

Hannah Heller

Dvar Torah – Parshiot Behar/Bechukotai – May 16, 2009

We have a lot of Monday holidays on the calendar. The United States Post Office, in its infinite “wisdom,” has managed to add another significant holiday that is not a day off for anyone. For the third consecutive year, the second Monday in May has been a date that the postage rates increase. For a few months before that date, they encourage people to buy the Forever stamp, which one can use for first class mail no matter how much the rate increases. On this postage stamp is a picture of the Liberty Bell. Why did they choose the Liberty Bell for this stamp?

Well, I can’t speak for the Post Office, but I know that what’s written on the Liberty Bell was initiated by Parshat Behar which we read this Shabbat. Engraved on the Liberty Bell is “Proclaim Liberty throughout all the Land and unto all the Inhabitants thereof.” Our founders devoted their lives to ensuring that we would be free from oppression and live in a free country. As the Torah describes Yovel, the Jubilee Year, which happens every 50 years, it states, “You shall proclaim release throughout the land for all its inhabitants. (*“Ukratem Dror, Baaretz Lichol Yoshveha”*). The Torah then continues with “It shall be a jubilee year for you; each of you shall return to his holding and each of you shall return to his family.” (*“V’shavtem eesh el achuzatoe if eesh el misphactoh tashuvu”*).

So, during this jubilee year, property reverts to its original owner and returning to one’s family includes the indentured servant who previously wanted to remain in servitude. In the book Torah Insights, Rabbi Shmuel Goldin relates that freedom cannot

be gained through a complete severance with the past. In order to move on to the future, one must review the past, learn from both the successes and the failures and from our varied experiences, both positive and negative. Each experience is valuable as we venture into liberty. True freedom needs to include responsibility to view the whole picture of our lives as we anticipate the future.

This time of freedom and *geulah* (redemption) also reminds us of the need to reach out to others who are not able to enjoy the freedoms that we take for granted. Parshat Behar also discusses the law that a relative is also expected to redeem an Israelite who has been sold as a slave to a non-Israelite by paying his sale price to the “owner” (Lev. 25:49). In verse 25, it states that a relative must redeem ancestral land that a poor person had to sell.

Caring about family, an important Jewish value, is expressed here. I remember in August of 2002, when my late husband, Craig was living his last ten days in hospice. Although he drifted in and out of awareness of his surroundings, he recognized his family members, who came to be with him. I’m convinced that he left this world in peace knowing that his family cared about him and about one another.

Earlier in the book of Leviticus (Vayikra), we are commanded to “love the stranger.” The Torah teaches us that the misfortunes of others are own problems and not just theirs alone. In our daily lives, we observe these laws by giving tzedakah to the poor and helping those who are oppressed. We must not forget the plight of “Agunot,” women who are chained to a dead and often abusive marriage by husbands who refuse to release them with a “get” and allow them to move on with their lives. Our society also greatly

suffers because of poverty, unemployment and widespread addiction to drugs and alcohol. Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson, in The Bedside Torah, notes that Rashi understands freedom as implying the ability to reside anywhere and that freedom precludes living under the authority of others. In order to be truly free, according to Rashi, one must be able to choose where to live. The poor and the homeless do not have that choice. Ethnic and racial minority groups often don't have the freedom to live in a neighborhood without fear of intimidation and assault. When a neighborhood is dominated by violence, people don't have the ability to move about freely for fear of encountering dangerous criminals. The Torah reminds us in this parsha about the need to care about and reach out to others who are less fortunate than we are.

As Jews, our freedom emerges because of our relationship to God. We are free and are no longer servants of servants. Yet, we are servants of God. Freedom succeeds in a world where there is social justice and spiritual depth.

Once every seven years, the Torah reminds us to observe a year of Shmittah, letting the land rest. We may cultivate the earth, but the earth is not owned by us. It is owned by God. We, like all living beings, are part of a cycle of nature. The earth is given to us and we are here to enjoy it in accordance with the laws of God. Since we don't get to live forever, we need to make the most of our lives as we carefully both develop the land and nurture our relationships with one another.

After we finish Parshat Behar, we complete the book of Vayikra by reading the parsha of Bechukotai. This parsha contains a description of what happens when we follow God's laws and the consequences of when we don't. When we follow the

commandments, we are promised that “you will eat your bread to your satisfaction.”

Rashi quotes the Midrash that states you will eat little, but the little that you eat will be blessed and will fill you. This sounds like a dieter’s dream – feeling satisfied without overeating. By observing the Torah values of caring about one another and protecting the environment, people can feel satisfied with what they have, without the need for envy and jealousy and seeking for more.

In spite of the increased cost of postage, take that Forever stamp or any other postage stamp of the right value and send a letter to someone to let them know that you care. Yes, we have the internet, faxes, cell phones and facebook. But nothing speaks volumes as much as that handwritten note to let someone know that they matter on this earth.

May we take the messages of Behar and Bechukotai as we venture into the hopefully more relaxing summer months and feel great joy and satisfaction in our lives as we reach out to one another.

Shabbat Shalom.