

## Heather's Bat Mitzvah D'var Torah — May 17, 2008

My Torah portion is called Behar; it is in the book of Leviticus. In this portion Moses is told by God on Mt. Sinai to inform the Israelites about the Sabbatical year and the Jubilee year.

The Sabbatical year comes every 7 years. We are told: on the 7th year you must let your land rest.

The Jubilee year is every 50 years. In the Jubilee year, we are told you must free your slaves and forgive all debts.

One thing I noticed about this Torah portion is that all the lessons are very clear. Usually we speak about wrestling with the Torah, meaning we are spending time trying to figure out what it means, and sometimes why it is written. But in this portion, not only are the lessons clear, they make sense. For example: Rest the land, free slaves and erase debts. This is clear to me because it is so straight-forward, and letting your land rest and freeing slaves make sense because that's the right thing to do and it helps you and other people.

So my question is, if the lessons of my Torah portion are so clear and make sense, then why don't we follow them?

Well, I learned that the Sabbatical year and the Jubilee year haven't actually been followed since the times of the First Temple, 2,500 years ago.

But everything in the Torah is written so it will have a timeless meaning. So my next question is, how can we keep the spirit and vision of a Sabbatical year and Jubilee year alive in our own time, in our own generation?

First let me explain how the rabbis understood the reasons for a Sabbatical and a Jubilee year when they were observed.

The rabbis explain that the reason for the Sabbatical year was much more than just about the land. Yes, the land needed to rest and restore, but from the Sabbatical year we learn that it's a time to study Torah and be with your family and friends. Basically it's a time to relax and connect with your inner-self.

Also, the Sabbatical year allowed for a time of renewal and rebalancing of a society.

In the Torah it is written that during a Sabbatical year we are not suppose to harvest new crops, but what grows on its own while the land is resting may be eaten.

Every seven years a society would become rebalanced because everyone would have to go out and pick from what the land had produced, like everyone else.

Let's say there are two families and one is wealthier than the other. In biblical times wealth was often determined by the amount of crops they grew.

Well, once it comes to the Sabbatical year everyone was back at the beginning and on the same level because no one would grow any crops.

One of the lessons I've been thinking about because of this Torah portion is from the commandment to let your land rest. It can apply to us today. Say you are a big business worker, and all you do is work, work, work. You should give yourself a break to rest. And that way you

can regain your health, and perspective on life. Just like how when you rest your land, you allow the time needed for the land to regain its nutrients and health.

When I was reading about the Sabbatical year, I was curious about how the farmers and workers had food, and what did they do for a year without their farming work?

I learned that on the sixth year God would bless the people with enough food for three more years from that harvest than on an ordinary year would produce for one year.

The reason the sixth year needed to produce a harvest for three years was so there would be food for that year, and then also the Sabbatical year when no work in the field was done, and then also in the year that followed the Sabbatical year, since they didn't plant new crops during the Sabbatical year.

So letting the land rest and restore its nutrients was also doing the same thing for individuals and society during a Sabbatical year.

Another message I got out of this portion is that the land is not ours; we are here on it as guests. In the Torah it says, the land belongs to God. Some people think its from no one, and others, like in this Native American proverb: "We do not inherit the land from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children." They believe it's from their children. No matter who or what you think the land is from, it's not ours to abuse and act irresponsibly.

When you are taking care of something that is yours you may not take as much caution as you would if it is something that isn't yours.

For example: Let's say you had a dog and it ran out the door. You might say, "oh he'll come back" but if a dog you were taking care of runs away then you would start sprinting after it.

When something is not our own we often pay more attention because we have been left in charge of it. I think we need to start doing the same thing for the land.

This Torah portion is also about The Jubilee year. The Jubilee year is the first year that follows 7 cycles of Sabbatical years.

During the Jubilee year, we are told to free slaves and forgive all debts.

The rabbis explain that the reason for the Jubilee year was much more than just about freeing slaves and forgiving debts.

During a Jubilee year the lender had to trust that the borrower would keep trying to work hard and grow his crops and not just say, "oh the Jubilee year is coming up I don't even have to try because next year the debt will be erased."

And the borrower had to trust the lender wouldn't stop lending to him what he needed and say, "Next year is the Jubilee year, I should just stop lending to you because next year your debt will be erased."

My point is that the Jubilee year isn't just about forgiving debts and freeing slaves; it's also about trust in one another.

One of the lessons I learned from the commandment to free debts, is when you do this, you stop a bad cycle. Because if debt continued for that person or that family it could keep that person impoverished. This can apply to individuals as well as nations.

For example, if you were a poor person you most likely wouldn't get a good education, and then not a good job. Once you have a family the same thing might happen to them, and this cycle is likely to continue.

This can happen to nations too. If a poor nation is spending all its money on paying off debt to other countries, then it doesn't have the money for the important things the people of the country need, like clean water and medicine.

However, if you forgive the debt of a person or nation, that gives the opportunity for a new and clean start, a new and better cycle.

Additionally, there is a very specific lesson about tzedakah in this Torah portion. The verses of the Torah that I read today include the commandment: we must "support" our brother when he falls into poverty. The rabbis explain that this means that you have to help him enough that he could support himself.

For example, If there was a man that was poor instead of just giving him some money and sending him away you should try to get him a job or a home.

Maimonides, the great twelfth-century philosopher and expert in Jewish law, thought a great deal about the mitzvah of caring for the poor, and how it could best be carried out. He was very concerned that we help others in a way that would not embarrass them or give us a chance to show off. Maimonides divided "acts of giving" into eight levels. The highest level, according to Maimonides is: "Helping a person to Help Himself." According to the rabbis, *this* is what is meant by "supporting" our fellow person when they fall into poverty.

Tzedakah is not just about helping the poor, but about helping people to not become poor. It's harder to get someone out of poverty than to keep them from going into poverty.

Rabbi David Rosen uses this Midrash to illustrate this commandment:

*When walking along with a load on a donkey, as long as he is standing up it's easy to grab him and steady him so that he remains upright. But once he falls, five people do not have the strength to raise him up again.*

I also think the work done with the Real Change newspaper is an example that illustrates helping our fellow person to help support himself.

The Real Change newspaper was started by people who wanted to make a difference for homeless and poor people. If you are homeless it is hard to get a job. But you can sell the Real Change newspaper and make some money and work to get out of poverty.

So instead of just asking for money they are actually selling something. Not only that, it is a good newspaper and has good articles.

When homeless and poor people work for Real Change they have an opportunity to change the bad cycle they are in to a better cycle.

Something this Torah portion and the whole experience of studying and preparing for my Bat Mitzvah has taught me is that any one person can make something good, or bad. It's your decision. And it can start with a small step. Hopefully that step will be in the right direction.

There are many people who start cycles, social activists. For example, Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi. However, it's not only famous people. It can be anyone.

Since I've been studying this Torah portion I started to become aware of examples of people beginning good cycles. While I was studying and writing this D'var Torah there was a story in the news about a man in a coffee line and he honked his horn at the person in front of him. The person in the car in front of him, instead of getting angry, he paid for the man's coffee. When that man got to the window he then paid for the coffee for the car behind him. And this went on for a while. This person began a good cycle, he made a good choice. When he got honked at, he bought a coffee— setting a good cycle in motion. We can all make good choices everyday, and maybe start a good cycle in motion.

I've been thinking about what else we can be doing to keep the vision and spirit of the Sabbatical and Jubilee year alive in our own generation.

Well, I think we can't just sit and wish for it to happen. Nothing will get done if we don't get up and do it ourselves.

You might remember earlier in the service we read from the Amidah prayer section, a Blessing for Peace. In this blessing it says that you cannot merely hope.

I think this is a good message that people need to start doing things, not just wishing. Because this is the only way the world is going to become a better place, when we all get involved.

Not long ago our family and our friends worked to change a cycle. We went to Guatemala and there we noticed that the children we saw everyday at the school had horrible dental care. So we decided to raise money for just that.

From this experience I learned that it feels good to help people and that it doesn't have to be the whole world because you have to start somewhere.

Maybe we can't celebrate a Sabbatical year and turn off all our factories for a year, and engage in a year of study and relationship building, but we can keep the message alive. And focus on how to make it happen. We can all be a part of keeping the vision of a Sabbatical and Jubilee year alive by just taking small actions.

I would like to thank my family for supporting me through this whole Bat Mitzvah experience. I also want to thank all of my friends and relatives from out of town. I really appreciate you coming all the way from Ethiopia, Ireland, New Jersey, Montana, and Oregon.

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Thank you all.

Shabbat Shalom