



***Parashat Behar and Parashat Bechukotai
Granting Peace in Our Land: Observing our Greater Shabbatot***

by Marisa James on Thursday May 10, 2007

22 Iyyar 5767

Leviticus 25:1 - 27:34, Shabbat

The teachings in this week's paired parshiyot, [Behar and Behukotai](#), are meant to prevent us from becoming greedy. At the beginning of Behar, literally "in the mountain" at Sinai, the first thing God tells Moses is "When you enter the land that I assign to you, the land shall observe a sabbath of the Lord. Six years you may sow your field and six years you may prune your vineyard and gather in the yield. But in the seventh year the land shall have a sabbath of complete rest, a sabbath of the Lord" (Leviticus 25:2-4).

Why do we give the earth a shabbat every seventh year? The lifespan of the earth is much longer than ours, so maybe every seven years is enough! But we must give the earth a rest, and acknowledge that it does not belong to us. We are meant to be equal partners with the earth, and treat it with the same kindness we hope it will show us.

Later in the chapter, we come to the rules for the Jubilee year, which is to occur every 50th year, when "each of you shall return to his holding and each of you shall return to his family" (25:10). This Jubilee year works in two ways: first, every person returns to the land that they lived on 50 years before, so that no individual gains all of the communal property and no individual is bereft. Secondly, this ensures that anyone who has fallen on hard times gets a fresh start, and if they have become indentured servants or slaves, "then he and his children with him shall be free of your authority; he shall go back to his family and return to his ancestral holding" (25:41).

Giving both people and land a fresh start is imperative and ensures that we are all refreshed and protected, and able to move forward after our rest. We are not the owners of the land, but the protectors. In turn, we expect the land to shelter and protect us. We do not belong to the people who we work for; our employers are supposed to ensure that our pay and benefits give us access to a comfortable life.

In both the case of the earth and the former slaves, we are being asked to ensure that each gets the rest and relief each deserves. When we are individually commanded to keep Shabbat, each of us is expected to keep it for ourselves; but in these longer cycles of relief, we are being told



BOSTON | DENVER | SAN FRANCISCO

Working for the full inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Jews in Jewish life

to ensure that the earth and the disenfranchised get a Shabbat of rest. This goes beyond being a personal commandment; each of us may or may not rest on the seventh day, but everyone is obligated to protect the rights of those without freedom.

Now, many of us garden organically, buy local produce, compost and recycle. Many of us march for the rights of immigrants and domestic workers, campaign for universal health insurance and increased anti-discrimination employment policies—aren't we filling our obligation? Shouldn't we, who follow these laws and work to care for our planet and its people, be individually rewarded?

After Behar's description of these new cycles of shabbatot, Behukotai reinforces what the consequences will be, depending on whether we fail or succeed, in looking out for the rights of others.

The final parasha of Vayikra (Leviticus) begins with "*Im behukotai teileichu v'et mitzotai tishm'ru va'asitem otam*/If you will go by my laws, and if you will observe my commandments, and you will do them" (26:3). As the book of Leviticus comes to an end, after we have been commanded to follow hundreds of laws, this final chapter begins with the word "if." Not everyone will respect the earth and other people enough to ensure that all get their shabbat rest. In their greed, they genetically alter crops to produce more food, spray toxic weed and insect killers on their fields, and do their best to avoid giving their domestic workers the benefits they enjoy themselves.

Individually, many of us do the right thing—the movements for workers' rights and environmental protection have gained momentum in the past few years. But we will only know the benefits of respecting all forms of life if all of us work together to repair our world. This doesn't just mean standing up for our families, our friends and ourselves. This means standing up for the rights of all living things, especially the ones whose voices are the most difficult to hear. It is not just our responsibility to listen to what is widely reported, it is necessary that we listen for the voices that are suppressed, and be aware of how we treat those with no voice at all.

The beginning of our reward is the increasing number of people who are standing up for the rights of others who are not like them. More straight people are working towards equality for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender folks. More city-dwellers are heading to farmers' markets for organic produce. More parents are choosing not to subject their intersexed children to surgery. More people are using public transportation and finding earth-friendly ways to power their homes. More corporations are competing with each other to appear on lists proclaiming their commitment to diversity and workers' rights. This is the beginning of our reward—and as we help this momentum to grow, the beautiful, healthy, peaceful earth and society God promises us will certainly follow.



BOSTON | DENVER | SAN FRANCISCO

Working for the full inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Jews in Jewish life

www.keshetonline.org