

Behar Comments
Rabbi Eliot Malomet May 21, 2022 20 Iyyar 5782

ויקרא כ"ה:א' וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה בְּהַר סִינַי לֵאמֹר:
Leviticus 25:1 *God spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai:* At the beginning of Vayikra we read that God called to Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting... **מֵאֵתֵּל מִזְבֵּחַ ה' מִן־הַשָּׁמַיִם**. Here we learn that God is speaking to Moses from **Mount Sinai**. This demonstrates that the Torah is not narrated in chronological order. Up until now the laws have focused mostly on the Sanctuary and the Kohanim. With this parasha, it is as if the Torah is presenting us a flashback to Sinai. If these laws were spoken at Sinai then they have already resided in Israel's consciousness for some time. But for us, who are reading the Torah in its weekly sequence of portions, this is our first time hearing them. It is as if the Torah is saying to us: *Take a moment and go back to Sinai. Let us remind ourselves of the moment we stood at the mountain. Among the covenant laws spoken there, were these specific laws relating to Sabbatical and Jubilee. Remember that you had just been redeemed and you were on your way to inhabit the land.*

ויקרא כ"ה:ב' וַיְדַבֵּר אֲלֵי־בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם כִּי תָבֹאוּ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי נֹתֵן לָכֶם וְשָׁבַתָה הָאָרֶץ שְׁבַת לַה':
Leviticus 25:2 *Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: When you enter the land that I assign to you, the land shall observe God's sabbath.* Mount Sinai is the place where God meets the people and issues the Ten Commandments and the basic laws of the Covenant. Mount Sinai is **also** the place where God issues the rules relating to the land. The message then is clear: the land is essential to the covenant. Were these rules given say, in the desert, they would not have taken on that meaning. Additionally, these laws have the effect of amplifying what is at the core of the covenant, namely Shabbat. Just as there is a weekly Shabbat that is God's, so too, there is septennial Shabbat that is God's. On God's weekly Shabbat the covenantal **people** suspends its productivity; on God's septennial Shabbat, the covenantal **land** suspends its productivity. The weekly Shabbat enables those who observe it to synchronize with the divine rhythm. The septennial Shabbat enables the land to synchronize with the divine rhythm. On the weekly Shabbat a slave is accorded the dignity of

rest equal to his or her master. On the septennial Shabbat the slave is given the option of emancipation. The weekly Shabbat orders the life of the individual within the primary structure of the family. The septennial Shabbat orders the life of the people within the primary structure of the land.

ויקרא כ"ה:כ"ה **כִּי־יִמְכַר אֶת־אֶרְצוֹ וְיָבֹא גֹאֲלוֹ הַקָּרִיב אֵלָיו וְגָאֵל אֶת־מִמֶּכֶר אֶת־וְגָאֵל:**

Leviticus 25:25 *When your brother will be so low so that he will sell any of his possession, then his redeemer who is the closest relative to him shall come and redeem his brother's sale.* **כִּי־יִמְכַר**

אֶת־אֶרְצוֹ It has long been noted that the three times that this phrase occurs in this chapter reflect three stages of increasing hardship. In the first (25:25) the person has to sell his land. In the second (25:35), he has both lost his land and is without money. And in the third, (25:39) he himself is sold (or sells himself) into servitude. And at each stage, the man's fellow Israelite is commanded to help him. If he has to sell his land, one must redeem it for him and then give it back to him in the jubilee year. If he is without money, one must lend him money without any charge or interest. And if he is sold, one must not treat him as a slave. Here the units of law convey the specific requirements while the arrangement conveys the basic principle, namely, that **as one's brother's need increases, so does one's responsibility to help him**. Further, one must thus help one's fellow as a matter of law. The chapter never speaks of charity, nor does it appeal to one's feelings of compassion or generosity. An unfortunate Israelite need not feel degraded to be poor nor ashamed to be pitied. Economic suffering is rather treated as a reality of life, which one is required by law to remedy. The poor man thus can know that his brother is helping him because the system requires brothers to help one another and that, if the shoe were on the other foot, he would do the same for his brother. This is not to say that the text denies or discourages feelings of compassion, but only that the fulfillment of the law is not made dependent upon the presence or absence of such feelings. (Richard Elliot Friedman)

ויקרא כ"ה:ל"ט וכי ימוך אחיך עניך ונמכר לך לא-תעבד בו
עבדת עבד:

Leviticus 25:39 *And when your brother will be low with you, you shall not have him work a slave's work.* Rashi interprets "slave work" עבודה שיהא נכר בה כעבד, ששל גנאי - work that is demeaning, כעבד, work that will render him to be thought of us a slave. For example, לקלו את ריו לבית, he should not follow his master to the bathhouse carrying his clothing, nor should he put on his boots for him. You cannot exploit someone's distress for your own aggrandizement. The examples given here are especially demeaning because they humiliate the individual and transform a kinship of equality into a relationship of subjugation. Contrast this with a "Body Man", (or "Body Woman") a civil personal assistant who accompanies a politician (or candidate) virtually everywhere, often arranging and providing lodging, transportation, interactions with media, public, and family, meals, personal briefings and briefing papers, logistical instructions, speech cards, snacks, cell phones, and any other necessary assistance. They need to be rather exceptional people and often end up in successful careers. The question for debate is this: what renders work demeaning? The actual set of tasks you have to do, or the way you are treated by your boss?

ויקרא כ"ה:מ"א ויצא מעמך הוא ובניו עמו ושבו אל-משפחתו ואל-אחוזת אבתיו ישוב:

Leviticus 25:41 *Then they, along with any children, shall be free of your authority; they shall go back to their family and return to the ancestral holding.*— That is, on the Jubilee year. The individual who has been forced into a situation of servitude on the basis of economic hardship receives a general amnesty in the 50th year. It is fascinating that the Torah anticipates that when he is released, a) he will be released with his children, that is, that his children will not become the chattel of his erstwhile master, and that b) he will return to his family. This of course assumes that he has a family to go to. But it raises a bunch of questions. If he has a family to return to then why didn't he go to them for help in the first place? Sometimes, people are too ashamed to go to their families for help, and of course, there could be a thousand other reasons why he didn't go to them. But whatever the reason, the Jubilee year is not only a chance for a grand

economic "reset," it's an opportunity for families to reconstitute themselves. We could draw a parallel to the Exodus and the Passover Sacrifice. We have long noted that the Passover Sacrifice was to be eaten in the family setting, meaning that the formative experience of Israel's founding was mediated through the institution of the family. Not only that, but the family constituted the ultimate counterpoint to slavery. Slavery crushed the family. Slavery undermined parental authority and obliterated sibling relationships. If the Jubilee was a national "reset" then the first thing necessary for that "reset" was the reconstitution of the family, hence, the slave is to return to his family. In the Torah's view, every 50 years, the people has an opportunity to reconstitute itself anew.

ויקרא כ"ה:מ"ב כי עבדי הם אשר הוצאתי אתם מארץ מצרים לא ימכרו ממכרת עבד:

Leviticus 25:42 *For they are My servants, whom I freed from the land of Egypt; they may not give themselves over into servitude.*— This is the idea that underpins the entire set of rules, and indeed, it is one of the great themes of the Torah. More than just a liberation from oppression, the Exodus was the great transformation in human dignity. In servitude to Pharaoh, the Israelites had zero dignity. As "servants of God", that is, as a people entrusted with being a vessel of God's name and bringing God's presence into the world, by being a blessing, being holy and choosing life, they attain total dignity. It ought to be restated often, that in making the covenant with Israel, God does not introduce himself as the Creator of the Universe. That would have put God's infinite power at the center of his relationship with Israel and would have framed that relationship solely in terms of the powerless to the Powerful. Instead, the First Commandment states, *I am the Lord your God, who took you out of the land of Egypt from the house of bondage.* This frames God's relationship with Israel in terms of his concern for human freedom and individual liberty. When you are a slave to a human despot or a totalitarian regime you have infinitesimal dignity and zero worth. But as a servant of God, you have infinite dignity and your value is beyond measure. If that is the case, then, the potential to subjugate another human being just because of unfortunate economic circumstances, would be in the end, a sin against God as well. Shabbat Shalom!

This Parsha Sheet is sponsored by Gittel Footerman and family to commemorate the Yahrzeits of Justin Footerman and Rubin Gruman. May their memories be a blessing.