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In Praise of Impracticality

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered May 6, 1972)

Our Sidra opens with the words וידבר ה׳ אל משה בהר סיני לאמר, "*And the Lord spoke to Moses at Mt. Sinai, saying...*" What follows this introduction is a portion that deals with the laws of the שמיטה, the Sabbatical year, when the land must lie fallow and all debts be remitted.

The Rabbis were intrigued by one word in that opening verse: the word בהר, on the mountain. Why this special reference to Mt. Sinai at this time? The question as they phrased it has come over into Yiddish and Hebrew as an idiomatic way of saying, מה ענין שמיטה אצל הר סיני, "*what does one thing have to do with the other*?" Thus, what connection is there between the sabbatical laws and Mt. Sinai? Were not all the laws and commandments enunciated at Mt. Sinai? Why then this special mention of Shemittah in association with Mt. Sinai?

Rashi quotes the answer provided by the Rabbis. Permit me, however, to offer an alternative answer: although Judaism is action-geared, oriented to the improvement of man and society; although it has a high moral quotient; although it addresses itself to the very real problems of imperfect man and suffering society; although, in contrast to certain other religions, it is more this-worldly; nevertheless, this concern with the real and the immediate and the empirical has a limit. Not everything in Judaism has to be as practical as an American businessman's profit-and-loss sheet or as "relevant" as the social activists and the radicals would like it to be. Judaism may not be ancient history; but neither is it journalism.

And this we see from the piquant fact that the laws of Shemittah were given specifically at Mt. Sinai. Laws known as מצוות התלויות בארץ, commandments whose fulfillment is dependent upon the Land of Israel, were given to the people of Israel before they ever arrived in ארץ ישראל, the Land of Israel! Agriculture laws were now given, in all their details, to a nomadic tribe without farms, without roots in the soil. Consider what the laws of shemittah sounded like to our grandparents as they surrounded Mt. Sinai, that bare desert mountain. They must have appeared weird, irrelevant, out of place, impertinent.

And yet, what was true of shemittah at Mt. Sinai is true of all the commandments at all times. They may seem hopelessly impractical, untimely, and irrelevant to the cold-eyed and hard-headed man, and yet they are the Law of the Lord, obligatory upon Jews at all times and all places.

Indeed, there is hardly anything as irrelevant as the piddling relevancy of the coldly practical man. Show me the man who sees only what is before his eyes, and I will show you a man who cannot see beyond his nose!

What does this praise of the impractical teach us?

First, it tells us simply that there are things that are of value in and of themselves, not only because they are instrumental or lead to other things. Thus, some of the commandments may restrain man's destructiveness. Others may lead him to improve society or his own soul or help the disadvantaged. But some are valuable simply because they were commanded by God. No other reason is necessary.

The same is true of knowledge. There are some kinds of knowledge which may lead to invention, and enhance the health of man and his convenience. But science is more than technology. There is also such a thing as knowledge for its own sake, knowledge acquired in order to satisfy the natural Intellectual curiosity of man.

A week ago, Apollo 16 returned from its trip to the moon. Except for those Americans who are so benumbed by the sensational that after the first time a thing is done it becomes a dreadful bore, the exploits of the

astronauts kept the world enraptured. And yet consider what a monumental irrelevance the whole project is! The government spends millions of dollars, some of the brightest men in the world donate their talents, three men risk their lives -- all in order to study the structure of remote rocks so that we might formulate a theory of when the moon was created and how old it is. So what?, one might ask. And the answer is: so everything!

Yes, there may be legitimate questions about the priorities in our national budget. That is not now our concern. But without doubt, knowledge for its own sake must not be deprecated. The real point, to a small man, sometimes appears to be beside the point.

And the same is true in Judaism. There is the study of Torah for the sake of performance of the mitzvot, or the sake of cohesion of the community, or the sake of raising the level of Jewish observance. But the highest concept of Torah study remains תורה לשמה, Torah for its own sake. Here too, there may be a question of priorities in determining the subject matter of Torah. But there is no denying the ultimate and high value of תורה לשמה, of study for its own sake.

It was the Jerusalem Talmud (Hag. 2:1) that attributed to the most notorious heretic in Jewish history the opposition to "other-worldly study of Torah." Elisha ben Abuya, known as אחר ("the other one"), is said to have stormed into a classroom, rudely interrupted the teacher, and shouted at the students: "what are you doing here? Why are you wasting your time in such irrelevant material as Torah? You, you must be a builder; you must be a carpenter; you ought to become a fisherman, and you should be a tailor. Do something useful in your lives!" The great heretic was an eminently practical man...

Of course, I do not mean to be cute by espousing impracticality and advocating irrelevance. Total irrelevance is deadening to the spirit and results in what philosophers call solipsism; divorce from the outside world and experience and the introversion into oneself; and impracticality can become nothing but a semantic excuse for inefficiency and incompetence. What I do mean is that relevance is a good, but not the only one or even the most important one. And while practicality is necessary for the execution of ideals, dreams and visions need not be pre-restrained in the Procrustean bed of a mercantile mentality.

The second point is that sometimes the apparently remote does contain highly significant and very real dimensions, but it is our narrow vision and restricted understanding that does not allow us to expose these obscure insights. Kashrut sometimes is ridiculed in this modern age because it appears superfluous when we consider the sanitary facilities we possess. And yet, those who understand kashrut realize that it has so little to do with sanitation and has so very much to say about reverence for life — and this, in a world in which life is losing its value, in which the approval of abortions is moving into the encouragement of euthenasia. כלאים and שעטנז, the prohibitions against mixing various garments or seeds or animals, has always been held up as a paradigm of non-rational commandments, and yet today we realize how much they have to say to us about ecology and the preservation of the separate species of the universe. The Sabbath laws are meant not only to give us a day of rest, because Sunday in modern America can accomplish that as well. It does tell us that we are not the by-products of a cosmic accident, that we owe our existence to God, and must therefore curb our insufferable pride and collective arrogance.

So, these and many other such illustrations remind us of the need to search beneath the surface of Judaism for teachings that are eminently pertinent.

Third, we must be future-oriented. We must have faith that what is genuinely irrelevant now may, some day, become most relevant and meaningful as a result of our ability to carry on heroically despite present irrelevance and impracticality. What today seems visionary may prove indispensable to tomorrow's very real need.

The Rabbis were fond of saying: דברי תורה עניים במקום אחד ועשירים במקום אחר, the words of Torah and the Sages are "poor" in one place and "rich" in another. By this they meant to say, that sometimes the text of Torah will seem utterly narrow and superficial, teaching very little indeed. It is only when we compare it with another text, in another context, that we can appreciate how genuinely deep and insightful it really is. I would like to paraphrase that passage, switching from מקום to זמן, thus: דברי תורה עניים בזמן אחד ועשירים בזמן אחר. It sometimes happens that the words of Torah in one epoch may seem to be thin and insignificant; it is only later, at another time, that the same words stand revealed as possessing unspeakable richness of insight and teaching.

Take as the most striking example: the hope for Jerusalem, whose fifth anniversary of liberation we celebrate later this week.

If we have the privilege to commemorate the reunion of people and city, of Israel and Jerusalem, we must acknowledge our debt to a hundred generations of Jews and Jewesses who since the year 70 have been wild dreamers, impractical idealists, possessed of visions impossible of execution; Jews who turned to Jerusalem three times a day in prayer; who when they ate bread thanked God for bread -- and for Jerusalem; who mentioned Jerusalem when they fasted and when they feasted; who brought little packets of dust of Jerusalem during their lifetime in order to take it along with them in their coffins on their long journey to eternity; who arose at midnight for תקון חצות, to lament over Jerusalem, and at every happy occasion promised to return there.

If we live in Jerusalem today - it is because of those unsophisticated visionaries who wanted at least to die in it.

If we can visit Jerusalem this year — it is thanks to those other-worldly dreamers who sang out לשנה הבאה בירושלים, at least let us be there next year.

If we can happily laugh — אז ימלא שחוק פינו — it is in large measure the work of those who did not realize how irrelevant they were, how impossible their dreams were, and who prayed to return there, thus daring and braving and risking the derisive laughter of legions of practical men who simply knew that we were finished, and that Jerusalem would never become a Jewish city again.

It is only because of generations of bridegrooms who concluded every wedding by stamping on a glass, its shattering fragments recalling the חרבן ירושלים (the destruction of Jerusalem), and proclaiming אם אשכחך ירושלים תשכח ימיני ("If I forget thee 0 Jerusalem, let my right hand fail") that today we can defy the whole world, East and West, and say: Never again shall you separate us from Jerusalem, not Capitalists and not Communists, not Moslems and not even Christians who have lately discovered that Jerusalem is important to them.

Jerusalem Day is a tribute to this special Jewish brand of impracticality and irrelevance.

So, מה ענין שמיטה אצל הר סיני, what is the association- or connection between the sabbatical laws and Mt. Sinai? They come to tell us first, that not everything need be relevant; second, that not everything that appears irrelevant really is; and third, that what is irrelevant today may be the most important fact of life tomorrow.

This lesson too is part of the heritage of Sinai. Indeed, without it all the rest is in jeopardy. With it, all the rest will prevail too במהרה בימנו אמן.

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A Double Message

Rabbi Joshua (The Hoffer) Hoffman z"l

Parshas Behar deals mainly with the laws of shemittah, calling on us to leave the land fallow in the seventh year, and the laws of yovel, calling on us to leave the land fallow an additional year, the fiftieth, as well to restore the land to its original owners, and to free our slaves. A major message of these laws is to strengthen out trust in God, as the sovereign of the land, and as true provider.

Interestingly, these laws are followed by laws regulating how to treat people in their time of need. We are told to strengthen the hand of someone who is slipping, offering him a loan, and not charging interest. Why do these laws follow those of shemittah and yovel? The Dubno Magid explains, that when we see someone in need we should not simply tell him to trust in God, but rather, help him out to the extent that we can. Trust in God is a personal matter, not something we tell others to do in order to avoid helping them. This explanation is in line with the teaching of Rav Yisroel Salanter, who said that we should worry about our own spirituality along with other people's material needs, rather than the opposite (our own needs and the other's spirituality), which unfortunately is what many people do.

Actually, the message of shemittah and yovel entails both aspects of comportment. We must acknowledge God's sovereignty over the land by keeping it fallow, and allow others to benefit from it by declaring its produce ownerless, and allowing others to partake of it. In Parshas Bechukosai, the Torah declares the severe punishment that would come from neglecting the laws of shemittah, but more than simply failing to leave the land fallow is included in this punishment. The Torah says, "The land will be bereft of them, and it will be appeased for its shemittah year having become desolate of them, and they must gain appeasement for their iniquity, indeed, as retribution for having rejected My ordinances (mishpatim) and because

their spirit rejected my statutes (chukosai) (Vayikra 26:43). Rav Yechezkel Abramsky points out that both mishpatim and chukim are mentioned in this verse. He cites the prophet Yeshaya, who, in his message of comfort to the Jewish people after the exile tells them, "Be comforted, be comforted my people" (Yeshaya 40:6). The rabbis explain that the people sinned in a double way, were punished in a double way, and would be comforted in a double way. Rav Abramsky explains that the double sin consisted, on the one hand, of a rejection of God's command, not leaving the land fallow, and, on the other hand, in a lack of proper respect of, and conduct toward, other people. Thus, even though the Torah describes our punishment as coming due to neglect of shemittah, this entails a double meaning, encompassing both the command to leave the land fallow, as well as the need to treat the people of the land properly. Punishment comes when both aspects of this double requirement are neglected.

Just Guests

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed and adapted by a talmid from a shiur given in the Gruss Kollel on May 6, 2021)

In Parshas Behar, the pasuk says *ve-ha'aretz lo timacher be-tzmisus, ki Li ha'aretz, ki geyrim ve-toshavim atem imadi.* You can't sell the land in Eretz Yisroel forever—it always goes back on Yovel. Hashem says: The Land is mine, and you are just geyrim and toshavim with me. Ok, the pshuto shel mikra is clear. Why can't we sell the land forever? Because you can only sell in perpetuity something that belongs to you. But the land in Eretz Yisroel doesn't really belong to us. We are merely guests, with Hashem, in His hotel—sojourners and temporary residents. And as a guest, even if you could lend someone your hotel room for a while, you can't sell it permanently. The Malbim—who is generally a pashtan —wants to say something more, al derech ha-drush. What does the pasuk mean when it says that we are geyrim and toshavim? He says that ha'aretz is this world. Like it says: *Ha-shomayim, shomayim la-Hashem, ve-ha'aretz nasan livnei adam*. Who are we? Why can't we buy and sell the land forever? Because this world is not where we belong—this is not our permanent place of residence. We are "*imadi*"—with Hashem. We really belong to the olamos elyonim. That's where we come from, and after our hundred and twenty years on this Earth we will return there. That's where we really live. We are just dwelling here for hundred and twenty years. It is our hotel room for a business trip to this world. And when you are temporarily staying somewhere for a business trip, you don't make permanent transactions. If you go to Shanghai for a business trip, you don't buy an apartment and furnish it, in Shanghai. That's not really where you live. And the pasuk gives us a little perspective. Just like Hashem is shayach le-Shomayim, we are "*imadi*." We are really with Hashem. We really belong to the Olam of ruchnious.

And therefore, it's crucail to have perspective. Ok, it's important to have land, assets, money, etc. But what is truly permanent? It's not whoever dies with the most money wins. There is nothing eternal in this world. It's only nitzchi in the next world. Therefore, we have to know that it may be important to have a house, a car, etc. But that's not what's really important.

They tell a story of a wealthy American who was on a trip to Europe and stopped in Radin to visit the Chafetz Chayim and saw that he was living in a hovel with simple wooden furniture. He asked the Chafetz Chaim: Where is your furniture? To which he responded: You are so rich—where is your furniture? He laughed. What do you mean? It's back in America, where I live! I am just passing through here. And the Chafetz Chaim retorted: Exactly. I am also just passing through. Why do I need to worry about furniture?

Therefore, even though we don't return the real estate nowadays—when the Yovel does not apply—it's good to remember that geirim ve-toshavim atem imadi. If we are really "*imadi*" with Hashem in this world, we are just passing through. We still need to be responsible for ourselves and make sure we have everything we need, etc. But still, looking from a proper perspective, we are just passing through, and while the material things in this world are good for their time and place, they are not a real goal in life. Our true goal is the nitzchiyous of where we really belong. Shabbat Shalom.

Sinai, Sympathy and Social Morality

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

It is always a joy living in Israel and observing Judaism worming its way into mainstream culture. Listening to secular Jews, or even Arabs, conclude their sentence with "im yirtzeh Hashem" exemplifies how religion can silently whisper its way into the public domain.

When Israelis wonder at ideas which appear irrelevant to one another, they often cite the first Rashi of parshat Behar: "*mah inyan shmita eitzel Har Sinai*" (literally what is the relevance of shmita laws to Har Sinai). Strangely, the Torah tags Har Sinai as the source of the shmita guidelines. Obviously shmita isn't uniquely "sourced" at Sinai. The entire Torah was downloaded at this mountain. Acknowledging this anomaly, Rashi cites the midrash which articulates this celebrated phrase: "*mah inyan shmita eitzel har Sinai.*"

Shmita and Social Equality

In truth, there is enormous significance in tagging shmitta to Sinai. A shmita year is a socio-economic experiment aimed at creating a fair and financially balanced society. Every seven years debts are cancelled, and slaves are released. During the shmita year itself, food can't be industrially harvested or hoarded. For an entire year, rich and poor are leveled into common experience. You learn a lot about someone when you walk a mile in their shoes.

By rebooting the economy, shmita checks against rampant greed and against the disproportionate allocation of wealth. It proposes a social model built upon ethics, compassion and fiscal moderation.

Moreover, cessation of agricultural labor invites a year-long spiritual retreat, enabling introspection and moral inventory. By sensitizing us the financial vulnerability of others, and stemming our avaricious desires, the 'sabbatical' year advances the noble agenda of creating a moral society.

Social Contracts

Humanity is forever in search of the recipe for a moral society. How can we fashion a kind and ethical society while still maintaining order and protecting ourselves against the internal and external dangers? How can we conjure a political system which can upholds common interest while still preserving human freedom and, more importantly, human dignity? Humanity hasn't always been successful in discovering that recipe.

Our modern democracies are daring experiments of "social contracts". Contemplated as far back as ancient Greece, the theory of a social contract became popularized in 17th and 18th century European political thought. The theory proposes that ultimate authority is vested in individuals, who willfully enter a common "social contract". Autonomous individuals mutually agree to waive some of their personal freedoms to elected governments in exchange for the advancement of public welfare and security. United by a common narrative, a society willfully binds itself to one another through government. These optimistic theories raised great hopes for the future of ethical societies.

Unfortunately, not all of those hopes materialized. Try as they may, imperfect human beings will never succeed in creating perfectly moral societies. At some point, the social contract frays, and the common narrative fades. Contracts always deteriorate and, sadly, we are witnessing some of this deterioration in the modern world. As noble as the human pursuit of moral societies may be, it is doomed to end in failure.

Religion as Moral Foundation

Moral societies must be founded on something more lasting and more absolute than a mutually agreed upon social contract. Moral behavior requires a system of absolute codes which aren't given to interpretation and can never be violated. Moral societies require religious scaffolding.

Morality conduct must be based on the absolute moral spirit of Hashem which will never fray and will always outlast human infirmity. Without religious foundations, moral codes possess no objective truths, only agreed upon moral consensus. That moral consensus can change. Worse, the argument can be made that there are multiple "consensus" viewpoints. Welcome to the blinding swirl of moral relativism where every position – even criminal ones-become moral. For the shmita project to succeed it must modeled after truths of Sinai not the moral instincts of Man. Moral society must be patterned after the divine moral image, or it will slowly fade into an abyss of broken narratives and muddled morality. Said otherwise, shmita will never succeed unless it is designed as "*shabbat LaHashem*."

Moral Society and Human Compassion

There is an additional condition to the shmita agenda

of crafting moral behavior. The end of the parsha parsha shifts from shmita to our response to personal poverty. Pressed into economic hardship, people begin to sell off their possessions and their land, further imperiling long-term financial fitness. Often, this snowballs into more severe decisions such as willfully entering slavery. Financial stress can become so overwhelming that a person may even indenture themselves to a Gentile, falling off the grid of Jewish community. The Torah instructs us to support fiscally weak people and, if necessary, quickly liberate them from the horrors of slavery.

These concluding scenes of the parsha don't reflect grand social theories or large-scale theories of ethical communities. These scenes depict quiet and personal acts of kindness and individual acts of compassion.

Large-scale morality cannot substitute for interpersonal compassion. The project of crafting utopia can't substitute for simple acts of love and support. Without private chesed and personal kindness, social justice is hollow.

Substitutes for Personal Kindness

Our world has become very large and impersonal. We live in large groupings which, by definition, are less personalized. The virtual world has replaced the real world of people and mass media groups us into blocs rather than distinguishing us as individuals. In our outsized large world, chesed faces the risk of depersonalization.

One risk to personal morality is "political" morality. Large global agendas sometimes masquerade as moral causes. Global conservation, world poverty, protection of species are not personal moral experiences but larger political agendas. They may carry great importance, but we should not confuse them with interpersonal morality. Sadly, we encounter leaders of these movements who are passionately dedicated to their pseudo-moral causes but who often don't display high moral integrity.

A second example of depersonalized chesed is institutional philanthropy. As we inhabit larger groups, we must organize and institutionalize to better allocate funds and resources. Institutionalized chesed has a reach and an impact far beyond private charity. However, institutional philanthropy is cold and impersonal and is often detached from the crying heart of a person in need. Relieving personal distress and sensing the pain of another human being, humbles our spirit, and reinforces the dignity of the individual. Depersonalized and institutionalized chesed cannot convey what William Wordsworth coined "That best portion of a man's life, his little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and love."

Shmita is bracketed by Sinai and by personal acts of grace. The moral society which shmita aspires toward must emanate from eternal divine morality and must be grounded by personal acts of compassion.

Shemittah & Har Sinai

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

This week's parsha (in chutza la'aretz), Parshas Emor, teaches us about the mitzvos of Shemitta (the seventh Sabbatical year) and Yovel (the 50th Jubilee), both of which are mitzvos ha'te'luyos ba'aretz (land dependent mitzvos that are only relevant and applicable in Eretz Yisrael).

The parsha begins with: וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה בְּהַר סִינַי לֵאמֹר - *and Hashem spoke to Moshe at Har Sinai saying*: דַּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם כִּי תָבֹאוּ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי נֹתֵן לָכֶם וְשָׁבְתָה הָאָרֶץ שַׁבָּת לַה - *Speak to the children of Israel and say to them: When you come to the land that I am giving to you, the land shall rest, a Shabbat to Hashem* (Vayikra 25:1-2).

Why does the pasuk make a point of saying that G-d transmitted these laws to Moshe at Har Sinai? Wasn't the entirety of Torah, each and every mitzvah, transmitted to Moshe at Har Sinai? Why single out Shemitta? Rashi famously asks this question and answers:

בהר סיני... אֶלָּא מַה שִּׁמְּשָׁה נֶאֶמְרוּ כְּלָלוֹתֶיהָ וּפְרָטוֹתֶיהָ וְדִקְדּוּקֶיהָ מִסִּינַי אַף כֻּלָּן נֶאֶמְרוּ כְּלָלוֹתֵיהֶן וְדִקְדּוּקֵיהֶן מִסִּינַי

"*To teach us that just as with shemittah, its general rules, details and fine points were stated at Sinai, so, too, with all the mitzvos, their general rules and fine points were stated at Sinai.*" Many commentators are puzzled by this teaching. How does this answer the original question? Weren't all the fine points, details and nuances of every mitzvah transmitted to Moshe at Har Sinai?

Rav Yitzchok Zilberstein teaches, "The Chassam Sofer explains that the reason shemittah and Har Sinai are juxtaposed is because shemittah is a clear proof that the Torah was given by Hashem, and not fabricated by Moshe Rabbeinu, chalilah. For what human being would dare to make the promise that: וְצִוִּיתִי אֶת בִּרְכָתִי לָכֶם בַּשָּׁנָה

הַשִּׁשִּׁית וְעָשָׂת אֶת הַתְּבוּאָה לִשְׁלֹשׁ הַשָּׁנִים - *and I will command My blessing for you in the sixth year, and it will yield a crop sufficient for the three year period* (25:21)? Only Hashem, Who is omnipotent - the Kol Yachol (All-Able) - can guarantee such a thing. Shemittah therefore serves as a proof of the entire Revelation at Sinai.

"Furthermore, Shemittah is a reflection of a person's belief in Hashem and in His Torah, because only if one has tremendous emunah will he keep Shemittah and let his fields lie fallow for an entire year," knowing and believing that even without his efforts, Hashem will nevertheless provide for him!

Rav Zilberstein then offers another beautiful answer, quoting the Imrei Shefer, who explains the connection between Shemittah and Har Sinai. "Shemittah is called Shabbos for just as Shabbos is the source of blessing for the other six days of the week, Shemittah is the source of blessing for the other six years of the Shemittah cycle. If a person allows his fields to lie fallow during Shemittah, that is what will bring his success during the years when he does work the land.

"Har Sinai itself serves as an embodiment of this concept. When Hashem came to give the Torah, all of the mountains presented their credentials, so to speak, in the hopes that the Torah would be given on them. Har Sinai, however, was modest and unassuming, standing at the side and not offering its own qualifications for having the Torah given upon it. That was precisely why it was chosen, and merited to become greater than all of the other mountains. This is the connection between Shemittah and Har Sinai: just as Har Sinai's inactivity was what led to its eventual distinction, our inactivity during Shemittah is what leads to our receiving Hashem's blessing upon the land" (Aleinu L'Shabei'ach, Vayikra, p.394-395).

What a beautiful and important lesson and reminder, especially during these weeks of Sefiras ha'Omer, as we journey, proverbially, to Matan Torah and Har Sinai once again. In order to be a vehicle and vessel where the Torah will rest, and the RS"O will dwell (keviyachol), one must internalize the teachings of Torah, Har Sinai, and Shemittah, which was specifically given at Sinai. When one is self-effacing, quietly involved in avodas Hashem, fulfilling mitzvos and engaged in Torah learning for the sake of Heaven, running away from honor while running towards opportunities for chessed, and lowers himself down, while yet recognizing his talents, abilities and capabilities - and utilizing them in the service of G-d and the people - that is precisely whereupon the blessing will flow.

Just as on Shabbos, our inactivity leads to blessing; just as Har Sinai's humility led it to be chosen as the site for Torah; just as the rest for the land in the seventh year will lead to blessing for all the other years; so too, when a person emulates this model, upon him G-d's blessing will flow.

Har Sinai is to Torah what Shemittah is to the Land of Israel.

Last Thursday (11 Iyar 5782/May 12, 2022) Noam Raz z'l, HY"D, a 47 year old father of six children, was killed in a special-operations gun battle with terrorists in Jenin. Police chief Kobi Shabtai said Raz, a 23-year veteran of the elite Yamam counterterrorism unit, was one of the best officers in the force. Raz was among the founders of the Kida settlement, according to a statement issued by the Mateh Binyamin Regional Council following his death. "Noam was a pillar in his community. A humble family man connected to the Land of Israel with every fiber of his being… He was loved by everyone," the statement said. Additionally, he was a volunteer for Ichud Hatzalah and was credited with saving hundreds of lives; t'hei zichro baruch.

שֶׁכָּל הַמַּשְׁפִּיל עַצְמוֹ, הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא מַגְבִּיהוֹ, וְכָל הַמַּגְבִּיהַּ עַצְמוֹ, הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא מַשְׁפִּילוֹ. כָּל הַמְחַזֵּר עַל הַגְּדוּלָּה, גְּדוּלָּה בּוֹרַחַת מִמֶּנּוּ, וְכָל הַבּוֹרֵחַ מִן הַגְּדוּלָּה, גְּדוּלָּה מְחַזֶּרֶת אַחֲרָיו (Eruvin 13b)

A non-effacing mountain; a field at rest; a weekly Sabbath of withdrawal from the business (and business) of this world; a humble family man, a hero of Israel… it is upon these that Divine blessings will ultimately rest. May we merit to see the Divine blessings in a revealed way.

The License to Worry

Rabbi Efrem Goldberg

After commanding the mitzva of shemitta, which forbids agricultural work throughout the seventh year, the Torah foresees that farmers will naturally wonder, "What will we eat in the seventh year, if we will not plant and not gather our grain?!" The farmers are being told to leave the field alone for an entire year, which they are to spend in kollel, learning Torah. And, they are required to allow anyone to come and help themselves to their field's

produce. This is akin to somebody who worked hard for six years to build a business, and is then required to leave the business alone, doing absolutely no work, for an entire year, during which he does nothing but learn. Understandably, the farmer will wonder, "What will we eat?!"

God reassures the farmer that in reward for his observance of this challenging mitzva, He will ensure his sustenance during the coming years. The fields will miraculously produce extra quantities of grain during the sixth year to compensate for the lost produce due to the observance of shemitta.

Rav Elimelech of Lizhensk, in Noam Elimelech, raises the question of why the Torah presents this promise in such a roundabout manner – as the response to the farmer's question of "What will we eat in the seventh year?" Why did God not simply state after presenting the mitzva of shemitta that He will provide sufficient produce to sustain them during the shemitta year and beyond?

Rav Yaakov Bender explained that the Torah wants to teach us a critically important lesson: it is okay to express anxiety. It is okay to ask, "How will we manage? How will we pay the bills?"

In these pesukim, Rav Bender writes, the Torah is giving us license to worry.

When a person is waiting anxiously for the lab results, and is visibly worried and distraught, it is wrong to admonish him, "Just trust in Hashem, everything will be fine." He is allowed to express worry. It is natural and expected that he will feel anxious.

Of course, we should always be working to strengthen our emunah, to reinforce our trust in Hashem and our belief that He is caring for us at all times. But at the same time, we are human beings, and it is perfectly natural, and acceptable, for a human being to worry. We are to strive to counterbalance our anxiety with emunah, but nobody should be made to feel ashamed over expressing legitimate concerns.

The Gemara in Maseches Pesachim (50a) teaches that in the next world, we will recite the beracha of הטוב והמטיב over all events, even those which outwardly appear tragic. This is in contrast to this world, where we recite הטוב והמטיב only over overtly joyous events, such as a new significant purchase, or receiving a large fortune, but when we suffer a loss, we recite the beracha of דיין האמת. Rav Yitzchak Hutner, as Rav Bender cites, noted that in this world, if a person suffers a tragic loss, but he insists that he has such faith in Hashem that he recognizes the tragedy as a blessing, and he proceeds to recite הטוב והמטיב, his beracha constitutes a ברכה לבטלה (beracha recited in vain). Such a person is disingenuous; he is a faker. In this world, we are expected to mourn and grieve, to feel pain and anguish. It is only in the next world when we will attain such pristine emunah that all events will be experienced as good.

It is perfectly acceptable, normal, and recommended to express our pain and our worries. King Shlomo teaches us in Mishlei (12:25), דאגה בלב איש ישחנה, which the Gemara (Yoma 75a) explains to mean that when a person feels anxious, ישיחנה לאחרים – he should speak about it with others. The Torah here in Parshas Behar gives us license to feel anxious, and when we do, it is beneficial to express our concerns to others, who are to listen with patience, empathy and understanding.

Helping G-d?

Rabbi Jonathan Ziring

If your brother, being in straits, come under your authority… do not exact advance or accrued interest, but fear your God. Let your kin live by your side as such…. I Hashem am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan, to be your God." (Vayikra 25:356,8, JPS)

The obligations to aid the poor, whether through charity, or in this unit, providing interestfree loans, are usually conceptualized as interpersonal commandments. More precisely, it may be a function of the brotherhood of all Jews. (Ramban, Shemot 23:20) However, these verses suggest that helping the poor is as much about one's obligations to God, as fear or recognition of God is mentioned twice in four verses, and an entire verse is devoted to remembering that God took us out of Egypt.

One midrash (Vayikra Rabbah 34) offers a radical understanding of how this is the case. The following argument is propounded:

1) The verse states that "He who is generous to the poor makes a loan to the Lord." (Mishlei 19:17, JPS). Why should giving to poor be considered a loan to God?

2) God is responsible for providing for the poor, as the

verse states that God is the one "Who gives food to all flesh." (Tehillim 136:25, JPS)

3) Thus, one who helps the poor grabs His mitzvah, and God becomes beholden to repay the loan.

4) The extent of this Divine obligation becomes clear from the verse's description of the relationship of a borrower to his creditor: "And the borrower is a slave to the lender." (Mishlei 22:7) God thus becomes enslaved to the one who helps the poor.

5) God's obligation surpasses that which the person gave. This is because a poor person might have nine out the ten coins he needs to buy food. The one who gives him the tenth coin, though a small amount of money, is granting him life. Thus, God becomes obligated to give the giver his life.

Several fascinating points emerge from this midrash. First, helping the poor is recast primarily as aiding God by taking the place of God. Second, God does not need human help, God treats the giver of charity as if he helped Him, to the point that He becomes beholden to him. Third, the impact of helping the poor is judged not only by how much one spends, but by the impact it can have on the poor. Thus, God becomes "beholden" to repay more than was extended. Rabbi Zev Wolf Einhorn (Maharzu to Vayikra Rabbah 34) argues that this is the explanation for the idea that charity saves from death. (Mishlei 10:2)

Rabbi Shemuel Yafeh Ashkenazi (Yifei Toar to Vayikra Rabbah 34) notes another layer to this midrash. Normally, stealing someone's opportunity to perform a mitzvah is considered an action able offense, with the "thief" obligated to compensate for the lost opportunity. (Bava Kama 91b) This midrash uses the language of "grabs the mitzvah" to highlight that one is usurping God's role to the extent that He should by right be upset. Nevertheless, God, unlike man, wants to "lose His chance". He wants human beings to take His place, and thus He pays us, rather than charges us, for making Him "lose his chance." Another midrash (Kohelet Rabbah 7:2) broadens this. God was "obligated to bury Yaakov," but Yosef stole the mitzvah. Moshe then took the mitzvah of burying Yosef, making God close the circle by burying Moshe.

At one level, this shows God's benevolence as He does not mind "losing His mitzvah." Furthermore, it highlights that we can actually take His roles. However, as Sefer Iyov (35:7) insists, the mitzvot do not help God. "If you are righteous, What do you give Him; What does He receive from your hand?" (Iyov 35:7) Our midrash must mean, therefore, that though our mitzvot do not help God, He desires that we fulfill his will, help others, become godly, and so He overlooks this theological reality. He ensures that helping others truly becomes Divine.

Understanding Hebrew and Canaanite Servitude

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

In this week's parasha, parashat Behar, we learn of the laws of the עֶבֶד עִבְרִי—Eved Ivri, and the עֶבֶד כְּנַעֲנִי—Eved K'na'ani, generally translated as the "Hebrew slave" and "Canaanite slave." These laws have appeared previously in the Torah, but parashat Behar presents us with a convenient opportunity to discuss and analyze both these perplexing and challenging statutes.

I would argue that the translation of Eved Ivri and Eved K'na'ani as Hebrew and Canaanite "slaves" is imprecise at best, and, in fact, most probably incorrect. The Hebrew language really has no word for slave. The Hebrew word עֶבֶד –"eved" means "worker," from the word עֲבוֹדָה —"a'vo'dah"–work. In fact, in order to say that the Egyptians enslaved the Jewish people in Egypt, the Torah, in Exodus 1:13, has to add the adverbial description "parech," וַיַּעֲבִדוּ מִצְרַיִם אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, בְּפָרֶךְ, and the Egyptians made the Hebrews work with rigor. Consequently, in both instances of Jew and non-Jew, the more precise translation of Eved is "servant" or "worker."

There are two situations in which a Jew becomes a Hebrew servant. The first instance, cited in Leviticus 25:39: וְכִי יָמוּךְ אָחִיךָ עִמָּךְ, וְנִמְכַּר לָךְ, is the case of a Jew who is waxen poor–basically bankrupt, and sells himself as a worker to a Jewish owner or master. In many societies, bankruptcy is a method of relieving a debtor from overwhelming financial obligations. In Jewish jurisprudence, an impoverished person is expected to always make a good-faith effort to return as much of what is owed as possible, and consequently sells himself into servitude for a maximum of six years. If after six years the debtor has not earned enough to pay back the full amount of his debts, only then are the remaining debts cancelled.

A second manner in which a Jew may become a Hebrew servant, involves a Jewish thief who doesn't have enough resources to return even the principal that he stole. So, for instance, a person who steals a candelabra worth $1,000, is required by the Torah to pay the victim $2,000, so that the thief would sustain the same loss that he inflicted on his neighbor from whom he stole. If the thief cannot pay back the penalty, he is not sold into servitude. However, if he cannot even pay back the principal, the $1,000, then the court of Jewish law sells him into servitude.

In both these instances, if the servant is married, he enters into servitude with his wife and family, requiring the master to assume the heavy financial obligations of providing food, clothing, housing, education and medical care for the servant's entire family.

The enormous expense incurred by the master of a married Hebrew servant is probably the reason why the Torah permits the master to give the Hebrew servant (only the thief says Maimonides, Laws of Servitude 3:4) a Canaanite maidservant to produce children who legally belong to the master. Otherwise, the economics of sustaining a married Hebrew servant would never be viable. On the surface, to mere mortals, this arrangement is of questionable rectitude, and is the one feature of the entire issue of servitude which appears to be morally problematic.

The practice of placing a criminal–a petty thief, into a private home, seems akin to the contemporary attempts at criminal rehabilitation. It is assumed that the thief comes from a complicated social background, and now, in servitude, will be exposed to the elevated behavior and healthy interactions of an extraordinary benevolent family. After all, it's not the average family that accepts a thief into their home when there are many other less dangerous workers whom they could retain. So, in effect, we see that Hebrew servitude is the Jewish way of dealing with bankruptcy as well as a method of rehabilitating criminals–not at all as "primitive" or "medieval" as we thought when we first encountered the original Biblical texts!

How do we know that the practice of Hebrew servitude was in fact benign? The Torah in Exodus 21:5-6, states, that if the servant says: "I Love my master, my wife and my children–I do not wish to go free!" The master shall take the servant to the court of law and pierce his ear with an awl, and he shall serve the master forever. Obviously, if this were a harsh or cruel system, not many servants would want to extend their servitude indefinitely.

Canaanite servitude, on the other hand, appears to be far more challenging. According to most commentaries, those who become Canaanite servants were most likely enemies captured in war or bought on the slave market. It was assumed that these Canaanites were so primitive, that they did not even adhere to the Seven Noahide Principles. They murdered, raped, stole, sacrificed their children to the idols that they worshiped, ate animals that were still alive–they failed to abide by even the most fundamental and basic rules of humanity.

What then is the Jewish practice of Canaanite servitude? It is an attempt to civilize uncivilized people. A Canaanite servant is bought on the slave market and welcomed into a Jewish home, initially for a period of only one year. During that year, the Canaanite is exposed to Jewish values, Jewish ideals and Jewish religious practices. At the end of the year, the Canaanite must choose whether to convert to partial Judaism or not. This understanding is derived from the verse in Genesis 17:12 where the Torah declares that all males in a Jewish household must be circumcised, whether born at home or bought on the market.

According to the Talmud, this verse teaches that Canaanites who are in a Jewish household must convert and are required to observe all the basics of Judaism–Shabbat, kashrut, and they must be circumcised. In fact, for all practical purposes, the only requirement that these Canaanite servants lack in order to be regarded as full-fledged Jews is freedom. Once they go through the process of conversion to Canaanite servitude all they need do to become fully Jewish is to be released from human ownership. The Talmud (Brachot 47b), in fact, tells the quaint story of the servant of Rabbi Eliezer who was needed for a minyan, and Rabbi Eliezer freed him so that he could instantly be counted as the tenth person to the minyan.

While no coercion or force is employed in convincing the Canaanites to convert, there was an element of indirect coercion. Most of the Canaanites knew that if they chose to remain in the Jewish home, they would be treated humanely. But if they were sold back to the general slave market, they would likely wind up as slaves or gladiators for the brutal Romans or the Greeks. So, most of the Canaanites happily opted to undergo the partial conversion and remain as servants with their Jewish families.

Eventually, the vast majority of Canaanite servants were granted their freedom and were fully integrated into the Jewish community.

The Talmud tells us that a master is not permitted to give his Hebrew servant undignified work. Consequently, a master may not instruct his servant to carry his shoes to the bathhouse, or to dig a hole indefinitely. One may instruct the servant to dig for an hour or two, or to dig for 10 or 20 feet–but the task must be quantified. Similarly, if there's only enough food for one person to eat, the servant eats while the master goes hungry. A master is not permitted to feed himself filet mignon and serve the servant goulash. If there's only one bed, the master must sleep on the floor. That is why the Talmud in Kiddushin 22a, declares: "He who acquires a servant for himself really acquires a master for himself."

Similarly, it was strictly forbidden to abuse a Canaanite. And so, if a Hebrew master strikes a Canaanite servant and injures him in any of his primary limbs or organs the servant goes free, which is not true for a Hebrew servant. Thus, if the master knocks out even a tooth of a Canaanite servant, the master loses the entire value of the servant. These laws served to forcefully discourage any abuse of Canaanite servants.

And, so we see, that what on the surface seemed to be two very difficult, indeed, primitive concepts, Hebrew servitude and Canaanite servitude are quite enlightened, and there is much that contemporary society can learn from them.

Once again, we see another instance of showing the world, that when it comes to universal values, the Torah was there from the start, and is often still light-years ahead of contemporary values.