

Proclaim Liberty! - Parashat B'har–B'hukkotai

A story is told about Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev whose task it was each Passover to supervise the bakeries throughout his town. In addition to overseeing the kashrut of the matzah, he was much concerned with the treatment of the store's employees, many of whom were women and children. One year, observing that they were being exploited, forced to labor from early morning until late at night under terrible working conditions, he approached the bakery owner. "Our enemies used to cause great consternation among our people," he said, "with rumors charging that we use the blood of Christian children to make our matzah. Today, however, God knows this is a foolish lie! But among our many sins, I see that there are indeed bakers who prepare their matzah with *Jewish* blood, with the sweat of poor women and children who are pushed further than the human spirit can bear. Food produced in such a way can never be considered the bread of freedom."

It is indeed one of the great curiosities of Jewish tradition that our Torah does not explicitly forbid the institution of slavery. Indeed, for a nation whose origin story centers around our experience of oppression at the hands of Egypt only to be freed by the benevolent God, we would expect Jewish law to take an unequivocal stance against the enslavement of others – particularly that of our own people. Instead, we read in Exodus 21:2, "When you acquire a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years; in the seventh he should go free without payment."

It is important to note that Biblical law provides many protections for the Hebrew slave, going far and beyond what existed in other Ancient Near Eastern societies at the time. In addition to the required manumission in the seventh year quoted above, slaves, according to the Book of Deuteronomy, were to be given provisions upon release in order that they would have the means to begin a new life. Female

slaves, especially vulnerable to the vagaries of their owners, were entitled to food and clothing even should their masters tire of them. And, as stated in this week's Torah portion, *B'har-B'hukkotai*, cruel treatment of a Hebrew slave was expressly forbidden as we read: "You shall not rule over them ruthlessly; you shall fear your God" (Leviticus 25:43). Hebrew slaves were more akin to indentured servants and seen as individuals worthy of dignity who had the right to various entitlements under the law. Still, at the end of the day, they were human beings stripped of many of their essential freedoms and forced to submit to the will of another.

"U'kratem d'ror" – we read in our Torah portion this morning, "You shall proclaim liberty!" These famous words even find themselves onto the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia, the iconic symbol of independence which was initially ordered by the Pennsylvania Assembly in 1751 to commemorate the 50-year anniversary of William Penn's Charter of Privileges, Pennsylvania's original constitution. The Biblical quotation was particularly apt for such an occasion not only because of the verse's emphasis on freedom but also because of its exhortation to sanctify the Jubilee, or 50th, year. In the words of ushistory.org, "What better way to pay homage to Penn and hallow the 50th year than with a bell proclaiming liberty?"

While our *parasha's* call for freedom has been broadened, largely through its association in Philadelphia, to be seen as a rallying cry for liberty in general, embraced by movements ranging from Abolitionism to Women's Suffrage to Civil Rights, the contextual focus of the verse – and our *parasha* in general – seems actually to be about economic justice. In addition to the Jubilee year being one of release for all slaves, it is also one in which land reverts back to its original owner, preventing the polarization of society into two fixed classes of rich and poor but rather recalibrating wealth every half-century. Our *parasha* later goes on to legislate that we should not exact interest from our fellow in need, whether in lending food

or money. Temporary difficulties should never force someone into an unending death-spiral of financial ruin nor should we be permitted to take advantage of another person's falling on hard times.

As inspiring and visionary as the Torah's concept of economic justice is in many ways, we notice still that society as described in our *parasha* is far from being a utopian vision. Slaves must be freed, but they're allowed to exist in the first place. Land reverts back to its original owner in the Jubilee, but during the intervening years inequality of wealth is allowed to run rampant. Written at a time in history so different from our own, it would have been near impossible for the Torah to outright forbid something as central to the economic order as slavery; it would have been impractical to imagine that land should never pass from the hand of one person to another. And so rather than making laws that the community could not abide by, Scripture attempted to take some of the inherently unequal elements of society and try to make them less so. For better or for worse, the commandments that we read of in *Parashat B'har-B'hukkotai* are no longer immediately relevant for us as American Jews – slavery, thank goodness, no longer exists in country in the way described in the Torah (although we are still living with the after-effects of its legacy) and the laws of the Jubilee adhere only to the State of Israel and not to Diaspora communities. Still, if the theme of our Torah portion this morning is economic justice, we recognize that we live in a country and at a time that has some of the most uneven distribution of wealth ever to occur in human history. What does tradition have to say to us here today about our own financial fortunes and how they should be spent? How might we find a way to embody the spirit of the law, if not its letter, when it comes to the teachings of our *parasha*?

The Hebrew word that we often translate as "charity" is *tzedakah*, the root of which - *tzadee-dalet-resh* – actually means "justice." And herein lies a significant message about Judaism's conception of what it means to give to others. *Tzedakah* is not something that we do in order to be kind or gracious or

generous; unlike its Christian analogue which derives from the Latin word *caritas* meaning “selfless love” it’s not a form of benevolent giving. Rather, *tzedakah* is something we do because life is inherently unequal and it is our responsibility to make it right. When we engage in acts of *tzedakah* we help to bring a little more justice into the world.

If moral notions of fairness and equity are one important part of why Judaism so strongly emphasizes giving to others, another element of our understanding of *tzedakah* lies largely in the theological realm and particularly with the idea that any fortune that we may acquire in this world does not actually belong to us but rather resides with the Divine. This view finds expression in our *parasha’s* notion of the Jubilee with land returning to its original owner every 50 years, not only so as to redistribute wealth but also in order to make it abundantly clear that all land is ultimately God’s – humans being but its temporary stewards. It is easy for us to feel that we have worked hard for all that we’ve earned and thus deserve to enjoy it, even if that means there’s less to share with others, and there are elements of this that may be true. But much of what we’ve been able to gain for ourselves comes not only through human agency but also from a great deal of luck – supportive families, strong education, good health, safe neighborhoods, and all the rest. We give out of gratitude for all that we have and with acknowledgement that it wouldn’t have been possible through just our own might alone. And we give because the world and all that’s in it belongs not to us but rather to God.

They say that money is one of the things you should never discuss in polite company, along with, sex, politics and religion, but I wonder if this reluctance deprives us of the opportunity to have meaningful conversation and think critically about the ways in which we spend, save, and give to others. What is the right balance between enjoying what we’ve worked hard to earn and engaging in significant acts of *tzedakah*? Is the Torah’s golden rule of tithing – giving a full 10% of one’s income to others – reasonable

and realistic? If so, should this income be calculated pre or post tax? Should it include money set away towards retirement? College tuition? Jewish education? Is there a difference between donating to an organization that truly works to alleviate poverty and inequality, as the Torah seems to favor, versus giving, for example, to the arts? How should we weigh giving to Jewish causes versus giving to secular ones? What is our responsibility towards the synagogue – should we ever be expected to make ourselves a little financially uncomfortable in order to honor our commitments there? Finally, if creating justice for all is really the ultimate goal, is giving money even the best way to achieve this aim or does our *parasha* also require us to work for change in larger and more systemic ways? To what extent do our current patterns and behaviors inadvertently support a system where income inequality is allowed to flourish? And how do we treat the people within our own personal employ, either as individuals or as business owners?

The questions that emanate from our Torah portion this morning may be large ones adhering to what economic justice looks like in society as a whole, but their answers lie in the personal financial decisions that we as individuals make each and every day. With every dollar we spend, we are expressing not only our preferences but also our values. And while slavery has long since formally disappeared from the United States, we know that stories like that of Rabbi Levi Yitzhak and his matzah factory continue to exist. One need not literally be in shackles in order to be enslaved to a system of poverty and mistreatment of workers. Just as our Torah saw it necessary to put forth a vision of justice even in the imperfect world within which it was written, so too may we be called to do the same. *U'kratem d'ror* – Let us proclaim true liberty throughout the land!

On this Shabbat of *Parashat B'har- B'hukkotai* may we be inspired to create a world in which all slaves should go free, in which there should be no distinction between rich and poor, in which no person's vulnerabilities are ever exploited. *Ken Y'hi Ratzon* – may this day come soon!

Shabbat Shalom,

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