

Parshat Behar-Bechukotai

The Nature of Trust

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Parshat Behar is not our first encounter with the laws of *shmita*. We've seen these before, in Sefer Shemot. There, it seemed the purpose of *shmita* was to provide for poor people: "Six years shall you sow your land and gather in its yield; but in the seventh you shall let it rest and lie fallow. Let the needy among your people eat of it." The laws of *shmita* appear together with the command not to oppress the stranger because we were strangers in Egypt. In Shemot, *shmita* is about our relationships with people.

In our parsha, though, *shmita* is different. It is about a tripartite relationship between God, God's land, and God's people. This difference makes sense: in Shemot, Bnei Yisrael become a nation, and in Vayikra, that nation learns about the relationships they are meant to have with God and with each other. During *shmita*, we are to forgive debts and release servants - as affirmation that our enduring identity is as *avdei hashem*, and any other statuses we've acquired since the last *shmita* - debtor, creditor, servant, master - are fleeting, and do not define us. And we are to give the land a complete rest, and return all pieces of land to their original holders - as affirmation that the land belongs to God.

God knew that the people would worry about how they would survive without working the land, and promised that their crops in the sixth year would be abundant enough to sustain them. But even with this promise, Bnei Yisrael would need to summon enormous trust in God in order to fulfill the mitzvot of *shmita*. In Vayikra, the people were still adjusting to life as servants of God, who takes care of the people and provides what they need. The memory of being slaves to Pharaoh, who cut off their supply of straw while demanding that they still produce the same quota of bricks, is still fresh. The *shmita* year is an exercise in *bitachon*.

In the haftorah, from Jeremiah 17, the prophet addresses this *bitachon*:
אָרוּר הַגִּבֹּר אֲשֶׁר יִבְטַח בְּאָדָם וְשָׁם בְּשָׂר זָרְעוֹ וּמִן-ה' יִסּוּר לְבָבוֹ - Cursed is the man who puts his trust in man, who makes mere flesh his strength, and turns his thoughts away from God...
בְּרוּךְ הַגִּבֹּר אֲשֶׁר יִבְטַח בְּה' וְהָיָה ה' מִבְּטָחוֹ: - Blessed is the man who puts his trust in God, whose trust is God alone. Jeremiah describes that this cursed man will be like a parched bush in a barren desert, while the blessed man will be like a tree planted by water, which can easily survive a year of drought.

Rashi offers a backstory for this curse; he says the cursed man's sin was that he violated the laws of *shmita*: "he put his trust in man in his plowing and his harvest, saying, 'I will sow during the seventh year, and I will eat.'"; this man doesn't believe that God will fulfill God's promise to sustain Bnei Yisrael through *shmita* and beyond, so he works the land when it is forbidden. We can't know if he violated *shmita* defiantly (perhaps with pride), or reluctantly (perhaps with guilt), but we know that he lacked the *bitachon* needed to fulfill this mitzvah. And if the cursed man's sin was violating *shmita*, we can assume, then, that the blessed man trusted God and kept *shmita*; like the tree that can endure a drought, he knew he could endure a year without working the land.

On a first read of Jeremiah's curse - אָרוּר הַגִּבֹּר אֲשֶׁר יִבְטַח בְּאָדָם - it seems like this verse is about a man who puts his *bitachon* in another person, and we might assume that Jeremiah is warning against relying excessively on other people. But if we look again at Rashi,

who has that man saying “I will sow during the seventh year and I will eat.”, it seems this man violated *shmita* by working the land when he wasn’t supposed to; he wasn’t putting excessive trust in another man, but in his own self. He worried that God wouldn’t provide enough food to sustain him in the seventh year, so he tried to solve the problem himself, and earned himself this curse by being too confident in his own power.

Radak also helps us understand what appropriate *bitachon* looks like. For Radak, the problem with the cursed person is that he put *all* his trust in humans. It’s ok - even good and necessary - for us to rely on other people. When we are in relationship with others, we trust that they, with God’s help, will help us, and we likewise do our best to be trustworthy to them. Jeremiah’s curse and blessing have parallel language - אָרוּר הַגֵּבֶר אֲשֶׁר יִבְטַח בְּאָדָם and אָרוּר הַגֵּבֶר אֲשֶׁר יִבְטַח בֵּה - but the curse has an extra clause with no parallel in the blessing: יָסוּר לִבּוֹ - and turns his thoughts away from God. The problem isn’t just that he trusts in people, but that he only trusts people, to the exclusion of God.

We learn from the navi, and from Rashi and Radak, that we need to have *bitachon* in God, and also the right amount of *bitachon* in ourselves and in others; we should trust that we - and the people in our lives - will use our God-given gifts to do the best we can. Our own capacities are limited. Rashi’s person who trusts too much in himself, and Radak’s person who trusts in others to the exclusion of God, all seem to believe they are in control; they think that if they just work the land, or rely on others, they will have the good outcomes they are hoping for. *Bitachon* involves letting go of our illusion of control. We can’t know how the events of our lives will unfold. We do our best, we make reasonable efforts to do right by ourselves and our communities, and we let go of our need to control the outcomes. *Shmita* pushes us to let go of that illusion of control, by pausing our productivity, and reminding us that we are *avdei hashem* and the land belongs to God. We stop working the land, and God provides the food we need. We let go of the statuses we’ve taken on - debtor, creditor, etc because any power we’ve gained - or lost - is temporary.

In addition to the *bitachon* we strive to have, there might also be a way in which God has *bitachon* in us. God knows that the people will worry about not having enough to eat in the seventh year, and God promises to provide extra in the sixth year - before *shmita*. Bnei Yisrael haven’t yet had the chance to show God that they will fulfill the mitzvah and let the land rest, but God seems to trust that they will, and promises extra food in advance of *shmita*.

God is teaching us here about the nature of trust. God demonstrates that by trusting us, we will know that we can trust God. As we try to mend our communal structures and begin to come back together, the parsha’s lessons about *bitachon* and trustworthiness can help us forge stronger bonds with God and with each other. And if we are able to cultivate this *bitachon*, God assures us - at the end of Behar - that we will have security and peace: וַיִּשְׁבְּתֶם לְבִטַח בְּאֶרְצְכֶם... וְנָתַתִּי שְׁלוֹם בְּאֶרֶץ; you shall dwell securely in your land, and I will grant peace in the land.



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