

The Gift of Being Alive (Shabbat Behar-Bechukotai, May 13)
by Rabbi Cheryl Stone

Behar-Bechukotai, this week's parsha, begins with a command to observe Shemittah, letting the land lay fallow for a full year, the seventh year of a seven-year cycle. For an agrarian society, one that had methods for preserving food, but certainly not the deep freezer, this is a terrifying prospect. In fact, the Torah asks this question: Vayikra (Leviticus) Chapter 25:20-23

וְכִי תֹאמְרוּ מִה־נֹּאכַל בַּשָּׁנָה הַשְּׁבִיעִת הֵן לֹא נִזְרַע וְלֹא נִקְטַף אֶת־תְּבוּאָתֵינוּ:
And if you should say, "What will we eat in the seventh year? We will not sow, and we will not gather in our produce?!"

God responds with

וְצִוִּיתִי אֶת־בְּרַכְתִּי לָכֶם בַּשָּׁנָה הַשְּׁשִׁית וְעָשִׂיתִי אֶת־הַתְּבוּאָה לְשָׁלֹשׁ הַשָּׁנִים:
[Know then, that] I will command My blessing for you in the sixth year, and it will yield produce for three [more] years.

וְזָרַעְתֶּם אֶת הַשָּׁנָה הַשְּׁמִינִת וְאָכַלְתֶּם מִן־הַתְּבוּאָה יוֹשֵׁן עַד הַשָּׁנָה הַתְּשִׁיעִת עַד־בּוֹא תְּבוּאָתָהּ תֹּאכְלוּ יוֹשֵׁן:
And you will sow in the eighth year, while [still] eating from the old crops until the ninth year; until the arrival of its crop, you will eat the old [crop].

God says, "Don't worry! If you follow my command and observe Shemittah, then I will make enough produce in the sixth year that you will be sustained for the next three years! Don't worry, I've got you!" Phew! What a relief!

Ok, trust in God and do what God says and all will be good. Got it. But did we really need yet another crazy system by which we were to learn this lesson? What is the purpose of Shemittah? Why come up with such a kookie idea?

When God tells the Israelites that they must observe Shemittah, that they must not work the land for a full year every seventh year, they must do so *not* because God said so, even though God did, and *not* because it is good for the Earth, even though, as it turns out it really is. Then, you might justly ask, "Why, then, go through such a headache?"

God tells us.

...כִּי־גֵרִים וְתוֹשְׁבִים אַתֶּם עִמָּדִי:
...for you are strangers and [temporary] residents with Me.

God commanded this as a recognition that we are not the rightful owner of the land. God is. We are wayfarers, passing through. Shemittah is designed to remind us that all that we believe to possess is merely an illusion, a fiction. All that we assume is ours is on loan to us. We are the temporary guardians, not the owners.

In our world of over-consumerism, remembering this premise is challenging. Something new and shiny is delivered to our doorstep with a click of a button. It is too easy to consume and forget that all that we own is not ours to keep.

For me, this is particularly arduous. I come from a long line of packrats. My great-great-grandparents survived the Pogroms in Belarus and fled to America to begin anew only to have their children and their grandchildren starve in the Depression. My grandmother instilled in me a fear of never having enough food. These things are compounded as I struggle to set down roots and search for a place to call home. I love my art, my mementoes, and my trinkets. They give me stability when so little feels stable. For me, this lesson of being “temporary guardians” rather than “permanent owners” is a real struggle.

I would like to assert, though, there is even a deeper level to be understood here. It isn't just about what we believe about our “possessions”, though that is important. It is our lives, our whole existence, not just our stuff, which is a gift, the true treasure that for a brief moment is ours to hold.

כִּי-גֵרִים וְתוֹשָׁבִים אַתֶּם עִמָּדִי:

“for you are strangers and [temporary] residents with Me.”

My father's name was Stanley Stone, שמואל דוד בן יהודה. His yaretziet was this week and I would like to share a bit about him. My father was a simple man. He worked hard and tried to be a good person. My father struggled with raising a child, but he loved me. At 6'1" and 250 lbs he was a giant of Herculean strength. There are family legends told about his brawny escapades. He could lift a whole piano and carry it on his back. He could bend steel bars with his bare hands. He was strong and I always felt secure knowing that if I fell, he would catch me.

And then, when he was 45 and I was 15 he was hit by a truck. It is hard sometimes to think now how young he was. I was in school when this happened. I came home to the news and wasn't allowed to see him for several days. He was in a coma and it wasn't clear how much damage had been done.

Recovery would take a long time. Eventually, he came out but he was never the same. He had gone into the hospital a mammoth of a man and emerged frail and old. Even his raven-like, blue-black hair had turned white. He had sustained substantial brain injuries. He was not the man whom I had grown up knowing. It would take decades for me to reacquaint myself with this new person and learn to love and understand the person who was before me.

My father deeply understood in a way that many of us do not that life is temporary. Being here is a gift, the real jewel, and not something to be taken for granted.

Unbeknownst to me, while in the hospital, my father had made a vow to himself and to God. If he survived he would regularly attend synagogue services. When he told me

about this vow many years later, I was shocked. I would never have called my father religious. My father loved to eat. If you owned an “all you can eat” restaurant, you took down the sign when you saw my father coming, and he would never have turned down a heaping pile of King Crab or hard-boiled shrimp. My father worked pretty much every Shabbat and only stepped foot in a synagogue when forced to. He didn’t hate religion, he just didn’t give it much regard at all. He liked being Jewish and was a proud Jew but religion was exactly his thing.

When he regained his mobility, never fully regaining his strength, he kept his word. He began to show up at synagogue. Not just the one we had grown up in, but any synagogue. He became “The Minyan Man”. Several synagogues were in close proximity to each other and he would hop from one to the other until he would find one where he was needed. He never learned the service, could barely remember the prayers, sometimes snoozed in the back, but was there nonetheless. When he died, members of the community came up to me to tell me what a valuable service he provided just by being present. They called him a Lamed Vavnick, one of the 36 hidden tzadikim that roam the earth at any given moment.

Could he have really been so righteous? He was just my dad. And yet, to a small community in Jacksonville, FL he made a difference, just by doing what he could, just by showing up.

My hope in sharing this is that we can all learn a little something from my father’s legacy. No, not about the value of recognizing that the possessions we own are not really ours. That concept would have been completely foreign to him. My father grew up with the same emotional baggage and trauma that I now carry. No, that was not the lesson he took away.

My father understood this deeper level of what God is saying to us:

כִּי-גֵרִים וְתוֹשְׁבִים אַתֶּם עִמָּדִי:

“for you are strangers and [temporary] residents with Me.”

recognizing that all of life is on loan to us. Life itself is not to be taken for granted.

May we remember the fragility of life, even in our most powerful moments and remember to express gratitude for the gift of this life that we call ours.

Shabbat Shalom