

The Parshah in a Nutshell

Behar-Bechukotai

Leviticus 25:1-27:34

For the week of May 9 - May 15, 2004

On the mountain of Sinai, G-d communicates to Moses the laws of the **sabbatical year**: every seventh year, all **work** on the land should cease, and its produce become free for the taking for all, **man and beast**.

Seven sabbatical cycles are followed by a **fiftieth year** -- the jubilee year, on which work on the land ceases, all indentured servants are set free, and all **ancestral estates** in the Holy Land that have been sold revert to their original owners. Additional laws governing the sale of lands and the prohibitions against **fraud** and **usury** are also given.

G-d promises that if the people of Israel will keep His commandments, they will enjoy **material prosperity** and dwell secure in their homeland. But He also delivers a harsh "**rebuke**" warning of the **exile**, persecution and other evils that will befall them if they abandon their covenant with Him. Nevertheless, "Even when they are in the land of their enemies, **I will not cast them away**; nor will I ever abhor them, to destroy them and to break My covenant with them; for I am the L-rd **their G-d**."

The Parshah concludes with the rules on how to calculate the **value** of different types of pledges made to G-d.



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Behar-Bechukotai

Leviticus 25:1-27:34

On **Mount Sinai**, G-d communicates to Moses the laws of the Sabbatical and Jubilee cycles:

*When you come to the land which I give you, the land shall keep a **sabbath** to G-d.*

Commentary

Mount Sinai: *And G-d spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying... (Leviticus 25:1)*

What has the sabbatical year to do with Mount Sinai? Were not all commandments given on Sinai? But the verse wishes to tell us: just as with the Sabbatical year both its general principle and its minute details were ordained on Mount Sinai, so, too, was it with all the Commandments--their general principle as well as their minute details were ordained on Mount Sinai. (Torat Kohanim; Rashi)

Rabbi Ishmael says: The general principles of the Torah were given at Sinai, and the details [when G-d spoke to Moses] in the Tent of Meeting.

Rabbi Akiva says: The general principle *and* the details were given at Sinai. They were then repeated in the Tent of Meeting, and enjoined a third time in the Plains of Moab (i.e., in Moses' narrative in the book of Deuteronomy). (Talmud, Shabbat 6a)

sabbath: *When you come into the land which I give you, the land shall rest a sabbath unto G-d (25:2)*

Taken on its own, this verse seems to imply that "a sabbath unto G-d" is to be observed immediately upon entering the Land. But in practice, when the Jewish people entered the Land of Israel they first worked the land for six years, and only then observed the *seventh* year as the *shmittah* (sabbatical year)--as, indeed, the Torah clearly instructs in following verses.

The Torah is telling us that a *shmittah* is to both precede and follow our six years of labor: to follow it on the calendar, but to also precede it--if not in actuality, then conceptually.

We find a similar duality in regard to the weekly seven-day cycle. The weekly Shabbat has a twofold role: a) It is the day "from which all successive days are blessed"--the source of material and spiritual sustenance for the week to follow. b) It is the "culmination" of the week--the day on which the week's labors efforts are harvested and sublimated, and their inner, spiritual significance is realized and brought to light.

But if every week must have a Shabbat to "bless" it, what about the week of creation itself? In actuality, G-d began His creation of existence--including the creation of time--on Sunday, which is therefore called the "First Day." But our sages tell us that there was a primordial Shabbat which preceded creation--a Shabbat existing not in time but in the mind of G-d as a vision of a completed and perfected world.

Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in its fruit.

But in the seventh year shall be a sabbath of solemn rest for the land, a sabbath for G-d; you shall neither sow your field, nor prune your vineyard.

Even that which grows of its own accord in the field and vineyard may not be harvested on the *shmittah* year; instead,

The sabbath produce of the land shall be food for you, and for your servant, and for your maid, and for your hired worker, and for your stranger that sojourns with you, and for your cattle, and for the wild beast in your land, shall all its increase be food

The *shmittah* years express our trust in G-d as provider:

And if you shall say: What shall we eat in the seventh year? Behold, we shall not sow, nor gather in our produce!

*But I will command my blessing upon you in **the sixth year**, and it shall bring forth fruit for three years. You*

Commentary

Therein lies an important lesson in how we are to approach the mundane involvements of life. True, we begin with the material, for in a world governed by cause and effect, the means inevitably precede the end. But what is first in actuality need not be first in mind. In mind and consciousness, the end must precede the means, for without a clear vision of their purpose to guide them, the means may begin to see *themselves* as the end.

The spiritual harvest of a Shabbat or *shmittah* can be only achieved *after* a "work-week" of dealing with the material world and developing its resources. But it must be preceded and predicated upon "a sabbath unto G-d" that occupies the fore of our consciousness and pervades our every deed. (The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

the sixth year: *And if you shall say: What shall we eat in the seventh year? Behold, we shall not sow, nor gather in our produce! But I will command my blessing upon you in the sixth year, and it shall bring forth fruit for three years... (25:20-21)*

The question "What shall we eat in the seventh year?" is even more pressing in light of the fact that, the land having been depleted by five years of planting, the sixth year's yield is naturally *less* than average. Yet G-d promises that it will provide not only for a full years sustenance, but also for the seventh year and beyond.

Our sages tell us that the seven-year *shmittah* cycle corresponds to the seven millennia of history. For six thousand years, man labors in the fields of the material world in preparation for the seventh millennium--a millennium that is "wholly sabbath and tranquillity, for life everlasting," the era of Moshiach.

shall sow on the eighth year and eat yet of old fruit until the ninth year; until her fruits come in, you shall eat of the old store.

Jubilee

The seven-year shmittah cycle is part of a greater cycle--the 50-year jubilee cycle. After counting seven *shmittahs*--forty-nine years--

You shall sound the shofar on the tenth day of the seventh month, on the Day of Atonement shall you sound the shofar throughout all your land.

And you shall hallow the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout all the land to all its inhabitants thereof: it shall be a jubilee for you. And you shall return every man to his estate, and you shall return every man to his family.

In addition to being a year of emancipation, on which indentured servants are set free and ancestral lands revert to their original owners, the fiftieth year is also a year on which all work on the land ceases, as in the seventh year of each *shmittah* cycle.

Selling Land

The Parshah goes on to outline the Torah's laws on commerce and property rights.

Commentary

Thus, the question "What shall we eat in the seventh year?" can be asked on the historical plane as well. If the spiritual giants of earlier generations--the Patriarchs and the Matriarchs, the prophets, the sages of the Talmud--failed to bring about a perfect world, what can be expected of us? If the first five millennia of history could not provide for the universal Sabbath, what can be expected of us, we of the "sixth year," exhausted and depleted of spirit?

Yet the sixth year will be the one to yield and sustain the seventh. Precisely because our resources are so meager, our every trial and achievement is so much more meaningful, so much more precious to G-d. He therefore promises to command His blessing to our efforts, so that they shall nourish the sabbatical millennium and beyond.

(The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

goes on: *And if you sell aught to your fellow... (25:14)*

Rabbi Yosse the son of Rabbi Chaninah said: Come and see how harsh are the results of [violating the provisions of] the seventh year. A man who trades in seventh year produce must eventually sell his movables, for it is said, "In this year of jubilee you shall return every man unto his possession," and immediately after it says: "If you sell aught to your

The ownership of movables--objects other than real estate and people--can be permanently transferred from one person to the other with a sale. The Torah only warns, "**You shall not** defraud one another."

But in the Land of Israel, where each tribe was allotted its province and each family its estate, "The land may not be sold for ever, for the land is Mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with Me."

So if a person becomes destitute and is forced to sell his estate, the "sale" is in fact only a long-term lease until the next jubilee year, at which time it reverts to the owner. Thus,

According to the multitude of years you shall increase its price, and according to the fewness of years you shall diminish the price of it; for what he sells you is a number of years of produce.

Furthermore, at any time (after two years from the time of the sale), the seller, or his close relative, has the option of

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fellow." If he disregards this, he eventually sells his estates, since following that it is said: "If your brother becomes poor, and sells some of his estate." Before he knows it, he is selling his house, for next it is written: "And if a man sell a dwelling house in a walled city" ... Before he knows it, he is compelled to borrow on interest, for next it is written: "And if your brother becomes poor, and his hand fail with you... Take no usury of him." And before he knows it he is selling himself, as it is said, "And if your brother becomes poor with you and sells himself to you" ...

(Talmud, Kiddushin 20a)

And if you sell aught to your fellow, or buy aught of your fellow's hand, you shall not defraud one another (25:14) ... And you shall not defraud one another; but you shall fear your G-d (25:17)

The first verse refers to financial fraud. The second verse forbids verbal fraud--speaking hurtful words or giving bad advice. That is why the second verse adds, "but you shall fear your G-d," lest a person say: Who will know that my intention was to do him evil? (Torat Kohanim; Rashi)

You shall not: *You shall not defraud one another (25:14)*

Legally, it is only forbidden to defraud one's fellow. But a Chassid must go beyond the letter of the law, and take care not to delude himself, either.

(Rabbi Bunim of Peshischa)

"redeeming" the field from the buyer by giving him the equivalent value of the remaining years until the jubilee.

All of the above, however, does not apply to the sale of a home within a walled city. Such a sale can be "redeemed" during the first year only; if the seller or his relative do not exercise this right, it remains in the hand of the buyer, nor does it revert to its original owner on the jubilee year.

(Regarding the Levites, who did not receive estates in the Holy Land, only cities in which to live, the sale of a home in the city does return to the Levite owner on the jubilee year, "for the houses of the cities of the Levites--these are their estate among the children of Israel.")

Prohibition of Usury

If your brother grow poor, and his means fail with thee; then you shall support him. Be he a stranger, or a citizen; that he may live with you.

Take you no usury of him, or increase, but fear your G-d; that your brother may live with you.

You shall not give him your money upon usury, nor lend him your foodstuffs for increase. I am G-d your G-d.

The Indentured Servant

And what of the person so impoverished that he has nothing to sell but his own self?

If your brother who dwells by thee be grown poor, and be sold to you; you shall not work him as a slave.

But as a hired servant, and as a citizen, he shall be with you, and shall serve you until the year of jubilee.

Then shall he depart from you, both he and his children with him, and shall return to his own family, and to the estate of his fathers shall he return.

One Jew can never be another's slave, for they are all G-d's servants:

For to Me are the children of Israel servants; they are My servants, whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt: I am G-d your G-d.

The Parshah of Behar ("on the mountain") concludes with a warning against idol-worship and yet another reiteration of the mitzvah of Shabbat.

Reward

"If you walk in My statutes and keep My commandments and do them; I will give your rain in due season, the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit."

Thus opens the second Parshah in this week's reading, **Bechukotai** ("in My statutes"), which goes on to

Commentary

My servants: For they are My servants, whom I took out of the land of Egypt; they cannot be sold into slavery (25:42)

At the time of the Exodus, G-d made freedom the inherent and eternal state of the Jew. From that point on, no power or force on earth can subvert our intrinsic freedom. (Maharal)

rain: I will give your rain in due season (26:3)

At times when people do not usually go out, like the eve of Shabbat.

(Talmud; Rashi)

And the trees of the field shall yield their fruit (26:3)

In the days of Moshiach, every species of trees will bear edible fruit.

(Torat Kohanim; Rashi)

Bechukotai: If you walk in My statutes (Leviticus 26:3)

The word *chok* ("statute" or "decree"), which gives the Parshah of *Bechukotai* its name, literally means "engraved".

The Torah comes in two forms: written and engraved. On the last day of his life, Moses inscribed the Torah on parchment scrolls. But this written Torah was preceded by an engraved Torah: the Divine law was first given to us encapsulated in the Ten Commandments, which were etched by the hand of G-d in two tablets of stone.

When something is written, the substance of the letters that express it--the ink--remains a separate entity from the substance upon which they have

enumerate the **earthly blessings** that will result when the people of Israel follow G-d's commandments:

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been set--the parchment. On the other hand, letters engraved in stone are forged in it: the words are stone and the stone is words.

By the same token, there is an aspect of Torah that is "inked" on our soul: we understand it, our emotions are roused by it; it becomes our "lifestyle" or even our "personality"; but it remains something additional to ourselves. But there is a dimension of Torah that is *chok*, engraved in our being. There is a dimension of Torah which expresses a bond with G-d that is of the very essence of the Jewish soul. (Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi)

A rabbi once offered the following analogy: "Every Jew is a letter in the Torah. But a letter may, at times, grow somewhat faded. It is our sacred duty to mend these faded letters and make G-d's Torah whole again."

Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak of Lubavitch heard this, and objected: "No, the identity of the Jew cannot be compared to erasable ink on parchment. Every Jew is indeed a letter in G-d's Torah, but a letter carved in stone. At times, the dust and dirt may accumulate and distort--or even completely conceal--the letter's true form; but underneath it all, the letter remains whole. We need only sweep away the surface grime, and the letter, in all its perfection and beauty, will come to light."

earthly blessings: *If you walk in My statutes... I will give your rain in due season (26:3)*

Rabbi Jacob said: There is no reward for the mitzvot in this world...

[What is the proof for this?] In connection with the mitzvah of honoring one's parents it is written, "In order that your days may be prolonged, and that it may go well with you" (Deuteronomy 5:16). In reference to the mitzvah of "dismissal of the nest" (to chase away the mother bird before taking the young) it is written, "That it may be well with you, and that you may prolong your days" (ibid. 22:7). Now, what if a person's father says to him, "Ascend to the loft and bring me young birds," and he ascends to the loft, dismisses the mother and takes the young, and on his return falls and is killed--where is this man's well-being and where is this man's long days? But "in order that it may be well with you" means on the day that is wholly good; and "in order that thy days may be long," on the day that is wholly long.

Perhaps such things don't happen? Rabbi Jacob saw an actual occurrence. (Talmud, Kiddushin 39b)

Since we know that the reward for the mitzvot, and the good which we shall merit if we keep the way of G-d written in the Torah, is solely in the life of the World To Come... and the retribution exacted from the wicked who abandon the ways of righteousness written in the Torah is the cutting off [of the soul]... why does it say throughout the Torah, "If you obey, you will receive such and such; if you do not obey, it shall happen to you such and such"--things that are of the present world, such as plenty and hunger, war and peace, sovereignty and subjugation, inhabitation of the land and exile, success and failure, and the like?

All that is true, and did, and will, come to pass. When we fulfill all the commandments of the Torah, all the good things of this world will come to us; and when we transgress them, the evils mentioned in the Torah

Your threshing shall reach to the vintage, and the vintage shall reach to the sowing time; and you shall eat your bread to the full, and dwell secure in your land.

*I will give **peace** in the land; and you shall lie down, and none shall make you afraid. I will remove evil beasts out of the land, neither shall the sword **pass through** your land.*

You shall chase your enemies, and they shall fall before you by the sword. Five of you shall pursue a

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will happen to us. Nevertheless, those good things are not the ultimate reward of the mitzvot, nor are those evils the ultimate punishment for transgressing them.

The explanation of the matter is thus: G-d gave us this Torah; it is a tree of life, and whoever observes all that is written in it and knows it with a complete knowledge merits thereby the life of the World To Come... Yet G-d also promised us in the Torah that if we observe it with joy... He will remove from us all things that may prevent us from fulfilling it, such as illness, war, hunger, and the like, and He will bestow upon us all blessings that bolster our hand to observe the Torah such as abundant food, peace, and much gold and silver, *in order that* we should not need to preoccupy ourselves all our days with our material needs but be free to learn the wisdom and observe the commandments by which we shall merit the life of the World To come... (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance 9:1)

Maimonides' concept of the "reward" for mitzvot in this world has a parallel in Torah law. The law states that farm workers must be allowed to eat of the food they are working with; even an animal may not be "muzzled as it threshes." This is not payment for their work--their wages they receive later, after their work is done--but a special provision that says that they must be allowed to eat from the produce they are working with.

By the same token, we are employed by G-d to develop and elevate His world through the performing of mitzvot. The actual reward for our work will come later, in the World To Come, after our task is completed; but G-d is also "obligated" to allow us to enjoy the material blessings of this world, which is the object of our toil. (The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

peace: *I will give peace in the land (26:6)*

There may be food, there may be drink, but if there is no peace, there is nothing. (Rashi)

Neither shall the sword pass through your land (26:6)

That there will not be war goes without saying; the sword will not even pass through your land on the way to another country.

(Torat Kohanim; Rashi)

hundred, and **a hundred of you** shall put ten thousand to flight...

For I will turn **My face** to you. I will make you fruitful and multiply you, and establish My covenant with you...

I will place My dwelling amongst you; and My soul shall not abhor you. I will **walk** among you; I will be your G-d, and you shall be My people.

I am the L-rd your G-d who brought you out from the land of Egypt, from being their slaves; I have broken the bars of your yoke, and made you walk **upright**.

The Rebuke

Then comes the *tochachah* ("rebuke" or "**punishment**")-- a harshly detailed prediction of what will befall the people of Israel when they turn away from G-d:

Commentary

a hundred of you: Five of you shall pursue a hundred, and a hundred of you shall put ten thousand to flight (26:8)

But is this the right proportion? It should have stated only "and a hundred of you shall pursue two thousand." But the explanation is: a few who fulfill the commandments of the Torah cannot compare with the many who fulfill the commandments of the Torah. (Torat Kohanim; Rashi)

My face: If you will not hearken to Me, and walk casually with Me; I, too, will act casually with you... (26:28)

All sins derive from the sin of insignificance: when a person ceases to be sensitive to the paramount importance which G-d attaches to his life and deeds. "I don't really matter" is not humility--it is the ultimate arrogance. It really means: "I can do what I want."

The most terrible of punishments is for G-d to indulge the sinner this vanity. For G-d to say: "All right, have it your way; what happens to you is of no significance"; for G-d to act toward him as if He really does not care what happens to him. (The Chassidic Masters)

upright: I have broken the bars of your yoke, and made you walk upright (26:13)

An animal walks with its face to the earth, for earthiness and materiality is all that it knows. Man walks upright, for man was born to gaze upon and aspire to the Heavens. (Rabbi DovBer of Mezerich)

But if you will not hearken to Me, and will not do all these commands; if you shall despise My statutes, if your soul shall abhor my laws, so that you will not do all My commandments, and break My covenant.

I also will do this to you; I will appoint over you terror, consumption and fever, that shall consume the eyes, and cause sorrow of heart...

I will set My face against you, and you shall be slain before your enemies; they that hate you shall reign over you and you shall flee when none pursues you...

Commentary

punishment: But if you will not hearken to Me... (26:14)

There are different opinions among the Kabbalists in regard to the rewards and punishments that the Torah predicts for the observance or non-observance of the mitzvot. Nachmanides is of the opinion that, "The rewards that befall a person for the doing of a mitzvah, or the punishments that come because of a transgression, come about only by supra-natural means. Were a person to be left to his nature and natural fate, the righteousness of his deeds would not give anything to him nor take anything from him. Rather, the Torah's rewards and punishments in this world are all miracles. They come hidden, for the one who observes them thinks them to have occurred by the normal conduct of the world; but they are in truth Divinely ordained rewards and punishments to the person."

Other Kabbalists, however, maintain that this is a natural process. In the words of the Shaloh: "The supernal worlds respond to the actions of the lower world, and from there the blessing spreads to those who caused it. To one who understands this truth, it is not a miracle, but the nature of the *avodah* (man's life's work to serve G-d)" In other words, punishment for wrongdoing is no more G-d's "revenge" than falling to the ground is Divine retribution for jumping out the window. Just as the Creator established certain laws of cause and effect that define the natural behavior of the physical universe, so, too, did He establish a spiritual-moral "nature," by which doing good results in a good and fulfilling life and doing evil results in negative and strifeful experiences.

A third approach sees the suffering associated with sin as the by-product of G-d's rehabilitation of the iniquitous soul. The analogy is the removal of an infective splinter from a person's body: the pain that is experienced is not a "punishment" as such for the person's carelessness, but an inevitable part of the healing process itself. The fact that a foreign body has become imbedded in living flesh and has caused its decay makes its removal a painful experience. By the same token, when something alien to the soul's bond with G-d has become imbedded within it, the extraction of this alien body, and the healing of the bond, is experienced as painful to both body and soul.

I also: I will punish you, I too (26:28)

When a father punishes his child, the suffering he inflicts on himself is greater than anything experienced by the child. So it is with G-d: His pain is greater than our pain. (Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov)

I will make your skies like iron, and your earth like brass: your strength shall be spent in vain, for your land shall not yield her produce, neither shall the trees of the land yield their fruit...

And so it goes--more than thirty verses filled with every catastrophe imaginable, predicting every calamity destined to befall our people in the course of our history because we "walk casually" with G-d:

*I shall cast your carcasses upon the carcasses of your **idols**... I shall lay desolate your holy **places**...*

*And you I shall **scatter** amongst the nations... your land shall be desolate, your cities in ruins... And*

those who remain of you shall pine away in their iniquity in your enemies' lands...

And yet,

*I will **remember** My covenant with Jacob. Also My covenant with Isaac, also My covenant with Abraham will I remember; and I will remember the land....*

Despite all, the people of Israel shall forever remain G-d's people:

*Even when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away; nor will I ever abhor them, to destroy them and to break My **covenant** with them; for I am the L-rd their G-d.*

Commentary

idols: *I will cast your carcasses upon the carcasses of your idols (26:30)*

It was told of Elijah the Righteous, that while searching for those who were languishing with hunger in Jerusalem, he once found a child faint with hunger lying upon a dung heap.

"Of what family are you?" he asked him. "I belong to this-and-this family," the child replied. He asked: "Are any of that family left," and he answered, "None, excepting myself."

Thereupon he asked: "If I teach you something by which you will live, you will learn?" He replied, "Yes." "Then," said he, "recite every day: "Hear O Israel, the L-rd is our G-d, the L-rd is one." But the child retorted: "Be silent, for one must not make mention of the name of G-d"-for so his father and mother had taught him--and straightway he brought forth an idol from his bosom, embracing and kissing it, until his stomach burst, his idol fell to the earth, and he upon it, thus fulfilling the verse, "And I shall cast your carcasses upon the carcasses of your idols." (Talmud, Sanhedrin 63b)

places: *I shall lay desolate your holy places (26:31)*

Even in their desolation, they retain their holiness.

(Talmud, Megillah 28a)

I shall make desolate the land; and your enemies who dwell in it shall be astonished at it (26:32)

This is actually a blessing for Israel--that their enemies will derive no satisfaction from the land, for it shall remain desolate as long as the people of Israel are exiled from it. (Rashi)

scatter: *And you I shall scatter amongst the nations (26:33)*

Commentary

G-d did a kindness to the people of Israel, that he scattered them amongst the nations. For if they were concentrated in one place, the heathens would make war on them; but since they are dispersed, they cannot be destroyed.

(Talmud Pesachim 87b; Midrash Lekach Tov)

The people of Israel were exiled among the nations only in order that converts should be added to them. (Talmud, *ibid.*)

The "converts" that the Talmud speaks of are the "sparks of holiness" contained within the material resources of the world, which are redeemed and elevated when we use these resources in our service of G-d.

(The Chassidic Masters)

covenant: *Even when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away (26:44)*

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai said: Come and see how beloved are Israel in the sight of G-d, in that to every place to which they were exiled the *Shechinah* (Divine Presence) went with them. They were exiled to Egypt and the *Shechinah* was with them, as it says, "Did I reveal myself unto the house of your father when they were in Egypt" (I Samuel 2:27). They were exiled to Babylon, and the *Shechinah* was with them, as it says, "For your sake I was sent to Babylon" (Isaiah 43:14). And when they will be redeemed in the future, the *Shechinah* will be with them, as it says, "Then the L-rd your G-d will return with your captivity" (Deuteronomy 30:3)

(Talmud, Megillah 29a)

Rabbi Isaac ben Samuel says in the name of Rav: The night has three watches, and at each watch the Holy One, blessed be He, sits and roars like a lion and says: Woe to the children, on account of whose sins I destroyed My house and burnt My temple and exiled them among the nations of the world... Woe to the father who has banished his children, and woe to the children who have been banished from the table of their father! (Talmud, Berachot 3a)

Values and Appraisals

The second part of Bechukotai legislates the laws of *erachin* ("values" or "appraisals")--the manner by which to calculate the values of different types of pledges made to G-d.

If a person is pledged (i.e., a person declares "I pledge my value to G-d" or "I pledge this person's value"), the Torah sets a fixed sum, based on the age and sex of the pledged person and ranging from 3 to 50 shekels, which is seen to represent that pledged person's monetary "value". This amount is given by the one who made the pledge to the treasury of the Holy Temple.

If a kosher animal is pledged to G-d, it is brought as an offering in the Holy Temple. "He shall not exchange it nor substitute another for it, be it a good for a bad, or a bad

for a good; and if he shall at all exchange beast for beast, then it and its substitute shall both be holy."

Other objects (such as a non-kosher animal or a house), are given to the Temple treasury to be sold, or else they are redeemed by their pledger for their assessed market value plus 20%.

A pledged field goes to the Temple treasury until the Jubilee year (see above), at which time it goes to the Kohen (priest). A person wishing to redeem his pledged field is not assessed according to the field's market value, but by the Torah's own criteria: 50 shekel per *beit chomer* (an area equivalent to slightly less than four acres). This amount is to be deducted in accordance with how many years remain until the Jubilee year (e.g., if only 20 years remain until the Jubilee, than the value per *beit chomer* is 20 shekels). The 20% addition also applies.

"These are the commandments," our Parshah concludes and closes the book of Leviticus, "which G-d commanded to Moses for the children of Israel on Mount Sinai."

Commentary

substitute: *He shall not exchange it nor substitute another for it (27:33)*

Every person was born to a mission in life that is distinctly, uniquely and exclusively their own. No one--not even the greatest of souls--can take his or her place. No person who ever lived or who ever will live can fulfill that particular aspect of G-d's purpose in creation in his stead.

(The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

This point is illustrated by a story told by the previous Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn:

A wealthy businessman and his coachman arrived in a city one Friday afternoon. After the rich man was settled at the best hotel in town, the coachman went off to his humble lodgings.

Both washed and dressed for Shabbat and then set out for the synagogue for the evening prayers. On his way to *shul*, the businessman came across a wagon which had swerved off the road and was stuck in the ditch. Rushing to help a fellow in need, he climbed down into the ditch and began pushing and pulling at the wagon together with its hapless driver. But for all his good intentions, the businessman was hopelessly out of his depth. After struggling for an hour in the knee-deep mud, he succeeded only in ruining his best suit of Shabbat clothes and getting the wagon even more hopelessly imbedded in the mud. Finally, he dragged his bruised and aching body to the synagogue, arriving a scant minute before the start of Shabbat.

Meanwhile, the coachman arrived early to the synagogue and sat down to recite a few chapters of Psalms. At the synagogue he found a group of wandering paupers, and being blessed with a most generous nature, invited them *all* to share his meal. When the synagogue sexton approached the paupers to arrange meal placements the town's householders, as is customary in Jewish communities, he received the same reply from them all: "Thank you, but I have already been invited for the Shabbat meal."

Commentary

Unfortunately, however, the coachman's means were unequal to his generous heart, and his dozen guests left his table with but a shadow of a meal in their hungry stomachs.

Thus the coachman, with his twenty years of experience in extracting wagons from mudholes, took it upon himself to feed a small army, while the wealthy businessman, whose Shabbat meal leftovers could easily have fed every hungry man within a ten mile radius, floundered about in a ditch.

"Every soul," said Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak in conclusion, "is entrusted with a mission unique to her alone, and is granted the specific aptitudes, talents and resources necessary to excel in her ordained role. One must take care not to become one of those 'lost souls' who wander through life trying their hand at every field of endeavor except for what is truly and inherently their own."

The Prodigy Under the Bed

Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson

Rabbi Hillel of Paritch (1795-1864) was one of the many scholars of his day to join the Chabad Chassidic movement. For many years, he was a devoted disciple of the second and third rebbes of Chabad, Rabbi DovBer and Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Lubavitch.

As a young man, Rabbi Hillel heard of the founder of Chabad Chassidism, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi and sought to meet with him. But the opportunity seemed to forever elude the young prodigy: no sooner did he arrive in a town that Rabbi Schneur Zalman was visiting, that he was informed that the Rebbe had just left. Finally, he managed to locate Rabbi Schneur Zalman's lodgings *before* the Rebbe was due to arrive. In order to ensure that he would not, once again, somehow miss his opportunity, Rabbi Hillel crept into Rabbi Schneur Zalman's appointed room and hid under the bed, determined, at last, to make the acquaintance of the great Rebbe.

In anticipation of his encounter with Rabbi Schneur Zalman, Rabbi Hillel had "armed" himself with some of his achievements in Talmudic study. At that time, the young scholar was studying the tractate *Erachin*, or "Appraisals", the section of the Talmud which deals with the laws of how to appraise the value of one's pledges to charity. Rabbi Hillel had a scholarly question on the subject which he had diligently rehearsed in order to discuss it with the Rebbe.

From his hiding place, Rabbi Hillel heard the Rebbe enter the room. But before he could make a move, he heard Rabbi Schneur Zalman exclaim: "If a young man has a question regarding 'Appraisals', he had best first evaluate himself."

The prodigy under the bed fainted on the spot. When he came to, Rabbi Schneur Zalman was gone...

The Lubavitcher Rebbe told this story, and then asked: How are we to apply this story to our lives?

The tractate of "Appraisals" discusses the laws presented in chapter 27 of Leviticus: if a person pledges to give to charity, but instead of citing a sum he says "I promise to give the value of this individual," we

are to follow a fixed rate table set by the Torah, in which each age and gender group is assigned a certain "value".

But why employ a flat rate which lumps together so many diverse individuals? Should not an accomplished scholar be considered more valuable than a simple laborer? The Torah states that we all stand equally before G-d, "from your heads, the leaders of your tribes, your elders... to your wood choppers and water carriers." But can a person truly view his fellow as his equal when he is so obviously superior to him in talent and achievement?

This is the meaning of Rabbi Schneur Zalman's remark to Rabbi Hillel: If you have a question regarding "Appraisals", if you find it difficult to relate to the Torah's evaluation of human worth, you had best take a long hard look at yourself. An honest examination of your own character and behavior will show how much you can learn from every man, how much there is for you to emulate in those who are supposedly "inferior" to yourself

Doing Business With G-d

If your brother grow poor, and his means fail, you shall support him [with a loan]... Do not take interest and usury from him... I am G-d your G-d, who has taken you out of the land of Egypt of Egypt... to be your G-d

Leviticus 25:35-38

From these [concluding words], our sages have derived: One who accepts upon himself the prohibition of usury, accepts upon himself the yoke of Heaven; but one who rejects the prohibition of usury, rejects the yoke of Heaven

Sifra, ibid

The Torah strictly forbids the collection or payment of usury on a loan granted from one Jew to another. However, there is a procedure, called *heter iska* ("partnership clause"), by which it is permitted to profit from funds extended to one's fellow. In a *heter iska* contract it is stipulated that the money is not a loan but an investment in a joint business venture, whose profits are to be shared between the owner of the capital and the one who has been granted the right to use it and deal with it.

Why is interest on a loan forbidden while profit-sharing on an investment is permitted?

The legal difference is that in the case of a loan, the money is no longer the property of the lender: from the moment the borrower receives it, it is his in every respect (it is only that in receiving the loan he assumes the obligation to make a payment in the same amount to the lender at some future date). So if the lender were to collect a fee or percentage in return for the benefit the borrower is deriving from the money, he would be being rewarded for the fact the money was once his, not for something he is contributing now. This the Torah forbids. On the other hand, in the case of a *heter iska* agreement, the money remains the property of the investor (in partnership with the one to whom the money has been entrusted); the compensation he receives is not "free profit," but profit that *his* money is *currently* generating. (This is also the difference between extending a loan in return for interest, which is forbidden, and renting a home or other object to another in return for payment, which is permitted. While loaned money becomes the property of the borrower, a rented object remains the property of its owner.)

Body and Soul

The Zohar states that Torah has both a body and a soul. The Torah's "body" is its physical dimension: its recounting of the physical history of the universe and its instruction of the physical life of man. Animating this body is a soul--a spiritual dimension, in which every law and event, and their every detail, has its metaphysical significance.

Body and soul complement and fulfill each other. The body is a vehicle for the soul, extending the soul's reach to areas it could not touch on its own; the body of Torah is its soul's implementer, realizing its ethereal concepts as concrete truths in a concrete world. On the other hand, a body without a soul is dark and cold: often, a law or event in Torah might seem dry, prosaic or trivial, until it is viewed in the elucidating light of its spiritual import.

The same applies to the laws of usury and *heter iska*. Viewed solely in terms of their application to our financial lives, these might seem highly technical, or even pedantic; *heter iska* sounds like an elaborate loophole by which to circumvent the prohibition of usury. Is there really that much of a difference between these two ways of being rewarded for granting use of one's capital to another--a difference equivalent (as the above-quoted Sifra states) to the difference between accepting the very notion of G-d's authority or rejecting it, G-d forbid? For this we must look to the soul of this law, to the concept behind its material incarnation.

Before and After

Our sages tell us that G-d Himself observes all that He commands us to do. A closer examination of their words reveals that there are, in fact, two aspects to G-d's observance of the mitzvot.

Quoting the verse (Psalms 147:19) "He instructs His words to Jacob, His statutes and His laws to Israel," the Midrash states: "G-d's way is not like the way of flesh and blood. The way of flesh and blood is that he instructs others to do, but does not do so himself; G-d, however, what He Himself does, that is what He tells Israel to do and observe." In other words, the mitzvot originate as divine deeds (*His* statutes, *His* laws); then, as a result of the fact that these are "what He Himself does," "He tells Israel to do and observe" them.

On the other hand, other sources imply the reverse: that our observance of the mitzvot causes G-d to respond in kind (e.g. Yalkut Shimoni, Eicha, section 1034 -- "One who studies Torah, G-d sits opposite him and studies with him"). Thus, there are two levels to G-d's observance of the mitzvot: the level on which it precedes and enables our observance, and a second level, on which G-d is "moved" to these deeds in response to our doing them.

A mitzvah is an embodiment of the divine will; doing a mitzvah creates a connection (the word *mitzvah* means both "commandment" and "connection") between man and G-d, between its human implementer and its divine conceiver. This is why G-d must first "do" a mitzvah before we can do it. Creating this connection is obviously beyond the capacity of finite and earth-bound man; it is G-d's initiation of a particular connection that empowers us to do the same.

But why does G-d follow our observance with an observance of His own? Certainly He, the paradigm of independence and perfection, is not "moved" or "affected" by anything -- unless He chooses to be affected. Why, then, did G-d desire that our fulfillment of His commandments should stimulate a similar response in Him?

The Empty Pitchfork

The answer to this question lies in another, more general question: why did G-d command us mitzvot at all? Certainly, He does not need anything from us. As Elihu the Bozite says to Job, "If you sin, how have you affected Him? If your transgression are many, what have you done to Him? If you are righteous, what do you give Him? What can He receive from you?" (Job 35:6). So why didn't G-d, who is "benevolent, merciful... bountifully kind" and "good to all His creatures," create a world free of demands and restrictions on its inhabitants?

Because a life free of work and responsibility -- a life whose blessings are not earned but handed out without cause or restriction -- is a life devoid of the only true joy there is: the joy of achievement. G-d's greatest kindness to us is His "burdening" us with the "yoke of Heaven" -- giving us a program for life that we are responsible to uphold, and making our material and spiritual well-being contingent upon it.

But G-d did more than hand down a list of do's and don'ts. For work alone is not enough. Unless work has a function, the worker will derive no satisfaction from it, even if it is amply rewarded. Achievement for the sake of achievement is hollow and unfulfilling -- something *objectively* significant must be achieved.

The previous Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, illustrated this point with the following parable: A nobleman was touring his estate and came upon a peasant pitching hay. The nobleman was fascinated by the flowing motions of the peasant's arms and the graceful sweep of the pitchfork through the air. He so greatly enjoyed the spectacle that he struck a deal with the peasant: for ten rubles a day, the peasant would model his hay-pitching technique in the nobleman's drawing room.

The next day, the peasant arrived at the mansion, hardly concealing his glee at his new line of "work." After swinging his empty pitchfork for an hour, he collected his ten rubles---many times his usual take for a week of backbreaking labor. But by the following day, his enthusiasm had somewhat abated. Several days later he announced to his master that he is quitting his new employment.

Said the nobleman: "I don't understand. Why would you rather labor outdoors, in the winter cold and summer heat, when you can perform such an effortless task in the comfort of my home and earn many times your usual pay?"

"But master," said the peasant, "I don't see the work."

So to grant meaning and fulfillment to our lives, G-d, made that our every action should have an objective significance -- that they should affect *Him*. Indeed, this is the only objectively significant effect there can be, since G-d is the only objective reality---any other objective is, by definition, contrived and artificial.

And to extend this significance to every aspect and detail of our deeds, He made that our should effect Him in a manner that reflects their particular earthly nature and function. He made that when we put on *tefillin*, a mitzvah whose function is to underscore the mind's

guidance of and involvement with the emotions, this should cause Him, too, to put on *tefillin*---cause the involvement of the divine "mind" with the divine "emotional" attributes. The same is true of all 613 mitzvot of the Torah: each has a corresponding impact on the divine reality.

Life is thus neither a humiliatingly free lunch, nor an empty pitchfork pitching imaginary hay, but true "work" -- work that earns the blessings it generates and has a true impact and effect, beyond its occupation and rewarding of the worker.

G-d's Money

Thus, the prohibition against usury embodies the very concept of the "yoke of Heaven" -- of G-d's imparting true work and achievement to our lives.

If G-d's observance of the mitzvot were only to precede observance, but not also result of it, our relationship with Him would be as a usury-paying borrower. G-d does the mitzvah, granting us the ability to do the same, but there His involvement ceases. The "capital" is now wholly in our domain, our efforts at His behest disconnected from anything that is truly His -- we are only making a "payment" in return for what He has given us, like a borrower who pays the lender for the fact that he has extended him a loan.

But G-d's contract with us is not that of a usurious money-lender, but of a *heter iska* investor. He extends us the capital and insists on payment in return, but He stresses that this is a partnership, an *ongoing involvement*. He retains His stake in the capital throughout our use of it, being affected, as we are, by the ups and downs of the market of our lives.

G-d desired that we emulate His relationship with us in our relationship with our fellows---that the nature of the "profit" He exacts from His creation should dictate the manner in which we profit from what we extend to one who has need for the resources in our possession. One who disregards the prohibition of usury, rejects the divine partnership in his life, a partnership that makes our every endeavor a true and fulfilling achievement.

Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe; adapted by Yanki Tauber