

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
May 9, 2026 *** 22 Iyar, 5786
Parashat Behar-Bechukotai

Behar-Bechukotai in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2904/jewish/Behar-Bechukotai-in-a-Nutshell.htm

The name of the Parshah, “Behar,” means “on Mount [Sinai]” and it is found in Leviticus 25:1. The name of the Parshah, “Bechukotai,” means “in My statutes” and it is found in Leviticus 26:3.

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 securely 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, and the mitzvah of tithing produce and livestock.

[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 Chronological Imagination by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l
(5767)

<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/behar/the-chronological-imagination/>

I want, in this study, to look at one of Judaism's most distinctive and least understood characteristics – the chronological imagination.

Sometimes a modern discovery so changes our ways of looking at things that it allows us to revisit ancient truths that have become deeply obscured and see them with pristine clarity as if for the first time. That is surely the case with quantum physics. What it allows us to do is to understand afresh a biblical way of thinking about truth that is profoundly different from the way we have been accustomed to think in the West. I call the Greek approach the logical imagination, and the Jewish approach, the chronological imagination.

Niels Bohr famously said about quantum mechanics that if it hasn't profoundly shocked you, you haven't understood it yet. Without entering the details of this tangled territory, the most profoundly shocking thing about the subatomic reality it exposed is that it does not fit our standard logical categories.

Is light a wave or a particle? Do subatomic particles have position or momentum? Is Schrödinger's cat alive or dead?[1]

The answer to each of these questions reminds us of the story about the rabbi who listens to a husband's account of an unhappy marriage and says, "You're right." He then listens to the wife's conflicting account and says, "You're right." His disciple, who has been present at both meetings, says to the rabbi, "But they can't both be right," to which the rabbi replies, "You're also right."

There are phenomena, from subatomic particles to domestic disputes, to which the standard rules of Aristotelian logic do not apply. Chief of these is the principle of contradiction that states that a proposition and its negation cannot both be true. Two contradictory statements cannot be true at the same time. Bohr's complementarity theory, Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, and other counterintuitive ideas, challenge this head-on. Light is both a wave and a particle. Schrödinger's cat is both dead and alive. There are phenomena that bear contradictory characteristics until we, the observer, enter the scene, at which point the contradiction is resolved retroactively.

Bohr tells the story of how he came to his theory. It happened after his young son was caught stealing sweets from a local store. Niels experienced mixed emotions towards his son and was conflicted as to the best way to approach him in light of this event. First he found himself thinking about this as a judge would. His son was guilty of a crime and justice must be done. But he also felt parental emotions of love and compassion. He realised that he could not hold both thoughts equally in his mind at the same time, and this led to his research on complementarity theory. As a fair judge of the situation, he had

to think impartially. As a father he could not help but have compassion for his son, who had made a mistake. One way of thinking leads to justice, the other to mercy, but these are conflicting perspectives and involve different kinds of relationships.

The same is true about the well-known drawing that can be seen as a duck or a rabbit, but not both at the same time. The multi-dimensionality of reality may simply be too complex for us to grasp it all at one time. But what we cannot think simultaneously we can often think sequentially. That is what I mean by the chronological imagination.

We owe our concepts of logic to the ancient Greeks. The Greeks thought of knowledge as a special kind of seeing. We still, in Western languages, preserve this visual metaphor. We speak of foresight and insight, of people of vision, and of 'making an observation'. When we understand something we say, "I see." For Plato, knowledge was deep insight into a world beyond the senses, where you see not the physical embodiments but the true form of things. The guiding metaphor for Greek epistemology, buried deep in the culture, was the image of Zeus, chief of the gods, looking down on the affairs of human beings from his lofty perch on Mount Olympus.

The worldview of the Torah is quite different. True knowledge is acquired less through seeing (God is not visible, and throughout the Hebrew Bible appearances deceive[2]) than through listening. The keyword is shema, meaning, "listen, hear, understand, respond." Knowledge, daat, is not detached observation but intimate personal engagement: "And Adam knew his wife and she conceived." God in the Torah is not a detached observer of the affairs of humankind, but an

active participant. In Judaism, words are not just pictures of reality, the “forms” of things. They affect relationships. Words can injure and inspire. Words can bless or curse. Words can create new moral facts, such as when we make a promise. Words shape the reality they describe. This is more like Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, in which the observer affects the reality he observes, than like Greek-inspired theories of knowledge in which a sentence can be true or false but not both.

The psychotherapist Viktor Frankl pointed out that what can be a contradiction in two-dimensional space need not be when we add a third dimension. So a square cannot be a circle, and a circle cannot be a square. But they can both be shadows cast by a single object, a canister, lit first from the side, then from above. Add the third dimension and the contradiction disappears. Nor is this a mere mathematical curiosity. As Niels Bohr, one of the masters of quantum physics put it, “The opposite of a trivial true is a falsehood, but the opposite of a profound true may well be another profound truth.”

This is absolutely fundamental to Judaism. There is more than one valid way of looking at the universe. Minimally, there is the point of view of God and there is the point of view of humankind, and they are radically distinct. The only time in the whole of Tanach in which a human being is invited to see the world from the vantage point of God occurs in the last four chapters of the book of Job, when Job finally understands that the universe is not anthropocentric. Not everything exists for the benefit of humankind. God is at the centre, not us.

No less significantly, though the Torah has a single Author, it does not speak in a single voice. I have argued throughout these studies that there are at least three discernible voices -

a wisdom voice, a priestly voice, and a prophetic voice - corresponding to the three modes in which God discloses Himself: through creation, revelation, and redemption. Each captures something of reality but none, on its own, portrays it all. That is why the Torah is such a complex interplay of different genres and tones of voice. The book of Numbers, for example, is structured as a fugue between law and narrative. There is no other book in the whole of literature that is quite like it. Throughout Numbers we see the interplay between prophetic and priestly sensibilities, and we begin to understand how law - the “ought-ness” of things - grows out of, and in turn influences, history, the “is- or was-ness” of things.

How then do you represent the three-dimensional nature of reality with its conflicting perspectives and multifaceted truths? One way in which the Torah does it is through what I call the dialogical imagination. We are shown a situation from two radically opposed viewpoints at the same time.

Two powerful examples occur in Genesis 21 and 27. In Genesis 21, first we see Sarah and her joy as at last she holds her long-awaited son. Then we see the pathos of Hagar and Ishmael, dismissed from the household and on the brink of death under the heartless desert sky. In Genesis 27, first we see Rebecca arrange for her beloved son Jacob to be blessed, then we see Isaac and Esau, bound together in shock and dismay, as they realise what has happened.

These narratives subvert any simplistic tendency to moralise, to divide reality into black and white. They force us to see the world from more than one point of view. The only way of bridging these perspectives is through conversation. Hence the idea of truth as dialogue. In Genesis, when speech breaks

down, violence - the attempt to impose my version of the truth on you by force - is often waiting in the wings.

The other way is through the chronological imagination. Conflicting propositions may both be valid - the opposite of a profound truth may be another profound truth - but not at the same time. A classic example of this is the interpretation by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik in *The Lonely Man of Faith* of the two Creation accounts in Genesis 1, and in chapters 2-3. In the first, man is created in the image of God and given dominion over all other life forms. In the second, man is formed from the dust of the earth, and told to “serve and conserve” the garden. In the first, man and woman are created simultaneously, side-by-side. In the second, woman is created in the wake of the loneliness of man, and they exist face-to-face.

Rabbi Soloveitchik argued that the first account describes the ‘majestic’ man, whereas the second depicts the “covenantal” man, and we are both. The result, he explained, was that to be human is to be conflicted, torn between the different facets of our being. In fact, though, the Torah resolves this contradiction in the simplest and most elegant way: through time.

‘Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath day to the Lord your God.’
Ex. 20:9-10

For six days we are majestic; on the seventh we are covenantal.

The chronological imagination - what Bohr meant when he said he could see his son through the eyes of a judge and a parent, but not both at the same time - was one of the great gifts of Torat Kohanim. The priest guards the border between

sacred and secular, eternity and mortality, the physical and the spiritual, the infinite and finite. He knows these are two different orders of reality and is all too conscious of the danger that awaits and blurring of the boundary. At one level of reality, all that exists is God. At another, all that exists is human beings and their devices and desires. The separation between heaven and earth is what makes the universe and human life possible. But their connection is what makes human life meaningful.

The priest resolves the contradiction between sacred and secular by seeing both as true and valid, but we can only experience them at different times. The times and places at which we focus on our human, mortal condition are chol, secular. Those in which we focus on God, the infinite Eternal, we call kodesh. They are integrated in the form of a precisely calibrated rhythm of time: six units (days, months, years) of chol, followed by a seventh that is holy. with the occasional addition of a fiftieth (day, year) after a sequence of seven sevens.

Biblical texts using the priestly voice are conspicuous for their mathematical precision. So, as Umberto Cassuto pointed out, [3] the creation account is not only divided into seven days. It also contains the word "good" seven times, "God" thirty-five times, and "earth" twenty-one times. The first verse contains seven words, the second fourteen, and the description of the seventh day, thirty-five. The whole passage is 469 (7x67) words. Likewise Leviticus 23, 25, and 26 are all structured around the repeated words "seven" and "Shabbat".

Mathematical precision is essential to the priestly understanding of reality, just as we now know it is to the universe, almost unimaginably finely-tuned for the emergence of conscious life. Had any of the mathematical constants that

govern the shape of the universe been even slightly different, the chemical elements necessary for life would simply not have formed.[4]

But the precision of the priest is different from that of the scientist. The division of time in the priestly calendar is a way of living out sequentially different and conflicting truths. We have already seen one in our study of Succot. Judaism embraces both the universal and the particular, the universality of our humanity, given religious force in the Noahide covenant, and the particularity of our people's relationship with God, epitomised in the covenant at Mount Sinai. The Jewish calendar gives weight to both. There is the cycle of the three pilgrimage festivals; Passover, Shavuot, and Succot, representing the particularity of Jewish history - the Exodus, the Giving of the Torah, and the years of wandering the desert. And there is the cycle of festivals of the seventh month, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and again Succot, representing the universals of the human condition: Creation, Divine sovereignty, justice, judgment, life, death, rain, and the renewal of nature.

One of the most beautiful consequences of the chronological imagination - seen clearly in our parsha of Behar - is its ability to reconcile the real with the ideal. History is full of ideal worlds. We call them utopias, a word that means "no place" because no utopia has ever happened. Torah Kohanim has a different, indeed unique, approach to ideal worlds. We live them, periodically, in the here-and-now of real time. On Shabbat we engage in a full dress rehearsal for the Messianic Age when no one will exercise power, political or economic, over anyone else. Something similar is true of the two great institutions in the parsha: Shemittah and the Jubilee year, the seventh and fiftieth years. By cancelling debts, releasing

slaves, leaving the produce of the land to be enjoyed by everyone equally, and restoring ancestral property to its original owners, we inhabit a world in which the inequities of the market economy have been redressed and, for a year, sometimes two, we suspend the world of competition and live in a world of co-operation and the fellowship of equals.

There is no other system quite like this, and it gives truth - not the truth we think or discover, but the truths we live and to which we owe loyalty - a three-dimensional character it does not have in the either/or world of Aristotelian logic.[5] That is the power of dialogical and chronological thought, and it comes from the depth reality acquires when we add to the two-dimensional nature of humanity the third dimension that is God.

[1] Schrödinger's cat is the name given to the thought experiment proposed by the Austrian physicist Erwin Schrödinger in 1935 to dramatize the paradoxical nature of quantum physics. It involves thinking about a cat in a sealed box whose fate depends on an earlier random event involving subatomic particles. According to the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum theory, the particles exist only in a state of probability until they are measured. It follows that the cat is only alive or dead once the box is opened. Until then, it is equally true to say that it is alive and that it is dead. [2] Think of Joseph, seen by his brothers but not recognised, or the spies sent by Moses who saw the land but misinterpreted what they saw.

[3] Umberto Cassuto, Commentary on Genesis, vol 1 (Jerusalem: Magnes Press 1961), pp. 12-15.

[4] One classic account is Martin Rees, Just Six Numbers (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999).

[5] Not that Aristotle was narrowly Aristotelian. He was one of the first philosophers to realise that different intellectual disciplines had different criteria of truth and different internal logics.

[Live and Let Live – Parashat Behar-Bechukotai by Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz](https://thekotel.org/en/149798/)

<https://thekotel.org/en/149798/>

A powerful dilemma: Can we ever decide whose life is more valuable? Rabbi Akiva's timeless lesson says—your life comes first, but never at another's expense.

In Parashat Behar, at the end of the verse where we are commanded regarding the prohibition of charging interest, it says:

“And let your brother live with you”
(Leviticus 25:36).

Many laws and halachic principles are embedded in this phrase, and one of them is: “And let your brother live – with you.” You are not obligated to ensure your brother's life at the expense of your own.

The Sforno (Rabbi Ovadia Sforno – rabbi, physician, and one of the leaders of the Jewish community in Rome and Bologna) learned from this that a person without financial means is not expected to lend money to his poor friend. The mitzvah of lending applies only to those who have the means. A person should not act irresponsibly and endanger himself for someone who lacks resources.

The Babylonian Talmud teaches:

“Two people were walking on a journey, and one of them had a jug of water. If both drink, they will both die. If only one drinks, he will reach civilization.
Ben Petura taught: It is better that both drink and die, than for one to witness the death of his friend.
Until Rabbi Akiva came and taught: ‘And let your brother live with you’ – your life takes precedence over your fellow's life.”
(Bava Metzia 62a)

When the first Rebbe of Gur, Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Alter (the “Chiddushei HaRim,” one of the greatest Hasidic leaders in 19th-century Poland), studied this Talmudic passage with his students, he posed a challenging question:

We’ve heard Rabbi Akiva’s ruling in the case where a person has only enough water for himself. But what is the law if he has enough water for himself and one other person, yet he is accompanied by two others? Should he split the water between both friends – knowing that doing so means both will die – or give it to just one? And if so, to whom?

In that class sat brilliant and righteous students, but only one dared answer. He spontaneously replied:

“He should give the water to the Torah scholar among them.”

The Chiddushei HaRim, the great leader of the generation, heard these words and became angry – a rare sight that left a strong impression on his students. He closed his books and ended the class, exclaiming:

“How could such an answer be uttered here?”

He explained:

“When I was young and learned Torah from my teacher, the ‘Holy Jew’ of Peshischa (an iconic figure in Hasidic history), he interpreted the Talmud’s phrasing in a marvelous way. The Talmud uses the phrase ‘until Rabbi Akiva came,’ rather than the usual ‘Rabbi Akiva said.’ Why? Because no one could rule on this matter without personal bias – until Rabbi Akiva, about whom the Talmud (Berachot 61b) tells us:

‘When they took Rabbi Akiva out to be executed, it was the time to recite the Shema. As they were combing his flesh with iron combs, he accepted upon himself the yoke of Heaven. His students said to him: “Our teacher, even to this extent?”

He replied: “All my life I have been troubled by the verse ‘with

all your soul' – even if He takes your soul. I said: When will I have the chance to fulfill it? Now that I have the chance, shall I not fulfill it?"

Rabbi Akiva, who longed all his life to give his soul to G-d and did so joyfully when the time came – he alone could rule on this matter without bias. He, of all people, ruled clearly and decisively:

'Your life comes first!' – "And let your brother live with you."

"But if the government were to order the execution of Moishaleh, the village fool – an old man mocked by all – or alternatively execute me, (the Holy Jew)... who among you would decide that I deserve to live more than Moishaleh? G-d forbid!

Who on this earth can know whose life is more valuable?"

We were never granted the ability to determine whose life takes precedence.

The only halachic ruling that was ever given is that "your life comes first" – and nothing beyond that. (*Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz is the Rabbi of the Western Wall and Holy Sites*)

[Behar-Bechukotai: Shemittah – The Law that Defines Us by Rabbi Dr. Susan Hornstein \(2025\)](https://yeshivatmaharat.org/behar-bechukotai-shemittah-the-law-that-defines-us/)

<https://yeshivatmaharat.org/behar-bechukotai-shemittah-the-law-that-defines-us/>

Our parsha opens with the laws of Shemittah, the Sabbatical year. Shemittah has it all! It has every kind of holiness— kedusha of the land, kedusha of the people, kedusha of time. It has interpersonal laws and laws between the people and God. In fact, it touches upon every aspect of our lives as God's chosen nation.

At first blush, Shemittah appears to be solely an agricultural law. However, the context and application of its first mention is interpersonal. It is first recorded in Parshat Mishpatim, as part of the list of societal laws given at Sinai:

Six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; but in the seventh you shall let it rest and lie fallow. Let the needy among your people eat of it, and what they leave let the wild beasts eat. You shall do the same with your vineyards and your olive groves (Shemot 23:10-11).

The very next verse brings its partner law—Shabbat—worded in just the same way, with an emphasis on all the creatures who will benefit from the law.

Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall cease from labor, in order that your ox and your ass may rest, and that your home-born slave and the stranger may be refreshed (Shemot 23:12).

The laws of Shemittah in Parshat Behar have a more agricultural bent. And here, unlike in Shemot, it is referred to as a “Shabbat of the Lord,” emphasizing its “bein adam laMakom” (between people and God) aspect, and repeatedly identifying Shemittah as a type of Shabbat. It ends with the permission for the household to eat the produce of the seventh year, but with no mention of the needy.

The Lord spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai: Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: When you enter the land that I assign to 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: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your untrimmed vines; it shall be a year of complete rest for the land. But you may eat whatever the land during its sabbath will produce—you, your male and female slaves, the hired and bound laborers who live with you (Vayikra 25:1-2).

The land itself is commanded to rest, which infuses it with holiness. The people are commanded to help the land rest and to use the respite to provide food for the needy. Thus, the people too become holy. And, like Shabbat, a period of time is set aside, dedicated to the Lord, holy time. In this system, interpersonal relationships are enhanced, and the relationship between the people and God is also enhanced. Shemittah is the synthesis of all the types of holiness and of all the key relationships in our lives.

This point is brought home in the one other place in the Torah that mentions the laws of Shemittah. The book of Devarim discusses the cancellation of debts and other monetary applications of the Shemittah year, and adds the reward that will come for its observance: “There shall be no needy among you—since your God the Lord will bless you in the land that your God the Lord is giving you as a hereditary portion” (Devarim 15:4).

In this special land, observance of this special commandment will ensure the prosperity of the people.

With this understanding, we can answer Rashi’s famous question on the opening of our parsha. Rashi notes with surprise that the laws of Shemittah are described as being presented on Har Sinai. He asks: “Mah inyan shemittah etzel

Har Sinai?” What relationship is there between Shemittah and Har Sinai? Were not all the laws given at Har Sinai? He goes on to answer that the different aspects of these laws that we mentioned above were all given at once, the generalities and the specifics. I’d like to suggest that the laws of Shemittah, discussed here at the end of Vayikra, many parshiyot after the revelation at Sinai, have to be identified with that seminal revelation. Just as Har Sinai provides the foundation of our faith, Shemittah is the observance that makes us into the Jews we need to be. *Comprising care for the needy, respect for the land, the sanctification of time, and enhancement of our special relationship with God, it is a foundational mitzvah of Judaism—wherever we may be, whenever we may live.* Along with its partner commandment, Shabbat, Shemittah had to be transmitted on Har Sinai. Together, these precepts form the very cornerstone of who we would become. *(Rabbi Dr. Susan is an educator and lifelong learner. She is a founder of the Women’s Tefillah Group of Raritan Valley and has been active in the Highland Park, NJ community for over 35 years. She is also a musician and a HaZamir conductor. R’ Susan has founded a community, Kol Ami, a welcoming halakhic congregation.)*

Yahrtzeit

Daniel Zwillenberg remembers his mother Myrna Zwillenberg on Sun. May 10.

The Orenstein family and all of Kol Rina remember Rabbi Jehiel Orenstein on Tues. May 12.

Nikki Pusin and Russett Feldman remember their cousin Rabbi Jehiel Orenstein on Tues. May 12

Cornelia and Francesca Peckman remember their mother Melita Peckman on Fri. May 15

