



Giving Each Other a Break: Torah Reflections on *Parashat Behar – Behukkotai*

Leviticus 25:1 – 27:34
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After a period of hard work, intense emotion, or stress, people often feel the need for a “break”. In fact, that feeling may come not just *after* such a period, but in the *middle* as well—although the opportunity to take one’s desired break might not come until a later point. Likewise, during or after times of major life transition, illness, or significant loss—even times of recuperation or spiritual growth—and certainly during a protracted experience such as the current pandemic, we might yearn for a “time-out”.

The Torah highlights the need for regular breaks. Some of these breaks are momentary, like the pause after a satisfying meal to offer grateful acknowledgement. Some of these breaks are longer and more regular. For instance, a day of rest and reflection and renewal is prescribed for us each week. In the classical Jewish understanding, a complete week includes six days of “doing” and a day of stopping. In Hebrew, the word “Shabbat” (Sabbath) comes from the root meaning to cease, to end, or to rest. On Shabbat we are invited to relax; change our pace; temporarily set aside some of our daily struggles and our efforts to control our world. Instead, we are invited simply to “be”, and to appreciate the fullness of the blessings we already have.

This week’s Torah portion presents a *year-long* break! It is framed as a sabbatical year for the land being farmed, but you might begin to imagine the impact this year-long Shabbat would have on the Israelite farming community as well:

When you enter the land that I assign to you, the land shall be given a Shabbat dedicated to the Eternal. Six years you may sow your field and six years you may prune your vineyard and gather in the produce. Then in the seventh year the land shall have a complete rest, a Shabbat dedicated to the Eternal: you shall not sow your field nor prune your vineyard.... But you may eat whatever the land during its Shabbat will produce.

(Leviticus 25:2-6)

Think what the effects might be of this sabbatical practice; how important—and challenging--it would be in the lives of the ancient Israelite community!

In the Torah, workers get breaks, new mothers get breaks, people who have come in contact with the dead get breaks—even the land itself, and livestock, require their “down time”. And this time off—whether connected to an illness or a festival, the seasonal agricultural cycle or the weekly Shabbat—is not seen as a drag on productivity, but rather as an integral and sacred part of the eternal fabric of life.

(over)

This might be an opportunity to ask yourself – or a friend: How do you take a break, when you need one? What can constitute a break or a nourishing change of pace in this current moment? By what means do you open the way for self-renewal—physically, emotionally, intellectually, socially, spiritually? How do you value – or how do you want to value – your “breaks” in the context of your life?

What might it look like to draw on the wisdom and richness of Shabbat when it is our time to mourn, to be vulnerable, to weather a difficult time, to undergo treatment, or to move through a life transformation? In what ways can we safely and fruitfully let some part of the “land”-scape of our lives lie “fallow” for awhile? How can we, and those near us, support and honor periods of retreat and rest that are, in the long run, so essential for safety and health, replenishment and growth? If we seek to be a comforting presence—whether in person or remotely—to someone who feels isolated, alone, or overwhelmed, how might we connect, sustain, or alternate that with our own needs for company and quiet?

And think of the times we find ourselves in a kind of enforced rest or a “time-out” not of our own choosing: debilitated or feeling sick in bed, awaiting medication in a hospital, in line for groceries.... What would it mean to make space for—or recognize and sanctify—the opportunities for healing that may arise while we’re on the schedule of some other set of forces or institutional routines?

For some people, Shabbat is about letting go. For some, Shabbat is about having time and space for worship or family time or creative expression, for reconnecting with God or with nature. For some, Shabbat is about doing different kinds of things than normal—things that are pleasurable, nurturing, spiritually elevating—or doing things differently—perhaps more slowly, or with an added measure of leisure or solemnity, soulful reflection or joy.

In your own conversations and reflections, you may come up with creative ideas that are particularly suited to you. May you find blessing and comfort as you bring healthy Shabbat “breaks” into the fullness of your life.

Shabbat shalom!

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2530 Taraval Street, Suite 202, San Francisco, CA 94116
(415) 750-4197 □ www.Jewishhealingcenter.org