

Sermon: Parshat Behar-Bechukotai

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כ"ב אייר תש"פ

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“God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.” Such reads the commonly quoted version of American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr’s Serenity Prayer, although his original composition slightly differed. Once again: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.” I have not recently recited these precise words, but a similar sentiment has certainly been present in my prayers. During these complicated times, it is natural for us to feel frustration, sadness, and anger. Why are things this way and why do my efforts to change these seem futile? What can I do to make a difference? What has helped me during this time is reminding myself to keep perspective, to remember that some things are beyond my control, and that I should focus my energies instead on that which is within my control. This week’s *parsha*, Behar-Bechukotai, reminds us of this important lesson.

The *parsha* begins with the instruction to observe the *shmittah* year, a Shabbat for the land, allowing it to lay fallow every seven years just as we desist from our work every seven days. From there we learn about the Jubilee, the 50<sup>th</sup> year celebration after counting seven *shmittah* cycles, during which land is returned to its original owner. And the final section of this first chapter of the *parsha* deals with laws of indentured servants and slaves. Professor Baruch A. Levine asserts that behind these laws is a theory about Israelite land tenure in this part of the Torah. He writes, “The God of Israel, to whom all land ultimately belongs, has granted

the Land of Israel to His People, Israel, as an everlasting *'ahuzzah*, 'holding.' In so doing, he has imposed on them certain conditions of tenure."<sup>1</sup> Throughout the Hebrew Bible we learn that *God* of Israel granted the *Land* of Israel to the *People* of Israel. In some passages, that gift is an eternal promise, a covenant that cannot be broken. What we do and how we behave seem to be irrelevant in those places. Yet in other passages, such as this one in Leviticus, the covenant is conditional. We, the *People* of Israel, are entitled to this *Land* of Israel as long as we uphold the conditions stipulated by the *God* of Israel. And if we fail to do so, this covenant is annulled and the precious gift, the everlasting *'ahuzzah*, is taken away.

This theological perspective of the Torah about land ownership challenges the basic assumptions of ownership that are held in our society. Those who own their own homes rightfully feel entitled to exercise authority over their plot of land. If we own the land, then isn't it ours to control? Our parsha would answer: No, it is not entirely ours to control. Our possession of the land is conditional, not absolute. And this teaches us an important lesson: Not everything is within our control; we are not all-powerful, and we cannot control everything, no matter how hard we try. We are not the masters over the things that even seem to be within our domain. Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change.

The prayer does not end there (and neither does this sermon). It continues: "Grant me the courage to change things I can." What are these things that I can change? According to the Torah, I can change my actions, over these I have dominion, over these I have control. The land may not be mine; other people may not be mine; but my actions are mine. And because they are mine, because I can choose between right and wrong, I am held accountable for them.

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<sup>1</sup> *The JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus*, Baruch A. Levine, ed., p. 270.

Hence the conditional possession of the land—it is mine, as long as I uphold my commitments and my obligations, as long as I do what is right. I may not be able to change much about the current circumstances, but I can decide how I respond to this reality. I determine what I do.

The final part of the prayer is, in practice, the hardest: “Grant me the wisdom to know the difference.” Oftentimes, when we get frustrated or angry, it is because we have failed to make a distinction between that which is within our control, and that which is outside. Being powerless and unable to control something may lead one to become angry and upset. But the Serenity Prayer, and this *parsha*, remind us to be mindful of that which we control and that which we do not, and to gracefully accept that which is out of our control. When we make this distinction, we liberate ourselves from the things that are outside of our control. No longer do we carry the burden of these things we cannot change. Our energies are not spent being frustrated, but are redirected to more productive ends, focusing upon that which is within our power.

In various places the Talmud teaches,

אָמַר רַבִּי חֲנִינָא:

Rabbi Hanina says:

הַכֹּל בְּיַדֵּי שָׁמַיִם, חוּץ מִיִּרְאַת שָׁמַיִם.

Everything is in the hands of Heaven, except for awe of Heaven

שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: “וְעַתָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל מָה ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ שׂוֹאֵל מֵעַמְּךָ כִּי אִם לִירְאָה” .

As it is stated: “And now Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you other than to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all of God’s ways, to love God and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deuteronomy 10:12).

In life, we do not have absolute control. There are things over which we have influence, and things over which we do not even have a shred of influence. Rabbi Hanina's statement teaches us that we have control over *yirat shamayim*, awe of heaven. This awe is demonstrated by our actions, and it is our actions over which we have control. The rest is in God's domain, the rest we cannot control.

The Torah thereby teaches us to liberate ourselves of that which is beyond our power, to take ownership over that which is within our domain, and to be ever mindful of the difference between the two. God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference