

Shabbat Parashat B'har Whose Land is it Anyway?

In this intercalated year (this is the fancy term for a “leap year” because it refers to the added month), we have the rare pleasure of *parashat B'har* having its own Shabbat. Most years, it is combined with *parashat B'hukotai* to make a “double *parasha*” because there are more *parashiyot* in the Torah than weeks in the year. Therefore, double readings are required to complete the Torah in one calendar year. The choice for which readings to combine was made strictly based on length so as not to make a reading for a week excessively long. *Parashat B'har* is one of the shorter weekly sections, so it was joined to its neighboring *parasha*.

It is not for a lack of interesting content that *B'har* does not get individual treatment. In fact, there are several other *parashiyot* whose content would better lend itself to being combined with another Torah portion. The rules of the Sabbatical and Jubilee years are found here, as well as some of the laws governing the acquisition, indenturing, and freeing of slaves. All of these laws get back to one essential idea: humans are but temporary inhabitants on God's earth; we are responsible for its care while we are here in order to ensure that it will be bountiful for the generations to come. To abuse the earth shows a sense of egocentrism that does not follow in the footsteps of the model of humility that is elevated by God in the Torah when God calls Moses the most humble individual that has ever or will ever be. To safeguard the earth and its inhabitants, God imposes rules that require us to allow even the land to rest. Just as human beings need Shabbat to recharge themselves for another week, so too does the earth require a respite from tilling, plowing, and harvesting in order to replenish the minerals that make it possible for crops to grow (a quick historical side note: it was not until the early Middle Ages that crop rotation was rediscovered and instituted in Western Europe to maximize the bounty of fields). Every seven years, the land would be given a Sabbatical and the fiftieth year would be a Jubilee, another fallow year that required all lands to be returned to original ownership, slaves to be freed, and debts to be forgiven. Each of these requirements for the seventh and fiftieth years in the cycle of time served as a reminder that human beings are not in control of the land and do not have absolute control over their lives, as much as they would like to attempt to procure it. Within nature and the entire universe, there is a greater power which we must recall in all of our actions; this is the discipline of living an observant, spiritual, and full Jewish life.

In our generations in the modern world, it is a challenge to be reminded of the question of “Whose land is it anyway?” when all around us we find signs that humanity has taken over and made the world truly ours. Technology has given us seemingly boundless power and ability to be creative and overrun the earth with our creations. It is in a time like ours when we need the reminder of God the most. In a world which destroys rainforests, pollutes the air, and ignores the sanctity of each human life all for the sake of “progress”, it is critical that we make true progress by regressing to tradition and humility. We can do so individually by doing simple acts, like reciting blessings of thanksgiving at meals to remind us of the miracles that make food grow from the earth, giving *tz'dakah* and doing acts of *hesed* to help those less fortunate than ourselves. Choose one thing that will help to remind you of God and your connection to the divine and the rest of humanity and open yourself up to the possibility of a traditionally spiritual and religious experience. We are but temporary inhabitants of God's beautiful earth along with many others. It is time that we remember to give more than what we take to ensure “fruitfulness” for those who will follow us.

Shabbat Shalom!