Changing Over Time

Shabbat B'har/B'chukotai 5785

May 23, 2025 Rabbi Barry H. Block

This week's Torah portion is quite familiar to me. I can read the opening lines blindfolded, typically in a sing-song voice, וידבר יהוה אל משה בהר סיני לאמר. I read them at my Bar Mitzvah, May 15, 1976. Do the math. It's fine.

What I did **not** do at my Bar Mitzvah was talk about the Torah portion. I'm not sure how I got away with it, but I told the rabbi, "Everybody talks about the Torah portion. That's boring. I don't want to do that." Instead, I shared my theology, such as it was at age twelve.

To atone for my Bar Mitzvah sin of dissing the Torah portion, I have sought to focus on *Parashat B'har*, whenever it comes up in the annual cycle. This year, I want to do something a little different, asking: What might I have said if I had addressed **God's** role **in the Torah portion**?

Speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai, God lays out rules for how the Children of Israel were to farm the land they would not enter for decades. Even before we get into the specifics of those commandments, God offers the people hope for the future: They **will** reach the Promised Land. They **will** have land to farm—that is, a way to make a living.

We who gather in worship tonight have lived through a golden era for our Jewish people—here in the United States, for centuries, and more recently, in Israel. The difficulties and challenges, injustices and violent antisemitism that we face today pale in significance to the persecution and degradation that our people endured throughout most of our history. Still, our realistic concern, that the golden age we have enjoyed may be coming to an end, is terrifying.

Mussar, Jewish ethical discipline, urges us to cultivate בטחון, trust. In the classical literature, בטחון calls for trust in God: When we experience times of trouble, even if the outcome we seek is not realized, God has a larger plan, and all will be well in the end. That's not how I usually think of God, neither at sixty-one nor at twelve, as such a belief suggests that God is responsible for everything that happens. My theology does not hold God accountable for human wrongdoing or imagine God overrides natural laws.

Still, the בטחון, the trust inherent in God's giving commandments is dependent on sovereignty that has not yet been achieved, is compelling and is borne out in our Jewish history. Our people have often had to wait a very long time

for things to get better, but persistent faith and hope helped those who came before us to endure eras so much worse than our own.

It's worth examining the nature of the laws that God imposes on the descendants of the Israelites standing at Sinai. They must provide a Shabbat to the Earth. Since an agricultural cycle is annual, not daily, the land's Shabbat would fall every seventh year rather than weekly. God demands that the people live off whatever the land produces on its own that year, not on planting and harvesting.[i]

Once again, the theological message, at least in part, is בטחון: The Israelites are asked to place sufficient trust in God to accept that they will have enough to eat in a year with neither planting nor harvest.

This time, though, the message is also about control. We often believe that we hold our own fates in our hands, that our actions determine our destiny, and that our own hard work and talents are sufficient to achieve our goals, at least if nobody else gets in the way. Having to let the fields lie fallow every seventh year, though, the Israelites are asked to relinquish control. They had to accept that their livelihood was not in their hands.

A present-day example: Not long ago, a furious argument erupted between Jewish leaders about the Gaza war. Progressive Zionists sparred with those who are more deferential to the Israeli government, with a few anti-Zionists thrown in, to everyone else's dismay. A moderator reminded us that nothing we said to one another would change the outcome for a single Israeli or Palestinian. Instead, our behavior toward one another **would** determine our ability to work together to achieve goals we all share.

The moderators did not say, "Trust in God, Who will assure that everything will be fine in Israel and Palestine." Most would have rejected that. Instead, focusing on what we **can** change, the impact we **can** have, is more productive than arguing over matters outside our control. Recognizing what we can**not** impact is critical to living a healthy and balanced life.

Our portion goes on to command that every fiftieth year be a jubilee, when all land in Israel would be returned to its original owner. In the wilderness, the territory of the Promised Land had been divided more-or-less equally. Over time, though, some would prosper, while others would fall on hard times. To survive, the latter would sell land to the former, further enriching the prosperous and impoverishing the poor, albeit providing them with means to feed their families in the short term. The plan was to treat every land sale as a purchase of no more than a lease until the land reverts to its original owners.[ii]

Even in the Bible, though, we find evidence that the jubilee was not observed.[iii] Perhaps, then, this commandment was always aspirational. Economists explain that it would not work in the real world.

Here, the lesson is again בטחון, trust. God offers a commandment that can only be fulfilled in a world that does not yet exist—including now, millennia after Sinai. Still, the *mitzvah* is not meaningless. Instead, its purpose may be to articulate an ideal, economic equality, that our human family has never come close to realizing. We are enjoined to keep working to make that dream come true. Failing that, we are commanded to keep the faith, to continue living, to make the best of the time and place into which we have been born, and to pray that those who come after us will eat the fruit of a repaired world.

A biblical verse in the traditional ברכת המזון, the blessing after meals, reads, "I was young, and now I am older, and I have never seen a righteous person go hungry."[iv] We traditionally chant that verse only in a whisper, lest a poor person hear and think that we are implying that all who go hungry must be sinners. Another way to think of it is that the young, immature person, like me on the precipice of turning thirteen, may think that they have life, even God, all figured out. Maturing, though, we recognize that the dreams of youth are visions for the future, hopes that may not be realized in the lifetime of our once-young selves.

In our own troubled times, let none of us despair, imagining that the world is coming to an end—that, this time, justice and righteousness will be wiped out for good, portending the end of both America as we knew it and the life of our Jewish people. No, like God commanded Moses, let us continue to pursue, or at least believe, in a better future, whenever it may come.

Amen.

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[i] Leviticus 25:1-7.

[ii] Leviticus 25:8-17.

[iii] II Chronicles 36:20-21. Specifically, the claim is that the length of the Babylonian exile corresponded to the number of jubilees that weren't observed, namely seventy.

[iv] Psalms 37:25.