

INSIGHTS

Into The Weekly Parsha

MAY 25, 2019

This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of
Moshe Shlomo Ben Tzvi. "May his Neshama have an Aliya!"

VOLUME 9, ISSUE 28

20 IYAR

Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

PARSHAS BEHAR

Learning for Life

Therefore you shall fulfill my statutes, and keep my judgments, and do them; and you shall dwell securely in the land (25:18).

This week's *parsha* delves into great detail regarding the laws of the *shemittah* sabbatical year. Rashi (25:18) notes that the punishment for not observing *shemittah* is expulsion from the land of Israel. Rashi goes on to say that the years of the Babylonian exile were a quid pro quo punishment for the seventy *shemittah* years that Bnei Yisroel did not keep upon entering the land of Israel (in next week's *parsha* on verse 26:35 Rashi gives the exact calculation for the 70 years that Bnei Yisroel violated).

One must wonder what is it about *shemittah* that Bnei Yisroel found so difficult to observe? Perhaps they didn't have that Hashem would provide for them if they didn't work their fields? After all, what were they to do if they didn't have food to sustain themselves and their families during the *shemittah* year (not to mention the following year as well, before the new crops of the eighth year arrived)?

While it is tempting to hypothesize that the reason was that a farmer relying on a yearly crop to survive may not be easily abandon planting his crops for lack of proper trust in Hashem, it is ultimately untenable.

The Torah (25:20) deals with this issue directly: "And if you shall say, 'What shall we eat the seventh year? Behold we shall not plant nor gather in our produce?' Then I will command my blessing upon you in the sixth year, and it shall bring forth fruit for three years."

Rashi (ad loc) explains that Hashem promises to provide for them. Hashem

guarantees Bnei Yisroel that the sixth year harvest would provide sustenance for them until the harvest of the eighth year. In other words, Hashem paid Bnei Yisroel three years of sustenance **upfront** and still they failed to observe the *shemittah*! This is simply incomprehensible. If they had the food that they needed already in storage after the sixth year, what possible reason could there be for not observing *shemittah*?

In fact, the question is really much more difficult. Once Bnei Yisroel were paid upfront to not work the *shemittah* year, how did they have the temerity to accept this payment and then violate the *shemittah* by working the field anyway? It seems like a terrible flaw of avarice. What compelled them to work the land?

Furthermore, in the beginning of the rebuke of the *tochacha* in next week's *parsha*, Rashi (26:15) points out that all of those terrible outcomes that ultimately led to Bnei Yisroel's expulsion from the land of Israel was due to the fact that they didn't labor in their Torah study. If the Torah already explicitly says that they were expelled from the land for not keeping *shemittah*, what does Rashi mean by saying it was because they didn't labor in the study of Torah?

We find a *possuk* (*Iyov* 5:7) that describes the very essence of man: "Man was born to labor..." According to Rashi (ad loc) the context of this verse is the challenge mankind faces in contradistinction to angels who don't sin. That is to say that while angels do not sin they also do not have potential for personal growth. On the



other hand, man is given the potential to achieve but this also enables him to falter and sin.

Thus, the very essence of man is driven by a desire to accomplish, which therefore defines much of his existence. In fact, many men who retire from work and choose to lead a purposeless life (aside from driving their wives crazy) begin to emotionally and physically deteriorate quite rapidly – often leading to an earlier demise.

This drive to achieve is why Bnei Yisroel weren't able to observe the *shemittah*; they simply felt horrible about being inactive and having nothing to do. They chose to violate the *mitzvah* of *shemittah* because without work and labor, without a purpose, they felt that they risked their mental and physical well-being. This wasn't about earning more money, it was about self-preservation.

This is why the Torah mandates that during the *shemittah* year men are supposed to labor in the learning of Torah and *mitzvos*. We are enjoined to immerse ourselves in growing in Torah – for when we study Torah with real effort and diligence, we begin to understand ourselves and the world around us. We continue to grow as people and lead an ever more purposeful life. This is, after all, the reason that Hashem gifted us the Torah; to enable us to lead the most incredible life that He has planned for each and every one of us.

Family Interest

And if your brother has become poor, and his means begin to falter; then you shall strengthen him... You shall not lend him your money for interest... (25:35-37)

This week's *parsha* contains the prohibition of lending money with interest to another Jew. Though it is prohibited to charge interest or pay interest to another Jew, the Torah makes it very clear that this only applies to Bnei Yisroel; it is permissible to lend money to non-Jews and charge them interest.

In fact, Maimonides (*Yad – Malveh Veloveh* 5:1) rules that it is a positive commandment to charge non-Jews interest. This dichotomy in lending practices has often been used as a pretext to attack Jews all over the world during the last two millennia.

In truth, the laws against charging interest and paying interest require a deeper understanding. As an example: Reuven needs money to pay for his daughter's wedding, and he happens to know that his friend Shimon has a lot of money sitting in the bank earning 2% interest. Reuven wants to borrow some of that money but he feels very uncomfortable asking Shimon, especially knowing that Shimon would be losing that 2% interest that the bank is paying him.

Reuven also realizes that he is already asking Shimon for a big favor because he knows that Shimon is taking a bigger financial risk by withdrawing it from the bank and lending it to him. Moreover, by Shimon lending Reuven the money and thereby losing his 2% earned interest, Reuven now feels like a charity case.

In reality, Reuven would MUCH prefer to pay interest so that he isn't uncomfortable asking Shimon for the loan and isn't made to feel like he is

receiving charity; so why should Reuven not be allowed to pay interest?

Obviously, the Torah is teaching us that paying interest between two Jews simply isn't appropriate. Why not?

Let's say that a person's mother needed money. Would a healthy person charge their own mother interest? Or their son, or brother? Of course not. Functional families are devoted to each other even at a cost. Moreover, a son asking his parents for a loan doesn't feel like he is receiving charity by not paying interest.

The Torah is teaching us that the reason you aren't allowed to charge interest isn't because one should not take advantage of another; the reason is because one Jew is obligated to treat another as family. This is why the Torah characterizes the borrower as family, "You shall not lend upon interest to your brother; [...] to a stranger you may lend upon interest; but to your brother you shall not lend upon interest..." (*Shemos* 23:20-21).

This also explains why it is not only okay to

charge non-Jews interest but actually a *mitzvah* to do so. We need to internalize that they aren't our family. Obviously, we shouldn't charge exorbitant interest, just something reasonable that they are happy to accept. Non-Jews understand that they aren't family and they, in fact, are more comfortable asking for a loan and paying interest because otherwise it would be like receiving charity.

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