

kol chovevei TORAH

PARSHA PONDERINGS

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Letting Go To Hold On

By Rabbi Avidan Freedman

In these days of scarcity, of tightening belts and reconsidering priorities, the words of Parshiot Behar and Bechukotai carry with them a message from Sinai about how to hold on to what is most dear to us.

Parshat Behar focuses on the details of the laws of *Yovel*, the Jubilee, that most rare of all Jewish calendrical observances, when we are told to "Proclaim Liberty throughout all the land," (Vayikra 25:10) when Jewish slaves are freed and ancestral land returns to its original owners. But *Yovel* is far more than a once every half-century novelty; its impact is felt in nearly every major transaction that occurs during the other 49 years of the cycle. The real estate industry prescribed by the Torah lives with a constant awareness of, and is defined by, proximity to the *Yovel* year. The formula for fostering this awareness is repeatedly described with the Hebrew root '*ga'al*' (*gimmel, aleph, lamed*)- to redeem, and these acts of redemption, bringing the world closer to a state of *Yovel*, guarantee our hold on the land- "and you shall dwell securely upon the land" (25:18).

The dark alternative to this cheery vision is presented in terrifying detail in Parshat Bechukotai, which paints a vivid picture of the plagues and war the Jewish people will face, culminating in their exile from the land of Israel, and the land's desolation. All this, the Torah says, so that the land can experience the rest that the Jewish people refused to allow it while settling there. "All the days of desolation it will rest, that which it didn't rest

during its Sabbaths, when you had settled there" (26:35).

In Bechukotai, replacing the redemptive life of *Shemita* and *Yovel- geula*, we find a very similar word repeating itself, with a starkly different meaning. *Gi'ul* (*gimmel, ayin, lamed*), revulsion, initially describes our attitude to God's laws, and eventually reciprocally adopted as God's attitude to us, necessitating our exile from the land. "The land will lie forsaken without them, and will again desire its Sabbaths, in its desolation from them, because, yes, because they were repulsed by my laws, their souls revolted by my statutes" (26:43).

A single letter distinguishes *ge'ula*, redemption, and *gi'ul*, revulsion. There is only a small, guttural difference, the Torah suggests, between the life that allows us to hold onto the land, the life of *Shemita* and *Yovel*, and the life that leads us to forsake it. What is that difference?

If we were to consider what attitude might lead to the land lying forsaken, we might imagine that it would relate to a sense of apathy towards the land, a lack of attachment which brings about the land's abandonment. But if we picture the person who would be unwilling to let the land lie fallow during *Shemita*, it's not the person who is indifferent to the land, but the person whose deep love of the land prevents them from letting it go! If we imagine the person who does not want to take the *Yovel* into account in their purchase of land, it is the person who holds a deep desire to hold onto that land, who is unwilling to consider having to forsake it!

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The idea, then, is counter-intuitive and provocative. One's love for the land must exist within the framework of a belief that fundamentally, no person has absolute ownership of the land- 'For the land is Mine, and you are but strangers and settlers to me' (25:23). If a person's love for the land blinds them to that transcendent truth, and prevents them, at the right time and in the right conditions, from relinquishing their ownership, they cannot hold onto it, and their love will turn into repulsion. *Shemita* and *Yovel* teach us that, in order to hold on to something dear, what's needed is the consciousness that allows you to let go.

The parasha of *Yovel* is always read in close proximity to Shavuot, as the 50th year hopes to spread its message to the 50th day, the day of our acceptance of Torah. Just as a deep love of the land of Israel is important, precious, and dangerous, so too is a deep love of Torah important, precious and dangerous. We (and this we encompasses literally everyone and anyone) are not the sole proprietors of Torah. No one human being has exclusive rights to it, no one other than God can fully lay claim to it. We make that idea real by being willing to relinquish sole ownership of Torah, in the right times, and in the right conditions. When our love of Torah makes us blind to that fact, we run the risk of losing it, of making it repulsive.

As Shavuot approaches this year, as resources are scarce and we wonder how to hold on to what is most dear and precious, individually and nationally, we are tempted to circle the wagons, to consolidate and solidify the exclusiveness of our ownership. Behar and Bechukotai, *Geula* and *Gi'ul*, remind us that if we are to

hold on, we need to recognize that all that we have we hold as a sacred trust from the one true Owner, and to know when and how to let go in order to hold on.

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