

Kol Rina  
*An Independent Minyan*  
Parashat Behar-Bechukotai  
May 8, 2021 \*\*\* 26 Iyar, 5781

Kol Rina – An Independent Minyan, is a traditional egalitarian community. We are haimish (homey/folksy), friendly, participatory, warm and welcoming. We hold weekly services in South Orange as well as holiday services and celebrations which are completely lay led. We welcome all to our services and programs from non-Hebrew readers to Jewish communal and education professionals.

[Behar – Bechukotai in a Nutshell](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2904/jewish/Behar-Bechukotai-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/2904/jewish/Behar-Bechukotai-in-a-Nutshell.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2904/jewish/Behar-Bechukotai-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

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 becomes 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 values of different types of pledges made to G-d.

[Haftarah in a Nutshell: Jeremiah 16:19 – 17:14](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/877065/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/877065/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/877065/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

The haftarah discusses the punishments that await those who disregard G-d's law, and the blessings that are the lot of those who follow the Creator's wishes. This follows the theme of this week's Torah reading which details at length the blessings and curses. The prophet Jeremiah rebukes the people of Israel for their idolatrous ways and for not having faith in G-d. He conveys G-d's words of wrath towards those who do not put their trust in Him — foretelling exile as their punishment — and of blessings for those who do. "Cursed is the man who trusts in man and relies on mortal flesh for his strength, and whose heart turns away from the G-d. He shall be like a lone tree in the desert, and will not see when good comes, and will dwell on parched land in the desert, on salt-sodden soil that is not habitable. Blessed is the man who trusts in the G-d, to whom G-d will be his trust. For he shall be like a tree planted by the water, and which spreads its roots out into a stream, so it will not be affected when heat comes, and its leaves shall be green, and in the year of drought will not be anxious, neither shall it cease from bearing fruit." The haftarah ends with the following poignant verses: "G-d who is the source of the

hopes of Israel, all that forsake You shall be shamed, and they who turn away from me shall be marked out on the earth that they have forsaken G-d, the source of living waters. Heal me, O G-d, then shall I be healed; help me, then I shall be helped, for You are my praise!"

## **FOOD FOR THOUGHT**

"We the People" (Behar-Bechukotai 5781) by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l  
<https://rabbisacks.org/behar-bechukotai-5781/>

In the final parsha of the book of Leviticus, in the midst of one of the most searing curses ever to have been uttered to a nation by way of warning, the Sages found a fleck of pure gold.

Moses is describing a nation in flight from its enemies:

**Just the sound of a windblown leaf will put them to running, and they will run scared as if running from a sword! They will fall even when no one is chasing them! They will stumble over each other as they would before a sword, even though no one is chasing them! You will have no power to stand before your enemies. (Lev. 26:36-37)**

There is, on the face of it, nothing positive in this nightmare scenario. But the Sages said: "They will stumble over each other" – read this as 'stumble because of one another': this teaches that all Israelites are responsible for one another."<sup>[1]</sup>

This is an exceedingly strange passage. Why locate this principle here? Surely the whole Torah testifies to it. When Moses speaks about the reward for keeping the covenant, he does so collectively. There will be rain in its due season. You will have good harvests. And so on. The principle that Jews have collective responsibility, that their fate and destiny are interlinked – this could have been found in the Torah's blessings. Why search for it among its curses?

The answer is that there is nothing unique to Judaism in the idea that we are all implicated in one another's fate. That is true of the citizens of any nation. If the economy is booming, most people benefit. If there is law and order, if people are polite to one another and come to one another's aid, there is a general sense of well-being. Conversely, if there is a recession many people suffer. If a neighbourhood is scarred by crime, people are scared to walk the streets. We are social animals, and our horizons of possibility are shaped by the society and culture within which we live.

All of this applied to the Israelites so long as they were a nation in their own land. But what about when they suffered defeat and exile and were eventually scattered across the earth? They no longer had any of the conventional lineaments of a nation. They were not living in the same place. They did not share the same language of everyday life. While Rashi and his family were living in Christian

northern Europe and speaking French, Maimonides was living in Muslim Egypt, speaking and writing Arabic.

Nor did Jews share a fate. While those in northern Europe were suffering persecution and massacres during the Crusades, the Jews of Spain were enjoying their Golden Age. While the Jews of Spain were being expelled and compelled to wander round the world as refugees, the Jews of Poland were enjoying a rare sunlit moment of tolerance. In what sense therefore were they responsible for one another? What constituted them as a nation? How could they – as the author of Psalm 137 put it – sing God’s song in a strange land?

There are only two texts in the Torah that speak to this situation, namely the two sections of curses, one in our parsha, and the other in Deuteronomy in the parsha of Ki Tavo. Only these speak about a time when Israel is exiled and dispersed, scattered, as Moses later put it, “to the most distant lands under heaven.” (Deut. 30:4) There are three major differences between the two curses, however. The passage in Leviticus is in the plural, that in Deuteronomy in the singular. The curses in Leviticus are the words of God; in Deuteronomy they are the words of Moses. And the curses in Deuteronomy do not end in hope. They conclude in a vision of unrelieved bleakness:

**You will try to sell yourselves as slaves—both male and female—but no one will want to buy you. (Deut. 28:68)**

Those in Leviticus end with a momentous hope:

**But despite all that, when they are in enemy territory, I will not reject them or despise them to the point of totally destroying them, breaking my covenant with them by doing so, because I am the Lord their God. But for their sake I will remember the covenant with the first generation, the ones I brought out of Egypt’s land in the sight of all the nations, in order to be their God; I am the Lord. (Lev. 26:44-45)**

Even in their worst hours, according to Leviticus, the Jewish people will never be destroyed. Nor will God reject them. The covenant will still be in force and its terms still operative. This means that Jews will always be linked to one another by the same ties of mutual responsibility that they have in the land – for it was the covenant that formed them as a nation and bound them to one another even as it bound them to God. Therefore, even when falling over one another in flight from their enemies they will still be bound by mutual responsibility. They will still be a nation with a shared fate and destiny.

This is a rare and special idea, and it is the distinctive feature of the politics of covenant. Covenant became a major element in the politics of the West following the Reformation. It shaped political discourse in Switzerland, Holland, Scotland and England in the seventeenth century as the invention of printing and the spread of literacy made people familiar for the first time with the Hebrew Bible (the “Old

Testament” as they called it). There they learned that tyrants are to be resisted, that immoral orders should not be obeyed, and that kings did not rule by divine right but only by the consent of the governed.

The same convictions were held by the Pilgrim Fathers as they set sail for America, but with one difference, that they did not disappear over time as they did in Europe. The result is that the United States is the only country today whose political discourse is framed by the idea of covenant.

Two textbook examples of this are Lyndon Baines Johnson’s Inaugural of 1965, and Barack Obama’s Second Inaugural of 2013. Both use the biblical device of significant repetition (always an odd number, three or five or seven). Johnson invokes the idea of covenant five times. Obama five times begins paragraphs with a key phrase of covenant politics – words never used by British politicians – namely, “We the people.”

In covenant societies it is the people as a whole who are responsible, under God, for the fate of the nation. As Johnson put it, “Our fate as a nation and our future as a people rest not upon one citizen but upon all citizens.”[2] In Obama’s words, “You and I, as citizens, have the power to set this country’s course.”[3] That is the essence of covenant: we are all in this together. There is no division of the nation into rulers and ruled. We are conjointly responsible, under the sovereignty of God, for one another.

This is not open-ended responsibility. There is nothing in Judaism like the tendentious and ultimately meaningless idea set out by Jean-Paul Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* of ‘absolute responsibility’: “The essential consequence of our earlier remarks is that man, being condemned to be free, carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulders, he is responsible for the world and for himself as a way of being.”[4]

In Judaism we are responsible only for what we could have prevented but did not. This is how the Talmud puts it:

**Whoever can forbid their household [to commit a sin] but does not, is seized for [the sins of] their household. [If they can forbid] their fellow citizens [but do not] they are seized for [the sins of] their fellow citizens. [If they can forbid] the whole world [but do not] they are seized for [the sins of] the whole world. (Shabbat 54b)**

This remains a powerful idea and an unusual one. What made it unique to Judaism is that it applied to a people scattered throughout the world united only by the terms of the covenant our ancestors made with God at Mount Sinai. But it continues, as I have often argued, to drive American political discourse likewise even today. It tells us that we are all equal citizens in the republic of faith and that responsibility cannot be delegated away to governments or presidents but belongs inalienably to each of us. We are our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers.

That is what I mean by the strange, seemingly self-contradictory idea I have argued

throughout this series of essays: that we are all called on to be leaders. One may fairly protest: if everyone is a leader, then no one is. If everyone leads, who is left to follow? The concept that resolves the contradiction is covenant.

Leadership is the acceptance of responsibility. Therefore if we are all responsible for one another, we are all called on to be leaders, each within our sphere of influence – be it within the family, the community, the organisation or a larger grouping still. This can sometimes make an enormous difference. In late summer of 1999 I was in Pristina making a BBC television programme about the aftermath of the Kosovo campaign. I interviewed General Sir Michael Jackson, then head of the NATO forces. To my surprise, he thanked me for what “my people” had done. The Jewish community had taken charge of the city’s 23 primary schools. It was, he said, the most valuable contribution to the city’s welfare. When 800,000 people have become refugees and then return home, the most reassuring sign that life has returned to normal is that the schools open on time. That, he said, we owe to the Jewish people.

Meeting the head of the Jewish community later that day, I asked him how many Jews were there currently living in Pristina. His answer? Eleven. The story, as I later uncovered it, was this. In the early days of the conflict, Israel had, along with other international aid agencies, sent a field medical team to work with the Kosovan Albanian refugees. They noticed that while other agencies were concentrating on the adults, there was no one working with the children. Traumatized by the conflict and far from home, the children were lost and unfocused with no systems of support in place to help them.

The team phoned back to Israel and asked for young volunteers. Every youth movement in Israel, from the most secular to the most religious, immediately formed volunteer teams of youth leaders, sent out to Kosovo for two-week intervals. They worked with the children, organising summer camps, sports competitions, drama and music events and whatever else they could think of to make their temporary exile less traumatic. The Kosovo Albanians were Muslims, and for many of the Israeli youth workers it was their first contact and friendship with children of another faith.

Their effort won high praise from UNICEF, the United Nations’ children’s organisation. It was in the wake of this that “the Jewish people” – Israel, the American-based “Joint” and other Jewish agencies – were asked to supervise the return to normality of the school system in Pristina.

That episode taught me the power of chessed, acts of kindness when extended across the borders of faith. It also showed the practical difference collective responsibility makes to the scope of the Jewish deed. World Jewry is small, but the invisible strands of mutual responsibility mean that even the smallest Jewish community can turn to the Jewish people worldwide for help, and they can achieve things that would be exceptional for a nation many times its size.

## When the Jewish people join hands in collective responsibility, they become a formidable force for good.

[1] Sifra ad loc., Sanhedrin 27b, Shavuot 39a. [2] Lyndon B. Johnson, Inaugural Address (United States Capitol, January 20, 1965). [3] Barack Obama, Second Inaugural Address (United States Capitol, January 21, 2013). [4] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes, New York, Washington Square Press, 1966, 707.

### [Why Do Jews Still Adhere To The Torah's Covenant? By Jeremy Tabik](https://www.jtsa.edu/why-do-jews-still-adhere-to-the-torah%E2%80%99s-covenant)

<https://www.jtsa.edu/why-do-jews-still-adhere-to-the-torah%E2%80%99s-covenant>

Why do we, as Jews, have fealty to the Torah? Why do many of us feel bound by the Torah's laws?

The Torah is such a fundamental part of us as a people that it's easy to forget how implausible it may seem that any document written 2,500 years ago would be relevant to modern life. Core assumptions since then have been overturned—about gender, power, nature, and society (to say the least!). Why would we think the Torah has anything to say to us? Why do we feel the draw of God's covenant as instantiated in this outmoded text?

Indeed, the Torah itself constantly reminds us that it was not intended for us Diasporic Jews. Again and again, the language of the Torah ties itself to settlement in the Land of Israel. To give two examples from this week's Torah portion: "if you observe My laws . . . you shall rest on the land in security" (Lev. 25:18); "I am God your Lord who brought you out of Egypt to give to you the land of Canaan in order to be your Lord" (Lev. 25:38). Is the Torah even relevant beyond the specific borders of the Land of Israel?

The Mishnah (Kiddushin 1:7) takes a strong stand on the issue, by distinguishing between "mitzvot dependent on the Land" (e.g. *Shemittah*, the once-in-seven-years agricultural rest; certain priestly gifts) and "mitzvot not dependent on the Land (e.g. Shabbat, tefillin).

The Talmud (BT Kiddushin 37a–b) tries to find some Scriptural criteria that puts any particular mitzvah into one category or the other, and in so doing undermines the very distinction it is trying to demonstrate. For example, the Talmud uses Deuteronomy 12:1 as the basis for the Mishnah's division: "These are the laws and rules that you must carefully observe in the land (*eretz*) that God, the Lord of your fathers, is giving you to possess, as long as you live on earth (*adamah*)." In the end, the Midrash there concludes that "as long as you live on earth" means that many mitzvot apply in all lands, not just the Land of Israel. But by bringing this verse, the Talmud reinforces the potential alienation: after all, the Hebrew terms *eretz* and *adamah* are often synonymous and so it's all too easy to read the passage as saying that the laws must be observed "in the land . . . as long as you live on the land"—clearly implying the necessity of being in the Land of Israel.

In other words, the reader realizes, through the Talmud's counterproofs, that so much of the core of Judaism is made, in the Torah, dependent on the Land of Israel! As later Judaism's most famous heretic, Baruch Spinoza, concluded when he tried to read the Torah anew with as few prior dogmatic assumptions as possible, "the Law revealed by God to Moses was simply the laws of the Hebrew state alone, and was therefore binding on none but the Hebrews, and not even on them except while their state still stood" (*Theologico-Political Treatise*, Preface).

Another example of the implausibility of the Torah: God's promise to Abraham that his descendants would be "like the stars of heaven" (Gen. 22:17). It is true that there are roughly 14 million Jews in the world, which sounds like a lot when you think about Abraham and his family. But compared to the 7 billion people in the world, it is extremely hard to square God's promise for keeping the covenant with the demographic reality. Our Temples were destroyed, our people scattered and murdered throughout time—we are hardly "a great nation, mighty and numerous" (Deut. 26:5).

Which just brings us back to the original question: *Why do we still look to words that may have no relevance to us for meaning? Why do we still cling to God's covenant despite all the evidence that suggests it is null and void?*

One answer might be that we are simply stubborn. To act as if the covenant still remains true, that the laws are still incumbent on us even beyond the borders of ancient Israel, that the Torah simply has anything to say to us at all—these are extraordinary acts of stubbornness and even hubris, defying all reason and evidence. Simply put, it is pretending that the world has never changed. This stubbornness I find strangely comforting. As Jews, we are anchored to the past like few others, and in some ways this has allowed the Torah to be ever-relevant for us. Perhaps another way to think about it is through the nature of a covenant as a relationship between two parties, us and God. In this way, our turning to the Torah is a way of never giving up on this relationship. Even when God's promises seem strained, even when God's law seems not to speak to us, we are unwilling to give up on our divine partner. It's a relationship that we know in our hearts, despite Scriptural prooftexts to the contrary, transcends borders in time and space and keeps us strong through the worst hardships.

Or perhaps our stubbornness reveals a deeper truth, that in some fundamental way, the world *has* never changed. The experience of being human and the exploration of answers to those questions that humans ask are still the same. Our lives have the same ingredients—relationships, births and deaths. Despite the drastic differences between the world of the Torah and ours, they are so overwhelmed by the continuities that the ancient wisdom naturally speaks to us.

I prefer to live in the absurdity. I know full well that my biblical ancestors would find my form of Judaism incomprehensible, that I cling to texts that speak directly to them and not me. For me, this is our triumph as a people, to continually reclaim our

tradition and our covenant and to demand that it applies to us now, that it speaks to us directly, that it encircles and enriches our lives, that it contains the very word of God. This is not a conviction based on rationality; it is rather a “leap of faith.” It is a reflection of our stubborn disposition—and yet it is at the core of everything that is beautiful and powerful in our tradition.

## Judaism's Utopian Vision of Universal Equality: Behar- BeHukotai 5781 by Rabbi Yitz Greenberg

[https://mechonhadar.s3.amazonaws.com/mh\\_torah\\_source\\_sheets/GreenbergParashatBeHarBeChukotai5781.pdf?utm\\_campaign=Dvar%20Torah%205781&utm\\_medium=email&\\_hsmi=124903086&\\_hsenc=p2ANqztz-80iYJraoWRTSXSZrHlalrVrJTV9Mmr9\\_FxD3GDc1A4YB475KU6qgZ8fUxndXIKAxO8YuJq8nQz-cWarMaBDRqnbXKNZQ&utm\\_content=124903086&utm\\_source=hs\\_email](https://mechonhadar.s3.amazonaws.com/mh_torah_source_sheets/GreenbergParashatBeHarBeChukotai5781.pdf?utm_campaign=Dvar%20Torah%205781&utm_medium=email&_hsmi=124903086&_hsenc=p2ANqztz-80iYJraoWRTSXSZrHlalrVrJTV9Mmr9_FxD3GDc1A4YB475KU6qgZ8fUxndXIKAxO8YuJq8nQz-cWarMaBDRqnbXKNZQ&utm_content=124903086&utm_source=hs_email)

Despite the biblical prophets’ outspoken calls for social justice and to end the exploitation of the poor, Jewish traditional religion in contemporary Israel and America has become mostly identified with conservative or even reactionary political and economic views. Plain and simple, this current stance contradicts an important part of the tradition. As shown in our *parashah*, the Torah actually encapsulates a strong Utopian vision of a world of equality, justice, and universal dignity.

True, it marries this vision with a method of world improvement—i.e. covenant—which is realistic, gradualist, seeking incremental change, particularist, and personal rather than universalist and ideological.<sup>1</sup> By stressing certain aspects of this method, Judaism can be presented as a ritualistic religion, focused on upholding the stability of the social order. But this does not do justice to the world transformation that the prophetic-messianic stream in Judaism seeks to achieve. I believe the marriage of utopian values with hard-headed actions and concrete steps is intended to enable Judaism to make dialectical moves and use the best policies from both general political approaches. This “hybrid” approach also has positioned Judaism to avoid the pathological, runaway revolutionary movements that have raised humanity’s hopes—and dashed them—for the past two centuries. Here, I want to focus on the Utopian vision. This will help readers grasp the fullness of the Jewish hope for world repair.

The Torah recognizes private property and upholds it by prohibiting stealing, unfair exchanges, or seizing others’ possessions by cheating, or moving boundaries without payment.<sup>2</sup> But private property and marketplace economics inevitably lead to inequality and the creation of a class of permanently poor. The Torah fights this by prohibiting taking interest on loans and by calling on family to help individuals avoid falling into poverty.<sup>3</sup> When individuals are driven by economic pressures to sell their land, the Torah instructs family and redeemers<sup>4</sup> to help them regain their



land and capacity to produce income (Leviticus 25:26-27; 48-51).

Most of all, the Torah reveals its commitment to equality by shaping the seventh year as a sabbatical year. The number seven represents the Torah's ideal of the perfect, the whole, the complete. The seventh day every week is Shabbat. Six days a week we tolerate and participate in the flawed daily regimen where there is equality and inequality, rich and poor, justice and injustice, satiety and deprivation. On the seventh day, the Shabbat, we put aside all the compromises and injustice. All people—be they free or slaves—are released from work. All competition and striving to get ahead is suspended. People live the day as a foretaste of the Messianic era when all people will have all that they need, without war or conflict. People live in harmony with God, with Nature, and with each other.<sup>5</sup>

In parallel fashion, the Torah creates a different economic paradigm for the seventh, sabbatical year that breaks from the model that governs the first six years of the cycle. In this year, we put aside all the inequalities, all the economic competition and the exploiting of labor. Private ownership, as it were, is suspended. The land is **not** cultivated but its produce is thrown open to all to come and take as they need (or as their animals need). It is as if the Torah is proclaiming a Socialist common ownership of the land by all for the duration of the year (Leviticus 25:2-7).

Our *parashah* also describes the fiftieth year, Yovel, the Jubilee year. Yovel upholds and restores the Torah's ideal vision of full economic equality for all. Equality and economic dignity start with the division of the land when the people, Israel, entered Canaan. Each family was given an equal portion of land, adjusted for the number of people in the family and the productive quality of the land.<sup>6</sup> Then the Torah prescribes interest-free loans, and instructs family to help to prevent people from having to sell their land and lose their source of income. The Torah also rules that land can not be permanently sold but only for a limited number of harvest years (Leviticus 25:23-24; 25-28). When poor farmers sell the land for these limited years, the Torah instructs the family and redeemers to help them buy it back and regain their earning power.

Despite all these special efforts, inevitably some land will be lost to some families and a permanent landless class mired in poverty will emerge. Therefore in this fiftieth year, the Jubilee year, all the land is redistributed back to the original families.<sup>7</sup> Thus every family can start over again with a guaranteed source of income. Permanent poverty is prevented.

In the Jubilee year, every Hebrew in servitude goes free. The Torah is saying that in the ideal world, no one will be a master; everyone will be free; everyone will be equal economically. Everyone will be restored to an ancestral heritage. To sum it up, the Torah says: "You shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants"

(25:10).<sup>8</sup>

Historians are not sure that these ideal laws were ever actually carried out. We know that far less economically transformational laws—such as the Torah’s limit of a six year term limit for Hebrew slaves—were resisted and violated by large landowners and wealthy nobles.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless the prophets insist that these laws are operative and that this ideal will be realized in the Messianic era. The exploitation of the poor and the privileging of the rich and powerful will be stopped. That is why the book of Isaiah predicts that, to have full dignity and equality for all, we must overcome poverty altogether. The poor are not only economically deprived. They are degraded in status and, more often than not, denied the opportunities or resources to move up on the socio-economic ladder. Therefore, Isaiah insists that in the messianic era, prosperity will “flood as a mighty stream” (Isaiah 66:12), and the phenomenon of the poor will disappear.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, illnesses and disabilities that reduce people’s status and earning power will be cured. This will pave the way for full equality and standing in society for those held back by such disabilities.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, according to the prophet Hosea, when the world is fully repaired and God renews the covenant, then the woman will call her husband *ishi* (“my man”) and not *ba’ali* (“my husband,” literally: “my master”). The implication is that the curse of male domination (see Genesis 3:16) will be undone and women will also achieve full equality (Hosea 2:18).<sup>12</sup> In that time, there will be full equality before the law and the poor will get equal justice with the rich. This, in fact, will be the hallmark of the Messianic age.<sup>13</sup>

The prophets have described this era as a realization of what the Rabbis called the Kingdom of God. This grows out of the belief that only when all injustice and inequality is ended, will humanity come to know God truly.<sup>14</sup> Then the whole earth will be holy—full of life, dignity, and equality for all.<sup>15</sup>

Shabbat Shalom.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, my essay “Book of the Covenant” on Parashat Mishpatim, available here:

<https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/book-covenant>. <sup>2</sup> See e.g. the focus of the laws of Parashat

Mishpatim (in Exodus 21-23) and Parashat Ki Teitzei (Deuteronomy 25). Moving boundaries:

Deuteronomy 19:14. <sup>3</sup> See Leviticus 25:36-37. On the family’s role, see vv. 25-26.

<sup>4</sup> In Hebrew the *go’el* is a redeemer, a near kinsman or an individual who has a covenantal

responsibility to this person. See Leviticus 25:25. <sup>5</sup> For a fuller articulation of Shabbat in this mode,

see my book, *The Jewish Way*, pp. 124-133, 136-139, and especially 149-153. <sup>6</sup> See Numbers 33:54ff.

<sup>7</sup> I should note that the fiftieth year represents 7 cycles of 7 years (i.e. sabbatical year squared) **plus one**. The additional one is a covenantal number (7 + 1 = 8, 7 x 7 + 1 = 50) in which the human partner adds their efforts so that the covenant is fully realized. <sup>8</sup> Need I add that these were the words the

founders of the United States of America were inspired to realize. They put these words on the Liberty

Bell in Philadelphia, the then capital. <sup>9</sup> See Jeremiah's description of the violation of the six year limit and the resistance to give up the privileges of ownership of people for unlimited periods (Jeremiah 34:8-22). It is difficult to believe that wealthy landowners would not resist equalizing land transfers even more vigorously. <sup>10</sup> See also Isaiah 54:11-12. On ending hunger, see Isaiah 49:8-10 and Ezekiel 34:23-24. <sup>11</sup> On overcoming sickness, see Isaiah 35:5-6. <sup>12</sup> See also Jeremiah 31:21. <sup>13</sup> On overcoming oppression and gaining equality before the law, see Isaiah 11:4. <sup>14</sup> How, then, do I explain the emergence of an Orthodox Judaism that is politically conservative and focused on observance of certain ritual commandments almost to the neglect of social justice issues? This is the outcome of the Haredi alliances with conservative (even reactionary) regimes in Eastern Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in the hope of jointly holding back the advance of modernity. The rightist tendency has been accentuated by Israeli orthodoxy seeking to maintain its monopoly on static religion and American Orthodoxy's ongoing embrace of Donald Trump. <sup>15</sup> Isaiah 11, especially v. 9.

[What Political System Does the Torah Favor? by Rabbi Dvora E. Weisberg](https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/what-political-system-does-torah-favor)  
<https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/what-political-system-does-torah-favor>

I have never thought of the Torah as a political manifesto. That is, I do not see the Torah as advancing a political system comparable to the type of systems that we see in contemporary society. Nor do I think of Judaism as a religious system that mandates a particular political stance. However, if we were looking for a political vision of society in the Torah, Parashat B'har-B'chukotai is where I would start. Leviticus 25 offers a vision for the relationship between the individual and community, an approach to resources and the distribution of resources, and an understanding of the limits of ownership and private property. Leviticus 26, one of the two chapters of the Torah known as tochecha (rebuke), follows with a detailed image of what happens when a community fails to live up to its values. In Leviticus 25, God tells Moses to instruct the Israelites how to live properly in the land where they are journeying:

**“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...You shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard” (Lev. 25:3-4).**

In addition to the sabbatical year, when the land is left untilled, every fiftieth year is a jubilee year, a year when ancestral land that has been sold is to be returned to its original owner. When an Israelite buys land belonging to another Israelite, the sale is essentially a long-term lease, with the purchase price calculated based on the number of years until the jubilee.

Further, sales of ancestral land to be apportioned among the tribes of Israel after the conquest of Canaan “must not be sold beyond reclaim (that is, in perpetuity), for the land is Mine; you are but strangers resident with Me” (Lev. 25:23). Although the

Torah uses the language of buying and selling, it proclaims that the Israelites do not truly own the land that God is giving them; it is God's land, and they are God's tenants. They must treat the land with respect, allowing it to rest, and know that although they may purchase the right to work and live on a piece of property, they cannot own it forever.

These limits on ownership of land extend to the ability to control other human beings. Leviticus 25 goes on to explain the laws that apply to individuals who, facing dire poverty, sell not their land, but themselves. Such individuals sell themselves not as chattel slaves, but as indentured workers, knowing that they will be freed in the jubilee year. Just as the land is God's, so too are the Israelites; "they are My servants, whom I freed from the land of Egypt" (Lev. 25:42).

If we were tempted to dismiss Leviticus 25 as a utopian vision, Leviticus 26 offers us a grim picture of what happens when we place ourselves at the center of the universe, disregarding the claims of other human beings, the land, and God. Leviticus 26 spells out the consequences of ignoring these claims. "I will make your skies like iron and your earth like copper...Your land shall not yield its produce, nor shall the trees of the land yield their fruit" (Lev. 26:19-20).

The Torah underscores important truths about maintaining a just and humane society and the challenges of communal life. Even in a world where humans desperately need each other for survival, there are individuals who use their power to acquire resources and control other human beings. They believe that power and wealth can insulate them from perceived dangers, such as those posed by the less fortunate, from disease, from the rigors of climate change, even from death itself. People barricade themselves in gated communities, build bunkers to withstand cataclysmic upheaval, and invest in technology that they hope will allow them to preserve their bodies until science finds a way to extend life. But the Torah warns us that if we fail to live up to our commitments, our cities and places of sanctuary will be ruins and the land will be desolate (Lev. 26:31-32).

I want to close this parashah – and my commentaries on the Book of Leviticus – by arguing that the Torah's vision for holiness and wholeness lies in its insistence throughout Leviticus that Moses, when annunciating the behaviors that God desires, speaks to the entire people. Leviticus is aware that each individual experiences unique moments of joy and gratitude, sickness and pain. But its focus is on the community of Israel. It is the Israelite community that has the capacity for holiness through its collective acceptance of a vision. Whether Israel is guided by a king, by judges, by priests, or by prophets, the Torah's vision cannot be achieved by leaders alone. Only when individuals see themselves as part of the community, responsible for their own behavior and for the welfare of those around them, can they be am kadosh, a holy people.

If we understand this message, then the Book of Leviticus ceases to be a recitation of sometimes bizarre practices and emerges as a blueprint for bringing the Divine

into the world.\*\*\*\*\*

## Yahrtzeits

Marty Fine remembers his mother Edith Joan Fine (Yehudit bat Mordecai v'Esther) on Wednesday May 12<sup>th</sup> (Sivan 1).

Elaine Berkenwald remembers Stan's mother Elaine Klughaupt (Elka) on Thursday May 13<sup>th</sup> (Sivan 2).

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### *Upcoming events at Kol Rina:*

#### Friday Torah Study and Service via Zoom, May 7, 2021

Our Friday evening observances will begin at 5:15 with Torah study led by Len Levin. Kabbalat Shabbat, led by Cynthia Schwartz, and Maariv, led by Treasurer Cohen, will follow, beginning at 5:45.

Rich Cohen will present a d'var on the world water crisis and Israel's contribution to its solution. We hope you will join us!

*Use the following Zoom link to attend:*

<https://zoom.us/j/533517572?pwd=dVFHR2NGZFBCYWp1Yzd6ald0bzFRdz09>

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#### Monday evening minyan via Zoom, May 10

Our regular weekday evening minyan will take place on Monday, May 10, beginning at 8:00. Your presence allows mourners and those observing yahrzeits to say Kaddish. Please support your Kol Rina friends by attending.

*Use the following Zoom link to attend:*

<https://zoom.us/j/97663987468?pwd=NjFhaVZUZkpSZ3pxQWJjOU5UWFR4QT09>

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#### Coming May 23: Brunch-and-Learn: An Environmental Tour of Israel

Tour guide Hava Erlichman-Voliovich will introduce us to the natural environment of Israel through three topics: Water usage and treatment; urban ecology; and birds and wildlife. She will discuss Israel's environmental challenges as well as its remarkable accomplishments.

A native Israeli, Hava Erlichman-Voliovich studied Linguistics and Geography at the Hebrew University. After working for many years in High Tech, she followed her passion to become a certified Israel tour guide and has been leading tours full-time for the past five years. She is enthusiastically looking forward to meeting us.

The program will take place via Zoom on **May 23 at 10:30 am**. Please save the date! Registration / Zoom information to follow.

