

Parsha B'har

Brotherhood Shabbat Sermon

May 16, 2020 22 Iyar 5780

Shabbat Shalom

From the Mountain- Lessons for Living Under Quarantine in Three Parts.

Disclaimer: I didn't say the lessons would be easy!

Part I

Today's parsha B'har brings us near the end of Vayikra a book of rules and regulations, short on narratives and places but not short on rules. The few events described occur in the vast desert between Egypt, and Israel. If you have seen the Sinai desert as have I on the Israel Ride; a shameless plug, I know; from the high mountains of the Negev, you would recognize its vast and beautiful landscape. **It is not a place to settle.** The desert offers almost no water, no shade, little sustenance and many challenges. It is a place of passage to leave bondage behind. Why then are so many of the 613 commandments that form our religious construct delivered there and how can we learn from the lessons of Vayikra in this our time of passage?

Where are we and where are we going? When will this end? On long drives, my three daughters would often ask in three part harmony, are we there yet. Each day brings new timelines and differing opinions. It seems that we are at sea lost in uncharted waters. Where is the playbook? I haven't seen it. Do you know the rules for shopping for groceries or how long one can go without a shave or haircut.

We are in the midst of a worldwide pandemic. We are sheltering in place gathering by Zoom. You are in your homes. Me in mine. We are apart or are we? Are we really apart?

How do we find the strength to journey on when the horizon is unclear when each hill climbed reveals a new more challenging peak? As a hiker I have often climbed rugged mountains with a forty pound pack upon my back late in the day with water supplies waning and energy sapped knowing that there is but one last peak to climb. There are false peaks however which trick the mind. Looking up it appears that the next rise is but the last only to find that once ascended there is another and another still to climb. These are daunting images, reminders of difficult quests and challenging travails. Just nine weeks ago we gathered on Purim knowing that we might not be together soon. But May will turn to June and now it is hard to know how or, even, if we will gather in September for the holy days of Tishrei.

What then are we to learn from reading this ancient book? What does Behar, the shortest of all the parashot teach us? What lessons can we glean from its commandments read here so beautifully by the Brothers this morning? Rashi perhaps our greatest and most prolific Torah sage who lived in France during the 11th Century observed that today's parsha opens much like many others in Vayikra. "V'yadaber adoshem el Moshe," "The Lord spoke to Moses,.... But, then the narrative shifts to a place, Mount Sinai. How is that a shift you might ask? Hasn't G-d been speaking to Moses all along from Mount Sinai. Yes, of course but, here Rashi observes is the lone Torah reference to the Mountain immediately following the phrase V'yadeber adoshem el Moshe. God spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai.

What do we make of this; knowing that the Torah's language is chosen so precisely?

When G-d is said to speak from Mount Sinai we are reminded that we are all there listening. In Exodus, Chapter 19 verse 2, the people amassed as many, entered the wilderness, but as one they camped at the foot of Mount Sinai. Our tradition teaches that all of Israel was gathered at Mount Sinai even those yet born. On Shabbat when Jews pray around the world it is said that we are together as at Sinai. If we are together as Jews around the world on Shabbat then today, throughout the Pandemic and throughout all time we as brothers we as Emanuelites and we as Jews are together as one today and everyday.

- Part II

There is more in today's parsha. More than just an opening line. Rashi tells us that the Mount Sinai reference alerts us to take special notice of the laws that follow. What are these laws the Shmita and Jubilee edicts and what reference do they have to our current crisis? What does G-d tell Moses to tell the Israelite people in the closing passages of Vayikra. What last commandments will we hear? We are told that the land comes with restrictions. Now remember the setting, the Israelites encamped at the foot of Mount Sinai are former slaves, workers at the end of a whip, landless laborers who have escaped the lash to begin new lives in a new land. They have been promised a land flowing with milk and honey a place to multiply as like the stars. Though not Eden, it is the Promised Land call'in as Chuck Berry would sing so many years later. The people are tired they are restless and they are bubbling with revolt already having constructed the golden calf but there are rich fields that await.

And then in verse 3 G-d tells Moses, 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. It is not the Cecile B. Demille scene that comes to mind here but Mel Brooks instead from the thousand year old man. Moses has been upon the mountain dutifully taking notes of every word G-d utters and G-d tells Moses to tell those farmers down there that one out of every seven years the land shall rest. He's joking. No? How is that going to work? Sounds a bit like Governor Cuomo telling the restaurants, the Broadway theaters, the Knicks the Nets the Rangers the Yankees and the Mets to take a rest. If this were Michigan there'd be a revolt. Yet there it is in the Torah read each year in synagogues throughout the world. If the ancients could withstand a year of rest from agrarian production, the very lifeblood of their economy, what lessons can we learn? Keep in mind that we are not talking about crop rotation. We are talking about crop starvation. How does this work. How does one survive the shmitah? A year without crops. Sure you and your servants can gather what grows on its own or falls off the vine but no fresh crops.

Lesson one; learn to save. Don't eat all your food grown each year. Save some for the lean years, the shmita. Lesson two, our bounty is borrowed from the earth a finite resource that cannot give endlessly without being depleted. Deal with it. Lesson three, deprivation grows character and lesson four, we our people will survive. We are in a sabbatical year; life is not normal and without diminishing the pain and loss that have touched us all, we will emerge.

Part III

There is one final piece I cannot overlook when reading today's parsha. I have an issue with the text. It reminds me of our nation's original sin and the sins of our own people. The sin of which I speak is slavery. Verse ten of Chapter 25 which is inscribed upon one of our nation's greatest symbols, the Liberty Bell reads, "You shall proclaim Liberty throughout the land for all of its inhabitants." But there was not liberty for all its inhabitants throughout the land in America or in the land of Israel. Our agrarian economy was built upon the toil of Africans brought here in chains. It is not this verse though that troubles me most. It is the commandment to free slaves in the Jubilee year at verse 6. Israel as slave owners. I have heard it said that these rules differentiate the slavery of the bible from the slavery of the Africans but, I ask how a people whose most sacred story, Passover, is of their release from bondage can rely on a book that sanctions the bondage of others. Perhaps we are imperfect perhaps even the almighty is imperfect too; perhaps we struggle with goodness and perhaps the text like our current oppression teaches us to look inward to search for new values to live better lives. Perhaps the blessing of our time is the time itself which allows us to keep the Sabbath, to pray as one, to improve our lives, and to learn life's lessons. Perhaps there is a lesson here perhaps.

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