PARASHAT BEHAR-BECHUKOTAI
Leviticus 25:1–27:34

Parashat Behar-Bechukotai is one of seven designated Torah portions that, depending upon the number of Sabbaths in a year, is either read as two separate portions or combined to assure the reading of the entire Torah. While this volume will combine them, it will present an interpretation on each of their most important themes.

Parashat Behar presents laws regulating the sabbatical year and the jubilee year. The people are told that for six years they are to sow their fields and prune their vineyards, but, during the seventh year, the land is to be given a complete rest, a Sabbath. Every fiftieth year is to be a jubilee year in which land and vineyards must not be worked and in which liberty will be granted to all Israelites enslaved during the previous forty-nine years. The jubilee year also marks a return of any properties purchased during the previous forty-nine years to the original owner-families who had been given the land at the time the Israelites entered it.

Parashat Bechukotai is filled with God's promises to the people if they are loyal and faithfully follow all the commandments and with God's warnings if they disobey. Peace, security, and abundant crops are promised if they are faithful. Misery, suffering, and ruin will come if they spurn God's commandments. The portion also includes brief discussions of the payment of vows and gifts made to the sanctuary.

OUR TARGUM

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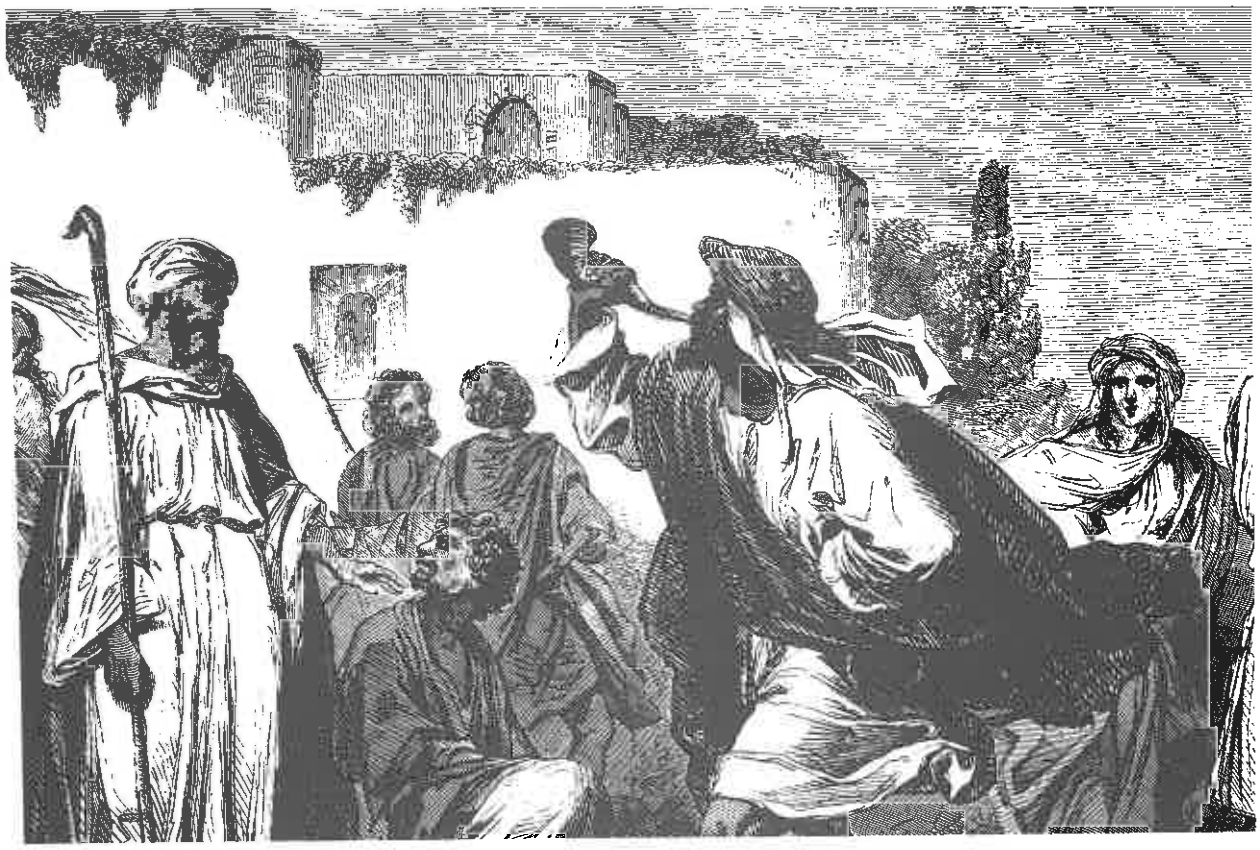
Parashat Behar begins with the commandment prohibiting the sowing or harvesting of lands or the pruning of vineyards during the sabbatical year. The Israelites are forbidden to use the aftergrowth of the harvest or to gather grapes from untrimmed vines during the year of rest. It is permissible, however, to eat whatever the uncultivated land happens to produce during the year of rest.



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After every forty-nine years a jubilee year is to be celebrated. It is to begin with the sounding of a *shofar* on Yom Kippur and with a proclamation of liberty, or release, throughout the land for all its inhabitants.

"Liberty," or "release," meant that all Israelites were to take possession of the original lands given to their ancestors at the time Joshua and the people conquered Canaan.

Given the rule about returning the land to its original owners, the people are told that, when they sell or buy property, they are to deduct for the years since the Jubilee and to charge for only the remaining potential years of productivity. The more years of use, the higher the price; the fewer the years of ownership, the lower the price. The people are taught: "When you sell property to your neighbor, or buy any from your neighbor, you shall not wrong one another." They are also instructed that the land belongs to God, and they are warned, "You are but strangers resident with Me."

·3·

If an Israelite is in trouble and must sell part of his holding, a relative is to help him. If, for financial reasons, one must sell a house in a walled city, one has the right of repurchase for a year. Once the year has passed, the house belongs to the purchaser forever. Houses in villages, however, are classified as "open country" and are to be returned to their original owners at the Jubilee.

The people are instructed that, if brother or sister Israelites are in trouble, they are to be treated as resident aliens. They are not to be charged interest on loans or food. Nor are they to be treated as slaves. While they may work as hired laborers, they must be freed at the Jubilee. The people are told: "For they are My servants, whom I freed from the land of Egypt; they may not give themselves over in servitude. You shall not rule over them ruthlessly; you shall fear your God."

If an Israelite, having had financial troubles, comes under the authority of a resident alien or his family, who have prospered, he may be redeemed by a member of his own family. His price

will be computed on the basis of the work years remaining until the Jubilee. Should no family member come along to pay for his release, he and his family will be liberated at the Jubilee.

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Parashat Bechukotai opens with a promise by God to the Israelites. If they follow all the commandments, they will be rewarded with abundant rains and harvests. They will be secure in their land and enjoy peace. When attacked by enemies, they will be victorious. Parents will enjoy many children, and none of them will know hunger. God will care for them, and they will always walk proudly as free people.

However, if they refuse to follow God's commandments, they will suffer terrible illnesses, lack of harvests, and defeat by their enemies. The skies will be as iron and copper [unproductive]; no fruit trees will yield produce; and wild beasts will destroy them.

Should the people turn away from God and refuse to follow God's commandments, pursuing idolatry and cults, their cities will be laid waste, and they will be scattered among the nations. The land will be given a long Sabbath time with no harvests. Fear of enemies will be so great that the sound of a fluttering leaf will set the people fleeing. Those who survive this desolation will wish they had perished.

When the people have suffered exile and punishment because they failed to observe God's commandments, God will remember the covenant made with them, with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They will not be rejected forever. God will not annul the covenant with them, for it is God who freed them from Egypt to be their God.

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This Torah portion and the Book of Leviticus conclude with laws concerning vows, gifts, and payments to the sanctuary.

If a person vows, or promises, to donate the equivalent worth of a human being, he is to use the following scale: for a male from twenty to sixty years of age, fifty shekels of silver, and thirty for a female; for a male from five to twenty years of age, twenty shekels, and ten for a female; for a male from one month to five years of age, five shekels, and three for a female. If the person promising a donation cannot afford it, the priest will make an assessment according to what the person can afford.

For promises of donations of animals, houses, or land, the priest shall make the proper assessment. In the case of land given to the priest, it can be bought back at the time of the Jubilee for an additional twenty percent of the sum. If it is not redeemed, it belongs to the priest. If the land is not actually owned by the person giving it to the sanctuary, it is to be returned to the original owner at the Jubilee.

All tithes, or payments of ten percent of seed, fruit, or the herd, are to be given to the sanctuary. However, one can pay the equivalent value plus one-fifth more and retrieve them for his own use.

THEMES

Parashat Behar-Bechukotai contains three important themes:

1. The sabbatical and jubilee years.
2. Caring for the poor.
3. God's rewards and punishments.

PEREK ALEF: *Lessons from the Sabbatical and Jubilee Years*

Just as the Torah calls for a Sabbath day of rest for people after every six days of work, it also commands a Sabbath year of rest for the land after every six years of cultivation; it also calls for a *Yovel,* or "Jubilee," a fiftieth year, completing a cycle of seven sabbatical years.

Mention is made of the sabbatical year in Exodus 23:10–11, where the Israelites are instructed not to cultivate their lands, vineyards, or olive groves. During the sabbatical year they are to leave whatever grows for the needy and wild beasts.

Within our Torah portion, the Israelites are told that, while they may not work the land or prune their vineyards or orchards, it is permissible to eat whatever *happens* to grow during the sabbatical year. (Leviticus 25:1–7) In addition to the practice of resting the land, the Torah also commands that all debts are to be cancelled during the seventh year. (Deuteronomy 15:1–3)

During the year of the Jubilee, which is announced by sounding the *shofar* on Yom Kippur, all laws of the sabbatical year are to be observed. In addition, all properties are to be returned to the families who inherited them at the time Joshua led the Israelites into the Land of Israel. To guarantee fairness in land values, all prices of land were calculated on potential usage before the sabbatical when they would revert to their original owners. The Jubilee was also a time when Israelites forced to sell themselves into slavery because of poverty were freed. (Leviticus 25:8–17)

These practices concerning both the sabbatical and jubilee years were adapted and extended by the rabbinic tradition. For example, owners of fields were not allowed to collect and store large amounts of food in their homes because such a practice would deprive the poor. Individuals or families were to take only the amount of fruits and vegetables required for their normal needs. If there was no longer any food available in the fields, owners were commanded to remove all food from their storage places and make it available to the entire community. It was forbidden to buy or sell produce from the field during the sabbatical or jubilee years.

With Alexander the Great's domination of the Middle East (330 B.C.E.), Jews moved from an agriculturally centered economy to an urban economy. Loans of currency were required for business dealings. However, the strict laws of Torah called for a release of all debts by creditors during the sabbatical year. This meant that potential creditors, fearing their loans would never be repaid, refused to make loans available, resulting in a desperate situation for the poor who were unable to secure necessary loans. To solve this unjust situation, Rabbi Hillel created a financial arrangement known as *prosbol*. It allowed for the transfer of debts to the courts, with a guarantee that, even during the sabbatical year, loans would be repaid. (See Abraham Chill, *The Mitzvot*, pp. 108–111, 297–300, 413–415.)

It is clear from our Torah portion, and from later rabbinic considerations of the commandments having to do with the sabbatical and jubilee years, that much concern was given to easing the plight of those who might suffer during years of no-work, no-production, and the release of debts. The needs of the poor were a primary concern of Jewish tradition. Why, therefore, was the practice of a sabbatical or jubilee year established if it produced hardships for parts of society? What did such years mean to the Israelites and to later generations of Jews?

Rashi

The commentator Rashi suggests that the reason for the sabbatical year is to give the land time to rest, just as the weekly Sabbath allows a human being to seek renewal and revitalization through rest. It is doubtful Rashi understood the process of natural fertilization and regeneration that occurred when the land was fallow for a year. Yet he, like the ancients, must have realized that crops usually grew more plentifully after the land had "rested" during a sabbatical year. For Rashi, the sabbatical and jubilee years, like the Sabbath, provided the land with a required period of reinvigoration. (See commentary on Leviticus 25:2.)

Rambam (Maimonides)

Moses Maimonides clearly understands the relationship between "rest" for the land and its productivity. The sabbatical and jubilee years, he explains, are commanded because "by releasing the land it will become invigorated; by lying fallow and not being worked it will regain its strength."

Maimonides, however, also stresses a social and ethical benefit of the sabbatical and jubilee years. In his discussion of charity, he emphasizes that such sabbatical and jubilee laws as guaranteeing food for the needy, freeing slaves, canceling debts,

and returning lands are all meant to teach "sympathy toward others and promote the well-being of all." A significant side of these special years is to encourage and instruct Jews to be generous with those in need, to share their profits and products, and to be just in their business practices. (*Guide for the Perplexed* 3:39)

Ibn Ezra

A parallel to creation

Abraham ibn Ezra suggests that the seven-year agricultural cycle parallels God's plan for creation. God completes the work of creation in six days, then rests. So, too, the Jew is asked to work the soil. Each year parallels a day of creation. The seasons of summer, fall, winter, and spring parallel the morning and evening hours of each day. And the seventh year is like the weekly Sabbath, a time of no work, a rest period for the fields. (*See comment on Leviticus 25.*)

Not like creation at all

Rejecting Moses ibn Ezra's argument, the author of Kelei Yakar, *Ephraim ben Aaron Solomon, says that the purpose of the sabbatical and jubilee years is "to teach us not to think that human beings control the yield of the soil . . . [and] to teach us to trust that God will provide us with adequate crops during the sixth year so that we will be able to subsist during the rest years." The sabbatical and jubilee years are meant as exercises in faith and self-discipline.* (*See Chill,* The Mitzvot, *p. 110.*)

Peli

Protecting society against evil

This Sabbath of the land and the jubilee year that comes in its wake are considered by many thinkers to be among the most advanced social reforms in history. They protect society against the evils of feudalism and totalitarianism, assuring an inherent "liberty to all the inhabitants in the land" and the right of each individual to "return to his home and to his family." (*Pinchas Peli,* Torah Today, *pp. 146–148*)

Aharon Halevi, author of *Sefer ha-Hinuch,* also emphasizes the moral significance of the sabbatical and jubilee years. God commands us not to work the land and not to use its fruits, except for the poor, to remind us that the earth does not yield by itself or even by human cultivation. "There is a God who commands it to produce." Furthermore, Halevi says, "There is no nobler generosity than giving without expecting returns." That is the goodness God displays for all human beings to see in the sabbatical and jubilee years. God generously provides food for all, and human beings are to copy God's goodness in their relationships with one another. Just as God grants food during the years of rest, human beings are commanded to leave produce for the needy and hungry, acting out of compassion and generosity.

Concerning the commandments relating to the forgiveness of debts, the freeing of slaves, and the return of all lands to their original owners, Halevi argues that these laws of the sabbatical and jubilee years "mold ethical character." Their purpose is to "impress upon human beings that everything belongs to God, and ultimately everything returns to God and to whomever God wishes to give it."

Such an understanding is meant "to prevent people from stealing their neighbor's land or coveting it in their hearts." If they comprehend that everything belongs to God and will return to God, people are less likely to cheat others or deal unfairly with them in business. Knowing that all lands will be returned to their original owners and all slaves will be released assures security, justice, and liberty in society. (See B.S. Jacobson, *Meditations on the Torah,* pp. 188–189; also Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Vayikra,* pp. 260–261.)

Measuring life by sabbatical years

Rabbi Morris Silverman suggests that a person's "span of life normally consists of ten sabbatical periods of seven years each. . . ." [After] you have lived twenty-one years, or three sabbatical periods, "instead of saying that you have forty-

> *nine years ahead of you, you should say that you have only seven more sabbatical periods to live. And so you see the days of your life are all too short. You will better appreciate how precious is time when you think of life in terms of sabbatical periods and not of one year at a time." This is what the commandment to observe the sabbatical year teaches us.* (*S.Z. Kahana,* Heaven on Your Head, *Morris Silverman, editor, Hartmore House, Hartford, 1964, pp. 134–135*)

Modern commentator Baruch A. Levine explains the goal of the jubilee laws regarding the return of lands to the original owners as a means of insuring the Land of Israel for the Jewish people. It was not a matter of morality, theology, or agricultural renewal; it was a matter of politics.

Levine explains that this part of the Torah may have been composed after the Jewish people returned from Babylonian exile in about 420 B.C.E. They had been promised by the Babylonian ruler, Cyrus, that they could repossess the land. In returning after nearly eighty years of exile, they found their holdings in the hands of other Jews and many non-Jews. A crisis faced them. How could they settle the land when it now "belonged" to others?

The jubilee law of returning the land to the original families, who had been given it at the time of Joshua, seemed to settle the issue. God had given the land to the people of Israel, family by family. While it could be sold for use, it could not be sold forever. At each Jubilee it was to revert to the original family. When Jews returned to the Land of Israel from Babylonia, this meant that, at the Jubilee, all lands, whether owned by Jews or non-Jews, were to be returned to their original owners. As Levine says, "The goal was to regain control over the land." In this way rich and poor were equal. Both classes would regain their lands. (*JPS Commentary: Leviticus,* pp. 270–274)

Leibowitz

Nehama Leibowitz also provides a social-political meaning for the jubilee laws concerning the return of property to its original owners. However, quoting the arguments of nineteenth-century American thinker Henry George, Leibowitz points out that the Jubilee was "a measure designed to maintain an even distribution of wealth." Moses realized from his experience in Egypt that oppression of the masses came about as a result of a monopoly of land ownership and wealth in the hands of the rich. According to George's view, says Leibowitz, "the Torah . . . intended to prevent the evolving of a landless class and the concentration of power and property in the hands of the few." The guarantee that land would return to its original owners, every fifty years at the Jubilee, was seen as the best means of promoting "justice and equity." (*Studies in Vayikra,* pp. 260–261)

The interpreters of Jewish tradition offer a variety of explanations and meanings for the sabbatical and jubilee years. Yet they all have one thing in common. Each explanation finds within the traditions of resting the land, feeding the hungry, returning the land to its original owners, and liberating the slaves measures of great ethical, political, or spiritual significance. By contrast, the ethical concerns underlying these ancient agricultural and economic laws challenge many of the social, religious, and economic policies and priorities of our own era.

PEREK BET: *The Mitzvah of Caring for the Poor*

According to Rabbi Assi, who lived and taught during the third century C.E., in Babylonia, the mitzvah of *tzedakah,* or caring for those in need, "is more important than all the other commandments put together." (*Baba Batra* 9a)

What are the origins of such an observation? Where do we find the basis within the Torah for Assi's conclusion about Jewish ethics?

The answer may be found in *Parashat Behar.* Just after the discussion of the sabbatical and jubilee years, the Torah deals with the question of how the poor and needy are to be protected and cared for by the community. Four times the words *ve-chi yamuch achicha,* or "and if your brother [or sister] should be reduced to poverty," begin an explanation of how the poor are to be treated.

Several examples are offered. The Israelites are told that, when a kinsman must sell his property, another should raise funds for its repurchase. If a kinsman falls into debt, it is forbidden to charge interest on any money or food given to him. If his situation of poverty continues and becoming enslaved is his only solution, he is to be treated as a hired laborer, not as a slave. If a poor Israelite is purchased by a resident alien (a non-Israelite), it is the obligation of his family to raise funds for his release; if he is fortunate and prospers while enslaved, he may purchase his own release. (Leviticus 25:25, 35, 39, and 47)

These regulations concerning treatment of the impoverished evolved into important discussions among Jewish commentators about the obligations of *tzedakah*. Through the centuries, ethical standards dealing with care for the needy emerge into a unique pattern of Jewish social responsibility.

For example, in discussing the meaning of the words "and if your brother should be reduced to poverty," the rabbis emphasize that helping those who have lost their property, who are without food, shelter, or clothing, or who are sick, infirm, or helpless, not only benefits the needy, but also brings happiness to the generous. Those who do *tzedakah,* says Abba ben Jeremiah in the name of Rabbi Meir, have the knowledge that their Good Inclination is ruling over their Evil Inclination. Rabbi Isi claims that those who give even a *perutah,* or "a small amount," feel fulfilled.

Several of the rabbis claim that the Torah's comment "and if your brother should be reduced to poverty" has to do with the obligation of rescuing those held by pirates or oppressors. Rabbi Huna argues that it refers to the mitzvah of visiting the sick and even estimates that one-sixtieth of a person's illness is cured by such visits.

Zugot

Rabbi Johanan says that the Torah means to instruct us to carry out the commandment to bury the poor with dignity and honor.

In another interpretation of reaching out to those who have fallen into poverty, Rabbi Jonah suggests that the Torah is particularly concerned about the feelings of the needy. They should not be embarrassed about their plight. By way of example, he tells about a person who had lost his money and was ashamed to ask for help. "I went to him," says Rabbi Jonah, "and told him I had news that he had inherited a fortune from a distant relative living far away. Then I offered him help, telling him that he could repay me when the inheritance was delivered. After giving him the gift, I assured him that it was not necessary for him to repay me. In that way I reduced his humiliation."

Other rabbis warn against shaming the poor with embarrassing questions. God, they warn, will punish those who are comfortable and ask the needy, "Why don't you go out and find a job, make some money, and put your own bread on the table?" Or, who say: "Look at those hips, look at those legs, look at that fat body. Such a person can work. Let him do so and take care of himself!" Such people, the rabbis observe, will bring evil upon themselves because they do not honor others as images of God. (*Leviticus Rabbah, Behar,* 36:1–16)

The art of doing tzedakah

The greatest charity is to enable the needy to earn a living. (Shabbat *63a*)

The person who gives charity in secret is greater than Moses. (Baba Batra *9b*)

A torch is not diminished though it kindles a million candles. A person does not lose by giving to those in need. (Exodus Rabbah *30:3*)

Charity knows no race or creed. (Gittin *61a*)

If you wish to raise a person from poverty and trouble, do not think that it is enough to stand above and reach a helping hand down to him or her. It is not enough. You must go down to where the person is, down into the mud and filth. Then take hold of him or her with strong hands and pull until both of you rise up into the light. (*Solomon ben Meir ha-Levi of Karlin, 1738–*

1798, as quoted in Francine Klagsbrun, Voices of Wisdom: Jewish Ideals and Ethics for Everyday Living, *Pantheon Books, New York, 1980, p. 331*)

The third-century teacher Eleazar ben Eleazar Ha-Kappar, who was known as Bar Kappara, maintains that we "are duty bound to view a poor person's body as if it were our own." In other words, we are to clothe, feed, and shelter the needy as if they were extensions of our own flesh and blood. Our standard of care for them ought to be what we would wish for ourselves. It should be given with respect for their dignity and concern for their feelings.

Tzedakah is not a matter only for the rich; nor is it exclusively material help. The poor are also responsible for giving *tzedakah*. Rabbi Levi explains that, "if you have nothing to give, offer consolation. Comfort the needy with kind words. Say, 'My soul goes out to you. Even though I have nothing to give you, I understand how you feel.' " (*Leviticus Rabbah* 24:1–15; see also *Sotah* 14a; *Baba Batra* 10a)

These observations by the early rabbis on the Torah's statement, "and if your brother should be reduced to poverty," define the obligations of charity within Jewish tradition. Building upon them, Moses Maimonides in his *Mishneh Torah,* written during the latter part of the twelfth century, identifies *tzedakah* "as the most important positive commandment" given by God to the Jewish people.

Agreeing with the early rabbis, Maimonides encourages generosity and sensitivity to the "cries of the needy." He counsels that human beings must learn to listen to one another, to speak to one another with sympathy, and never to insult those whose lives are broken by poverty and sickness. While the people of Israel are to care for one another because "they are bound together in a single destiny," the obligation of *tzedakah* also extends to non-Jews. "It is forbidden," writes Maimonides, "to let a poor person who asks for help go empty-handed."

Furthermore, helping a person who has fallen into trouble is not a matter of whim or sympathy. It is a *mitzvah,* an obligation, a commandment of God. The word used for "charity" in Hebrew is *tzedakah* from the root *tz-d-k,* meaning "right," "just," "morally correct." Within Jewish tradition, *tzedakah* is a matter of doing the "right thing." That, undoubtedly, is why Maimonides emphasizes the law: "If a person has no clothing, it is your responsibility to provide clothing. If furnishings for a home are needed, give furniture. If a poor person requires help in affording a marriage celebration for a child, help with the marriage celebration. If the person is hungry, offer food. And do so without delay, without any further begging!" (*Mishneh Torah* 6–8; see also Jacob Neusner, *Tzedakah,* Rossel, Chappaqua, New York, 1982, pp. 81–106)

In summarizing the attitude of Jewish tradition toward *tzedakah,* the giving of charity, Maimonides offers a ladder of eight levels. It is now a classic expression of Jewish ethics.

Maimonides' eight levels of tzedakah

1. *The highest degree of all is one who supports another reduced to poverty by providing a loan, or entering into a partnership, or finding work for him, so that the poor person can become self-sufficient.*
2. *Below this is giving to another so that the donor does not know the recipient, and the recipient does not know the donor.*
3. *Below this is giving to another so that the donor knows the recipient, but the recipient does not know the donor.*
4. *Below this is giving to another so that the recipient knows the donor, but the donor does not know the recipient.*
5. *Below this is giving to the poor without being asked.*
6. *Below this is giving to the poor after being asked.*
7. *Below this is giving to the poor less than is proper, but in a friendly manner.*
8. *Below this is giving, but in a grudging and unfriendly way.* (Mishneh Torah *10:7–15, based on translation by Jacob Neusner*)

The single emphasis of all interpreters of the Torah's words "and if your brother should be reduced to poverty" is the obligation to offer help. If a person is in debt, you are to lend him money

without interest. If it is clothing, food, or shelter that is required, you are to provide it. Commenting on the Torah's statement, Rashi notes that it is followed by the words "you shall strengthen him." These words, Rashi says, mean: "Don't let the poor fall and become impoverished so that it will be hard for them to recover. Instead, strengthen them the moment their strength and fortune fail." (See also *Torah Temimah* on Leviticus 25:35.)

Within the realm of Jewish ethics, charity is to be given immediately, generously, and always in a way that protects the dignity of those in need.

PEREK GIMEL: *Rewards and Punishments: The Consequences of Our Choices*

Modern interpreter Rabbi Bernard J. Bamberger points out that many ancient Middle Eastern nations developed legal systems that promised great rewards for those who observed them and cruel punishments for those who violated them. Both the Sumarian *Code of Lipit-Ishtar* and the Babylonian *Code of Hammurabi* announce blessings for those who live by the law and suffering and death for those who do not.

The Torah, Bamberger maintains, does not follow either of these codes. Instead, it offers another view of the consequences of choices made by individuals and nations. While there are blessings and curses brought on by choices, the Torah also holds open "a glimmering of hope" of new opportunities for reward and happiness. In other words, we may suffer the consequences of our choices, but we are never completely doomed by them. (*The Torah: A Modern Commentary,* pp. 953–954)

In setting out the list of blessings and curses facing the Israelites, *Parashat Bechukotai* raises serious questions. First it describes the blessings that God will bring upon the people *if they follow* the commandments of Torah. They are promised prosperity and peace, safety from wild beasts, and victory over their enemies. Their land will yield abundant crops, and their population will grow. On the other hand, *if they do not follow* the commandments of Torah, they will be punished with diseases, crop failure, and the death of their flocks and children. Fear of enemies and starvation will overwhelm them. Their cities will be ruined. They will be defeated, ravaged by their enemies, and taken into exile. (Leviticus 26:3–38)

A parallel of this catalogue of blessings and curses is found in Deuteronomy 28–30.

After reading such a list of blessings and curses, one may ask: Does God actually punish those who do not observe all the laws of Torah? Is it possible to say that the people of Israel actually suffered exile, starvation, and fear because they did not all choose to live by every law in the Torah? Does Jewish tradition teach that nations and individuals are punished by God for their wrong choices, for not living according to the laws of Torah?

Contemporary commentator Baruch A. Levine notes that "two major principles of biblical religion find expression" in this section of the Torah. The first is the concept of *freewill,* that is to say, the conviction that each person has the liberty to determine whether to follow what the Torah commands or to reject it. The second concept concerns *reward and punishment.* It holds that "obedience to God's will brings reward; disobedience brings dire punishment." (*JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus,* p. 182) These two principles not only function within the Torah, but they are also found in the writings of many of its interpreters.

In elaborating on these principles, Rabbi Hama ben Hanina maintains that all the commandments of Torah were given to human beings in order to safeguard them from their inclination to make evil choices. If one faithfully acts according to the commandments, rewards will follow. If not, one will suffer the consequences.

Rabbi Eleazar illustrates this view by claiming that God presented the Jewish people with a package from heaven, containing the Torah and a sword. "If you observe what is written in the Torah," God told the people, "then you will be saved from the sword. If you do not live according to the Torah, then you will be destroyed by the sword." (*Leviticus Rabbah* 25:5–6)

This view of reward for obedience to the commandments of Torah and punishment for disobedience is echoed in a story told by the early rabbis. It is about a man who falls from the deck of a ship into the sea. The captain throws him a

line and tells him: "Grasp it tightly. Don't let go. If you do, you will lose your life." The Torah, say the rabbis, is the lifeline of the Jewish people. If they grasp it faithfully and practice its commandments, then they will live. If they let go of it, pay no attention to it, then they will perish. Their rewards and punishments have to do with the choices they make. (*Tanchuma Buber* to Numbers, p. 74)

This classic view of reward for loyalty to the Torah and punishment for disloyalty is reflected within the "Thirteen Principles of Faith" written by Moses Maimonides and included in most traditional prayer books for many centuries. The eleventh principle declares: "I believe with perfect faith that the Creator . . . rewards those who keep the commandments and punishes those who transgress them." According to Maimonides, everything depends upon the free choice of human beings. If they do good, they will be rewarded with good. If they choose evil, they will suffer painful consequences.

What about those, however, who are loyal to the Torah, who faithfully observe all commandments, but, rather than enjoying the rewards of peace of mind and material benefits, bear burdens of misery and pain? How do those who claim that God rewards all who keep the commandments and punishes all who do not explain the suffering of good people?

Some Jewish thinkers, like Rabbi Eleazar ben Simeon, who suffered persecution by the Romans, teach that human beings and nations should always see themselves as half-guilty and half-worthy, knowing that the next choice will tip the balance to either reward or punishment. Clearly, from Eleazar's point of view, those who suffer have made wrong choices—even though they fail to recognize where they have made their mistakes.

On the other hand, there are teachers who believe that the rewards and punishments are not given in this world but in heaven. Human beings are judged by God at the end of their lives. They reap the benefits of living a good life or suffer the consequences of evil decisions throughout all eternity. Because the mix of good deeds and sins is so complex, it is only God who can make an ultimate judgment. For this reason, as the medieval Jewish philosopher Joseph Albo suggests, God dispenses material and spiritual rewards and punishments not only during life on earth but also after death in heaven. (*Kiddushin* 40 a–b; *Sefer ha-Iggarim* 4:29ff.)

A guarantee for the future world

Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis points out that some of the ancient rabbis "repudiate the doctrine of reward and punishment as running counter to their sense of justice. . . . The suffering of the righteous is, in fact, a badge of honor, not a stigma of transgression." The Holy One brings suffering upon the righteous of the world in order that they may inherit the future world. (Kiddushin *40b; see "Suffering and Evil," in Abraham E. Millgram, editor,* Great Jewish Ideas, *B'nai B'rith/Bloch Publishing Company, 1964, pp. 206–207*)

Causes of human suffering

Rabbi Roland B. Gittelsohn does not believe in a God who sits in heaven and rewards those who live in accordance with the commandments of Torah and punishes those who do not. Instead, Rabbi Gittelsohn holds that there are four sources of suffering. "One: defiance *of nature's physical laws. Two:* ignorance *of these physical laws. Three: defiance of nature's* spiritual *laws. Four: ignorance of these* spiritual *laws."* (Man's Best Hope, *Random House, New York, 1961, p. 127*)

Explanation of suffering

Suffering brings out and develops character. It supplies a field for all sorts of virtues, for resignation, faith, courage, resource, endurance. It stimulates; it purifies. (*Claude G. Montefiore*)

For many moderns, neither the conclusion that the world and human life in it are too baffling to understand nor that God rewards and punishes in mysterious ways or in an afterlife in heaven is acceptable. How, it is asked, can we explain the suffering of innocent children who were put to their deaths in Nazi concentration camps, or the agony of "good" people who endure the torture of disease, or the cruelty and brutality of others?

Where are God's rewards and punishments in situations like these?

Rabbi Harold S. Kushner, in his book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (Shocken Books, New York, 1981), argues that one reason for the suffering of innocent, good people "is that our being human leaves us free to hurt each other, and God can't stop us without taking away the freedom that makes us human." In other words, human pain is not the result of God rewarding or punishing, but it is the result of human beings harming one another.

Kushner puts the matter this way: "Human beings can cheat each other, rob each other, hurt each other, and God can only look down in pity and compassion at how little we have learned over the ages about how human beings should behave. . . . When people ask 'Where was God in Auschwitz? How could He have permitted the Nazis to kill so many innocent men, women, and children?' my response is that it was not God who caused it. It was caused by human beings choosing to be cruel to their fellow men."

But what about the sickness of innocent people, the suffering of those afflicted with disease, crippled by illness? Are these God's punishments for not observing the Torah's commandments? Kushner, whose son Aaron died in his teens of a rare disease, writes: "I don't believe that God causes mental retardation in children or chooses who should suffer from muscular dystrophy. The God I believe in does not send us the problem; He gives us the strength to cope with the problem." (pp. 81–86, 127)

Reward, punishment, and conscience

The whole tradition of Judaism helps us in the understanding of right and wrong that is contained in our conscience. If we want personally to believe that by this means God punishes wrong and rewards goodness, we are fully within what Judaism teaches.

But is all wrong punished, all goodness rewarded? What of people of whom we feel, "They have no conscience"?

Perhaps they are part of the abundant evidence that God's world is as yet very far from reaching perfection and that God has given man the task of developing a universal conscience. (*Meyer Levin,* Beginnings in Jewish Philosophy, *Behrman House, New York, 1971, pp. 78–85*)

Quoting the third-century teacher Yannai, contemporary Rabbi Robert Gordis writes: "It is not in our power fully to explain either the well-being of the wicked or the suffering of the righteous." Gordis sees the universe "as a work of art, the pattern of which cannot be discerned if the spectator stands too close to the painting." He claims it is only "as one moves back a distance" that the "blotches dissolve and the design of the artist emerges in all its fullness."

Gordis's point is that human beings "are too close to the pattern of existence, too deeply involved in it, to be able to achieve the perspective that is God's alone." As a result we cannot fully comprehend the meaning of God's rewards or punishments, nor the reasons for our joys and sufferings. In the end, after all our explorations and explanations, we are left face to face with the mystery of life and with the choice to mold whatever we are given into blessings or curses, rewards or punishments. (*A Faith for Moderns,* Bloch Publishing Company, New York, 1960, chap. X)

Throughout the centuries, Jews have struggled to understand God's relationship to human beings. The study and practice of Torah became the means through which they sought to master ethical discipline, celebrate the seasons of existence, and unravel the deeper mysteries of life. For the ancient authors of Torah, obedience to the commandments was rewarded with material and spiritual benefits, disobedience was punished by deprivation and destruction.

Some later Jewish thinkers accepted this view of reward and punishment; others strongly disagreed. Instead they argue it is not clear when God rewards or punishes. Perhaps it is here on earth, perhaps in heaven—maybe on both sides of existence.

Still other Jewish commentators believe that God gave the commandments to human beings for their benefit but does not sit in heaven deciding who will suffer and who will have good fortune, who will live and who will die. Instead, the Torah's commandments help us to find strength in times of trouble and faith for the confusions and pain we endure as human beings. Our reward is in the

meaning and discipline that the commandments give to our lives. If there is punishment for not observing them, it derives from the loss of wisdom and potential meaning observance may provide.

> ***Obligations of Liberal Jews***
> *At its June 1976 meeting, the Central Conference of American Rabbis adopted a policy statement:* Reform Judaism: A Centenary Perspective. *In describing the relationship of Reform Jews to the commandments of Jewish tradition, it notes that "Judaism emphasizes action rather than creed as the primary expression of a religious life." Jewish responsibilities for action, the statement continues, "begin with our ethical obligations but they extend to many other aspects of Jewish living, including creating a Jewish home centered on family devotion; lifelong study; private prayer and public worship; daily religious observance; keeping the Sabbath and the holy days; celebrating the major events of life; involvement with the synagogue and community; and other activities that promote the survival of the Jewish people and enhance its existence. Within each area of Jewish observance Reform Jews are called upon to confront the claims of Jewish tradition, however differently perceived, and to exercise their individual autonomy, choosing and creating on the basis of commitment and knowledge."*

One other issue concerning the choice of carrying out the commandments of Torah is also important. While the ancient rabbis identified 613 commandments in the Torah, they did not expect that Jews would observe all of them, or all of the rituals traced to them. Since many of the commandments have to do with the sacrifices offered at the Jerusalem Temple, Jewish teachers held that all Jews are exempt from such commandments until the Temple is rebuilt.

Furthermore, there are many cases today, as in the past, where Orthodox Jewish authorities differ in their interpretation and follow diverse practices. For example, some view the commandment "Be fruitful and multiply" as a prohibition against using contraceptives. Other Orthodox Jews disagree, believing that use of contraceptives is permitted once a husband and wife have a male and female child.

Liberal Jews, among them Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist Jews, freely choose on an individual basis which commandments they will observe. They are not bound by rabbinic authority, and they reject the idea that God punishes them because of their choices. Instead, liberal Judaism stresses the obligation of every Jew to examine the ethical teachings and ritual observances of Jewish tradition and to choose to put into practice those that will enrich the meaning of life, "promote the survival of the Jewish people, and enhance its existence." The personal fulfillment derived from carrying out a commandment is its own reward.

Perhaps from the time students of Torah began debating whether God actually rewards those who seek to fulfill all the commandments or punishes those who ignore them, there have been Jewish thinkers who believed that the subject was beyond human comprehension. Indeed, to this very day, the matter remains controversial. No one has the answer.

We do not know why the innocent suffer, why cruelty comes into the world, and why some who are selfish have great fortune while some who are generous endure horrors of pain. All we can do is accept the mystery of life and seek to give it meaning with our choices. It is regarding those choices that the Torah tradition can help us. By asking each time we are faced with a significant decision, "What would Jewish wisdom command us to do?" we may increase our options for "rewards" and for "blessings."

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. What are the ethical lessons we may learn from the Torah's description of the sabbatical and jubilee years? Which of these are most important? Which are least important?
2. Do you agree with Moses Maimonides' ranking of charitable giving?
3. How would you explain why the innocent suffer?
4. Do you agree that suffering and pain result from failing to observe the commandments of Torah or that suffering actually improves character?