal of Iyov's friends and of David's detractors at very least sends a forceful warning to anyone who feels compelled to engage in similar indictment.

It is here that the accuser's honest assessment of the situation and more importantly of him/herself plays a key role. It is with regard to such a gray situation-- one in which one feels his/her statement justified-- that pasuk goes out of its way to emphasize, "and you shall fear your God." When we personally attack or implicate others out of zealotry for Torah ideals, we stand in danger of

## Every Man to his Field

Rabbi Meir Goldwicht

Our parasha opens with the laws of shemittah and yovel. At the end of the Torah's discussion of Yovel, the Torah says, "*V'kidashtem et shnat hachamishim shanah ukratem dror ba'aretz l'chol yoshveha... v'shavtem ish el achuzato v'ish el mishpachto tashuvu*" (VaYikra 25:10). Rashi explains: "*V'shavtem ish el achuzato*: the fields return to their owners." The difficulty with Rashi's explanation is that it is exactly the opposite of what is written in the passuk—the Torah writes that every person returns to his field, *ish el achuzato*, whereas Rashi writes that the field returns to its owner! Why does Rashi write the exact opposite of the passuk?

Rather, Rashi is coming to teach us the meaning of the word "dror," which appears for the first time in the context of yovel. The word dror has three meanings in lashon hakodesh: 1) When HaKadosh Baruch Hu commands Moshe to prepare the ketoret, He tells Moshe that the first spice he must obtain is "mor," but that he should obtain "mor-dror," as the passuk says, "*V'atah kach lecha b'samim rosh, mor dror*" (Shemot 30:23). The Ramban explains that dror indicates "*naki miziyuf*," free of counterfeit – since mor was very expensive and difficult to obtain, it was a spice that was often counterfeited. HaKadosh Baruch Hu commanded Moshe to make sure he obtained the real mor, mor-dror. 2) The second explanation of dror is chofesh, freedom, as it says in Yeshayahu, "*Likro lishvuyim dror*" (61:1). 3) Dror is also a type of bird. What is special about this bird is that, while most houses have a roof, this bird lives in a "roofless" nest, with no interruption between the nest and the sky. This allows it a direct connection to HaKadosh Baruch Hu – all it needs to do is to simply lift its eyes and look skyward. We have a rule in lashon hakodesh that if a word has more than one meaning, the synthesis of

violating not only Rashi's warning-- saying "who knows whether I intended to harm him/her?" We can fall a prey to an even more perilous trap-- unquestioning self-commendation: "have I not acted for the sake of Heaven?" To sin while waving the banner of Torah values is one of the worst possible forms of chilul Hashem-- not merely a misrepresentation of the Torah but a gross distortion of Torah values. It is in these areas that the Torah demands an especially sensitive, carefully penetrating inner eye. "You shall fear God, for I am the Lord your God."

all the meanings provides the one true explanation of the word; the case of dror is no exception.

Yovel does not mean that a person returns to the house he sold earlier or to the field he sold earlier. The reason a person sold his house is that he was enslaved to his money and to his business dealings – his money became his owner. His enslavement removed his ability to determine his own seder hayom – whether to get up in the morning for davening, whether to set aside times for learning. Rather, yovel is a chance to start over, to contemplate past mistakes and to build a new life. It is a chance to take control back over one's property and over one's seder hayom.

Therefore, the greatest compliment you can give a person is to call him a "*ba'al habayit*." Someone who is truly the ba'al of his bayit – determining his own seder hayom, able to spend time with his wife and children, and able to learn Torah – truly experiences dror. He is *naki miziyuf*, he is free, and he has an uninterrupted connection to HaKadosh Baruch Hu. This is the deeper meaning of Rashi: what is special about the yovel is that control returns from the property to the owner.

How amazing is it that the yovel begins on Yom Kippur, the day a person feels more *naki miziyuf* and more connected to Hashem than any other day of the year. The idea of yovel is for the feelings of Yom Kippur to linger with you for the entire year. And essentially, what happens on Yom Kippur in a major way happens every Shabbat in a smaller way. On Shabbat, a person has more time to learn, to contemplate, to clean himself from contamination, and to strengthen his connection to HaKadosh Baruch Hu. How amazing, then, that on Shabbat we sing Dror Yikra. Perhaps this is also the reason why some have the minhag to begin kiddush on Shabbat morning with "*Im tashiv mishabbat... v'karata*

*lashabbat oneg*” (Yeshayahu 58:13), pesukim that come from the haftarah read on the morning of Yom Kippur.

Our parasha teaches us the importance of a proper set of priorities. The more we work on setting our priorities from the proper perspective and the more we try to increase

## The Essence of Shabbos

Rabbi Dovid Gottlieb

**T**he last chapter in this week’s Torah portion begins on a somewhat surprising note as the pesukim mention the prohibition of idolatry, the requirement to venerate the Beis Ha-Mikdash, and “ve’es Shabsosai tishmoru,” the obligation to observe Shabbos (Va’yikra 26:1-2). These are all important laws and values but, nevertheless, their presentation presents us with an obvious difficulty: why are they mentioned here? What connection do these ideas have with the rest of Parshas Behar? Moreover, compounding the difficulty, all of these laws have already been mentioned in the Torah, most recently in Parshas Kedsohim (ch. 19), so why repeat them now?

Rashi, citing the Midrash, explains that these pesukim actually refer to a specific situation that we read about in the preceding chapter, of a Jew who was compelled by financial difficulty to sell himself into the service of a non-Jew. Given the inevitable religious challenges that such a reality would present, the Torah now warns the servant – specifically – not to forsake his tradition despite his current residence in a foreign environment. Despite the temptations and despite the hardships, he must fastidiously avoid imitating the ritual and religious practices of his master.

But, of course, this explanation just begs the question: why, according to Rashi, did the Torah specify these particular mitzvos when clearly the message of loyalty to Judaism is all embracing?

The Seforno offers an important – albeit partial – explanation that focuses specifically on the example of Shabbos. He explains that a Jew in servitude might have thought that Shabbos is no longer relevant to him given that it is focused on rest and freedom from the shackles of the work week. The Jewish servant, under these circumstances, might conclude that Shabbos isn’t relevant when he is already denied his freedom. The Torah therefore reminds him that despite his rationalization he too must continue observing Shabbos to the best of his ability.

The question is, however, why should this be so; isn’t the Jewish slave’s initial assumption correct? What meaning

kevod shamayim through our actions, the more we will feel dror – nekiut, chofesh, and connection to Hashem – and the closer we will come to the time of “*v’shavtem ish el achuzato v’ish el mishpachto tashuvu.*”

can Shabbos have for a person in this situation? Upon reflection it seems clear that the servant’s fundamental mistake lies in his associating Shabbos exclusively with *menuchah*, physical rest. In fact, many of us are prone to this same error when we translate Shabbos as the “Day of Rest.” It is that, of course, but it is also so much more.

My teacher Rabbi Mayer Twersky has noted that the root of the Hebrew word for Shabbos (*shin, bet, taf*) is found in a number of other contexts (for example, Shemos 12:15 and Yehoshua 5:12) where it clearly doesn’t mean “rest.” Rather, a more precise translation, or explanation, is actually “cessation,” and the implication is that Shabbos is a day when we cease doing one thing – our mundane activities – and we commence with other, loftier, and more spiritual actions.

It is therefore readily understandable that Shabbos remains obligatory even for a Jewish servant as it is the weekly nourishment for his soul which will, hopefully, keep him spiritually anchored and attuned. Despite his challenges – or perhaps because of them – the servant must try to connect with the deeper message of Shabbos, what the Seforno (Va’yikra 23:2) himself describes, in an earlier passage, as a charge that, “you should desist from your work and your preoccupation should be entirely for Hashem your God.”

The servant may not be able to commit his day “entirely” to Hashem but he must do as much as he can.

The significance of the Seforno’s approach is that it goes beyond the specific, textual issue of understanding the pesukim about the servant and speaks to all of us about the broader and very relevant issue of the essence of Shabbos observance. Shabbos is intended to be a time when, freed from other distractions, we can focus on developing our relationship with Hashem. A good night’s sleep, delicious food, and quality family time are all wonderful benefits of the Shabbos, but they should not be confused with the essence of the day. As R. Twersky eloquently notes, “Too often we shortchange ourselves and view the Sabbath as a day of rest and relaxation rather than respite and

redemption.” Shabbos affords us the opportunity of a 25 hour “island in time” where we can focus – without the Blackberry, Bluetooth, or other distractions – on matters of the spirit. It would be a real shame if we waste the chance.

It has been more than one hundred years since Ahad Ha’am famously declared that, “more than Jews have

kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath has kept the Jews.” He was right then and he remains correct now. And in light of the Seforno’s insight we can just add that the better we observe the Shabbos, embracing not only its rules but also its essence, the more the Shabbos will not only keep, but also inspire and uplift us.

## There is No Dispensation

*Rabbi Avraham Gordimer*

**P**arshas Behar devotes 55 pesukim to the halachos of Shmitah and Yovel, and to various other topics which depend upon Shmitah and Yovel. However, the parshah inexplicably shifts gears at its very end: “You shall not make for yourselves idols, and a graven image and heathen altar you shall not erect for yourselves, and you shall not place an engraved stone in your land upon which to prostrate, for I am Hashem your God. My Shabbosos you must observe, and my Mikdash you must fear - I am God.” (26:1-2)

Struck by the apparent disconnect of these pesukim from the rest of the parshah, Toras Kohanim (quoted by Rashi) explains the relationship: The end of chapter 25 speaks of a Jew sold as a slave, and the immediately subsequent admonitions at the beginning of chapter 26 warn such a Jew who is enslaved to a non-Jew that he may not engage in forbidden practices despite the fact that his master engages in them. “The Jewish slave cannot say, ‘Since my master is involved in illicit relations, I will do likewise. Since my master worships idols, I will do so as well. Since my master does not observe Shabbos, I will do the same.’ These warnings address such a situation.” (Toras Kohanim 25:106 in Rashi on 26:1)

The question arises as to why a Jew who is enslaved to a non-Jew would think that he should be permitted to emulate the acts of his master. Does the Torah really need to address such a scenario? Isn’t it clear that such a Jew is not allowed to violate the Torah? Why would he think otherwise?

The main themes of Parshas Behar are God’s total control of the world and the restoration of people and property to their original associations, as per the Divine determination and mandate at the time of Yetzias Mitzrayim and entry to Eretz Yisroel. One whose ancestral property is restored, whose field cannot be tilled, whose loan is canceled or who is spontaneously set free from servitude is reminded that Hashem controls and owns all that exists and that He can intervene in the natural and legal orders. Legitimate acquisitions and permanent possessions are rendered void

by God’s decree; He is indeed the Master of the universe, including property and personal status.

While these majestic and powerful concepts are both comforting and awe-inspiring, they can also lead to a sense of despair on the part of one who does not seek to submit to Hashem’s authority and masterplans.

This is where the interpretation of Toras Kohanim comes in. One who experiences misfortune and despair, feeling like an object at the mercy of Providence, is prone to fail to take responsibility for those aspects of his life which are still and forever in his control. Such a person may think that since Hashem placed him in a certain predicament, the person is not bound by the rules and expectations of the Torah which are applicable to people in more normative circumstances.

This is exemplified precisely by the case of a Jew who is enslaved to a non-Jew. In such an environment, which the Jew did not choose and from which he cannot escape, the easy way out is to despair and disavow any responsibility for mitzvah observance, proclaiming, “Fate has overtaken my path, and I am a mere object of circumstances beyond my control. I am not responsible for my spirituality any more. I was thrust into these surroundings, and I cannot any longer be held accountable for my actions - certainly not as they pertain to religious observance.”

The message of Parshas Behar is that Hashem’s control over the human condition and the universe does not negate one’s responsibility. A Jew who is enslaved to a non-Jewish master and is trapped in an environment which is anathema to Torah is not excused from Torah observance to the extent that it is possible. Moreover, such observance is an affirmation of God’s authority in the most true sense, with a realization that one cannot escape from God and from His mitzvos, irrespective of the situation in which one finds himself.

This understanding of the explanation of Toras Kohanim enables us to appreciate the conclusion of the parshah: “My Shabbosos you must observe, and my

Mikdash you must fear - I am God.” (26:1-2) We are instructed that despite the surrounding circumstances and any other factors, as exemplified by the case of a Jew who is enslaved to a non-Jew, Hashem’s authority, the paradigm expression of which is Shabbos, remains forever and must be recognized and heeded. Regardless of the environment, Hashem is God and He demands our allegiance; His control is unlimited and transcends all. Honest recognition of His authority mandates allegiance in all circumstances, while only a shallow, naive and distorted perception of God’s authority enables one to feel excused from submission to it.

This is likewise why fear of the Mikdash is mentioned at the conclusion of the parshah, for the Beis Ha-Mikdash represents Avodah - formal religious service. One response to new and difficult circumstances faced by

Jews has been to modify their approach to observance (and very often their mode of tefillah). While many Jews during the Haskalah period abandoned Judaism totally, others made radical changes to their observance and created new “streams” of Judaism. The Torah speaks to this by admonishing, “and you shall fear my Mikdash” - do not change Torah observance in response to new circumstances, claiming that the new state of affairs does not lend itself to traditional observance as formulated in the Torah. “My Avodah must be expressed and practiced as I defined it in the Torah - it may not be tampered with, and you must revere and be ever awed by it”, declares Hashem.

Genuine recognition of God’s authority involves acting upon it in situations which are most challenging; there is no dispensation.

## The Lesson of Shemitta

*Rabbi Ami Merzel*

Parshat Behar begins with a discussion on the mitzvah of shmitta. The commentaries offer several explanations regarding this special mitzvah. The Kli Yakar explains that the mitzvah of shmitta is meant to instill in Klal Yisrael the idea of emunah and bitachon, faith and trust in the A-mighty. Hashem was afraid the Jewish nation would enter Eretz Yisrael, live off the Land, and credit their success to “kochi veotzem yadi” “my strength and the might of my hand”. By commanding the people not to work on the Sabbatical Year and rely totally on Hashem, the people would then realize that Hashem is the Provider during the other six years as well.

The Sforno offers a similar insight into this mitzvah: This week’s parsha states: “If you will say: what will we eat in the seventh year” - behold! we will not sow and not gather in our crops” (Vayikra 25:21). Hashem’s response will then be: “I will ordain My blessing for you in the sixth year and it will yield a crop sufficient for the three year period, you will sow in the eighth year, but you will eat from the old crop; until the ninth year, until the arrival of its crop you will eat the old” (ibid. 22). The simple understanding of the pasuk appears to be that Hashem is promising a great miracle in which there will be a surplus during the sixth year which will sustain us through the Seventh Year.

A more careful look at the Sforno provides us with an even deeper explanation: Hashem will certainly provide

a surplus as promised, for those with little faith who ask “what will we eat”. However, for those with a higher level of faith and trust who will not ask “what will we eat”, Hashem will provide them with an even greater miracle - they will be able to live on much less.

When we realize that the same G-d Who has provided for us until now is the same G-d Who has commanded us to let the Land lay fallow, then our needs will be satisfied. The same person who toiled and worked hard for his living during the first six years will be able to survive on less during the Sabbatical Year without feeling any lack - what an amazing idea!

The Gemara in Massechet Brachot (5a) teaches us that when faced with hardships a person must examine his actions, is he living his life in the way that Hashem wishes him to? Our reaction should not be: “the market is cyclical, for years it has had its ups and downs we just need to wait this one out.” We must ask ourselves how we lived our lives during the six years of prosperity. Did we give sufficient money to tzdakah or was the money spent purely on luxuries. Did we thank Hashem when things were going well or did we attribute our success to “kochi veotzem yadi”?

Hashem is sending us a message - the time has come to strengthen our emunah and bitachon in Him. Hashem wants to shower us with good, all He asks from us is to remember that He is the Source of all good.