

**“Proclaim LIBERTY Throughout the Land,
Unto All Its Inhabitants Thereof”**

Parashat Behar/Behukkotai

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A few minutes ago, we read from the Torah a verse that has always been very familiar to me. Let me tell you why.

I grew up in Philadelphia, and I can remember travelling at a very young age to Independence Hall, where the Declaration of Independence was first proclaimed in 1776, to visit the Liberty Bell, which was then housed there. On that bell are embossed words we read earlier today from today’s parashah, the words from Leviticus 25:10: **“Proclaim LIBERTY throughout the Land, unto all its inhabitants thereof.”**



When were the Israelites supposed to proclaim liberty? On the jubilee, or 50th, year. As the text goes on to teach us, during the fiftieth year, slaves are freed and the land reverts to its original owners. It is a collective, societal **reboot**.

Was the *yovel*, or the jubilee, ever practiced in ancient Israel? We don’t know, but if it was, we have lost track of the counting. Farmers in Israel keep track of the

seven year cycles, and observe the *shmitah* year at the end of each one, but we don't have a sense of when the actual Biblical jubilee year would take place today.

Nonetheless, the significance of that period of time is embedded in our collective consciousness. That verse about the jubilee was embossed on the Liberty Bell in 1751 to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Pennsylvania's "Charter of Privileges," a state constitution that granted various liberties to its inhabitants. And who hasn't heard of celebrating a couple's 50th, or golden, wedding anniversary? We celebrated our own congregational jubilee not too long ago. Looking back, and taking stock, after 50 years, makes sense. It's a good chunk of time. It's a long time.

I've been doing some of that looking back lately, because I've been aware that today I would be celebrating a jubilee of my own: the fiftieth anniversary of my bar mitzvah. I could tell you all about it: How special it felt for me to become a bar mitzvah. How I cherished the tallit I received. I could tell you how excited I was to read from the Torah, to participate in services, and to celebrate at a luncheon in honor of my bar mitzvah.

But all that would be about me, and that's not what I want to talk to you about today. Instead, I want to talk to you about **one of the strangest sermons I ever heard.**

It occurred on May 19, 1967, the night before my bar mitzvah, at Friday night services at Congregation Beth Sholom, the synagogue where I grew up, in Elkins Park, PA.

Aaron Landes, the rabbi of the congregation was absent that night. (I later learned that he had had an emergency appendectomy.) In his place, the emeritus rabbi of the congregation, Rabbi Mortimer J. Cohen, officiated. He was a very regal and dignified man, who always wore a black robe and a clerical cap at services.

I remember listening, along with the hundreds of others who were gathered there that evening, to this short, quiet man tell us to go home and to **"send a telegram."**

What? I was thinking to myself. “Send a telegram?” This was 1967, not 1927! People didn’t communicate with telegrams anymore. What was he talking about? And he seemed to be telling people to go home that very evening, on Shabbat, and *write* -- which is prohibited according to traditional Jewish law. It didn’t make sense.

He clarified what he was talking about. “Go home,” he said, “and send a telegram to the President of the United States.” Now, if a rabbi today were to tell you to go home and write to the President, you could imagine all sorts of reasons why he would say that. But *then?* Why?

It soon became clear. “Write to President Johnson,” he said. “Ask him to support Israel during this crisis.”

“What crisis?” I thought. “What was he talking about?”

He explained that Egypt, Israel’s large and powerful neighbor to the south west, had been threatening Israel in very worrisome ways. It had just done two things that had dramatically increased anxiety within Israel -- indeed within the entire Jewish community. The first thing that they did was to insist that the U.N. remove its peacekeepers from the Egyptian/Israeli border. Those peacekeeping troops had been there since 1956, maintaining safety and security between the two hostile neighbors. Astonishingly, the U.N. had agreed, and they had promptly begun removing their peace-keeping forces from the border. And so the Egyptians had immediately moved their troops right up to the border.

The second thing that the Egyptians did was to block the straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping, thus preventing ships from gaining access to Israel’s southern port city, Eilat. This, everyone knew, was an act of war.

Israel had suddenly realized that it was utterly alone. The U.S. was not yet Israel’s ally. France was its ally, but it was showing signs that were not very supportive. Things were looking very, very scary. They were digging graves in Tel Aviv. The army was anticipating thousands of casualties, civilian as well as military. The fear was that the Arab nations surrounding Israel were going to succeed at

accomplishing what they had long claimed they wanted to do, namely, destroy Israel by “driving the Jews into the sea.”

And so my rabbi, Rabbi Cohen, was asking us to write telegrams to President Johnson.

Although his voice was calm, I knew that Rabbi Cohen was worried. We were all worried. I didn't know where the Straits of Tiran were. I didn't know about the UNEF, the United Nations Emergency Force maintaining peace on the Israeli-Egyptian border. But I understood the threats Israel was facing.

And so, although my bar mitzvah was personally a celebration, all of us in attendance were worried about what was going on in Israel.

We all know what happened next. Within two weeks, war broke out. Instead of Egypt and Syria and Jordan overwhelming Israel and massacring hundreds of thousands, if not millions of Israelis, the Israelis managed to overwhelm their enemies and expand their borders in just six days. And on the seventh day they rested.

The war was an extraordinary victory for Israel. Israel had managed to overcome a profound, clearly articulated existential threat and secure much more defensible borders on three fronts. It had silenced the artillery guns on the Golan Heights that had been threatening Israeli farmers for years. It had captured Sharm El-Sheikh, and opened up the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping once again. It had managed to capture or recapture or liberate -- choose your verb -- the city of Jerusalem, which had been off-limits to Israelis for 19 years. Snipers no longer threatened Jews walking the streets of Jerusalem, hoping for a glimpse of the holy sites. Jews could now not only peek at those sites but approach them and touch them. It really was a case of, as we say in the Haggadah, moving from *evel* to *yom tov*, from mourning to joyous celebration.

And yet, with those expanded borders, particularly on the Jordanian front, came responsibility for the lives and welfare of over a million Arabs who weren't Syrians or Jordanians or Egyptians, but were Palestinians -- that is, Arabs living in

the historical land of Israel, the land they called Palestine, all of whom considered themselves -- and were considered by others -- not potential Israelis but part of a separate nationality that was not about to reconcile to Israeli power and control.

There had been Palestinian refugees after the War of Independence in 1948, and this war created new refugees. But now, not only some of these refugees, but also those who had lived in the area since before the War of Independence were living within borders maintained by Israel.

One might have thought that the incredible victory of 1967 presented an opportunity for Israel: to work out relations with its neighboring states; and to begin to resolve the decades-old hostility between Arabs and Jews in the Land of Israel. But neither happened.

At the end of August in 1967, eight Arab heads of state gathered in Khartoum, the capital of Sudan. And they hardly held out an olive branch. Instead, they declared three resounding “No’s”: they vowed, first, not to make peace with Israel; second, not even to recognize Israel; and third: not even to negotiate with Israel. And the Palestine Liberation Organization and all of the other Palestinian nationalist organizations remained implacable foes of peaceful coexistence with Israel.

And so the Israelis remained in control of the Golan Heights, the so-called West Bank, including the City of Jerusalem, and the Sinai. And that’s the Israel I grew up with in my teens. Even though I’d remembered the much smaller Israel, this newer, larger, bolder Israel became the norm. And some Israelis -- at first, just a small group of religious Jews, who were passionate about returning to the Jewish heartland of Hebron and Shechem (Nablus) and Jerusalem, but then more and more Israelis of all religious stripes -- began to settle in all of these areas, rendering them more and more difficult ultimately to return. There was, though, at that time, very little concern about that, because there was a sense of great power and security.

The sense of security was shattered only six years after the Six Day War, when Egypt and Syria surprised Israel with an attack on Yom Kippur. They nearly split the country in two. They nearly overran it. As much as it was a miracle that Israel defeated its enemies in 1967, that’s how much of a miracle it was that Israel

recovered from the surprise attack in 1973 and regained control of the Sinai desert and the Golan Heights.

And yet, it wasn't Israel's military accomplishments in that war but its diplomatic achievements that followed it that ultimately secured peace on those two borders and neutralized the threats along them. Following exhausting shuttle diplomacy by Henry Kissinger -- who recently, incidentally, was photographed in the White House meeting with President Trump -- agreements were signed with both Egypt and Syria that managed to hold up for many years. In the case of Egypt, this ultimately led to a peace treaty that involved further, substantial withdrawals. And Israel subsequently negotiated with Jordan, securing that border as well.

Two facts we all should ponder. First, Israel has not faced a serious threat of invasion from any of the nations that attacked it in 1967 for over 40 years.

Second, the conflict with the Palestinians has remained unresolved. Israel remains in control of land it captured in 1967. It also remains in control of those who were living there in 1967 -- as well as their children *and grandchildren*. They are still living there, millions more than ever before, and, fifty years later, they're still hostile to the Jewish state.

“Proclaim liberty throughout the land, unto all its inhabitants thereof.”

On this jubilee, it's time not only to look back but to look forward and to try to see a future. For the present is unstable.

The situation is highly volatile. It could erupt -- and it tends to do just that -- at any moment. Israel may not actually be experiencing a third intifada, a third Palestinian uprising, but the spate of stabbings and car and truck rammings have continued unabated.

What should we, living here in America, be doing as we celebrate this 50th anniversary of the Six Day War?

First, I think it's cause for celebration. The Israel that was almost destroyed in 1967 is now an economic and military powerhouse. Think of the Soviet Jews who were able to find refuge there in the 1980s and beyond; or the Ethiopian Jews who in some cases walked all the way to the Promised Land; or the French Jews who, even today, are finding their way to Israel. Israel truly has lived up to its mandate to be a refuge for the Jewish people. Israel is an extraordinary success story and we should celebrate that.

But we have to do more than celebrate. Aware that threats continue to challenge Israel's security, we must continue to support Israel and to defend Israel from her enemies -- who are legion.

But that's not enough either.

For if we really care about Israel, we must do whatever we can to encourage Israel to do whatever it can, to achieve greater mutual respect and trust between Israeli society and Palestinian society (and between Israeli and pan-Arab societies). If we really care about Israel, which I hope we all do, we can and should be doing something in that regard.

Now, we here in America have no right to lecture Israel. (If we have a need to lecture, we can try lecturing our own government -- and we can see how successful we'll be at that.)

Seriously, we can and should be offering suggestions, and supporting trends within Israeli society that we believe will lead Israel toward peace.

For example, we should promote efforts to bring people together across the ethnic and religious divides that permeate the country. There's an organization called Kids4Peace that is doing just that. And a member of our congregation, Sarah Stone, is involved in that. This coming week, there will be a gathering at Temple Israel in Natick at which we can meet folks from that group. I urge everyone to attend.

There are other things we can do, and some things we don't need to do.

I'm not telling anyone to send a telegram anywhere. But I'm telling you -- I'm telling all of us -- that though the situation may not seem as urgent as an impending war, I believe that it is. The situation is unstable. It is ultimately untenable. And the reason is simple: Unless people on both sides of a border are free, the border is not secure. And unless all people within a border are free, that region is not secured.

And that brings us back to the Liberty Bell.

As we've seen, this is not only the jubilee year of Israel's victory in the Six Day War. It's also the jubilee of Israel's occupation of the West Bank. No message from this week's *parashah* could be simpler than the one embossed on the Liberty Bell:

“Proclaim LIBERTY throughout the land, unto all its inhabitants thereof.”

Unless and until Palestinian residents in the West Bank have the same freedoms that Israelis living in the same region have -- freedoms that we cherish here -- peace will never be at hand.

Now, even with our help, Israel can't make that happen on its own. But remember Rabbi Tarfon's message in Pirkei Avot: “It is not upon us to finish the task; but neither are we free to desist from it.” Are we doing all we can to try to help Israel achieve that goal?

Let me conclude by reminding everyone that the Liberty Bell is now silent. As I hope everyone knows, it has a large crack. It was repaired with two large bolts that you can still see today, but it cracked again, and it has not been rung since.

Yet the bell is still powerful. For it's the bell of freedom. Long after it was silent, abolitionists claimed the Liberty Bell as their symbol to fight for freedom from slavery for African Americans in this country. And others have embraced it as a symbol as well.

There's a replica of the Liberty Bell in the "Gan HaPaamon" -- Liberty Bell Park -- in Jerusalem. That reflects a commitment by the leadership of the city never to forget the spirit of that bell nor the spirit of the text quoted on it.

On this jubilee of both a great victory and also the commencement of an uneasy, unstable political impasse lasting -- so far -- fifty years, an impasse that has maintained and sustained a fundamental inequality incompatible with Leviticus 25:10: if we truly care about Israel, which I hope we all do, we must not remain complacent. Let's take the message of that verse on the Liberty Bell, that verse that was read fifty years ago, and that was read again today, and let's do our part to help fulfill it.

Shabbat shalom.