

Repetition of key phrases in the Torah always draws our attention. Such is the case with a phrase that we find twice in this parasha and twice elsewhere. That phrase is:

*Repetition  
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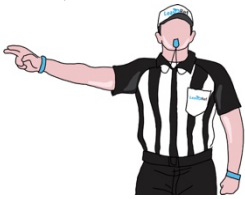
**כי לי -ki li.**

It means, **for it is mine** or, **it belongs to me**. The first instance occurs in reference to the land. Lev. 25:23:

והארץ לא תמכר  
 לצמחת כי לי הארץ  
 כי גרים ותושבים  
 אתם עמדי.

*But the land is not to be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are sojourners and resident-settlers with me.*

God owns the land. The land belongs to God. This declaration appears in the context of the rules pertaining to the Sabbatical (every 7th) and Jubilee (every 50th) years. Every 7th year the land is to rest. Planting, pruning and harvesting is prohibited. Every 50th year, **you shall proclaim liberty in the land, to all its inhabitants** (Lev. 25:10). The REF<sup>1</sup> makes the following comment: *In the law of the jubilee, God commands that every fifty years all property is to return to the original owners. This appears to be an economic program designed to prevent the feudal system, common in the rest*



*of the ancient Near East, from developing in Israel. That is, it functions to prevent the establishment of a class of wealthy landowners at the top of the economic scale and a mass of landless peasants at the bottom. Every Israelite is to be apportioned some land (described in the books of Numbers and Joshua), and the deity commands that in every fiftieth year the system returns to where it started. If an Israelite has lost his ancestral land as a result of debt or calamity, he regains ownership of it in the jubilee year. Land is unalienable.<sup>2</sup> Individuals can suffer difficult time, but there is a divinely decreed limit to their loss, and the nation as a whole can never degenerate into a two-tiered system of the very rich and the very poor.*

The jubilee system is grounded in the idea that even the original allotment of land is subject to God's discretion. To God, even the original owners, the ones with the ancestral titles given to them by Moses and Joshua, have the legal status of

<sup>1</sup>Jewish commentators of the Bible go by their acronyms. **RaSHI** (רש"י): Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki. **RaMBaN** (רמב"ן) Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman. The **REF** is our little acronym for **R**ichard **E**lliott **F**riedman, author of a popular modern English commentary on the Torah, which, as of this past February has been in print for 25 years.

<sup>2</sup>The term "unalienable" (used interchangeably with "inalienable") with regard to land or property means that you cannot transfer ownership through sale or trade or any other means. In the Torah, while you can temporarily sell property to relieve indebtedness, the jubilee system renders those sales temporary. Ownership must revert to the original

sojourners or temporary residents. That is because God is the ultimate owner of the land, as it says above: **כי לי הארץ - the land belongs to Me.**

The second instance is in reference to Israel. Lev. 25:54:

כי לי בני ישראל  
 עבדים עבדי הם אשר  
 הוצאתי אותם מארץ  
 מצרים אני ה' אלהיכם.

*For it is to me that the Children of Israel are servants; my servants are they, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt, I am the Lord your God!*

This declaration comes in the context of a series of rules about how to treat your fellow Israelites when they are so severely in debt that they have to resort to indentured servitude. Ever concerned with the vulnerable, the Torah prohibits the lender from oppressing the debtor as if he were a slave. That is because all human beings belong to God. God is our ultimate "owner" and therefore no single human being can exert total control over another human being.

The third instance of **כי לי -ki li** occurs in the context of rules pertaining to the firstborn in the book of Numbers:

כי לי כל בכור ביום  
 הכתי כל בכור בארץ  
 מצרים הקדשתי לי  
 כל בכור בישראל  
 מאדם עד בהמה לי  
 והיו אני ה'.

*For mine is every firstborn; at the time that I struck-down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, I hallowed to me every firstborn in Israel, from man to beast. Mine are they to be; I am the Lord!* (Num. 3:13)

כי לי כל בכור בבני  
 ישראל באדם  
 ובבהמה ביום הכתי  
 כל בכור בארץ  
 מצרים הקדשתי  
 אתם לי.

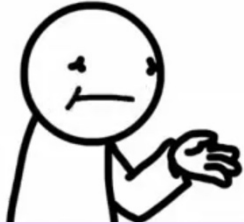
*For mine is every firstborn among the Children of Israel, of man and of beast; at the time that I struck down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, I declared-them-holy for myself.* (Num. 8:17)

In both of these instances, the Torah is providing the rationale for substituting the tribe of the Levites for the firstborn. We recall that immediately following the exodus God instructs Moses to **consecrate every firstborn** (Exod. 13:1). God declares "ownership" over the Israelite firstborn because they were spared in the final plague prior to the exodus. They owed their lives to God and therefore they would become consecrated to God to serve as priests. However, it is not hard to see how destabilizing this could be to Israelite families. If every firstborn were to be consecrated to God, families would collapse. This would

owner or clan in the fiftieth year of the jubilee cycle. We are familiar with the term "unalienable" from the American Declaration of Independence: **We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.** The drafters of the Declaration borrowed the term from property law to convey the permanence of the Rights that they listed, that they cannot be transferred and that no one, even governments can take them away from you.

imperil the entire project of creating a people **as numerous as the stars in heaven** (Gen. 22:17). To alleviate this conflict, God designates the entire tribe of Levi - because they were zealous in the service of God during the Golden Calf incident - as a substitute for the firstborn. This demonstrates once again, the primacy of family in the biblical worldview. Even God yields his prerogative to conscript the firstborn into his service, for the sake of the family.

In each of these three instances, the land, the people, the firstborn, God declares ownership. God says: **The land belongs to Me. Israel belongs to Me. The firstborn belongs to Me.** What would an Israelite have understood from these three claims? I asked one and here is what he said:



*The claim about the land belonging to God makes me think about Creation. God brought heaven and the earth into existence; therefore, the world belongs to no-one else but God. The principle at work here is not,*

**You break it you own it, but You make it you own it!**  
**God makes the world therefore God owns the world.** As the owner of the world, God can apportion it to whomever he wants. Indeed, he apportions it to all of the families of the world. That's why the Arameans live in Aram, and the Egyptians live in Egypt. And when God wanted to establish a relationship with humanity and make a covenant **through which the whole earth would be blessed,**<sup>3</sup> he selected our ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and promised them a specific land.

Sometimes when I hear God say, **this land is Mine** it makes me want to think that this land is special in some way. But we are wise enough to know that all lands are special to the peoples that live in them. I lived among the Egyptians for a while. I know how much the Egyptians love their land. And boy, do they sure love their Nile River! And how they love it and adore it and worship it when it floods and "gives" them life.

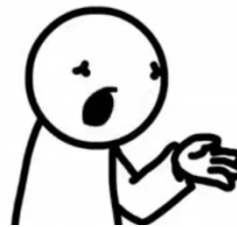


We are not in our land yet, but Moses has told us that the land we are going to is **a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey.**<sup>4</sup> I'll take it. But when God says that **it is His land,** I already know something very basic: it may be extraordinarily special, but it will never be mine. I can assure you that I will never "own" it. It is God's. God owns it. I am only there as a tenant. Do you know what that means? That means responsibilities. I have responsibilities to my Landlord, to listen and to adhere to His conditions. And do you know what else it means? It means that my Landlord, in this case, God, also has responsibilities to me, to provide and maintain my security, and ensure that me and my descendants will be able to survive and thrive there.

<sup>3</sup> Gen. 12:3.

*And when I hear God say that **the Children of Israel belongs to me and that we are His servants,** it makes me think how fortunate we are to have gone from actual slaves to servants of God, the single Being who governs everything. Consider this paradox dear friend: **when you are slaves to a despotic king, you have no value as a person. You are an object. Often you are nothing more than an animal who is exploited for strength and utility and extinguished when all that strength and utility is used up. But when you are a servant of God, you have an infinite value!** When I hear that **we belong to God** it is a way of telling me that even someone as unworthy as I am, has infinite value and dignity in God's eyes!*

*And when I hear that all the firstborns belong to God, it makes me think about our story. The story of our people. I personally am not a firstborn. I have a lot of older siblings. However, when I think of my firstborn brother, I imagine that had our father not put the blood on the doorposts on the night of the exodus, he too would have been killed! He owes his life to God in a way that I don't because he was directly spared! But there's one more thing. In this world, a lot of people, especially the Egyptians, see a firstborn and*



*think wow, look what nature and its gods have produced! Because of that, they tend to revere and venerate the firstborn. They think the firstborn are super-special. In Egypt, Pharaoh drafted all the firstborn of Egypt to be a special class of servants simply because he thought that nature had designated them as special. That's kind of ridiculous! In our case, God says **the firstborns are His** not because they are super-special (for example, my firstborn brother is nothing to brag about!) or because nature brought them into existence first, **but because God redeemed them!** In other words, my friend, there's a story here. When God says that **the land belongs to Him and that we belong to him and that the firstborn belong to Him,** He is saying to all of us: **I have a story with you. I have a relationship with you. We have some amazing events in our past and there will be more in our future. We have mutual responsibilities. The purpose of this relationship is to bring God's blessing to the world. And that, my friend, is a very good story!***

**Shabbat Shalom!**

This parasha sheet is sponsored by the Weinstein/Dickstein family to commemorate the **yahrzeit** of Natalie Dickstein, z"l, and in honor of the upcoming Bar Mitzvah of Dov Netanel Bercuson on Rosh Hodesh Sivan.

With comfort to the family of our two-term Past-President, our long time Gabbai, Boy Scout mentor and dear friend, Sheldon Freidenreich, z'l. May his memory be a blessing.

<sup>4</sup> Exod. 3:8.