

We Have the Power to Change Torah

Parashat Behar



Parashat Behar

This week, we study Parashat Behar. It talks about of the sabbatical year, the year of Jubilee, and the redemption of land - the return of all real estate to their original owners. Further, it discusses the notion of helping others and lending money.

According to our portion, a loan is supposed to be free of interest, in order to help your neighbor get back on his feet. Likewise, it mentions that if someone is in a difficult situation, he can sell himself as a slave.

Therefore, our parasha also teaches us about the release of slaves during certain periods, including the right of redemption and paid redemption.

Why the Sabbatical Year?

One of the most famous quotes in the Jewish and Israeli world is the question that Rashi asks in regards to the first paragraph of this week's Torah portion:

“What [particularly] has Shmita [the sabbatical year] to do with Mount Sinai?”

This phrase is used today as an expression of puzzlement over the connection between two matters that are seemingly unrelated to each other.

Rashi originally said that indeed all the commandments of the Torah were given at Mount Sinai. Therefore, why, in the case of the Shmita (sabbatical year) commandment, was the place where it was given mentioned? Of course, there have been many commentaries on this verse.

Past Rabbinical Amendments to the Torah

Today I want to touch on the ancient debate about the correction of the Prozbul (loans), the selling of the land, and the commandment of Shmita.

The difficult question that arises regarding the Shmita commandment has accompanied us since the renewal of agriculture in modern Israel from 1889, which was the first sabbatical year in the new era.

Until then, the commandment was not relevant because it is connected to the Land of Israel alone. However, the question and discussion still remains relevant, because similar questions have been asked on various subjects over the years, both in the Christian and Jewish world.

For example, the correction of the Prozbul was an amendment made by Hillel the Elder. Hillel lived around 100 BC, and he made a correction against the cancellation of debts near the sabbatical year simply because the rich were not lending money. They did so because they feared that the money would not be returned.

Hillel claimed that it was necessary to loan money to those who have none, for they actually need it. Thus it would be better for there not to be the cancellation of debts, in order so that the rich will continue to loan money to the needy.

The same is true of the question of the sabbatical year for Israeli agriculture. At first, it could not meet the Torah's requirement that agricultural activity be halted for a year. Then, the Heter Mechirah (sale permit) was approved, in which the land of Israel was sold to a foreigner, so that it became possible

to continue to work the land which would technically no longer belong to you.

The argument in favor of this idea was that the most important thing was that the momentum of settlement and agriculture in Israel should not be stopped.

The Debate Over the Torah's Flexibility

Rabbi Kook, who was the rabbi of the renewed Jewish settlement in Israel, believed that his duty was to find a way that would enable agriculture, economy, and agricultural exports to continue. He believed that the community should not go bankrupt.

Further, he saw Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel as the beginning of redemption. He believed that his duty, as a religious leader, was to stand alongside the renewal of the Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel.

Those who opposed the idea of selling land placed the center of the debate on the need for devotion to the observance of the Torah. For them, the ability and willingness of the public to stand financially during the sabbatical year was not under consideration.

There is the obligation, the commandment, as well as the promise from God to bless those who will keep the Shmita year. The opponents claimed that we must observe the sabbatical year and prove the eternity of the Torah, the eternity of the Word of God.

Personally, I very much agree with Rabbi Kook's ruling at the time. Such a decision, which changes the Torah's commandments and influences an entire economy of settlers, requires great faith and emotional strength.

I appreciate the religious leader who understands that the Torah was given to human beings in order to help them build a healthy and correct society.

The Purpose of the Torah

The purpose of the Torah is to bring closeness between a man, his society, and God. The leader must be attentive to the society in which he lives, bend the laws, and even cancel the Torah's commandments when they may harm the public.

As believers sometimes it is hard for us to be flexible on God's Word, to find the middle way. Many times we think that God's Word is above our economy, comforts, and above our society's needs.

The truth is that there isn't a black-and-white answer. Rather, every public leader must examine his society's current situation and alter it according to their needs.

Therefore, Rabbi Kook's decision to sell the land and bypass the Shmita commandment was the right decision for that time. The obligation should be to support the poor, even if a million other problems might be a higher priority.

Why Torah Amendments are Important for Us

Today, however, the economic ability of the Israeli economy to fulfill the commandment of the sabbatical year must be re-examined. We will have to find creative solutions to strengthen the economy and specifically the agricultural sector. Even more, we ought to find a solution in which farmers can live in dignity even while keeping the Shmita.

In this day and age, we can import all our crops from other countries during the sabbatical year, but the real question is: What will happen to farmers? They'll go bankrupt, and then what? What is the future of Israeli agriculture?

This kind of thinking is important for us as believers. One of our greatest challenges is to develop the Messianic body so that it will emerge from the cultural, religious, and social background of Israel. In fact, we must strive to adapt Messianic Judaism so that it can deal with these kinds of complicated questions and problems of the public.

Yeshua Gives Us Authority, and Responsibility

Yeshua, the New Testament, and the Torah itself give us authority and responsibility. Thus their relevance lasts throughout life and through all generations.

The Torah is eternal, it continues to be relevant for thousands of years. It has both a fixed and flexible nature. God has added the human mechanism to the Torah, so that it can be adapted and continue to be relevant and guide life.

The Torah is not in heaven, it is here on earth, given to human beings, and God Himself entrusted authority to human beings by means of the government.

Yeshua went so far as to teach us the meaning of this authority and said Peter:

“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” – Matthew 16:19 [NIV]

In other verses :

“Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” – Matthew 18:18 [NIV]

I think that this authority was given to every head of a community, each one has great authority. Yet such power comes with a price; the punishment for a teacher is in proportion to his responsibility. This can be seen in a teaching from James:

“Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.” – James 3:1 [NIV]

These verses give us responsibility and authority. The main emphasis in this verse is balance. On the one hand, it is our duty to understand the spirit of God's Word, to teach it, internalize it, and to live by it.

On the other hand, it points out that we should not get caught up in religious legalism. In which religion, beliefs, and Torah are becoming more important than the people around us.

The Human Element in the Torah

Why did God put the human element into the Torah? A Torah that is complete and finished, that does not require the study and reasoning of human beings, would leave us out of the picture.

The human element, the changing variable, is the component that God chose in order to maintain the relevance of the Torah and the commandments for generations to come.

The challenges we face today are very large. Each generation has its own difficulties, advantages, and disadvantages.

However, in our generation, the entire institution of the family is at risk. People are becoming more and more individualistic, each one living in his or her own bubble.

The Importance of the Next Generation

The biggest challenges and something that I find to be of utmost importance, is teaching the children and youth, the development of the next generation. For the next generation is our future, it is the direct continuation of our lives and our work.

In recent times, there has been an awakening in the world regarding the education of youth and children. It needs to be one of the burning issues today, because there can be no continuity of values, culture, or faith without the education of the youth.

I believe that the education of the next generation is a top priority in the Bible. In fact, most of the holidays are meant to teach the children about God, Yeshua the Messiah, redemption, the Torah, and about doing the work of God.

I pray that God will give us the power and the wisdom to find the right balance in the commandments of the Torah between man and God, and between man and his fellow man.

**The Teachings of
Messiah Yeshua
*in a Jewish Context***

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