

Parashat Behar: “Spiritual Comfort Food”

One day, I would like to have four pets and name them Rose, Blanche, Sofia, and Dorothy.

Now, if you are not one of the people chuckling, you may not be aware that, Rose, Blanche, Sofia, and Dorothy are the names of the four main characters of the TV series Golden Girls, a series which, for me, is the entertainment version of comfort food.

I not only own all seven seasons of the Golden Girls, I have seen all of it so many times that there are episodes and scenes I can almost quote verbatim. I like to watch it when I’m happy, I like to watch it when I’m sad. And yet, I never get tired of it. I never get bored with it. And not only do I not get bored with it, I find myself actually noticing new details each time, even if it’s years after my original time watching. I find myself asking new questions-- why does that character always wear the same necklace? Why did they replace a side actor? How did the producers and writers choose which stances and topics to avoid, and which to embrace, even ahead of their time?

Each time I watch the Golden Girls, it feels both like coming home to a safe place, and also, within that safe place, I can revel in the details and wonder about the backstory within the story that I'll never know.

And when I meet someone else who similarly has a deep love of the Golden Girls, I feel like there is a sudden, sweet connection between us, perhaps even a common shared safe place.

Interestingly, the way I feel about the Golden Girls is similar, at times, to how I feel about the stories inside of our Torah. I've spent more time reading the Bible than I could ever measure, given that I was raised in a very religious family, ultimately went to rabbinical school, and now regularly revisit the contents of our scrolls to write sermons like this one. The Torah feels familiar and comfortable to me, a set of stories I know well and can turn to when I'm feeling up or down.

And yet, each week when I sit down to reread that week's parashah, I am ready to find something new. I am hungry to find something new. It is FUN for me to find something new. I approach our most sacred texts with curiosity, and with the

freedom that comes from being comfortable with the content I'm about to explore.

This is all to say that while Golden Girls are my entertainment Comfort Food, Torah is my spiritual Comfort Food. Because I have read through the basics of the text, I can relax into the experience of re-reading a parashah for the umpteenth time, and can allow new questions and new curiosities to bubble out.

And whenever that happens, it's special.

But something even more special is when I have a Torah question that is new to me, and when I go digging, it turns out that famous rabbis centuries ago had the exact same question. Similar to when I find out that a friend of mine shares my love of the Golden Girls, I feel a similar connection to the commentators from long ago who, similarly, took a deep dive into the details of Torah and came out wondering the same things as me. It's amazing to read things that were written four hundred or five hundred or more years ago and realize that I was stuck on the same detail as Rashi, or Rambam.

Which is exactly what happened this week.

This week, in parashat Behar, we learn more about our sacred calendar, and how it applies not only to us as humans and how we divide and occupy sacred time, with Shabbat and Yom Kippur and the Jubilee year and other observances, but also to the Earth, to the physical ground we live upon and sustain ourselves by working. The Torah tells us:

כִּי תָבֹאוּ אֶל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֶנִּי נֹתֵן לָכֶם וְשָׁבַתָּה הָאָרֶץ שָׁבַת
לַיהוָה:

When you come to the land which I am giving to you, that land will rest, a Sabbath for God.

Behar then teaches us that every seventh year, we humans have the obligation to enable the very Earth we live on to rest, as we ourselves do every seventh day on Shabbat. Just like how we rest and rejuvenate and do not work on Shabbat, so too the land must rest and rejuvenate every seventh year.

This parashah teaches us that the land itself has a relationship with God, and that one of our sacred responsibilities is to nurture and enable that relationship.

Parashat Behar then outlines precisely what humans are supposed to avoid doing in order to enable this rest for the land every seven years:

- We shall not sow our fields or reap our fields
- We shall not prune our vineyards
- We shall not harvest aftergrowth or even weed our fields
- Even the best grapes we had set aside for ourselves we will not gather in

This then leads to the natural question, later in the parashah:

וְכִי תֹאמְרוּ מִה־נֹּאכֵל בַּשָּׁנָה הַשְּׁבִיעִת הֵן לֹא נִזְרָע וְלֹא נֶאֱסָף
אֶת־תְּבוּאָתֵינוּ:

What in the world are we supposed to eat, then, if we aren't sowing or gathering?!

To which God explains, don't worry, if the land is going to rest every seventh year, I will just make every sixth year a particularly bountiful one, so you will have extra and be able to allow the land to rest.

OK, sounds good. All of this, I had read through before. It's a familiar and comfy concept. I love this lesson-- I love the idea that

the Earth is, itself, in relationship with God. I love that this parashah goes even further and is humbling for us, containing the direct reminder that any land we inhabit, even if we think it belongs to us, ultimately does not. This parashah teaches us that even Israel, which is the Jewish homeland, is a place where we are only temporary sojourners and tenants, not true owners. All of the Earth doesn't actually belong to humans-- it belongs to God. God and humans have a sacred relationship, yes, but God and the Earth have a relationship of immense depth and longevity, one that existed before humans existed, and one which will extend past our lifetimes.

OK, all of this, I had heard before.

But this year, when I reread these verses we are talking about, a new question came to mind. Consider this:

For the vast majority of people in that part of the world at that time in history, several thousand years ago, how did they survive? What did their lives look like?

Most people were not royalty, were not merchants, were not wealthy. Most people lived simple lives, as farmers, working the

land day in and day out, year in and year out. For most of the known history of the land of Israel, wars aside, most people have lived in a way that was very connected to the land, working it, living off of it, waking early to till and sow and cultivate and harvest. This is part of why sunset and sunrise and rain and dew play such pivotal roles in our prayer cycles. Many, many of our ancestors-- including those who made aliyah within the last few hundred years-- were farmers.

And farming isn't just a job. It's not a 9 to 5. It's a lifestyle, and one that can truly be all-encompassing.

So my question is: what happens when that all-encompassing lifestyle is suddenly required to stop for a whole year? If every seventh year the Earth is supposed to rest, and we aren't allowed to work it, then what are we humans supposed to be DOING all year while the Earth is resting? The Torah outlines what NOT to do, but what SHOULD we do with all that time?

What's the positive directive inside of the negative directive here?

You may think that there are other farm-related things we could be doing. But the commentator Sforno says that any and all work

related to farming is forbidden during this time, even any preparatory work for the following year.

Imagine what life would look like if every seventh year, instead of our jobs, our all-encompassing livelihoods, we could instead do anything we wanted all the time, anything from cooking to playing football or laser tag to investing to binging Golden Girls to volunteering to writing a book? Does this really mean that we have no restrictions and no imperatives whatsoever every seventh year, apart from, y'know, all of the rest of the normal mitzvot?

Well, it turns out, I'm not the first one to wonder what the Sabbatical year for the Earth actually means for us humans. I'm not the first rabbi in history to ask-- wait, what should we do with all of that spare time?

The commentator I just mentioned, Sforno, centuries ago, had the same question when he read this parashah. And the guidance he offers I find to be truly beautiful in its simplicity and its potential. And I want to share it with you today.

He grounds his conclusion in the very first quote from this week's Torah portion that I shared in this sermon, the quote saying that the Earth will have a "Sabbath for God." Here's what Sforno concludes that the phrase "Sabbath for God" means for us humans: quote,

שבת לה'. שגם עובדי אדמה כאשר ישבתו בשנה ההיא יתעוררו
לדרוש את ה' באופן מה:

That "also those who normally work the earth, during this Sabbatical year, shall endeavor to explore and understand God in some fashion."

Sforno concludes that the fact that the Sabbatical Year is called "A Sabbath for God" means that during this special seventh year, though we humans, like the land, are exempt from the farming process, we are instead obligated to spend time in pursuit of a deeper understanding of God "b'ofen mah", that is to say, in some way or another.

(Fun fact as an aside here: in the online database of rabbinic literature, Sefaria, the Hebrew-to-English translation of Sforno's commentary on this parashah includes in its translation the

clarification that we humans are, and I quote, “not to use the year to play golf, etc.”) ... it’s almost like Sforno knew that one day, Har Shalomers would be reading his commentary!)

Now, you may be thinking,great. In addition to the 613 *other* mitzvot we *already* have, in addition to every Shabbat and every Chag, we now have to spend a *whole year* pursuing a deeper relationship with God? Just what we need, more rules!

Except that this rule is different.

This rule says we have to take time to develop a deeper relationship with God, yes.

But there is something missing from that directive.

It says we must try to understand and connect with God, but it notably doesn’t tell us *how*.

The *how* is, incredibly, left up to us.

And that’s a huge deal.

Unlike so many other aspects of Jewish life-- the details of Kashrut, the melodies we sing, the schedule of prayers, the rules outlined in the Mishna of what we avoid doing on Shabbat and Chag, the flow of a Jewish funeral or bris or wedding-- Sforino concludes that we are also *meant* to have a portion of our spiritual lives that is self-directed, perhaps even *commanded* to pursue a connection to God that is individual, that is “b’ofen mah”, in some way or another, to each their own.

This isn’t a substitute for all of the traditional mitzvot-- it’s a supplement. One of the gifts of traditional Judaism is that we get to complete the same actions and say the same words in the same way that generations before us have. That’s pretty cool. This brings us closer to our ancestors in a unique and sacred way.

But Sforino’s conclusion, here, acknowledges in a very real and human way that there is not only space within our tradition for the *possibility* of individual creative exploration of the Divine, but that in fact we are *supposed* to explore our personal spirituality, *in addition* to taking part in the traditional prayers and rituals.

How beautiful is that?

I can't tell you how wonderful it was for me to not only have a new question about this week's parashah, and not only to then learn that a famous commentator had had the same question as I had, but then to truly love the resolution that that commentator reached.

One of the struggles I hear most frequently from modern Jews is that they don't find meaning in the old ways, and as a result feel that they should leave Judaism altogether. They feel like the only important part of Judaism is the old stuff, the proscribed stuff, the stuff that we do for the greater good or for the community or out of obligation to God but that isn't tailored to our personal spiritual needs.

And yet, in his commentary, Sforno, speaking *in the 15th century I might add*, tells us we actually have an obligation to take time for personal spiritual pursuits, for individual relationship with God, for other types of sacred connection in addition to the traditional ones.

What would it look like if we taught our children that both sides of this coin are crucial?

What would it mean for the future of Judaism?

What would it look like if each of us left here today believing not only in the importance and sanctity of the words in the siddur, and the words in our Torah, but also the words in our individual hearts? Believing that God not only wants to hear the traditional words, but also actively wants to hear the personal ones?

What if we extended our sense of obligation to include an obligation to deepening our individual spirituality in a way that works best for us, or as Sforno says, b'ofen mah? In some way?

The days will come and go,
The months and years will come and go,
A shabbat for us here, a shabbat for the Earth there,
An endless pulse of mitzvot, of holidays, of work and rest.

We may not all be farmers, nowadays, but the ancient wisdom of the Sabbatical year is still with us, albeit in a slightly different way.

A conversation I regularly have with the people I just mentioned, with the people who struggle to connect to our traditional prayers,

includes me asking, how does it feel to know that Jews around the world and throughout history have said the same words, and done the same rituals? What are the benefits you can embrace about never being spiritually alone, as part of an ancient chain?

And that's all true. That's a reason to love being true and to love our traditional practice.

But Sforino's commentary on Parashat Behar emphasizes that the flipside is also important.

If you are someone who values our traditional prayers deeply, but perhaps finds it harder to develop a personal or private spirituality, I encourage you to ask yourself, what is the part of you as an individual that you might share with God? How might you go about doing that? When, outside of shul or ritual observance, do you feel closest to the sacred, and how can you intentionally engage with that part of yourself?

Maybe this, too, is Torah.

