

PARSHAS BEHAR-BECHUKOSAI 5778

The gemara in Megillah states that the tzibbur is required to read the tochocho of Sefer Vayikroh before Shavuos. Before Rosh Hashono we read the brochos and kolos in Mishnah Torah. Our reading of the parshiyos is arranged so this is the way it works out every year. In Eretz Yisroel, in the times of the gemara, instead of an annual cycle of reading the Torah, the Torah was finished every three years. They didn't always have these parshiyos come out naturally and they had to deviate from their regular schedule in order to read these tochochos at the right time.

Normally, Behar and Bechukosai are read together. This year they are separated in Eretz Yisroel but are being read together in Chutz Lo'oretz. There is a deep reason why these parshiyos are put together and read before Shavuos.

Parshas Behar revolves around a few topics—shemittah, yovel, eved ivri, issur ribbis and the various halachos of avodim.

Shemittah and Yovel have a basic underlying theme: *“Ki li kol ho'oretz. Ki geirim vesoshavim atem emodi.”* The posuk presents us with a paradox: a ger is a stranger, a foreigner—someone who doesn't naturally belong where he is. A toshav is a permanent resident, a citizen—someone who belongs. So why does Hashem say that we are both geirim and toshavim with Him? We are a combination of both. But the world doesn't belong to us. The mitzvah of Yovel teaches us that the land belongs to whomever Hashem gives it to. We can't own another Jew. All Jews are Hashem's slaves—not ours.

Shemittah is a very deep statement of bitachon in Hashem.

In the middle, we are taught about honesty in business and ribbis. The parsha concludes with the reason for everything—we are in this world and we are in this land—as guests of Hashem. Our identity is built around that fact that Hashem took us out of Egypt and we became His slaves—not to be free.

Parshas Bechukosai follows this theme.

We get all the blessings and benefits of this world if we toil in Torah. There will be tremendous prosperity only when we are devoted to limud haTorah. This is how Rashi begins his explanation of the parsha. This doesn't seem very scientific—to link the productivity of the land and the amount of rainfall to our level of Torah learning. The Torah promises peace and tranquility if we toil in Torah. But all the politicians and diplomats claim we need to negotiate and make peace plans and sign peace deals in order to have peace. There is a machlokes between Torah and the United Nations. In case of a regional war, the Torah promises that there will be no military activity in Eretz Yisroel. If there is war with us, we can send out just a few soldiers and they will have no problem driving out a much larger force. It will be because we toil in Torah. But all the military analysts and newspaper columnists think that's impractical and crazy. So we have a conflict between the Torah and the news media.

The world will enter a utopian state if we toil in Torah. We get

prosperity, peace, Beis Hamikdosh etc. without any normal effort. It all comes from Klal Yisroel's dedicating themselves to toiling in Torah. It is a very different perspective about the world and how it runs. It's not run by Trump or Putin, Kim Jong Un or Benjamin Netanyahu. They are all little puppets who are being pulled around by Hashem's strings.

But the kolos start when we don't follow Bechukosai. What does that refer to? Is it being mechalel Shabbos and doing aveiros? That is referred to by other pesukim. Rashi says that once we neglect toiling in Torah, we immediately start to slide down a slippery slope. Eventually, one actually comes to despise those Jews who are toiling in Torah and doing mitzvos. If there are people learning in yeshivos, they will push them to leave the yeshivos. Then all sorts of disasters befall us. Diseases and epidemics. Despite all the medical technology and drugs that we've developed, Hashem is really the one who heals us—if He finds us worthy.

There are different responses one can have to tragedy and misfortune. One can take it to heart—to see it as a message from Hashem and try to improve, or one can brush it off as mere chance—as keri. This is the central problem which the parsha describes. The Rambam says it is a serious aveiroh—thinking the world runs by itself and everything happens because of natural law and social and political scientific theories.

Before we accept and receive the Torah again this year, there is a basic idea that has to be driven home — we don't run the world. Hashem runs the world.

We found ourselves in Egypt under brutal, backbreaking slavery. The Jews in Egypt were utterly powerless. The Egyptian empire was the richest and most powerful, most culturally advanced civilization at the time. Then came Moshe Rabbeinu — a stutterer — and Aharon to tell Pharaoh that all his power and all his wealth is just an illusion. It's not really his. The curtain is drawn back and Hashem shows Klal Yisroel and Pharaoh that there is only Hashem and there is no other power which causes things to happen. It is based on an exact calculation of reward and punishment. Klal Yisroel saw the gilui Shechinoh and the incredible precision of Hashem's judgment openly manifest at Kriyas Yam Suf.

Just a year ago these were downtrodden slaves with no power and no independence and now they emerge with wealth and freedom—vanquishing the greatest superpower in the ancient world. It all occurred with no natural causation — only by following the will of Hashem and believing in His power.

They came to Har Sinai with absolute recognition and deep understanding that there is only Hashem and no other force besides Him. Without this understanding, you don't know with whom you are making a deal. We made a bris with Hashem at Matan Torah. It is the ultimate commitment, and we need to know who is on the other side of this commitment. It is the Being

who created the entire universe and is in absolute control of the entire world.

He allows us to be here but makes it conditional. We can plant and work the land for six years, but the seventh year we have to walk away. Everything is hefker and we can't exert control or show ownership. Then every 49 years there is Yovel. All the complicated real estate plans and schemes you concocted with your summer homes and office buildings simply dissolve. All the slaves you had at your beck and call are gone. You aren't in charge. What are you going to eat for three years? Whatever Hashem gives you to eat. This is what we have to understand. We are only temporary guests here, not permanent residents. We are here for a while and we are gone.

There is a very important principle operative here. Hashem tells every Jew that we can work for six days and we need to stop on Shabbos. 120 years ago, when Jews migrated in large numbers to the West, not working on Shabbos meant giving up any sense of financial security. But keeping Shabbos is our guarantee for parnossah. Keeping Shemittah is our guarantee for parnossah. Do we believe it?

The posuk in Mishlei says Hashem protects us when we rely on His protection. Hashem didn't act spontaneously when He decided to give Klal Yisroel the Torah. The very fabric of the universe was built with the goal of one day Klal Yisroel receiving the Torah. Eretz Yisroel was given special properties to be sensitive to ruchniyus and respond to what the inhabitants of Eretz Yisroel do on it. The land responds to shemiras Shabbos and Shemittah and Yovel. But you have to believe in it. If you don't believe in it, it is not going to work. The brochos of Shemittah are well known, and the stories about how Shemittah was kept with mesiras nefesh and those who kept it were rewarded are well known. But it only happens when you put your absolute trust in Hashem with no reservations and no begrudging what the Torah demands. If you don't believe, or you think you are suffering because of the demands of the Torah, then Hashem's brocho will not come down.

Hashem runs the world and this is what we had to know before kabbolas haTorah even gets started. He built this world around the Torah and He told us that the way to function successfully in this world is by keeping the Torah. If we do what we are supposed to do and we believe that He is running the world, we will live in a paradisiacal existence. But if you believe in mikreh, that Hashem forgot about the world and He is off behind some black hole at the edge of the universe, then the brochos don't come and disaster falls.

Accepting the Torah isn't just a good idea and nice suggestions. It is brochos or kolos. Hashem created and runs everything that exists and chose this people to be the center of it. He is going to shower gifts and plenty if we abide by our side of the bargain. We accepted the Torah with all the commitments and obligations that came with it. We understand that there is disaster when we don't follow it because there is so much to gain when we keep the Torah. Every potential for greatness and elevation comes with an equal potential for smallness and debasement. We can acknowledge our lofty position in the universe — how we are the center of Hashem's grand scheme for creation, or we can be small and petty and think it's all by accident and believe that whatever happens is just another random throw of the dice.

Hashem set the whole system up and brought Klal Yisroel to Har Sinai. They knew there is only one power and one cause. He says: if you do what the Torah demands and you accept

that this is how the world functions and I am your partner, then everything is good. But if you think the world just happens to run by itself and Hashem is out of the picture, then there is going to be disaster.

Parshas Behar is Shmittah and Yovel, honesty in business and setting slaves free. The issur of ribbis is a very rough halacha for Jewish businessmen. But Hashem shows us how we can do business very well without lending money to other Jews on interest.

When Klal Yisroel came out of Egypt, after Kriyas Yam Suf they came to Moroh, desperate for water. They found that the water was undrinkable. Hashem showed them a stick to put in to make the water drinkable. Why did Hashem do this? He took us to a place where we couldn't drink the water. He does something miraculous to make it drinkable. It was to teach us how the world works when we are guided by Hashem. Listen to Hashem and do what is straight, keep His chukim and Hashem will heal you.

Egypt was a disease-ridden land when they left. They might think that if they left Egypt, it means they left all their problems behind. But it's not true. Hashem gave them problems in the Wilderness and showed them that the existence of problems doesn't depend on geography and the solution to those problems doesn't depend on geography. It all depends on Hashem and Klal Yisroel keeping Torah and Mitzvos. He is the one who heals us and makes the water drinkable. That's what this little exercise at Moroh was all about.

We made a bris with Hashem. A bris can be the most wonderful thing in the world. We have a deep and unbreakable bond with the Creator of the Universe. He is available to us. He is there! He listens to our tefillos. Sometimes the answer is yes and sometimes it's no. But He is listening and responding. We ask Hashem for health because we believe health comes from Hashem. If you daven to Hashem for health and don't believe that health comes from Hashem, your tefillos are worthless. It is not some spell or incantation. We are putting ourselves in Hashem's hands when we daven.

There are differences between the brochos and kolos of Bechukosai and those of Mishnah Torah. Before Shavuos, we are about to accept the Torah. We strengthen our bitachon that Hashem runs this world completely and absolutely. This is why we keep Shabbos and Shemittah and Yovel —because we have to remind ourselves that it all belongs to Hashem. We have to keep halachos of business ethics because we have to keep our perspective that Hashem gives us our parnossah and we are successful when we act with yashrus.

We count 49 days to prepare for Kabbolas HaTorah. How many of us take inventory and think that because Matan Torah is approaching, we have to get our act together. Shavuos is not just our commemoration of that one-time event. No. We receive and accept the Torah again every year on Shavuos.

The gemara in Shabbos 129b tells us an incredible thing. Hashem told us that briyas ha'olam was carefully designed and mapped out for a nation to eventually recognize Hashem's existence and control and make a bris with them and receive the Torah. He used Torah as a blueprint for this creation. If Klal Yisroel would have refused the bris, the whole universe would have reverted to the primordial state of *tohu va'vohu*. The gemara in Shabbos says don't think this was only true 3500 years ago. Every year Klal Yisroel has to keep the world in existence by re-accepting the Torah. We have to reflect, why is Klal Yisroel so important? How is my kabbolas haTorah this year so vital for Hashem's plan for the universe?

For this, Chazal said that we have to read these parshiyos of Behar and Bechukosai.

The biggest danger is falling into the mentality of keris. The Rambam in Hilchos Taanis says it is a serious aveirah and an act of cruelty to think Hashem has left the world and it runs by itself. No. Hashem is running the world completely hands-on. This is the basis for our kabbolas HaTorah. We have a tremendous

zechus to accept the bris and connect with Hashem and release the prosperity of all the brochos through our toiling in Torah.

Im yirtzeh Hashem, with these concepts in mind, we can accept the Torah again with a full awareness of the special status we occupy in Hashem's plan for the entire universe.