**S.A.L.T. – PARASHOT BEHAR – BECHUKOTAI**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

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**This week's SALT shiurim are dedicated in memory of**  
**David Moshe ben Harav Yehuda Leib Silverberg z"l,  
whose yahrzeit is Tuesday 18 Iyar, May 12**.

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Motzaei Shabbat

Following the Torah’s discussion in Parashat Behar of the laws of the *yovel* (jubilee year), it proceeds to instruct how these laws affect sales of property, in light of the fact that property returns to its original owner with the onset of the *yovel*. The Torah warns, “*Al tonu ish et achiv*” (literally, “Do not wrong one another” – 25:14), which our tradition interprets as introducing the prohibition of *ona’a* – unfair pricing in commercial transactions. The immediate context is the sale of property, which must take into account the transacted property’s eventual return at *yovel*, requiring the parties to set the price in accordance with the number of years remaining until *yovel*, which is the number of years of benefit the buyer will receive from the property. More generally, the Torah here warns against misleading the other party by selling merchandise for an unreasonably high price, or buying merchandise for an unreasonably low price.

The Torah appears to reiterate this command several verses later (25:17), commanding once again, “*Ve-lo tonu ish et amito*” (“You shall not wrong your fellow”). However, *Chazal* understood this command as referring not to the prohibition of unfair pricing, but rather to the prohibition of *ona’at devarim* – hurtful speech. The Torah here forbids intentionally insulting or upsetting people with words, and the Gemara in Masekhet Bava Metzia (58-59) gives several different examples of this prohibition.

Rav Shlomo of Radomsk, in his *Tiferet Shlomo*, makes a comment about this prohibition of *ona’at devarim* which perhaps sheds light on its connection to *ona’at mamon* – unfair pricing in the marketplace. He writes that one violates the command of *ona’at devarim* not only by offending one’s fellow, but also by projecting a misleading image of himself. If one portrays himself as more pious than he truly is, thereby deceiving his fellow into treating him with greater respect than he actually deserves, then this, too, qualifies as a form of “*ona’at devarim*.”

Merchants seek to earn money by selling their wares, and in their quest to increase their profits, they might be tempted to misrepresent their merchandise, to make it appear more valuable than it really is. The *Tiferet Shlomo* observes that in a broader sense, we are all “merchants” seeking to earn people’s respect, admiration and friendship. And in this ongoing quest, we are prone to making the same mistake as the unscrupulous merchant, misrepresenting our “wares,” our characters and achievements. It is tempting to project a deceptively impressive image in order to “raise the price,” to increase people’s esteem for us. The *Tiferet Shlomo* warns that such deception is unfair and inappropriate. Just as it is wrong to deceive people into investing in tangible merchandise more than its real value, so it is wrong to deceive people into making an unwise emotional investment. If we desire people’s respect and friendship, we must be prepared to earn it honestly and fairly by being people who truly deserve it, rather than simply trying to appear as people who deserve it. The prohibition of *ona’at devarim*, according to this chassidic teaching, warns against deceptively “selling” our personalities and qualities, and demands that we avoid projecting a false image of ourselves in our quest for admiration and social acceptance.

Sunday

The opening verses of Parashat Bechukotai present the rewards which God promises to bestow upon *Benei Yisrael* in reward for their compliance with His laws. God first promises copious amounts of rainfall which will result in an abundance of food, and He then pronounces, “I shall grant peace in the land” (26:6).

Rashi, citing *Torat Kohanim*, explains, “Lest you say: Here there is food and drink, but if there is not peace, then there is nothing! It therefore says after all this: I shall grant peace in the land.” The promise of peace was emphasized, *Chazal* comment, despite our having already been promised material prosperity, because even abundant food and drink is “nothing” without peace.

It is likely that *Torat Kohanim* made this comment not simply to explain the progression of the verses here in Parashat Bechukotai, but rather to shape our perspective on the importance of peaceful relations among people. *Chazal* sought to remind us that material success offers us very little – or perhaps even “nothing” – if it is achieved without, or at the expense of, peace. Too often, people sacrifice relationships for the sake of material gain, preferring to instigate or prolong conflict in the pursuit of their financial aspirations. *Chazal* here teach us that to the contrary, “food” and “drink” are “nothing” without peace. If we have to choose between material comfort and peace, we should choose peace, because in the final cost-benefit analysis, conflict and tension with other people is not a reasonable price to pray for financial success.

Rav Menachem Bentzion Sacks, in his *Menachem Tziyon*, discusses in the context of Rashi’s comments to this verse the common custom to bow to the right and to the left upon completing the *Shemona Esrei* and *kaddish* prayers. We bow as we plead, “Maker of peace in His high places – may He bestow peace upon us and upon all Israel, *amen*.” It is conventionally understood that we bow out of respect to God as we complete the prayer. Rav Sacks, however, added a different possibility, suggesting that our bows express the understanding that we must sometimes “bow” and veer to the “sides” for the sake of peace. As we beseech God to grant peace upon our nation, we must realize that the blessing of peace depends also on us. In order to be blessed with peace, we need to be prepared to “bow,” to humbly relent, and to veer away from the course which we had charted. We cannot pray for peace as long as we refuse to “bow” and refuse to yield. We cannot pray for peace as long as we insist on moving straight ahead, doing everything we decided we want to do, without occasionally moving to the side, changing our plans and our decisions out of consideration of other people’s needs and wishes.

This willingness to yield originates from the realization that “if there is not peace, then there is nothing,” that what we gain from strife and conflict is less valuable than the priceless blessing of peace and harmony among people. *Chazal* here implore us to make peaceful relations with people a higher priority than material prosperity, and to always remember that wealth has little value when we are embroiled in conflict.

Monday

Towards the end of Parashat Bechukotai, the Torah discusses the laws of *arakhin* – a particular type of pledge that a person could make, vowing to give to the Temple treasury the “value” of a given individual. If a person makes such a pledge, pronouncing that he will donate the “value” of a certain individual whom he names, then he is obligated to give the sum stipulated by the Torah here for that individual’s gender and age group. These amounts likely stem from the relative amounts for which people of different genders and age groups would have been sold as servants.

The Midrash (*Vayikra Rabba* 37:2) traces the concept of *arakhin* back to the period of *Benei Yisrael*’s enslavement in Egypt, specifically, to the time when Moshe, who was raised in Pharaoh’s palace, left the palace to observe the plight of his oppressed brethren. The Torah tells in Sefer Shemot (2:11) that Moshe went out to see *Benei Yisrael*’s suffering, and the Midrash adds that Moshe not only observed their hardship, but also tried to help them. He saw how the Egyptians had assigned to members of *Benei Yisrael* jobs which were not appropriate for them, as heavy loads appropriate for strong men were placed upon women, and loads appropriate for young men were placed upon the backs of older men. Moshe intervened by rearranging the different loads so that each slave was carrying a burden appropriate for him or her. The Midrash relates that God then announced to Moshe, “You arranged My children’s burdens for them – by your life, you will in the future sit and explain to My children their vows, [the differences] between a man and a woman, between an adult and a child, between a young person and an elderly person.” Just as Moshe distinguished between different groups of people to ensure that each received appropriate work responsibilities, the Torah similarly distinguished between different groups of people with respect to *arakhin* pledges.

By connecting the laws of *arakhin* to Moshe’s compassionate assistance to the slaves in Egypt, the Midrash perhaps reveals us to the underlying moral message of the institution of *arakhin* – namely, that different kinds of people have different sets of skills and capabilities. The assigning of different “values” to different groups of people most definitely does not imply that some are “worth” more than others. Rather, as the Midrash teaches by linking this section of laws to Moshe’s efforts in Egypt, this system expresses the fact that different types of people have different kinds of abilities, and so they must not be given the same “burdens.” The institution of *arakhin* teaches that our expectations of other people must be determined based on each individual’s abilities, and we must avoid expecting more than those abilities. It tells us to acknowledge that people’s different strengths and weaknesses make them better suited for certain tasks than others, and to respect these differences. And it urges us to learn from Moshe’s example to ensure not to impose unreasonable burdens of expectation, and to instead demand from other people no more than can reasonably be expected based on their nature and circumstances.

Tuesday

Yesterday, we noted the comment of the Midrash (*Vayikra Rabba* 37:2) associating the final section of Sefer Vayikra with Moshe’s efforts to assist *Benei Yisrael* as they worked as slaves in Egypt. The final section of Sefer Vayikra deals with “*arakhin*” – a type of pledge to the Temple treasury whereby one commits to donate the “value” of a certain individual, and the Torah here assigns different amounts for different groups of people, based on age and gender. The Midrash traces this concept back to the time when Moshe left Pharaoh’s palace, where he was raised, to observe *Benei Yisrael*’s torment as slaves. Seeing that the Egyptians had forced older people to perform work suitable for young people, and women to perform work suitable for men, and vice versa, Moshe rearranged the work assignments, so that the people performed the types of labor for which they were better suited. In reward for these efforts to ease the people’s hardship, the Midrash teaches, God presented the *mitzva* of *arakhin* – whereby different value amounts are associated with different kinds of people, just as Moshe recognized that different people were suited for different types of labor.

To explain the meaning behind this connection, the *Imrei Emet* (Rav Avraham Mordechai Alter of Ger) suggested that the section of *arakhin* is presented here, in Parashat Bechukotai, to affirm the value and worth of each and every person. This section is presented following the *tokhecha* – the detailed description of the calamities which God threatens to bring upon *Benei Yisrael* should they violate the covenant. The *Imrei Emet* proposed that the section of the *tokhecha* is followed by the laws of *arakhin* to remind us that even when God sees fit to punish His nation, we must acknowledge the great worth of each and every one of us. Even when we fail and are deserving of punishment, we are each valuable and precious. And herein, the *Imrei Emet* explains, lies the connection to the story of Moshe assisting *Benei Yisrael* in Egypt. His intervention symbolizes the message of *arakhin* – that even in the darkness of suffering, we must recognize every person’s value and worth. Even when God punishes, He still cherishes His beloved nation. This perspective is underscored by Moshe’s efforts to assist the people during their period of bondage, showing that they were worthy of compassion even as God subjected them to suffering.

The *Imrei Emet*’s comments bring to mind the Gemara’s famous account in Masekhet Bava Batra (10a) of Rabbi Akiva’s exchange with the Roman governor Turnus Rufus on the subject of charity. Turnus Rufus posed a theological challenge to the virtue of charity to the poor, wondering why God would want people to feed somebody whom He had condemned to poverty. If a king’s servant committed a crime for which he was jailed, and the king gave strict orders that the inmate may not be fed, then certainly, Turnus Rufus argued, nobody would dare violate the order and feed the convict. Why, then, does the Torah require us to feed those whom God has sentenced to hunger?

Rabbi Akiva replied that the situation is different if the prisoner is the king’s own son. If the prince angered the king, and the king sentenced the prince to jail and ordered his subjects not to feed him, the king would nevertheless be overjoyed if his edict is violated and his son is fed. Rabbi Akiva told Turnus Rufus that as God considers *Benei Yisrael* His beloved children, He wants us to feed and care for even those whom He has, for reasons we do not know, condemned to deprivation.

God’s warnings in the *tokhecha* are exceedingly harsh, and He goes so far as to proclaim, “*ve-ga’ala nafshi etkhem*” – “I shall be revolted by you” (26:30). The *Imrei Emet*’s insight suggests that we qualify even this drastic pronouncement, and remember that we are cherished by God even when He deals with us harshly. Under all circumstances, each member of our nation is the King’s prince, and not simply His servant, whom He continues to love and care for, and whom He wants us to continue loving and caring for, as well.

Wednesday

The Torah in Parashat Behar introduces a number of commands relevant to those who have fallen into dire financial straits, forcing them to sell their property or themselves as servants. These laws are presented as part of the Torah’s discussion of the *yovel* year, when all servants are freed and sold property is returned to its original owner. However, before discussing situations of people forced to sell property or become servants, the Torah first speaks of a less extreme situation – a person who requires a loan (25:35). The Torah commands us to support such a person by lending him money, and it forbids charging interest (25:36-7).

*Tosafot*, in two places (Sota 5a; Bava Metzia 70b), cite a startling Midrashic passage stating that those who lend money on interest will be excluded from the future resurrection. This prohibition is uniquely severe in that violators are denied the chance to return to life when the dead are resurrected.

The association drawn by the Midrash between lending on interest and the resurrection likely stems from the verse here in Parashat Behar, where the Torah warns against charging interest and then adds, “*ve-chei achikha imakh*” – “so that your brother may **live with you**” (25:36). Those who are capable of lending are required to extend interest-free loans to the poor in order to allow the needy the opportunity to “resurrect” themselves,” to regain their financial footing. Charging interest on a loan to a fellow in need lowers his chance of recovery, as he is constantly falling deeper and deeper in debt because of the interest costs. In effect, then, charging interest keeps the individual “dead,” denying him the possibility of “resurrection,” and thus the Midrash warns that lenders who charge interest are punished by being denied the restoration of their lives at the end of time.

Developing this point one step further, the belief in the future resurrection represents the broader belief in God’s ability to reverse any condition, to restore “life” even to those who have “perished,” who have fallen into seemingly irreversible hardship. Our belief in *techiyat ha-meitim* (the future resurrection of the dead) affects us not only in our anticipation of the actual resurrection, but also in day-to-day life, assuring us of God’s unlimited power to reverse any situation. This doctrine is a source of hope and optimism in times of adversity, as we recognize that just as God will one day restore life to the dead, He can restore joy even now to those beset by any kind of trouble or crisis.

The Torah obligates us to follow God’s example by assisting those who have fallen into hardship such that “*chei achikha imakh*” – their “life” and vitality is restored. We must do what we can to help reverse the fortunes of those who struggle, and lend them the assistance they need to recover and rebuild their lives.

This might explain the deeper connection between the prohibition of charging interest and the laws of *yovel*. The institution of *yovel* assures that the drastic measures undertaken in response to financial hardship will be temporary. It guarantees the restoration of one’s property or freedom which had been sold in a desperate attempt to survive, thereby guaranteeing all people the opportunity to recover and rebuild after an otherwise permanent collapse. In this context, the Torah adds the prohibition against charging interest, which helps ensure that we allow our fellow in need the opportunity to “resurrect” himself after falling into financial straits and experience his own process of “*techiyat ha-meitim*.”

Thursday

The *tokhecha* section of Parashat Bechukotai presents God’s warnings of the calamities He threatens to bring upon *Benei Yisrael* should they disobey His commands. These warnings include, “*Va-hashimoti et mikdesheikhem*” – “I shall make your Sanctuary desolate” (26:32).

This verse is an important source relevant to discussion among the *poskim* concerning the halakhic possibility of offering sacrifices at the site of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, even in the *Mikdash*’s state of destruction. The Mishna in Masekhet Eduyot (8:6) brings a tradition that “*makrivin af al pi she-ein bayit*” – sacrifices may be offered at the site of the Temple even without a Temple. The Rambam famously adopts this view in *Hilkhot Beit Ha-bechira* (6:15), and he explains (6:16) that the halakhic sanctity of the site of the Temple depends not on the presence of the structure, but rather on the presence of the *Shekhina* (divine presence), which, the Rambam writes, never left the site. As a source for this position, the Rambam cites the aforementioned verse, noting *Chazal*’s observation that the verse refers to the *Mikdash* as such – “*mikdesheikhem*” – even in foreseeing its desolation. That is to say, even after its destruction, the site remains “*mikdesheikhem*” – a sacred site. As the site’s halakhic sanctity remains intact after the Temple’s destruction, sacrificial offerings are, at least in theory, possible at the site even in the Temple’s absence.

Among the questions raised regarding the Rambam’s position relates to the continuation of the verse, where God proclaims that in the wake of the Temple’s destruction, “*ve-lo ari’ach be-rei’ach nichochakhem*” – “I shall then not smell the pleasing fragrance [of the sacrifices].” Even if the site of the Temple retains its halakhic sanctity after the destruction, the Torah makes it very clear that sacrifices would not be pleasing to God at that point. And the Mishna in Masekhet Zevachim (56b) states explicitly that sacrifices must be offered “*le-sheim rei’ach nichoach*” – with the intention that their “fragrance” should be pleasing to God. Seemingly, if the Torah establishes that God does not “smell” sacrifices after the Temple’s destruction, then this means they should not be offered. Why, then, do the Mishna and the Rambam allow offering sacrifices at the site of the *Beit Ha-mikdash* after the destruction, when the sacrifices are not accepted as “*rei’ach nichoach*”?

Rav Yaakov Ettlinger, in the first responsum in his *Binyan Tziyon*, writes that indeed, the Mishna and the Rambam should not be understood to mean that sacrifices are to be encouraged when there is no *Mikdash*. The conclusion of the verse makes it very clear that our sacrifices would not be welcomed by God after He destroys the Temple. When the Mishna and Rambam rule, “*makrivin af al pi she-ein bayit*,” Rav Ettlinger explains, this means that sacrifices would technically be valid if they are offered without a *Beit Ha-mikdash*, but not that this should actually be done. Rav Ettlinger writes that this is why even those *Tanna’im* who followed this view of “*makrivin af al pi she-ein bayit*” did not offer sacrifices, because this position was not intended prescriptively, to sanction sacrificial offerings in the Temple’s absence.

Instead, as Rav Ettlinger proceeds to explain, this ruling means that sacrifices are theoretically possible – a possibility which yields several practical ramifications. First, if one offered a sacrifice at a site other than the site of the *Mikdash*, he is in violation of the prohibition of *shechutei chutz* (offering sacrifices outside the Temple). This prohibition took effect only once the Temple was built in Jerusalem, at which point it became strictly forbidden to offer sacrifices anywhere else. After the destruction, this prohibition remains in place, because even though we cannot, in practice, offer sacrifices in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, such sacrifices would theoretically be valid, and thus suffices to make it prohibited to offer sacrifices anywhere else.

Secondly, Rav Ettlinger explains that when it becomes possible to rebuild the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, it would then be permissible to offer sacrifices at the site, even before the *Mikdash* is built. God’s warning that He would not look pleasingly upon our sacrifices refers only to the time when He angrily denies us the privilege of a *Beit Ha-mikdash*. But once He gives us this opportunity, our sacrifices are welcome even if we have yet to complete the process of building the Temple.

Additionally, Rav Ettlinger writes, this ruling means that a person who is required to offer a personal sacrifice discharges his duty if he offers a sacrifice even in the Temple’s absence. Although this should not be done, as God warned that He would not look pleasingly upon our sacrifices when the Temple is destroyed, nevertheless, if a sacrifice is offered, it is valid and the individual has fulfilled his requirement.

Friday

Yesterday, we noted God’s warning in Parashat Bechukotai (26:32) that if *Benei Yisrael* disobey His commands, He would destroy the *Beit Ha-mikdash* – “*Va-hashimoti et mikdesheikhem*” – “I shall make your Sanctuary desolate.” The Rambam, in *Hilkhot Beit Ha-bechira* (6:16), cites the Sages’ understanding of this verse as implying that the site of the Temple retains its halakhic sanctity even after the building’s destruction. Therefore, the Rambam writes (based on the Mishna, Eiduyot 8:6), it is halakhically permissible to offer sacrifices at the site, even when there is no *Beit Ha-mikdash*. As we saw, some writers questioned this conclusion based on the continuation of the verse, “*ve-lo ari’ach be-rei’ach nichochakhem*” – “I shall then not smell the pleasing fragrance [of the sacrifices].” God here clearly states that after the Temple’s destruction, He will not accept our sacrifices. How, then, can the Rambam rule that sacrifices may be offered without a *Beit Ha-mikdash*?

Rav Yitzchak Aharon Itinga, in his work of responsa (*Teshuvot Mahari Ha-levi*, 1:88), dismisses this question, stating that God’s decision to accept or reject our sacrifices has no bearing upon the technical, halakhic permissibility of offering them. Rav Yitzchak Aharon noted that not every warning in the *tokhecha* section (the list of curses which God threatens to bring upon the people for their disobedience) materialized, and just because God warned that He would not accept our sacrifices, this does not mean that this would definitely be the case. If the sanctity of the site of the Temple is intact, thus satisfying the halakhic prerequisites for offering sacrifices, then the question of whether God will accept them is immaterial. Rav Yitzchak Aharon borrows in this context the prophet Yeshayahu’s exhortation to King Chizkiyahu (Berakhot 10a) regarding a different matter, “*Be-hadei kavshei de-Rachamana lama lekha*” – “What are you doing probing the Almighty’s secrets?” When or why God chooses to accept our sacrifices – or any other *mitzva* we perform – is not a factor in considering whether or not conditions allow for such observances. (See also *Keli Chemda*, Parashat Ki-Tavo.)

Others, however, accept the question’s premise, and offer different answers. Rav Nachum Weidenfeld, in *Chazon Nachum* (2:42), notes the position of the Ra’avan (50), that according to the view permitting sacrifices without a *Beit Ha-mikdash*, if one erects a private altar on the site of the Temple, the altar would have the status of a *bama* (private altar). A *bama* – which was permitted at certain points in Jewish history – has different halakhic properties than the national altar in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. For example, only personal, voluntary sacrifices may be offered on a *bama*, but not obligatory or communal sacrifices. Possibly, Rav Weidenfeld writes, the warning of “*ve- lo ari’ach be-rei’ach nichochakhem*” pertains only to obligatory sacrifices offered on the national altar, but not to voluntary sacrifices offered on a private altar on the site of the *Mikdash*. Therefore, this warning does not prevent one from offering personal sacrifices on a private altar on the site of the *Beit Ha-mikdash* after its destruction. (Interestingly, Rav Meir Simcha Ha-kohen of Dvinsk, commenting to this verse in his *Meshekh Chokhma*, suggests that to the contrary, this verse implies that God would destroy the Temple and also refuse to accept sacrifices even if they are offered on private altars.)

Netziv, in his *Meishiv Davar* (Y.D. 56) and his *Ha’ameik Davar* (Devarim 16:3), offers an especially creative solution. He notes that the term “*rei’ach nichoach*” – expressing the notion that a sacrifice is to be a “pleasing fragrance” for God – is mentioned by the Torah in the context of all sacrifices except one, namely, the *korban pesach*. Evidently, Netziv writes, the *korban pesach* is unique in that it is not offered for the sake of “*rei’ach nichoach*.” Therefore, he explains, the view allowing offering sacrifices in the absence of the *Beit Ha-mikdash* refers specifically to the *korban pesach*, which does not require the element of “*rei’ach nichoach*.”

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