

Parshiot B'har-B'chukotai

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Annual (Leviticus 25:1 – 27:34): Hertz p. 531
Haftarah (Jeremiah 16:19-17:14): p. 551

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Once they enter the Promised Land, the Israelites must allow the land to go untouched once every seven years, during which they eat what the earth naturally produces (God will provide enough crops to guarantee that the Israelites will eat well). Once every fifty years is the Jubilee year, in which all people are allowed to return to their land they originally held but later sold. The overriding idea is that the land belongs to God, and its residents must allow the land to be redeemed, even if that means allowing the original land-owner to pay a reduced rate to reclaim his/her land.

Additionally, a fellow Israelite with financial difficulties can be an indentured servant but not a slave. An Israelite who becomes indentured to a non-Israelite retains the right to redemption, and can certainly be emancipated during the Jubilee Year. The portion ends with an exhortation to avoid idolatry and observe God's Sabbaths.

If the Israelites follow God's commandments, they will have unmatched peace and prosperity. But if they do not follow the commandments, a litany of suffering will befall them, with conditions worsening each time the Israelites turn their backs on God's words.

The Israelites are required to maintain the Tabernacle; the amount of money each person must commit depends on his/her gender and age. It is possible for to pay by providing an animal or one's house; later, the initial owner can retain ownership with payment plus 20 percent interest. A firstborn animal or proscribed property cannot be redeemed. Tithes can be redeemed with payment plus 20 percent interest.

I. *You shall not make idols for yourselves, or set up for yourselves carved images or pillars, or place figured stones in your land to worship upon, for I the Lord am your God.* (Leviticus 26:1)

1. After a lengthy chapter filled with details about the sabbatical and Jubilee years, we are reminded of the paramount expectation that our allegiance must be to God only.
2. We find even the prophets still engaged on the task of smashing to bits their nation's graven image of a national god who offered protection and bestowed the blessings of nature, because they knew that Israel was finished if she put her trust in "worthless gods" (the deities of other nations are frequently described as "worthless gods" in the Old Testament [including Leviticus 26:1]). -- Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology, Volume II*
3. [The verse is directed] toward this one who has been sold [as a slave] to a non-Jew, that he should not say, "Since my master practices sexual immorality, I will too, like him; since my master worships idols, I will too, like him; since my master desecrates Shabbat, I will too, like him." That is why these verses have been stated [in this order]. -- Rashi on 26:1
4. One senses in these sentences the abhorrence of every sort of "idolatry." "You shall not make any 'worthless nothings' for yourselves." The Hebrew word for "idols" on the one hand recalls the normal designations for the deity El or Elohim; on the other, its sound resembles that of words such as "fool" or "dunty things," "idols." -- Erhard Gerstenberger, *Leviticus: A Commentary*

Questions for Discussion

Von Rad notes that idolatry remains a key issue for many generations past the time of the Torah. Why do our ancestors seem so easily lured by other gods or faith systems? Was this a natural reaction among ancient humankind? Or is there something timeless about this reaction -- that when we are unhappy about someone or something, we tend to look elsewhere for comfort rather than confronting our unhappiness?

Rashi claims that the temptation to commit idolatry often stems from close contact with non-Jewish slave-owners. While contact with non-Jews today rarely involves pressure to follow non-Jewish

practices, how can we try to stay unique in a way that is respectful of other people's traditions? Is it worthwhile to make ourselves available to non-Jews to explain the origins of our practices, so that they may be educated and respectful of our differences? Gerstenberger expands the definition of idolatry to include foolhardy pursuits. And how does idolatry still manifest itself today? While we may not bow down to statues anymore, in what ways are we tempted into worshipping other people or things rather than God?

II. And if, for all that, you do not obey Me, I will go on to discipline you sevenfold for your sins ... and if you remain hostile toward Me and refuse to obey Me, I will go on smiting you sevenfold for your sins. ... And if these things fail to discipline you for Me, and you remain hostile to Me, I too will remain hostile to you: I in turn will smite you sevenfold for your sins. ... But if, despite this, you disobey Me and remain hostile to Me, I will act against you in wrathful hostility; I, for my part, will discipline you sevenfold for your sins. (Leviticus 26:18, 21, 23-24, 27-28)

1. The refrain of the threatened curses indicates that God anticipates Israel's constant rebellion, even after bitter suffering.
2. The foundation and the root of estrangement from God and the source of all sins come from saying that God does not supervise creation, and that everything is only due to chance, without reckoning, without purpose. ... The first premise of faith is to believe with perfect faith that there is no such thing as chance. "And God alone did everything, just as God does everything and will do everything." Every details, small or great, they are all from the Holy One. And this is the meaning of "you remain hostile to Me," that is, that everything is just chance. Then, "I too will remain hostile to you." I will certainly hide my face from you, you will not see Me as the cause of all causes. And then there will be no one to whom you can turn in times of distress. -- Rabbi Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin
3. It is hard to see how this people could have survived had they not been tough-spirited or, as they so frequently called themselves, "stiffnecked." Stubbornness, when it represents convictions and unwillingness to be easily swayed from a course, is desirable. Without a measure of tenacious obstinacy, Israel could hardly have served as it did the working out of the divine purpose. -- Interpreter's Bible, Volume II
4. The Jewish people are described in the Bible as stubborn and stiff-necked. We have certainly earned the title, for better or worse. Were it not for this legendary stubbornness, the Jewish people would not have been able to survive and even prosper until today. The stubborn loyalty of the Jews to their faith and values, in spite of overwhelming pressures to convert and change, adapt and assimilate, is one of the brightest chapters in human history. The stubborn loyalty of Israel to the Land of Israel survived centuries of separation, and was finally rewarded with the establishment of the State - against all natural and human obstacles - in our time. But Jewish stubbornness has a second face to it. The term "stiff-necked," as recorded in the Bible, was not meant as a compliment, for the Jews have a way of being stubborn about ideas, ideologies, people and events that defies logic and common sense. It is a Jewish trait: "Don't confuse me with facts, my mind is made up." -- Rabbi Berel Wein

Questions for Discussion

Rabbi Tzadok HaKohen claims that the reason why the Israelites may have continued wrongdoing is because they dismissed their bad fortune to chance, and not to a divine punishment. However, many who suffer today often comfort themselves by saying that there is no way to know the cause of their suffering. Is there a middle ground for modern people to take? Might it be sufficient to say that while we don't know why we are suffering, we will continue to look to God for answers?

The Interpreter's Bible offers a positive aspect of being stubborn -- while it may lead to trouble, it also provides an indomitable will to survive. When is being stubborn today an asset? When is it a liability? Rabbi Wein offers the flip side to the Interpreter's Bible's argument -- saying that it's one thing to be stubborn in the face of adversity, but it's another thing to ignore basic facts. How is a defiance of logic a factor in our debates and discussions today? Is it more prevalent today than ever? Is it more difficult than ever to discern between truth and opinion?