

I Parashah Overview

This week's double Torah portion B'Har/B'Chukkotai wraps up Leviticus by addressing treatment of the poor and indentured, respect for the earth, and reward and punishment. Perhaps its most famous Verse 25:10 "You shall proclaim release throughout the land for all its inhabitants" is paraphrased in an inscription on the Liberty Bell.

The portion promises that only good will come to those who follow God's commandments while horrific punishments will befall sinners and their families.

V3,4: If you follow My laws and faithfully observe My commandments, I will grant your rains in their season, so that the earth shall yield its produce and the trees of the field of their fruit. V6 I will grant peace in the land, and you shall lie down untroubled by anyone...

However, V15 warns that "if you reject My laws and spurn My rules, so that you do not observe all My commandments and you break My covenant, I in turn will do this to you: I will wreak misery upon you...I will go on to discipline you sevenfold for your sins.."

But of course we know that bad things happen to good people and visa versa. Perhaps we need to look beyond the literal in our interpretation.

Cantor Sarah Sager suggests that this portion is not really about reward and punishment but rather about the moral order to the universe. In her view, "the physical and ethical dimensions of God's Creation are wholly dependent upon each other", and "uniting heaven and earth and heart, mind, and soul is what we must strive for." She refers to 16th Century Kabbalist Isaac Luria and his "dream that collective human effort can mend a broken world."

II Strangers and Slaves

So how do we unite heaven, earth, heart, mind and soul? To start, the portion tells us we need to treat strangers and slaves with kindness and dignity. As May is Mental Health Awareness month, for my discussion I'm going to use "slave" and "stranger" as metaphors for those bound by the invisible chains of mental illness, as a mentally estranged person in emotional and psychological turmoil often feels isolated and alone even when surrounded by others.

I came to understand the pain and loneliness of mental health struggles as my siblings one by one suffered from crises related to depression, anxiety, and substance abuse. I brought my younger brother into our home when he was consumed by feelings of worthlessness, feeling that he did not deserve to be alive. We took in my older brother as he confronted severe depression during recovery from years of substance abuse. Depression so severe he lacked motivation to eat or take medications prescribed to help him. I worked with my sister's therapist and social worker as she was unable to rationally address her own needs. Each of them in so much pain. Each of them enslaved by their oppressive states of mind. V35 instructs "If your kinsman, being in straits, comes under your authority, and you hold him as though a resident alien, let him live by your side:" The reference here is to financial straits and slavery, but its application extends to the shackles of illness as well.

III Mental Health

One of the hallmarks of mental illness is its impact on one's ability to form and maintain relationships. A person struggling to accept themselves may find it impossible to fathom that others will accept them. Our congregant psychiatrist Dr. David Aftergood explains that often "they expect rejection and believe they deserve it." Thus they become further isolated, living in their own dystopian world. Dr. Aftergood told me

“Treating them as fellow human beings with the same divine core as any other, albeit buried and inaccessible by illness, is a beautiful act of godliness”.

Maimonides addressed the link between body and soul writing:
(Maimonides, *On the Regimen of Health* Author: [Gerrit Bos](#) 2019)

“... for someone who is overcome by anxiety, constant worry, or fear of something that he normally would not be afraid of, or by a lack of joy of something that he normally would enjoy. ... the skillful physician should not let anything precede the rectification of the state of their soul by the removal of these passions. “ He acknowledged that we can’t repair the body without repairing the mind.

III Dignity

Treating sufferers of mental illness with dignity is the first step towards mending their broken world. 26:13 “I the Lord am your God who brought you out from the land of the Egyptians to be their slaves no more, who broke the bars of your yolk and made you walk erect.”

Treating people with dignity is how we help them walk erect. We must remove the stigma, the sense of shame that often accompanies depression, anxiety, personality disorders, and schizophrenia. Rather than viewing these as character defects, we must acknowledge them as illnesses beyond one’s control just like cells running amok in cancer or a pancreas unable to manufacture insulin in T1 diabetes.

Overcoming mental health challenges is hard.

In a recent essay published in the NYT, science writer Benedict Carey noted that despite an enormous body of research addressing mental health issues, the lives of those living with mental distress have only marginally improved. He cites Dr. Thomas Insel, former director of the National Institute of Mental Health and author of “Recovery: Healing

the Crisis of Care in American Mental Health,” who wrote: “The scientific progress in our field was stunning, but while we studied the risk factors for suicide, the death rate had climbed 33 percent. While we identified the neuroanatomy of addiction, overdose deaths had increased by threefold. While we mapped the genes for schizophrenia, people with this disease were still chronically unemployed and dying 20 years early.” (*Science Plays the Long Game. But People Have Mental Health Issues Now.* 4/1/21)

Opening Up

We can't always save people. It's important that we accept this. My siblings are gone now, directly and indirectly a consequence of their mental health challenges. I like to think that at least they knew they were loved, cared for, and that their lives mattered to me, but I understand that one of the horrific characteristics of mental illness is often an inability to believe this.

BAS is a strong community, strong enough to withstand fires and plagues (pandemics). We come together weekly for zoom services, continue to celebrate life events and provide support for those in mourning. To me the message of B'Har B'Chukkotai is ultimately about the strength of our relationships and communities, about how mitzvot and ritual help nurture our relationships and keep one another erect.

Fred Rogers, who not only hosted an iconic TV show but was also an ordained minister, said: “Anything that's human is mentionable, and anything that is mentionable can be more manageable. When we can talk about our feelings, they become less overwhelming, less upsetting, and less scary.”

Maybe he got this from the Gemarra! A verse in Proverbs (12:25) reads: **“If there is worry in a man's heart, let him quash it [yashhena]”**.

The Gemarra tells of the dispute between 2 rabbis over the verse's meaning. **One said: He should forcefully push it [*yashena*] out of his mind.** One who worries should banish his concerns from his thoughts. **And one said:** It means **he should tell [*yeshena*] others his** concerns, which will lower his anxiety. Mr. Rogers would concur with this 2nd interpretation.

People all around us are suffering from depression, anxiety, loneliness, and other mental health concerns, especially during these difficult times of COVID and social and political unrest. During Mental Health Awareness Month and beyond, we need to commit to increasing access to treatment and ensuring that those who struggle know that they are not alone.

The Haftorah ends with "Heal us."

In his drash on an earlier portion of Leviticus, Rabbi Bronstein spoke of the need to believe that we are not broken, bad, and unworthy. He encouraged us to help others find their way to feeling whole.

I'll repeat Dr. Aftergood's powerful words: "Treating them as fellow human beings with the same divine core as any other, albeit buried and inaccessible by illness, is a beautiful act of godliness".

Be there. Hold out your hands. Listen without judging. This is how we create moral order to our universe.

Shabbat shalom.