

Parshat Behar
Sow Reality, Reap Utopia
Miriam Lorie - Class of 2024

I have a teenage friend who became very interested in ideological anarchism, one definition of which is “belief in the abolition of all government, and the organization of society on a voluntary, cooperative basis without recourse to force or compulsion.” He and I have passionately debated whether a society built on these principles would actually work, or whether it would descend into, well, anarchy. A society without hierarchical structures or authority may sound appealing, but would it motivate people to work hard? Is it built on a foundation of trust in human goodness which may, sadly, be misplaced? Is it a utopian vision which cannot be maintained in reality?

Nevertheless, I can't help but admire my friend's optimistic aspiration for a more ideal world. It reminded me of my own teenage questions: “Why do we have money?” “Why is there so much inequality?” “Why do I have to do what I'm told?” Sometimes we need to allow ourselves these hopeful questions, free from the disillusionment of what we have come to accept.

Behar presents us with the Torah's own radical vision for society, which isn't quite capitalism or socialism, and certainly isn't anarchy, but is a utopian vision of its own:

שש שנים תזרע שדך ושש שנים תזמר כרמך ואספת את-תבואתה: ובשנה השביעית שבת שבתון יהיה לארץ שבת ליקוק שדך לא תזרע וכרמך לא תזמר:

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, a sabbath of the LORD: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. (Vayikra 25:3-4)

In addition to this, all loans were written off in the shmitta year, that seventh year when the land rests. And then in the 50th year, right on the back of the shmitta 49th year (seven cycles of seven), is another year of cessation from farming. But on top of this:

ושבתם איש אל-אחזתו ואיש אל-משפחתו תשובו:

...each of you shall return to their ancestral land and each of you shall return to his family. (Vayikra 25:10)

The vision is a daring one. Nobody really owns anything in the long term. We are but tenants on God's land. And every seven years we submit entirely to trusting God that enough will grow in the sixth year to sustain us for the seventh. As a Pardes teacher R. Meir Shweiger taught, “for six years we are capitalists, for the seventh, we are socialists.”

We are in a shmitta year currently (127 days remaining from Shabbat Behar!) and yet over the years, shmitta has, sadly, proved almost impossible to keep. Divrei HaYamim tells us that the Israelites were exiled from the land for 70 years in order to make up for 70 missed shmitta years that were not kept. In this time of exile, with no Jewish farmers around, the land finally, ironically, gets its rest.

Then in Second Temple times, we do have sources which suggest that agricultural shmitta was being kept. However, Hillel saw that people were reluctant to lend money to the poor, knowing that loans would be written off in the shmitta year. Hillel created his famous *prozbul*, a contract where,

even in the shmitta year, loans had to be repaid. The end result protected the poor, but in the process undid a key part of shmitta.

And so to our current times, where Rav Kook, seeing how the farmers of the early Yeshuv (modern resettlement of Jews in the land of Israel) would not last through a year without farming, allowed the *heter mechira*, which enables Jews to sell their land to a non-Jewish person for the year, therefore still technically being able to farm and sell the produce. Today, walk around Israeli supermarkets and farms and you will see signs informing consumers that the right boxes have been ticked to discharge the *heter mechira*.

How far we are from the original bold utopian vision of the Torah. It is not that Jewish farmers historically or today are to blame - they need to subsist, as do all of us who expect the luxury of full supermarket shelves. And our rabbinic tradition is accustomed to honing the Torah to something more livable - think about "an eye for an eye," the stubborn and rebellious son or the Torah's laws around marriage - all of these have been given rabbinic treatment to bring them into line with how post-Biblical societies operate.

But are we left impoverished of the vision the Torah had for social levelling, releasing people from crippling debt or slavery, and treating the land as something worthy of just "being" without the need for endless production and profit?

A saying goes "one who sows utopia, reaps reality" - if you set out to build a dream world, you will end up with something demoralizingly banal. But perhaps the opposite needs to be true too. If you sow reality, (employing *prozbul* or *heter mechira* for example) make sure you do so in such a way as to reap utopia. Do not become what the Ramban called a *גבול ברשות התורה*, a scoundrel with the permission of the Torah.

How we balance our responsibility as a rabbinic religion to make Judaism livable, with our responsibility as God-fearing people to be true to the spirit of the Torah - this is the big question that follows me around these days. I have no clear answers, but perhaps these words of the Chazon Ish can serve as guidance:

כל מצות התורה וחוקיה, ניתנו ללמד מהן מלבד פרטי מצותן, את חפץ ד' מאיתנו בהנהגתנו

All the commands of the Torah and its laws - it is possible to derive from them, beyond the details of the commandments, what God's desires from our behavior.



Miriam Lorie is from Borehamwood UK, where she lives today with her husband and two small boys. Her life has led her to rabbinical school, even though it took time to realise this was the direction everything was pointing. Miriam's teenage fascination with religion led her to read Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Cambridge and work in inter-faith dialogue for seven years. Her love of Judaism has taken her to study at Midreshet Harova and the Pardes Centre for Jewish Educators. Miriam co-founded a local Partnership Minyan in 2013 - the first such minyan to regularly meet in the UK. She regularly leins, teaches and leads davening at this warm and open minyan, "Kehillat Nashira". Miriam has worked at Lead, developing Jewish leaders for the UK Jewish community, where she collaborated with the London School of Jewish Studies to develop an online Jewish literacy course for community leaders, which she continues to run. Miriam trained with the Eden Centre as a kallah teacher. She has worked with couples pre

marriage for several years and is part of a team creating a new, spiritually-oriented mikveh for London. Miriam has taught Jewish texts in a variety of adult education settings and has been a bat mitzvah teacher for over 10 years. Her teaching philosophy is to instill a Judaism which is affirmative, joyful, text based, and which inspires the bettering of our world. Miriam was named one of the Jewish Chronicle's "Sixteen under 30's to watch in 2016" and in the Jewish News' "40 under 40" in 2020. Realising that Jewish teaching was a life calling, Miriam began the Yeshivat Maharat Beit Midrash Programme in 2019 and became a freelance Jewish educator in 2020.