



dedicated learning. dynamic leadership.

Parshat Behar: From the Transactional to the Transcendent and Back Again **Rabba Dina Brawer** *Class of 2018*

Most years the Torah portion of Behar is read in conjunction with that of Behukotai. Although that is not the case on a Jewish leap year, analyzing the tension inherent in the two sidrot, enables a more nuanced understanding of each.

Behar, named for mount Sinai, symbolizes the aspirational: revelation as an invitation to connect to God. Behukotai, captures the granular detail of God's laws.

Behar begins with *כִּי תָבֹאוּ אֶל-הָאָרֶץ*, *when you come to the land*, and can be read as a future tense description of an idyllic life in the land of Israel observing three key mitzvot:

- Shmita, the Sabbatical year, when the land is left fallow. This mitzvah captures the essence of a work/life balance; an opportunity to take a break from the daily rat race to study, contemplate and place our faith in God for our daily sustenance.
- Yovel, the Jubilee year, when all land reverts to its original owner and slaves are liberated. This point in time is a reminder that while we work hard to invest in our own fortunes, we must find ways of allowing others a fresh start free of debt and afford them a chance to prosper.
- Shabbat, the weekly day of rest, described by the Rabbis as *a taste of the World to Come*, encourages us to live a life directed towards the spiritual and to find our purpose beyond work.

All the mitzvot described in Behar convey lofty aspirational values.

In contrast Behukotai opens with the conditional *אִם-בְּהִקְיִיתִי תִלְכוּ*, *If you follow My laws*, and promptly proceeds to specify how the key blessings necessary to prosper in an agricultural society, rain and peace, are conditional on faithful observance of God's laws and commandments. The entire sedra suggests negotiating and bartering, a transactional relationship with God.

And yet, despite the apparent differences between these two sidrot, there is an integrity shared between them. Behar begins with God's revelation at Sinai, *וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה בְּהַר סִינַי לֵאמֹר*, and Behukotai comes full circle restating: *אֵלֶּה הַמִּצְוֹת אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' אֶת-מֹשֶׁה אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּהַר סִינַי*, *these are the commandments that God commanded Moshe at Mount Sinai*.

Perhaps this is because one is the portal to the other. The transactional phase of Bechukotai is where many of us begin. We seek God's favour and blessing, and in order to be worthy of them we try to arrange our lives in accordance with God's will. But this somewhat infantile phase can be the



opening to a loftier one, in which the ideals of Behar are sought. These ideals, captured in the laws of Shemitah, are about living on an elevated spiritual plane. One that recognizes and celebrates God's continuous flow of energy into all of creation.

But it's not a one way ticket. Living with a heightened spiritual awareness is difficult to sustain, and so we often move back and forth along the transactional - transcendent continuum. Sometimes our religious experiences are of a heightened nature. Other times we find ourselves back at the infantile stage, behaving so as to elicit God's blessings.

The fact that these two sidrot are so intimately bound with each other, and that both point towards Sinai, indicate the complexity and fluidity of religious devotion.



Rabba Dina Brawer was born in Milan, Italy and studied in Jerusalem and New York. She holds a BA in Hebrew and Jewish Studies from the University of London and an MA in Education and Psychology from the Institute of Education, London. Together with her husband, they have recently co-launched Mishkan: The Jewish Community Beyond Borders. In 2013 she launched JOFA UK as a platform to engage in communal discussions around religion and gender. She ranked 55 in The Jewish Chronicle's Power 100 List of individuals who are most influential in shaping the UK Jewish community.