

Seven dollars and fifty cents.

That's less than two mocha-frappuccinos at Starbucks; less money than a sandwich at Temptations; less money than the MA minimum wage allots for ONE hour of work.

Seven dollars and fifty cents. That's the amount of money spent for food, per person, for the past five days, by the nearly four-thousand global citizens taking the "Live Below The Line" challenge. Live Below The Line challenges people to spend five days living on \$1.50 a day, which is the price that the World Bank uses to determine "extreme poverty". There are 1.2 billion people living in extreme poverty in the world, each living on less than a dollar-fifty a day.

The story told on the organization's website is not about trying to change the world - rather, it promotes trying to understand how the other lives. One of the founders describes the start of the organization like this:

*One night, over a few beers with my housemate, we started talking about the **difficulty of communicating the lack of choice and opportunity for those living below the extreme poverty line.***

*....I took on the challenge for three weeks in September, and documented my experiences. Friends who had never shown an*

*interested in my work were suddenly engaged with the reasons for my sudden change in eating habits. **My experiences living below the line created a window into the world of extreme poverty.***

This isn't the story of a couple of guys out to eradicate poverty. This is a story of people who wanted to strengthen their empathy muscle; to learn for themselves - and learn to communicate to others - what extreme poverty really feels like.

The sages saw poverty as an assault on human dignity. Poverty is not a divinely ordained condition. It is, the rabbis said, "a kind of death" and "worse than fifty plagues". They said, "nothing is harder to bear than poverty, because he who is crushed by poverty is like one to whom all the troubles of the world cling and upon whom all the curses of Deuteronomy have descended. If all other troubles were placed on one side of a scale, and poverty on the other, poverty would outweigh them all".

The people taking this challenge can not expect to experience true poverty. At any given moment they can walk down the street and order food from Panera. They have basic options that others don't. That said, they might get just a small taste of what it would feel like to have vastly

limited options. It's a small taste, but it might just open their eyes to the inequality in the world.

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In addition to empathy, the lessons of Parshiyot Behar and B'hukotai teach environmental awareness, economic justice, proper interpersonal behavior, labor laws, and God's preferred relationship with us. We are given the laws of *shmita*, the command to let the land lay fallow, untouched and un-farmed, every 7 years. We are taught that the Land ultimately belongs to God and therefore we must return any purchased property and release any Israelite slave on the Jubilee year, which occurs every 7 cycles of the 7-year *shmita* cycle - or in other words, every 50 years. Mixed into those laws are rules about how we treat one another, particularly when a fellow community member has fallen on hard times. We also read about the blessings that would come to us if we follow God's laws, as well as the curses and consequences if we opt to ignore God's commands.

While seemingly disparate topics, they all revolve around the value of preserving dignity.

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Before we dig too deep into the parsha, there are a couple of things that we need to understand about Ancient Israelite society, in order to fully understand what we read this morning.

\* This was an agrarian society. You were nothing without your land. And that land was owned by God, shared with the Israelite people according to ancestral tribes. Therefore, your land was not to be sold, except in cases of absolute necessity. Selling was a last resort to pay back debts and stave off poverty.

\* The JPS Bible teaches that in agrarian societies of the past, virtually all indebtedness was associated with the land. People borrowed for the purpose of sowing seed, purchasing farm implements or work animals, and defraying the cost of hiring laborers. The loan was to be repaid after the harvest. If the crop failed or if the borrower, for whatever reason, found himself unable to repay his debt, the next step was mortgaging or selling the land. As a consequence, one who no longer had land to pledge or sell was often forced to indenture himself or his children in order to work off the debt.

This is where our Torah portion begins - with the laws of owning land, selling it, redeeming it from being sold, allowing it to rest, and returning it to its rightful owner.

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I began by talking about people living in such extreme poverty that they survive on no more than \$1.50 per day. Although less explicit, the Torah's laws are set up to prevent the creation of a society where its wealthiest citizens spend each day what the poorest survive on each month - or even each year.

The practice of returning the land to its original owner every 50 years makes it impossible for someone to accumulate long-term wealth - or debt - over multiple generations. One generation's bad financial circumstances does not condemn future generations to poverty. There may be a temporary losses, financially or to one's dignity, but entire familial lines are not condemned to a situation from which they can never recover.

Moreover, the practice of *shmita* - of being allowed to eat what the fields grow but being forbidden from planting during that seventh year - equalizes society and encourages empathy. Rather than having food planted, tilled, harvested for you and served to you by servants, each person may gather and eat what happens to grow from the land. Once every seven years, everyone eats like equals, which raises up the raises up the downtrodden and restores equilibrium to society.

The entirety of chapter 25 of Leviticus aims to correct the ever-increasing inequality caused by a free market society. Debts are released in the sabbatical year. Hebrew slaves are set free. The land and anything it produces belongs equally to everyone. And once every fifty years, land is returned to its original owners. It is here that we also see the command to help the needy (25:35):

לֵה וְכִי-יִמּוֹךְ אֶחָיֶךָ, וּמָטָה יָדוֹ עִמָּךְ--וְהִחֲזַקְתָּ בּוֹ, גֵר וְתוֹשֵׁב וְחַי עִמָּךְ.

*35 If any of your fellow Israelites become poor and are unable to support themselves among you, help them as you would a foreigner or stranger.*

We are obligated to be sympathetic to those who have fallen on hard times, and treat them as “hired workers or temporary residents” (25:40). If we follow these laws, we are told, God will bring rain, food will be bountiful, and life will be good. And as an added bonus, those who fall on hard times will have the ability to pick themselves up and start again in a dignified manner.

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Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks wrote an article last year discussing these laws and how they relate to the Free Market system that exists in much of the modern world. Rabbi Sacks writes:

The market economy is the best system we know for alleviating poverty through economic growth. In a single generation in recent years, it has lifted 100 million Indians and 400 million Chinese from poverty....However, the market economy is better at producing wealth than at distributing it equitably. The concentration of wealth in a few hands gives disproportionate power to some, at the cost of others.

Unfortunately, we cannot return to the fair and equitable system described in the Bible. But we can strive to model the same values of dignity and justice. Rabbi Sacks concludes his article by reminding us that “Mankind was not created to serve markets. Markets were made to serve the image of God that is mankind.”

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The socio-economic makeup of society is not the only justice issue that Behar and B’hukotai address. The Torah makes very clear how we are to treat people who have fallen on hard times - we must take care of them, give them work, and treat them respectfully, just as we would hope to be treated in their situation.

Anyone who has been out of work, not by choice, for any amount of time, will tell you that it is challenging. Earning one's keep, whether by hunting and gathering food, running errands, or working on Wall Street, gives a satisfaction that can only come from being a productive member of a group. Psalm 128, which we recite at the end of Shabbat, as we transition from the Sabbath to the work week, reminds us that, "When you eat of the labour of your hands, you are happy and it shall be well with you." It is our nature to value feeling productive - it is what helps us hold our heads up high and be proud.

So it should come as no surprise that in a parsha about dignity, we are told that if a fellow Israelite needs to work for us, he should not be treated as a slave but as a hired laborer. We give him work not only so his family can eat, but so that his dignity may be restored. In this way, our sages teach that emotional well-being is as important as physical and financial well-being.

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Of everything we read this morning, the laws of Behar seem easiest to justify to our modern sensibilities. They are intended to maintain a just economic society, where everyone is given an equal opportunity.

The blessings and curses of B'hukotai are a little harder to justify.



Here are promises made by God: if we follow the laws, great, wonderful things will happen to us. But if we don't.... well, let's just say, no one wants to find out what will happen.

This does not make for an easy theological conversation.

But what if it isn't about theology? What if instead, the blessings and curses are *also* about dignity - and in fact, fit neatly into the topics presented in Behar?

The combined nature of Behar and Behukkotai reinforces the idea that the laws that God warns us to uphold are not the laws of the entire Torah, but specifically the agricultural laws in Behar. Many commentators have noticed that the curses are decidedly NOT spiritual; rather, they are entirely physical - and many involve acts of nature.

Commentators have also noted the peculiar nature of the opening sentence of Behar and the closing sentence of B'hukkotai. Both make note of that fact that these laws were given by God to Moses, *on Mount Sinai*. There are only four times Mount Sinai is mentioned in the Bible in connection to laws - and three of them happen in this week's double-parsha. The fourth time is earlier in the book of Leviticus and discusses sacrificial offerings.

## Beginning of Behar (25:1)

א וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה, בְּהַר סִינַי לֵאמֹר.

*1 And the LORD spoke unto Moses in Mount Sinai, saying:*

## End of B'hukkotai (27:34)

לד אֵלֶּה הַמִּצְוֹת, אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה אֶת-מֹשֶׁה--אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: בְּהַר, סִינַי.

*34 These are the commandments, which the LORD commanded Moses for the children of Israel in Mount Sinai.*

By beginning and ending today's Torah reading with language that is both consistent - from the beginning to the end of the parashiot - and yet jarring, we see an envelope structure that defines these two parshiyot as a single unit.

Therefore, while some might read the blessings and curses of Behukkotai as vengeful, I prefer to read them as cause and effect. If we don't take care of the land, the environment won't take care of us. Adina Gerver, an AJWS fellow from a few years ago, wrote a drash on this and said, "We can see a similar poetic pairing of reward and punishment in our relationship with the earth today: if we care for it, it will provide abundant gifts. If we fail to be thoughtful stewards of the earth, we risk a future without resources. If we don't let the earth rest, it will claim its own *shmita* of sorts - climate change and natural disasters will prevent us from continuing to enjoy the earth's bounty."

And that's precisely what the Torah says. Chapter 26, verse 34:

לֹד אֶז תִּרְצָה הָאָרֶץ אֶת-שַׁבְּתֹתֶיהָ, כֹּל יְמֵי הַשְּׁמָה, וְאַתֶּם, בְּאֶרֶץ אֲיִבֵיכֶם; אֶז תִּשְׁבֹּת הָאָרֶץ,  
וְהִרְצָת אֶת-שַׁבְּתֹתֶיהָ.

*34 Then shall the land make up for its sabbath years throughout the time that it is desolate and you are in the land of your enemies; then shall the land rest and make up for its sabbath years.*

This does not mean that God will vengefully send an earthquake or tsunami; rather, the consequence for not keeping the earth's natural balance is a world without any balance - literally and figuratively.

Scientists compare global warming to the Earth having a fever. When we have a fever, we need to rest in order to recuperate. So too with our land; if we run our earth ragged and refuse to give it the rest it needs, it will get sick and take the break of its own accord - no matter how inconvenient the timing may be. Flash floods, hurricanes, super storms - these aren't punishments from God; rather they are the natural consequence of overworking our environment that we are warned about in B'hukkotai.

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The Kli Yakar, a 16th century Polish commentator, shares a parable about a man on a boat. The man begins to drill a hole under his seat. And his fellow passengers are enraged! “What are you doing?” they ask him. “You can’t do that!” they say. “I’m drilling under my own seat”, the man replies, “Why do you care what I do to my seat?”.

As in this story, the moral of Behar and B’hukkotai is that we are all in the same boat. What you do to your plot of land affects me as well - and in fact, it is often those with the least control who are impacted the hardest.

Oxfam estimates that by the year 2015, 375 million people, most of them in poor countries, will be adversely affected by climate change. As Adina Gerber writes: “Of course climate change exposes everyone in the world to more floods, droughts, and other natural disasters, but the impact that these catastrophes have on people is almost entirely determined by their vulnerability: the physical strength of their homes, the safety of their clean water supply, their proximity to rivers and oceans, and their food security.” In other words, the people whose lives don’t include decisions about carbon offsets, airplane travel, and carpooling are the ones whose houses aren’t sturdy enough to withstand the natural disasters that will continue to come, if we continue to abuse our relationship with the land.

This week's lesson is clear: direct from Mt. Sinai, God commands us to treat our relationships with dignity - whether that is our relationship with God, with the Land, or with the members of our community, dignity and respect are paramount. We are tasked with caring for those people who have fallen on hard times and cannot easily recover, and we must remember that the Earth must also be cared for, lest it too fall on hard times from which it cannot recover.

Shabbat Shalom.