

TORAH TABLE TALK – *PIRKE AVOT*

Sin, Consequence, and Justice from the Ground Up

Parshat Bahar Bechukotai, Leviticus 25:1 – 27:34

Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt

With love to their grandchildren

Elka, Joshua, Lindsay, Oren z”l, Jenny, David, Lauren, Kayla, Zenna, and Emily

Bahar Bechukotai, the final *parshiot* in Leviticus, brings this book to a stunning conclusion. Having spoken about the holiness of the priesthood and the mandate for the nation to be holy, *Parshat Bahar* concludes with the holiness of the land. The land belongs to God and must be treated accordingly. Like the people, it must be given a Sabbath when it can replenish itself and every fifty years the land is to revert back to the families who inherited it at the time of the conquest. In order to allow for the reapportioning of the land, debts were to be cancelled and Israelites who had become slaves were liberated to return to their ancestral homes. The Torah proclaims: “The land shall not be sold beyond reclaim, for the land is Mine; you are but stranger residents with me.” (Lev. 25:23) The Sabbatical and Jubilee years served both a theological and social purpose. Recognizing our stewardship of the land was a way of both acknowledging the presence of God and treating others with dignity and justice. While we are not certain if the Jubilee year was observed, the underlying concept behind this institution has influenced Jewish attitudes toward social justice and ecology. To emphasize these institutions, the book of Leviticus concludes with warnings and admonitions. Israel’s presence in the land is directly related to its faithfulness to the covenant and the land. Only a holy people can live in a holy land. While this chapter raises issues regarding the connection between sin and punishment which trouble us, underlying this *Parshah* is the premise that social and communal behavior have consequences for the wellbeing of the nation.

Pirke Avot 5:8 - 9 Seven kinds of punishment come upon the world for seven classes of sins.

If some give tithe and some do not give tithe, there comes famine from drought. Some hunger while some have a sufficiency.

If all resolve not to tithe, there is famine from tumult and drought. And if they do not set aside dough offerings (Numbers 15:20) there comes an all-consuming famine.

Pestilence comes upon the world because of crimes deserving the death penalties enjoined in the Torah that are not brought before the court; and also because of the transgressions of the Torahs of the seventh year produce (Leviticus 25:1-7).

The sword comes upon the world because of the delaying of justice and the perverting of justice; and because of those that teach Torah not according to the *Halachah*.

Evil beasts come upon the world because of false swearing and the profaning of the name.

Exile and homelessness comes upon the world because of idolatry, sexual immorality and bloodshed; and because of neglect to give release to the soil during the sabbatical year.

Sources

Leviticus 25:2-7

When you enter the land that I assign you, the land shall observe a Sabbath of the Lord. Six years you may sow your field and six years you may prune your vineyard and gather in the yield. But in the seventh year the land shall have a Sabbath of complete rest, a Sabbath of the Lord...but you may eat whatever the land during the seventh year will produce – you, your male and female slaves, the hired and bound laborers who live with you, and your cattle and the beasts in your land may eat all its yield.

Leviticus 25 35-36

If your kinsman, being in straits, comes under the authority and you hold him as though a resident alien, Let him live by your side; do not exact from him advance or accrued interest but fear the Lord.

Rabbi Rami Shapiro, Ethics of the Sages, Annotated and Explained

Social justice is essential to human survival. If the law does not protect the people from predators, or the earth from exploitations and over-cultivation; if the law is used to pervert justice, or the courts fail to adhere to the standards of law in trials; then justice crumbles and the people are exiled, having forfeited their right to their homes. There is no right free from responsibility. You reap what you sow.

Here, too, justice for the poor and powerless determines the quality of a society and is a barometer of its destiny. The Sabbatical year is to be a year of rest for the earth, allowing her to rejuvenate. The foods that grow during this period are not to be used by the owners of the land but are to be left for the poor...when this isn't done, greed overwhelms the world and all suffer

Commentary

Of all the institutions in the Torah, the Sabbatical and Jubilee years were the ones most likely to be ignored. For a farmer to allow his land to lie fallow took an extraordinary amount of courage, particularly at a time when people knew so little about ecology or land management. For a land owner to give up possession of his property that he legally purchased and return it to its original owners would have been most difficult – it flies in the face of human nature. Elsewhere in *Pirke Avot* we are told that the average man says “What is mine is mine, and what is yours is yours.” Yet the Torah is very clear. We do not own land; we are its stewards. We must manage it and use it according to God’s rules. We can only possess what God has given us and then, according to God’s instructions.

The passage above from *Pirke Avot* is troubling. Whenever we confront statements which suggest that there is a connection between sin and suffering we wrestle with the question of theodicy. What about good people who suffer unjustly and bad people who seem to thrive? Why do, “bad things happen to good people?” This statement is quite explicit in drawing a connection between sin and suffering. There are specific consequences for specific transgressions.

To appreciate this passage, then, we must understand two underlying assumptions. First, the transgressions which are discussed here are social transgressions, not individual sins. A society that condones such actions will bring misery upon itself. No one will be immune: the innocent and the guilty will suffer as a consequence of social indifference and injustice. This is not meant to be a judgment but a statement of fact. Second, to express justice there must be moral symmetry here. This passage assumes that if God is just, then there must be connection between the nature of the transgression and the type of suffering it unleashes on society. Thus, a society in which some tithe while others don’t will be a society in which some people will go hungry while others don’t. A society that does not provide an effective system of justice will become a society rife with violence and crime, and so on. These are statements of fact rather than judgments.

So how does the sabbatical year fit into this? It is surprising to note that the Sabbatical year is grouped together with the three cardinal sins: murder, sexuality immorality, and idolatry. Three of these transgressions involve the abuse of power. In the cases of the murder, sexual immorality and the abuse of the land, there are always victims. They are connected to the central theological principle of Judaism – the rejection of idolatry and belief in one God. To destroy life is to deny the sacred image of God in every human being. These four transgressions have a direct consequence upon the nature and quality of society. Social justice begins with the apportioning of well and basic resources. The Sabbatical year, like the Jubilee year was all about creating a society in which all were treated with dignity, fairness and justice, from the ground up. A society that does not protect the weak and provide the opportunity for renewal will ultimately devolve into a civilization of injustice and violence in which the individual worships himself.

Questions to Ponder

1. Review the transgressions listed above. Why do you think the sages singled out these particular sins?
2. The past year was a Sabbatical year in Israel. There was a great deal of discussion about how and if this law should be observed today. What relevance does the sabbatical year have in the contemporary world? Is it practical to expect modern day farmers in Israel to allow their fields to lie fallow for an entire year? How can we institutionalize the element of social justice implicit in this practice in today’s world?
3. How might we understand this idea of ‘seven punishments’ in terms of modern society? In what ways do we see the consequences of sin in the unfolding of society?
4. There are two references to the sabbatical year in the passage from *Pirke Avot* – can you find both? Why do you think there are two ways in which we suffer as a result of not observing this law?

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