

BEHAR (LEVITICUS 25:1-27:34)

Free as a Bird

2002 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

We're all familiar with the famous words on the Liberty Bell: "Proclaim Liberty throughout the land..." Many people are not aware that it is actually a quote from the Torah. (Leviticus, 25:10)

Do you know why we blow the Shofar every year at the end of Yom Kippur? Many people assume that the purpose of the Shofar blast is to announce the end of the fast. Actually, the Shofar on Yom Kippur has nothing at all to do with the fast.

The blast of the Shofar is in memory of the Shofar of the Jubilee year. The Torah tells us that every seven years, there is a Sabbatical year. Farmers in Israel are not permitted to work the land. After a series of seven Sabbatical cycles (i.e., 49 years) there is a Jubilee year. (While the Sabbatical year is still observed in Israel, the Jubilee year is not. The law of the Jubilee year applies only when all of the Tribes of Israel are living in Israel.)

The Jubilee year is "give-back time." If you bought a Hebrew servant, (sold by the court to pay off his debts for stealing) he is released. If you bought land, it reverts to its original owner. (Purchase of land in Israel is, in effect, a lease. The "purchase" price is determined based upon how many years are left until the Jubilee year.) During this year, the farmers were once again forbidden from planting anything.

The Jubilee year was publicized on the Day of Atonement: "...on Yom Kippur you will sound the Shofar throughout your land. Sanctify the fiftieth year, and proclaim 'D'ROR' throughout the land for all its inhabitants...everyone will return to his hereditary property and to his family." (Verses 9 and 10)

"Proclaim 'D'ROR' throughout the land."

You'll notice that I left the word "D'ROR" untranslated. Most commentaries give comparable translations: Artscroll renders it as "freedom." Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan ("The Living Torah") preferred "emancipation." These are both almost synonymous with the bell-maker's translation -- "Liberty."

But is this liberty? True, the worker was emancipated. But what did the Jubilee mean to the farmer? He lost his workers. He lost the farm he had purchased. The land that he had inherited had to lay fallow for two consecutive years. (Year # 49 was a Sabbatical Year.) If he was so emancipated, he should have the freedom to work his field! He wasn't free at all!

Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra presents an interesting insight into the word "*D'ROR*." The word appears in Proverbs, 26:2 and in Psalms, 84:4. In both places it is a reference to a type of bird. (He doesn't identify it by name, but he mentions that this type of bird was known of in Spain.) Ibn Ezra tells us that the Dror is a very independent bird. As long as it is in its own nest, it sings to its heart's content. However, once it is taken into captivity it silently refuses to eat and eventually starves. ("Give me liberty or give me death!")

What is the connection between this "Freedom Bird" and the prohibition to plant one's field during the Sabbatical and Jubilee years? I think we can gain an insight into this prohibition by reading a few verses later: *"You might ask, 'What will we eat in the seventh year? We have not planted nor harvested crops!' I will direct My blessing to you in the sixth year and the land will produce enough for three years."* (Verses 20-21)

The Torah is telling us that our survival is based, not upon the support of others, or even the work of our own hands. Rather, *"I will direct My blessing to you..."*

Obviously, we are not supposed to just sit back and wait for G-d to drop income and security into our laps. We are obligated to make a legitimate effort. However, it is comforting to know that we're not in this by ourselves.

As difficult as it can sometimes be to make ends meet, there is true freedom in knowing that G-d will send His blessings. We will not be forgotten. That is why the *Dror* sings in the wild, where he relies upon G-d for his sustenance. Reliance upon man is nothing to sing about.

There was a time when the French were great friends of the State of Israel. (Napoleon too gave the Jews unprecedented freedoms) During the Middle Ages, Jews lived in peace in many Muslim countries. After the Six Day War, Israel was the darling of Europe and the rest of the world. Today, she is a pariah. There are very few people today who are willing to count themselves among the friends and allies of Israel.

This is nothing new. The Talmud tells us that Esau's hatred of Jacob is a fact of life. Logically, we should have disappeared a long time ago. Isn't it comforting, isn't it LIBERATING, to know that G-d has assured our continued survival, despite our enemies' attempts to destroy us?

There is peace of mind that comes in knowing that we are in G-d's hands. Israel continues to be attacked by enemies on all sides. It is important to remember the words that we recite every year at the Passover Seder "...in every generation, there are those who rise against us to destroy us. The Holy One, Blessed be He, saves us from their hands." They will not succeed.

Speaking of birds, remember the dove with the olive branch, that so-called symbol of peace? (I say "so-called" because I have never found any reference in the Talmud or other commentaries that say anything about it being such a symbol. Let's not forget; there are some people who actually consider the United Nations to be a symbol of peace!!!) Noah had sent the dove out of the ark to see if the floodwaters had subsided. She returned with an olive branch, plucked from a tree, in her mouth.

What was the silent message she was delivering to her ship's captain? Rishi tells us that she was giving Noah the message of Freedom: Let my food be bitter like an olive, from the hands of G-d, rather than being as sweet as honey, from the hands of man.

The sweetness of gifts from our friends of today can lead to a bitter aftertaste tomorrow.

Have a great Shabbos.

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