

Behar
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Several years ago I traveled to the east coast for a trip that was a combination of business and vacation. Never having lived there, I have missed out for most of my life in seeing so many of the famous sites relating to the founding of our country. So I decided that this was a good opportunity to catch up on this slice of American history at its source. Of course it was thrilling to read about Paul Revere and the minutemen and the shot heard round the world, but being there in person was a far cry from reading about these events in a book. One place I went was Valley Forge where George Washington and the continental army spent the bitter winter of 1777-1778. I was able to touch the same banister he used in climbing the stairs in the small building that was his headquarters. Seeing one of the early copies of the Declaration of Independence made me feel proud of John Hancock who in an act of treason boldly made his signature large enough for King George III to read it. But perhaps most stirring for me was seeing the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia with its famous engraving: Proclaim liberty throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof. These stirring words have become a hallmark of the American people. They are part of the foundation of our freedom; a cherished value that we live and die for. And their source is in this week's *parasha*, Behar.

God speaks to Moses from the mountain and describes the laws pertaining to the land. The Israelites are to provide a Sabbath for the land, just as they are to observe a Sabbath for themselves. In order for the land to be more productive, it too must rest. Every seven years no crops are to be planted nor are the vineyards to be pruned; the people are to live off the excess from previous years. They are to count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven for forty-nine years and then celebrate the fiftieth year, the Jubilee year. In the *yovel*, the Jubilee, land that has been sold shall be returned to its original owners. Redemption of land must be computed fairly, taking into account the value that the buyer has already received and the number of harvests that remain until the next jubilee. Kinsmen who have indentured themselves because of economic necessity are to be set free to go back to their families. Israelites are not to charge each other interest on loans or wrong each other in business. Thus proclaiming liberty throughout the land sums up the goal of these laws, namely to ensure the fundamental freedom from economic oppression.

Americans took the idea of economic freedom from the Biblical verse and expanded it to include human freedom. The bell with its inscription became known as the Liberty Bell in 1839 when a poem called the Liberty Bell was printed in William Lloyd Garrison's anti-slavery publication called *The Liberator*. In the same time period it was adopted by the American Anti-Slavery Society as a symbol of the abolitionist movement. Abraham Lincoln emphasized the important of human freedom in the Gettysburg Address of 1863 in which he said, "...our fathers brought forth a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." Those famous words have given us a dream, an ideal to strive for that we are still trying to achieve today.

There is no jubilee year in America. For some people poverty is unrelenting. The difference between the haves and the have nots continues to expand. People who work in

service industries, those who care for the sick and the old, the ones who make life comfortable for the rest of us, don't make enough money to support their families. Waitresses don't even receive minimum wage because they are supposed to live on tips. Farmers are paid not to grow their crops while children go hungry every day. Labor unions provide collective bargaining because management has a history of exploiting workers. Those people who don't speak English have very little hope of achieving economic parity. And people of color continue to struggle to have the same access to jobs and promotions, to be treated fairly in housing, to receive a quality education - in short to be treated as equal.

Tackling poverty and economic injustice is a huge task. It is easy to feel hopeless in the face of all the change that needs to happen. How can one person possibly affect a systemic problem of such magnitude? While it may not be realistic to create the equivalent of a jubilee year in our country, it is possible to affect change one person at a time. The Talmud teaches us that when you save one life it is as if you save the whole world. By helping out even one person in need, you can change that person's life which in turn can change the lives of those who are dependent on the one whom you helped. And if they in turn can offer assistance to another, then little by little we can build a chain of helping hands to lift people out of the circumstances that threaten their very existence.

One of our obligations as Jews is to help out those who are less fortunate than we are. Maimonides, the great 12th century philosopher, has given us a blueprint for making a difference for someone in economic need. He called it the ladder of *tzedakah* and it enumerates the eight levels of giving. The first is to give but to do so unwillingly. Here you are giving out of obligation, and though this level is of the least merit, the recipient still benefits. The second level is to give less than what is fitting but with good grace. The attitude you display is an integral part of the *mitzvah* of charity. The third level is to give an amount that is fitting but only after being asked. The fourth level of charity is when both the giver and the receiver are known to each other but the gift is given before the poor person has to ask for it. In this case the giver is showing care since he or she anticipates the needs of poor. An analogy can be made to our patriarch Abraham who did not wait for the stranger to come to ask for his assistance, but ran towards him and begged him to share his hospitality; this is the archetype of Jewish righteousness. The fifth level is when the recipient is aware of the source but the giver doesn't know to whom the money is given. The recipient, knowing who gave him the money, may feel beholden to the donor and be ashamed in his presence. Yet, there is merit in this type of giving since the poor are saved from direct shame. The sixth level is when the benefactor knows the recipient but the recipient is unaware of the source of the charity. Since the benefactor may subconsciously have pleasure and a sense of power over the recipient, this detracts from the act of giving and makes it less meritorious. This is what the sages used to do when they would go in secret and place their gifts at the door of the poor. It is fitting to do this and meritorious in those cases where the officials in charge of the communal charity do not behave righteously. The seventh level of charity is when neither the benefactor nor the recipient are known to each other. This can be likened to giving in secret, or practicing the *mitzvah* of charity for the sake of the *mitzvah* since the benefactor has no reward, either social or egotistical. Such charity is like the courtyard in the ancient Temple where the righteous used to place their donations secretly and the poor would benefit from them in secret. Similar to this courtyard practice is the act of

putting money into a charity box or donating to a fund. The eighth and highest degree is strengthening the hand of the poor person by giving an interest free loan, finding him a job or entering into business with him. By this partnership the poor person is really being strengthened as the Torah commands us in Lev. 25:35: “Strengthen him so that he does not fall [as distinct from the one who has already become poor] and become dependent on others.” In modern terms, these are all charitable actions aimed at breaking the poverty cycle and enabling the poor to establish themselves as independent and productive members of society. For this reason, there is no halakhic objection to the poor working while they are receiving their basic needs from society. By the same standards, guidance regarding budgeting, financial planning, consolidation of loans, and so forth, would be included in this highest form of charity.

It is incumbent upon each one of us to do what we can to relieve the economic oppression that is all around us. Whether it is helping out someone on the street, remembering to tip the people who serve us, supporting people in need through donations to charitable causes, or providing a job to someone who needs work, we can make a difference in people’s lives. We must be fair in our business dealings and not oppress each other by taking economic advantage. We can make a difference.

As it says in Behar and as it is inscribed on the Liberty Bell, let us proclaim liberty throughout the land to all of its inhabitants. Let us strive to bring back the spirit of the jubilee year by working to end economic injustice and to restore a sense of dignity to those who are less fortunate. By breaking the bonds that keep people enslaved to a life of poverty, we let freedom ring.