

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parshiyot Behar - Bechukotai
May 16, 2020 *** Iyar 22, 5780

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)

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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

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

The Power of a Curse (Behar – Bechukotai 5780) by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

<http://rabbisacks.org/behar-bechukotai-5780/>

The book of Vayikra draws to a close by outlining the blessings that will follow if the people are faithful to their covenant with God. Then it describes the curses that will befall them if they are not. The general principle is clear. In biblical times, the fate of the nation mirrored the conduct of the nation. If people behaved well, the nation would prosper. If they behaved badly, eventually bad things would happen. That is what the Prophets knew. As Martin Luther King paraphrased it, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice."^[1] Not always immediately but ultimately, good is rewarded with good, bad with bad.

Our parsha starkly sets out the terms of that equation: if you obey God, there will be rain in its season, the ground will yield its crops and the trees their fruit; there will be peace. The curses, though, are almost three times as long and much more dramatic in the language they use:

"But if you will not listen to Me and carry out all these commands ... then I will do this to you: I will bring on you sudden terror, wasting diseases and fever that will destroy your sight and sap your strength... I will break your stubborn pride and make the sky above you like iron and the ground beneath you like bronze... I will send wild animals against you, and they will rob you of your children, destroy your cattle and make you so few in number that your roads will be deserted... Your land will be laid waste, and your cities will lie in ruins... As for those of you who are left, I will make their hearts so fearful in the lands of their enemies that the sound of a windblown leaf will put them to flight. They will run as though fleeing from the sword, and they will fall, even though no one is pursuing them." (Lev. 26: 14-37)

There is a savage eloquence here. The images are vivid. There is a pulsing rhythm to the verses, as if the harsh fate that would overtake the nation is inexorable, cumulative and accelerating. The effect is intensified by the repeated hammer blows: "If after all this ... if you remain hostile ... if in spite of these things ... if in spite of this." The word *keri*, key to the whole passage, is repeated seven times. It appears nowhere else in the whole of Tanach. Its meaning is uncertain. It may mean rebelliousness, obstinacy, indifference, hard-heartedness, reluctance or being-left-to-chance. But the basic principle is clear. If you act toward Me with *keri*, says God, I will turn that same attribute against you, and you will be devastated.

It has long been a custom to read the *tochachah*, the curses, both here and in the parallel passage in Devarim 28, in a low voice in the synagogue, which has the effect of robbing them of their terrifying power if said out loud. But they are fearful enough however they are read. And both here and in Devarim, the section on curses is longer and far more graphic than the section on blessings.

This seems to contradict a basic principle of Judaism, that God's generosity to those who are faithful to Him vastly exceeds His punishment of those who are not. "The Lord,

the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands ... He punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation” (Ex. 34:6-7). Rashi does the arithmetic: “It follows, therefore, that the measure of reward is greater than the measure of punishment by five hundred to one, for in respect of the measure of good it says: “maintaining love to thousands” (meaning at least two thousand generations), while punishment lasts for at most four generations.

The whole idea contained in the 13 Attributes of Compassion is that God’s love and forgiveness are stronger than His justice and punishment. Why, therefore, are the curses in this week’s parsha so much longer and stronger than the blessings?

The answer is that God loves and forgives, but with the proviso that, when we do wrong, we acknowledge the fact, express remorse, make restitution to those we have harmed, and repent. In the middle of the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy is the statement, “Yet He does not leave the guilty unpunished” (Ex. 34:7). God does not forgive the unrepentant sinner, because were He to do so, it would make the world a worse place, not a better one. More people would sin if there were no downside to doing so.

The reason the curses are so dramatic is not because God seeks to punish, but the precise opposite. The Talmud tells us that God weeps when He allows disaster to strike His people: “Woe to Me, that due to their sins I destroyed My house, burned My Temple and exiled them [My children] among the nations of the world.”[2] The curses were meant as a warning. They were intended to deter, scare, discourage. They are like a parent warning a young child not to play with electricity. The parent may deliberately intend to scare the child, but he or she does so out of love, not severity.

The classic instance is the book of Jonah. God tells Jonah the Prophet to go to Nineveh and warn the people, “In forty days Nineveh will be destroyed.” He does so. The people take him seriously. They repent. God then relents from His threat to destroy the city. Jonah complains to God that He has made him look ridiculous. His prophecy has not come true. Jonah has failed to understand the difference between a prophecy and a prediction. If a prediction comes true, it has succeeded. If a prophecy comes true, it has failed. The Prophet tells the people what will happen if they fail to change. A prophecy is not a prediction but a warning. It describes a fearful future in order to persuade the people to avert it. That is what the *tochachah* is.

In their new book, *The Power of Bad*,[3] John Tierney and Roy Baumeister argue on the basis of substantial scientific evidence, that bad has far more impact on us than good. We pay more attention to bad news than good news. Bad health makes more difference to us than good health. Criticism affects us more than praise. A bad reputation is easier to acquire and harder to lose than a good one.

Humans are designed – “hardwired” – to take notice of and rapidly react to threat. Failing to notice a lion is more dangerous than failing to notice a ripened fruit on a tree.

Recognising the kindness of a friend is good and virtuous, but not as significant as ignoring the animosity of an enemy. One traitor can betray an entire nation.

It follows that the stick is a more powerful motivator than the carrot. Fear of the curse is more likely to affect behaviour than desire for the blessing. Threat of punishment is more effective than promise of reward. Tierney and Baumeister document this over a wide

range of cases from education to crime rates. Where there is a clear threat of punishment for bad behaviour, people behave better.

Judaism is a religion of love and forgiveness. But it is also a religion of justice. The punishments in the Torah are there not because God loves to punish, but because He wants us to act well. Imagine a country that had laws but no punishments. Would people keep the law? No. Everyone would choose to be a free-rider, taking advantage of the efforts of others without contributing oneself. Without punishment, there is no effective law, and without law there is no society. The more powerfully one can present the bad, the more likely people are to choose the good. That is why the *tochachah* is so powerful, dramatic and fear-inducing. The fear of bad is the most powerful motivator of good.

I believe that being warned of the bad helps us to choose the good. Too often we make the wrong choices because we don't think of the consequences. That's how global warming happened. That's how financial crashes happen. That's how societies lose their solidarity. Too often, people think of today, not the day after tomorrow. The Torah, painting in the most graphic detail what can happen to a nation when it loses its moral and spiritual bearings, is speaking to us in every generation, saying: Beware. Take note. Don't function on autopilot. Once a society begins to fall apart, it is already too late. Avoid the bad. Choose the good. Think long and choose the road that leads to blessings.

Shabbat Shalom[1] This is a quote that Dr. King used many times, including during the march from Selma in 1965 when answering the question: How long will it take to see social justice? This is now widely hailed as one of his most famous quotes, although King was himself quoting 19th-century Unitarian minister and abolitionist Theodore Parker of Massachusetts. [2] Brachot 3a. [3] John Tierney and Roy Baumeister, *The Power of Bad*, Allen Lane, 2019.

[The Nature of Peace: Behar – Bechukotai by Walther Herzberg and Aron Wander](http://www.jtsa.edu/the-nature-of-peace) <http://www.jtsa.edu/the-nature-of-peace>

The description of peace and prosperity in this week's Torah portion seems particularly fitting for our current situation.

Lev. 26 begins by stating that "If you walk in My statutes and keep My commandments and do them . . . the Land will give her produce [v. 4] . . . you shall eat your bread until you have enough and you shall dwell in your land safely [v.5]. **And I will give peace (*shalom*) in the Land** [v. 6] . . . and you will eat old grain long stored and you will have to clear out the old to make room for the new [v. 10].

What is the nature of this peace (*shalom*) that God is promising? As it turns out, several textual difficulties in the passage, and the commentators' ensuing efforts to explain them, offer us a complex and powerful lens through which to reconceptualize "peace."

Rashi, (R. Shelomo Yitzhaki, France, 1040–1105) commenting on the verse, states: *Perhaps you will say "Here is food, and here is drink, but if there is no peace, there is nothing." In answer, the verse says, after all this "I will give peace in the Land." Here we see that peace is as weighty as everything else combined.*

It is left to the commentaries of the following generations (and to us) to read the Torah text very closely in order to find textual support for Rashi's interpretation and expand upon his lesson.

Our analysis will be based on the responses of six commentaries and supercommentaries (the more than 200 commentaries dedicated to elucidating,

defending, and taking issue with Rashi's comments). They will all be responding explicitly or implicitly to our question concerning the nature of the peace that God gives for obeying commandments. This study will provide us with the opportunity to enter the world of Rashi's supercommentaries.

In the eyes of the Mizrahi (R. Eliyahu Mizrahi, 1455–1526, Constantinople), Rashi's reading is based on the strange order of the verses. Since the promises begin with agricultural rewards (v. 5), mention peace (vv. 6–9), and return to agriculture (v. 10), we can infer that peace is equivalent to the promises of plenty that precede and follow it. The Mizrahi, therefore, concludes that the text is not really out of order because **peace is integral to and actually a feature of plenty**—for without peace, what's the value of the blessing of plenty?! It is this apparent interruption that prompts the reader to consider the significance of peace during times of plenty.

The Gur Aryeh (The Maharal, R. Judah Loew ben Betzalel, 1520–1609, Prague) agrees that Rashi's assertion is based on the strange order of the verses. "Peace is also [considered] a blessing of plenty," he writes, "for if there is plenty and one cannot eat in peace [i.e. with **peace of mind** (*menuhah*)] then the plenty is not worth anything." Whereas the Mizrahi employs an objective standard—the absence of war—the Gur Aryeh understands peace subjectively as a lack of anxiety.

Divrei David (R. David Halevi Segal, 1586–1667, Ukraine, Poland) offers a creative explanation for the order of the verses. According to him, Rashi believes that "I will give peace" serves as a response to an implied question rather than just as another one in a list of blessings. In other words, God anticipated that as God was enumerating the agricultural blessings, the Israelites would begin asking themselves, *Will there be peace enough for me to enjoy these promises?* and would be distracted and consequently unable to focus on God's words. God, therefore, offers a brief aside—*Don't worry, you'll have peace!*—to ensure that the Israelites continue to pay attention. In addition to apprising them of the blessing of literal peace, God is granting the listeners peace of mind. Not the emotional peace of mind of Gur Aryeh, but rather an **intellectual peace of mind**.

Other commentators focus on the verse's redundancy rather than its placement. Or Hahayyim (R. Hayyim ben Attar, 1696–1743, Morocco, Jerusalem) asks, "Why did the Torah have to mention this [I will give peace in the Land] after having already stated 'you shall dwell safely' (v.5)"? He offers two possible interpretations. "Perhaps it [peace in the Land] is referring to the people of [the Land of] Israel themselves, [meaning] that there would be no discord among them, that God would plant within them **peace and friendship**." According to this interpretation, "dwelling safely in your land" (v. 5) means protection from **external** threats and worse, while "giving peace in your land" (v.6) means freedom from **internal** strife and discord among fellow inhabitants of the land.

He offers a second interpretation whereby a distinction can be made between **local peace** and **world peace**. Local peace is not enough, unless complemented by world peace since "those dwelling safely will also be frightened by the sound of war and that's why [the phrase] 'and I will give peace in the Land' concludes 'and you will lie down and **none** will make you afraid.'"

According to Abarbanel (R. (Don) Isaac Abarbanel, 1473–1508, Portugal, Spain, Italy),

the repetition is a response to the fact that an unequal harvest often engenders conflict: *The text states “I will give peace in the Land” meaning He will give peace among them [the inhabitants].” Ephraim will not be jealous of Judah’s [prosperity] and Judah will not begrudge Ephraim, so much so that even in the fields and the vineyards “they will lie down and not be afraid.”*

Abarbanel’s explanation of the redundancy is similar to Or Hahayyim’s first interpretation that “I will give peace in the Land” means that there will be **peace among the people** of the Land but he expands upon it based upon his understanding of human nature: in times of plenty, increased income will often be cause enough for discord and jealousy among the people of the Land. Therefore, a special blessing for **peace and harmony during times of prosperity** is required. This seems paradoxical or counterintuitive at first glance. But Abarbanel reminds us that prosperity produces challenges of its own. If people do not begrudge their neighbors’ success, then peace will ensue.

Finally, Be’er Basadeh (R. Meir Binyamin Menahem Danon, 18th–19th century, Sarajevo) notes both the redundancy of the verse as well as its choice of words. According to him, if “peace” were meant to be taken literally, God would have promised to grant peace “‘among you’ or ‘between you and your enemies’ rather than ‘peace in the Land.’” Rather, it means that the land and air and waters of a land must be good in order to provide the people with the health necessary to enjoy its yield. Health plays the role that internal and external safety do for Or Hahayyim.

This is an entirely different take on Rashi’s comment “if there is no peace (*shalom*), there is nothing.” Without the peace (*shalom*) of good health, all wealth is worthless; partaking of the blessings of plenty becomes meaningless, perhaps even impossible.

To review, the following explanations for the phrase “I will give peace” were offered:

- Local peace;
- world peace;
- peace and harmony among neighbors/countrymen;
- emotional peace of mind;
- intellectual peace of mind;
- economic peace—a lack of jealousy and strife during times of prosperity;
- health—physical peace resulting from healthy air, water, and climate.

Ultimately, these interpretations perhaps raise more questions than they resolve. But they do give us the opportunity to consider the nature of peace in our own lives. Our sense is that peace may mean different things to us—at different times. (Walter Herzberg is Assistant Professor of Bible and Professional and Pastoral Skills at JTS. Aron Wander is a student at JTS Rabbinical School)

Behar – Bechukotai by Rabbi Michael Katz

<https://gem.godaddy.com/p/309db01?pact=604780-158364672-11701354334-6700d69abbb8bde683fe0d4f46f773c87c5a9827>

There's a section in this week's Torah reading that is dreaded: It's known as the "To-che-khah"- The Warning (or The Curses). It's found in Leviticus chapter 26, verses 10-46. It consists of the terrible things that will befall the Israelites if they do not follow God's law. We read about famine, drought, disease, wild animals, defeat, exile, death, depression, cannibalism... The list goes on.

Jews were not happy to hear this portion, and so in some communities they came up with radical ways to avoid it: In one or two places, they actually skipped reading the Torah that week! Among most communities today, this portion is read very quickly, and in an undertone. But there was another problem: No one wanted to accept the Aliyah when this portion was chanted-this week, in our double portion, it's the 5th Aliyah. Usually Jews are desperate for an Aliyah, but not for this one. Some shuls just read this section, without calling anyone up; in some towns, they paid a poor person to take this Aliyah. In other communities, they drew lots- the loser got the Aliyah! Today, the "honor" is often given to the Torah reader, or the Gabbai- no one else would take it.

All of this seems pretty silly to us, and smacks of superstition: If you're standing up there by the Torah when these curses are read, it's possible that they may happen to you! And yet, it seems that we sophisticated people suffer from the same silliness- but with much more tragic results. We don't want to hear about the "curses" that medical authorities are warning us about every day. We're tired of staying home, so we'll head out to the beach, or to a bar. We're suffering financially from not going to work- so we'll open up our places of business- ignoring that this may only prolong our agony, and make things much worse. "If I don't hear the To-che-khah- then it can't hurt me!" If we pretend that the virus is gone- then it's gone. That's not how it works.

These warning verses in Leviticus are there to "scare the daylights" out of us. We need to listen to the curses, take them seriously, and then do the right thing. We shouldn't take our cues from angry, impatient people - some of whom are carrying guns and trying to bully the rest of us. We shouldn't be happy with irresponsible politicians who are interested only in their approval ratings, and not in public health and welfare. This Shabbat we need to listen to the To-che-khah, and absorb its message. These days, we need to listen to doctors and what they are telling us. In both cases, it may not be what we want to hear; in both cases, not listening may only bring about the very things we're most afraid of. (Rabbi Katz is the Rabbi at Temple Beth Torah in Westbury N.Y.)

[Behar – Bechukotai by Shaul Rosenblatt](https://mailchi.mp/d70e5f4bfdf4/weekly-davar-ki-sissa-2577681?e=e0f2ca6c0d)

<https://mailchi.mp/d70e5f4bfdf4/weekly-davar-ki-sissa-2577681?e=e0f2ca6c0d>

The Torah portion begins with the laws of the Sabbatical year where the Jewish people are commanded to desist from all agricultural activity every seventh year. Every 50th year is the yovel, the Jubilee (a word which clearly comes from the Hebrew) year, where agricultural activity is also prohibited. The portion also talks about land ownership and the buying and selling thereof. In Jewish law, there is no such thing as selling a freehold. Land can only ever be leased.

The second portion talks firstly of the good that will befall the Jewish people if they live up to their billing of being a light to the nations and then it talks about what will happen if not. Unfortunately, the latter part of the portion is much more the story of Jewish history than the former.

The Sabbatical year is what is says on the tin. A seventh year in which the land rests. Whilst there are sound agricultural reasons for giving the soil a year to replenish its natural nutrients, the main purpose of this law is spiritual. It is a year to remember that we are 'residents and aliens' on this earth – not citizens. We have Green Cards, not

passports.

Whilst I sometimes feel that the environmentalist movement, certainly its militant branches, goes too far, Judaism is certainly sympathetic to its core idea.

If one thinks of staying as a guest in someone's home – one would see oneself as very responsible to take care of the home and return it in its pristine state. By all means, use it and take advantage of its facilities. But you should not do anything that couldn't ultimately be made good.

My sense is that this is Torah's message in the Sabbatical year and other similar laws in this portion. To remind us that our planet is loaned to humanity, not ours to do with as we please. We are guests on this earth. It is given to us to benefit from and enjoy, but not to destroy. Of course, such a balance is a delicate one.

But any one of us could use our common sense to understand what is appropriate and what is not if we were generously allowed to stay as a guest in someone's residence for a period. If they had a small back garden, for example, we would clearly not cut down trees. If they had a large forest, however, we might consider doing so with the understanding that they would grow back in time. I believe that the same common sense needs to be applied to the environment.

I don't see the answers are black and white, they will be different in different locations, with different resources and different human needs, but I think that human beings, using their common sense with a set of agreed upon principles can get it right. As long as each generation considers itself a resident, and hence something of a custodian, not an owner, I think we will do just fine. I don't believe it's a lot to ask of ourselves that we do our best to ensure that our planet is just as much of a gift for future generations as it is for our own.

[Toiling in Torah by Rabbi Leah Jordan \(Conservative Yeshiva Student 2019-20\)](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1fEruirI9pa7PANMyc2dlwaWvWxjgluJfamiikcl6zQ/edit#heading=h.lem7ixwltqzr)

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1fEruirI9pa7PANMyc2dlwaWvWxjgluJfamiikcl6zQ/edit#heading=h.lem7ixwltqzr>

God yearns for us to toil in Torah. So says the Sifra about this week's parsha, Behar- Behukotai, on the famous opening verse, "If you walk in My laws and keep my mitzvot." (Leviticus 26:3)

We must be "*amilim ba-Torah*." The verb *ah-mal*, toil, suggests physical labor, but perhaps also emotional or spiritual work. It implies, too, that the work might be hard, maybe even inherently a struggle. And God's "yearning" for us to do this toil shows God's own desire to be in relationship with us through it.

For the past two years, I forsook life partner, career, and home to toil in Torah in Jerusalem. So I've been asking myself if I might have any insight into what this toil might entail.

First, like any work, you need tools, teammates, guidance, sustenance. I have found that toiling in Torah can be lonely work. It is in some ways ascetic. Early mornings and late evenings. For me, a lot of oatmeal and no partner to come home to. Putting a lot of one's physical desires (for the sun! outdoors!) on hold and living on a student budget.

The companionship of the beit midrash therefore is everything. And the devotion of my chevrotas, the expectation that they were waiting for me to start the work together, made plowing the furrows together possible. And the mentorship of my teachers, who in the analogy of 'toil' are not the bosses but perhaps rather the foremen, set an example that

we all strove to follow. Their one-on-one feedback, their care and relationship tending, made the toil worthwhile.

The Talmud says that the “competition of scholars increases wisdom.” In my experience, this is true, but also a difficult reality. One of the most paradigmatic *yeshiva buchers* I know, when I asked them what their main experience of toiling in Torah was, said they were angry a lot of the time. In my experience, toiling in Torah involves a lot of fighting one’s own demons of ego and intellect and expectation.

At the same time, if the toil happens only in the beit midrash, surely it is not fulfilling the command of this parsha to walk in God’s ways, which must also be in the world. Life goes on. And as the pandemic crashing into us in the middle of our second semester at the Conservative Yeshiva proves, our toil in Torah is not an island outside of time, but intimately vulnerable to the world’s shared struggles. God’s yearning for us to follow in Their ways through this engaged struggle means questions of spiritual and moral purpose are real.

All of us who have sat in the Conservative Yeshiva’s beit midrash are lucky. We have had the privilege to meet God’s yearning for us through our toil. I certainly felt so every day. I hope that our toil will bear fruit. Our toil in Torah must be translated into mitzvot, acts of toil in and for the world. Just like the toil in the beit midrash, this work is ongoing and requires many partners to sustain us. Walking in God’s laws in this way is intense and joyful and painful and necessary.

Haftarah: God's Redemptive Healing by Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1fEruirlr9pa7PANMyc2dlwaWvWxjgluJfamiikcl6zQ/edit#>

At the conclusion of the haftarah, Jeremiah offers this prayer to God: “Heal me, O Lord, and let me be healed, save me and let me be saved for You are my glory.” (Jeremiah 17:14) This prayer is a reaction to Jeremiah’s pain. His pain was not physical. Instead it was a reflection of the harsh message he was burdened to carry. According to Abrabanel, the 15th century Spanish commentator, it was a response to what Jeremiah prophesied in a previous chapter: “Why is my pain perpetual and my wound incurable so that it refuses to be healed? Will You [God] be to me a deceitful brook, as water that fails?” (Ibid. 15:18) In this verse, Jeremiah expresses his angst over his difficult position as a prophet.

Jeremiah’s prayer, then, is not for a physical cure but for a feeling of God’s redemptive hand. Moreover, it is the prayer of an individual, the prophet Jeremiah, expressing his own needs before God.

This individual prayer is the basis for the eighth blessing of the Shemoneh Esreh, the weekday Amidah. In this blessing we beseech God to bring healing to the sick of the community: “Heal us, God, and we will be healed. Save us and we will be saved, for You are our glory.” The rabbis have turned Jeremiah’s individual prayer into a communal prayer. This transformation, however, presents a problem, since the rabbis posited that Biblical verses should not be altered: “A verse written in the singular should not be transformed into the plural; a plural verse should not be transformed into the singular” (Tosefta Megillah 3:41 – London Manuscript – see Lieberman, Tosefta Kifshuta).

Rabbi David Abudraham, the 14th century Spanish liturgical commentator, offered a

number of solutions to this question: “According to Rabbi Meir Halevi Abulafia, the 12th century Spanish Talmudist, this law only refers to the translation of Biblical verses, but when the use is for prayer it is permitted to change verses as necessary.” Rabbenu Yonah, the 13th century Spanish Talmudist and moralist, limited the application of the law from the Tosefta to situations where the verse is quoted within its literary context, but where the verse is removed from its context for the purpose of prayer, changes are permissible.” (adapted from Abudraham Hashalem, Wertheimer edition, p. 99)

The sages realized the impact of the words of Jeremiah’s individual prayer and used them as a means for expressing the concerns of the entire community. The Jewish tradition teaches us through this process to look beyond our individual concerns and to pay attention to those around us. This is a crucial element of Jewish prayer and the basis of true religiosity. It is also an essential lesson for modern people.

[This is Our Land – Parshat Behar-Bechukotai by Rabbi Eve Posen](https://rabbieve.com/2020/05/15/this-land-is-our-land/)

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It seems that much of the tension in our world stems from the human desire to own a tangible piece of the world. Whether this means the simple notion of a backyard vegetable garden, a commercial real estate investment, or anything in between, we have an innate desire to have something to call our own. For much of our modern history, land ownership has been a measurement of status, and the drive to own more and more has in many cases increased the divide between those who have ownership and those who don’t.

This concept was also familiar to the Israelites in their quest for the creation of a civil society. This week we read *Parshat Behar-Bechukotai*, the final *parshiyot* in the book of *Vayikra*. This double portion focuses primarily on the laws of agriculture and land. What makes this section of text unique is that it suggests a type of land ownership and farming in which no one group holds complete power forever.

Specifically, we read about the 50-year land ownership cycle requiring the land to rest every seventh year. At the end of the 50 year cycle, land rights returned to their original owner. No one was able to hold land acquisition above the head of someone else because equality and balance would be the rule. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook taught that the purpose of the 50th “Jubilee” year (after 49 years of seven seven-year cycles) was primarily spiritual, not economic. It came to restore the sense of unity that once prevailed in Israel and to restore self-respect to the person who may have sunk into poverty or failure.

In today’s world we pride ourselves on the systems set up to maintain balance, like our branches or government and varying income tax brackets, yet we still haven’t been able to close the gap that divides far too many of the most impoverished families and communities in our country. For the entirety of our existence as a Jewish people, the Torah has imagined a world where we’re not stratified and strangulated based on income or job description. Imagine if every 50 years (or every 7 years) we reevaluated and took a serious look at where we’ve been, what we need to continue to thrive, and how we can help others to do the same.

Thought for the day from Rabbi Sacks:

We've been through too much to simply to go back to where we were.

<http://rabbisacks.org/weve-been-through-too-much-simply-to-go-back-to-where-we-were-thought-for-the-day/>

When the worst of the pandemic is over, what kind of future will we seek? Will we try as far as possible to go back to the way things were? Or will we try to create a more just and caring society? What impact does collective tragedy have on the human imagination? The philosopher Hegel said that the one thing we learn from history is that we learn nothing from history. But the great prophets of the Bible who experienced tragedy, like Isaiah and Jeremiah, said in effect, we must learn from history if we are to avoid repeating it. We have to use the pain we've been through to sensitise ourselves to the pain of others, the poor, the weak and the vulnerable – the widow, the orphan and the stranger. Collective suffering can move us from I to We, from the pursuit of self-interest to care for the common good. Which will it be for us?

It's worth looking at the last two great tragedies in Western history, World War I and the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918, and World War II. After 1918, nothing much changed. It was an age of individualism and inequality, of the Roaring Twenties and the great Gatsby, wild dances and even wilder parties, as if people were trying to forget and put the past behind them.

It was fun, but it led to the great strike of 1926 and the great crash of 1929, the recession of the 1930s and the rise in mainland Europe of nationalism and fascism. And a mere 21 years after the war to end all wars, the world was at war again. On that occasion, Hegel was right. People learned nothing from history.

The reaction to World War II was quite different. There was the 1944 education act that extended secondary education to everyone. There was the National Health Service and the birth of the welfare state. America produced the Marshall plan that helped a ravaged Europe to rebuild itself. The result was 75 years of peace. People knew they had to build something more inclusive. When war or disease affects all of us, you learn to care for all of us.

I hope that's what happens now, that we build a fairer society, where human values count as much as economic ones. We've been through too much simply to go back to where we were. We have to rescue some blessing from the curse, some hope from the pain.

Yahrtzeits

*Ilisia Kissner remembers her aunt Sadye Rosenblum (Hannah Sarah bat Hayyim v'Rachel) on Saturday May 16th (Iyar 22).

*Daniel Zwillenberg remembers his mother Myrna Zwillenberg (Miryam) on Sunday May 17th (Iyar 23).

*Sylvia Orenstein remembers her husband Rabbi Jehiel Orenstein (Ha-rav Jehiel ben Matisyahu u-Malka) on Tuesday May 19th (Iyar 25)

*Nikki Pusan and Russett Feldman remember their cousin Rabbi Jehiel Orenstein (Ha-rav Jehiel ben Matisyahu u-Malka) on Tuesday May 19th (Iyar 25)