

STATUTES OF LIBERTY

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

(Parashas Behar)

Six years you may sow your fields, and for six years you can prune your vine-yard and gather in the harvest. However, the seventh year will be a sabbath of strict rest for the land, a sabbath to G-d. You will neither sow ... (Vayikra 25:3-4)

This week's double parshah begins with the mitzvah of Sh'mittah, while we are right now half-way through a Sh'mittah year in Eretz Yisroel. It has already been a particularly unusual year, weather-wise.

It was a dry winter again, and the water crisis is deepening. However, last week, extremely uncharacteristically, we had two major rain storms -- lightning, thunder, and all -- that even caused flooding (at least in our back laundry room). Entire roads were washed over with mud and rubble, all within a few hours. By the afternoon, the sun had returned.

That was after an eerie day of dust that left the sky murky and orange for an entire day. Twenty minutes before sundown, it was already pitch black -- the sun just wasn't strong enough at that point to force its way through the thick dust cloud that enveloped a large section of Eretz Yisroel. As I write this very moment, a whole new one is beginning as the light of the sun, at 2:45 pm, is slowly being blocked out. It's gettin' dark in here.

We know that the keeping of Sh'mittah is central test of faith in G-d's Divine Providence, to provide for us and take care of us, not just when we have a hand in our own affairs, but, ESPECIALLY when we don't. This is why it is also a mitzvah that is so intertwined with exile and redemption.

According to our tradition, the seventy years in exile from the destruction of the First Temple until the over-turning of Haman's plot was measure-for-measure for the seventy Sh'mittah cycles the Jewish people did not keep until their exile into Babylonia. This is alluded to in the next parshah, 'Bechukosai':

Then the land will enjoy her sabbaths [which you violated] while it lies desolate, and you are in your enemies' land -- the land will rest and enjoy her sabbaths. (Vayikra 26:34)

And, according to the Talmud, the Final Redemption is defined in terms of a Sh'mittah cycle:

The rabbis taught: The seven-year cycle during which Moshiach will come, in the first year, the verse, "I caused it to rain on one city, but, on another city, I did not cause it to rain" (Amos 4:7). In the second year, slight famine (Rashi: a slight famine so that no place will be completely satisfied). In the third year, the famine will be great, and men, women, children, pious people, and men of good deeds will die; Torah will be forgotten by those who learned it. In the fourth year, some will be satiated while others are not, but, in the fifth year there will be plenty and people will eat, drink, and be joyous, and Torah will return to those who learned it. In the sixth year, there will be voices. In the seventh year, there will be war. Motzei Sh'viis, Ben Dovid will come. (Sanhedrin 97a)

Why a Sh'mittah cycle? Jewish history, unlike Western history, moves forward and in circles, or rather, cycles. Since creation exists for a specific purpose, and that purpose is to allow man to use his capacity of free will to build a relationship with G-d, it makes sense that time should be measured by cycles of time that promote that relationship -- the Sh'mittah Cycle.

The Sh'mittah Cycle represents one of the holiest concepts, and, is extremely Kabbalistic in nature, obviously an expansion of the Seven-Day Week, which culminates in the holy day of Shabbos. Just like each day of the week is another step up towards the completion of 'Day of Rest,' so, too, is each year of the Sh'mittah Cycle supposed to be a step up to the holiness of the 'Year of Rest,' when, free of a yetzer hara and physical limitations, we can enjoy being one with G-d.

As well, each year of the Sh'mittah Cycle corresponds to one of the six millennia of world history -- and corresponding Sefiros of Chesed through Yesod -- which are leading to the seventh millennium, the 'day' that is called 'kulo Shabbos,' 'completely Shabbos,' and the sefirah of Malchus. Thus history -- all of it -- is defined in terms of Sh'mittah cycles.

Man, in order to unify with G-d, must undergo different periods of preparation. 'Olam HaZeh,' or, 'This World,' is referred to as a 'corridor' to 'Olam HaBah' - 'World-to-Come' (Pirkei Avos 4:16). However, in truth, it is a corridor to another corridor (Days of Moshiach), which is followed by another corridor (Soul-World), that finally leads to the World-to-Come.

No matter which direction history seems to follow, in the end, it is always going in one direction: fulfillment of the master plan for creation. However, some things facilitate that fulfillment faster than others, such as Moshiach, which means 'Anointed One.' And thus, even a Sh'mittah Cycle is a process that must end in re-birth, renewal, and the arrival of the Final Redeemer.

(For an explanation of what the Talmud means regarding each of the years, visit www.thirtysix.org, and see the section on 'Sanhedrin, Chapter 11.')

Shabbos Day:

(Parashas Bechukosai)

*If you still will not listen to Me, then I will continue to chastise you seven times more for your mistakes.
(Vayikra 26:18)*

This posuk comes well within the section that outlines the rewards for obedience to Torah and the punishments for disobedience.

You may have noticed the reference to the number 'seven' again. Based upon what we spoke about in the previous section on Sh'mittah, it is understandable that, if there is going to be Divine retribution, it is going to be based upon the number seven. For, in seven days G-d made creation, and, though there are a few ways to define the concept of 'sin,' the most straight-forward way is: any act that man performs which results in abuse of creation which was made in seven days.

At this point, one may envision some 'evil' company dumping phosphates into some crucial life-supporting river, poisoning it for good, all for the sake of profit. However, although that is certainly an abuse of G-d's creation, one should also envision eating food for the sake of physical pleasure only, or any physical indulgence that is not for the sake of Heaven.

For, 'abuse' is any use of something other than for the intended purpose. For example, when Adam and Chava ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil for the sake of the knowledge only, and not to come close to G-d, for which it was intended, they abused creation. The severity of their/our punishment is enough to help us to understand how G-d looks at such abuse.

Each day of creation was considered to be an additional 'veil' over the sublime light of G-d. On the first day, the light was allowed to stand separate from the darkness, and even given physical representation in This World. This made the light more physically visible but more spiritually invisible. Then, when G-d divided the waters and made land and sea, creation became even more physical and less spiritual, and this is the way it went for six days until man was created.

If mankind had been around on the first day of creation, he could never have lived to doubt the existence of G-d. However, he wasn't created until Day Six, long after all the Heavenly veils had been put in place. And, as spiritual as the Garden of Eden was -- and, it was VERY spiritual -- still, it was a vision of physicality with many 'distractions,' of what the Light looked like with all its veils over its 'face.'

I remember once going into one of these 'monster' hardware stores -- I LOVE hardware stores -- that had everything, and I mean EVERYTHING. I don't remember what it was that I had in gone to buy at the time, but I know that it had not been anything that major.

Anyhow, I remember winding my way through the many and long aisles of this store in pursuit of my

trivial item, and being amazed by what was available in this store, things I had never even known existed. It did not take long before my paced slowed, and I began to pay more attention to the items I saw along the way, and even examine many by hand. It also did not take long before I forgot why I had come into the store in the first place, so distracted I became by all the 'whatchamacallits' and 'dudads.'

A little time later, my inner clock had told me that valuable time was slipping away, and, after spending a few moments searching my short-term memory (which gets shorter by the day) for my original item of need, I sadly pushed onward and checked out with what represented about one-trillionth of the store's inventory. Leaving the store for the outside world was like waking up from a pleasant dream with a thud.

Of course, as I drove away and 'slipped' back into everyday life, I realized that the 'real world' was the one I was now a part of, not the one I left behind in the giant store. However, while in that place of tremendous potential, one is easily duped and can even be cajoled into spending money he neither wants to or has to spend.

The 'hoax' of history is creation. While in it, one is easily fooled into believing that it is all there is. It is a double-edged sword: on one side it is beautiful and enjoyable, but, on the other side it is tempting and distracting. When used as a vehicle to come close to G-d, it is a blessing and results in even more blessing, as the parshah begins to tell us. When used as a vehicle to forget G-d and get involved into fairy-tale fantasies, it ends up becoming a source of curse, G-d forbid.

This is the meaning of the allusion to 'seven' in the above posuk, a number that always alludes to physical creation. Says the Torah: If you persist in using creation, which was made in SEVEN days, in a way that is contrary for its reason for existing, then, it -- creation itself -- will be your own source of punishment. It was a source to distract you -- it will be your wake-up call too.

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

(Parashas Bechukosai)

The remainder of you [after all this] will dwindle away as a result of your mistakes and the mistakes of your ancestors [which occurred] while living in your enemies' lands. (Vayikra 26:39)

All of a sudden, this posuk has added relevance. Recent statistics show that, after many years of post-war growth, the overall population of the Jewish people is, in fact, decreasing. Death rates, combined with less births, not to mention rampant assimilation and inter-marriage among the larger, more secular sector of the Jewish people, are actually resulting in negative net growth.

We are, indeed, dwindling away as the posuk warned.

We have, and are making BIG mistakes, and it is costing us as a people. While so many Jews are

trying to fashion Judaism to 'fit in' with the present, they are in fact sacrificing the future. In haste, convenience, and ignorance, absolutes are being rejected and abandoned with the goal being to build a more 'palatable' everyday Jewish life. However, the result is that Judaism, for millions of Jews, is going the route of most religions: oblivion.

We are, in the end, dwindling.

Of course, for some Jews, that is good news. There are many groups who celebrate such findings, seeing little or no value in continuing that which Avraham Avinu sacrificed so much to begin, and billions of other Jews have sacrificed so much along the way to maintain. However, for those 'some Jews,' that is precisely the reason to give up the ship and put an end to the need for such sacrifices once and for all.

Who, or what will teach them otherwise? So, the Torah continues:

They will admit their mistakes and those of their ancestors, evil performed against Me, and that they walked contrary to Me, [and that it was for this reason] that I worked against them and brought them into the land of their ene-mies ... (Vayikra 26:40-41)

They will admit their mistakes.

HAH! It is easier to land cows on the moon than it is to get many of us to admit our mistakes, with so much time, energy, money, manpower, and thought invested in mistaken ways of life. We're talking decades (if not more) of philosophies

"Oh ... that's what's holding you back from reaching truthful conclusions? Too bad. I gave all of that to you to help you live truthful lives, and here you went and used them for just the opposite. Well, that forces me to take them away from you and work against you while in the land of your enemies."

"Enemies?" you may say. "These people are friendly to me. They treat me with respect," you add.

'Enemies,' the Torah warns. Today's friends will become tomorrow's enemies if you don't watch yourself. The 'heat' will turn up, and you will soften your positions, and, eventually, you will admit your mistakes.

How hot? Hot enough to dwindle us down to nothing. Fortunately, the Torah adds:

In spite of all of this, even though they live in the land of their enemies, I will not discard them, or detest them to the point of annihilating them, or void My covenant with them, for I am G-d, your G-d. For their sake, I will remember the covenant of their ancestors, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt before the eyes of the nations, to be their G-d. I am G-d. (Vayikra 26:44-45)

But WHO will remain? That the Torah doesn't tell us, because THAT is our own free-will decision.

To dwindle, or not to dwindle, that is the question. Only WE can provide the answer.

MELAVE MALKAH:

(Sefiros HaOmer)

This year's Sefiros HaOmer is winding down, or shall we say, up. This Motzei Shabbos is the forty-second day of the Omer-Count, the last day of the week of 'Yesod,' as we enter the phase of 'Malchus,' en route to 'Malchus sh'b'Malchus' and the holiday of Shavuos.

This period represents a great oxymoron. It is, in fact, a time of great celebration as we commemorate the great exodus from Egypt through awesome miracles, on our way to receive G-d's Torah at Mt. Sinai and experience inconceivable revelation.

Yet, we are mourners instead. Because Rebi Akiva lost 24,000 of his students to plague -- basically ALL of them -- during this period of time, celebration has turned to sadness and inhibition. Until 'Lag B'Omer,' the thirty-third day of the Omer, we don't allow marriages, and many don't even listen to music in any form that includes instruments -- live or recorded.

Thus, in the minds of those who observe the 'Sefirah' as it should be observed, what ought to have been a time of joy is viewed each year as a time of sorrow and restriction.

It reminds me of Parashas Shemini, in which at the height of the inauguration of the Mishkan, Nadav and Avihu caused a great emotional 'crash' by bringing their 'unauthorized fire' and eliciting Divine punishment. What should have been one of the brightest moments in the history of mankind proved to be one of the darkest.

Even at weddings during times it is permissible to get married, we are not allowed to forget Jerusalem and the Temple. At the height of the celebration, when, after much hope and anticipation the union between 'chasan' and 'kallah' (groom and bride) has become quite official, we break the glass to remember Jerusalem, and some even sing in sadness, "If I forget you, O Jerusalem ..." before returning to the festivities of the day.

It is a disturbing pattern, at least at first glance. It can even make one afraid to succeed and become happy, for fear of what will follow in its wake. However, upon investigation, one can better come to understand why this pattern exists, how to live with it, and, on occasion, even beat it.

Next week, b"H, Parashas Bamidbar will fall once again, as it does EVERY year, in advance of Shavuos -- the "Time of Our Torah." It is not a coincidence, but rather, a well-planned occurrence arranged by the rabbis in consonance with the Talmudic dictum: If you want to receive Torah, make yourself like a desert ('midbar'; Eirubin 54a).

For, the desert represents the simplicity of a humble person, one who does much but expects little - like Moshe Rabbeinu himself. Elsewhere, the Talmud states, Torah flows from Above to below, again, suggesting the need for simplicity and humility. Man, to receive Torah and be close to G-d can

have a 'towering spirit,' but, not towering pride.

The name of the game during this build up to 'Mattan Torah' every year is objectivity, so that we can receive the Torah the way it is given by G-d, not distorted through our personal prisms of bias and subjective desires. The basis of objectivity is humility, which, by definition means to see oneself as one truly exists within the framework of creation and its purpose to exist.

The death of a single individual is a tragedy and waste of life -- how much more so 24,000 up-and-coming Torah leaders. And, what about the billions of lives lost before and after that sad period in Jewish history? But, whatever sadness it creates and whatever 'tikun' it brings to creation, it is, nonetheless, a humbling experience for the Jewish people, and a path back to Torah.

The parshah concludes:

... If then they humble their hearts, if then they accept the punishment for their wrongdoings, then will I remember My covenant with Ya'akov, My covenant with Yitzchak, and My covenant with Avraham. (Vayikra 26:41)

If we don't like the oxymoron, then, we can remove it and avoid it all together. True Joy can, but doesn't always lead to humility, objectivity, and Divine favor. But, true humility is the source of all good 'middos' (traits), another name for the 'Sefiros.'

The fact that the students of Rebi Akiva, the great teacher who was famous for saying, "A major principle of Torah is to love your neighbor as yourself," did not treat each other with sufficient respect also indicated insufficient humility, and therefore, insufficient objectivity. As a result, they did not merit to live to experience the upcoming Shavuot, and, they have gone down in history as a vehicle for us to achieve new heights of that crucial trait of humility.

We would do well to learn that lesson. We bring meaning to their deaths when we do.

Have a great and contemplative Shabbos,
Pinchas Winston