

My family spent the bulk of the past 5 months based in New York City, living near the northern edge of the Bronx, in North Riverdale. It was wonderful. We lived only two blocks from Van Cortland Park, one of the largest urban parks in New York. Our children thrived in a Jewish preschool. We routinely found ourselves in spaces where Jacob and I were the least Jewishly learned adults in the room, which was very refreshing.

Of course, there were also challenges that we didn't expect. Despite New York's famous public transit system, we found we had to drive almost every day, to drop our kids off at school or do grocery shopping. We had to work to commit to biking or transiting even just occasionally, since driving was so much more convenient. We realized that we had become Oregonians in our commitment to getting outside, and there were many chilly or drizzly days when our daughters asked why we were the only ones at the playground.

We were excited to get back to springtime in Oregon, to our neighbors and friends, to outdoor culture. Of course, being here has challenges, too. We crossed in from Washington in a drenching rain last Thursday. There was no kosher restaurant to fall back on when we felt overwhelmed on this first week back. And, far more seriously, as we got off exit 194a from I-5 into Eugene last Friday, one of the first things we saw were the tents of unhoused people tucked under the overpasses, reminding us how far from perfection this place is, no matter how utopic it seems.

One of the great learning of this sabbatical for me has been about the elusiveness of a "perfect place." As with our arrival in New York, now in our return to Eugene, we are negotiating the gaps between the ideal of a place and reality. We celebrate what we love about being here, and acknowledge the challenges and hold ourselves accountable to meeting them.

This is what Parashat Behar is about: what it means to be committed to a place, and to a community. What it means to love a place and to hold the vision of what it could be, while also meeting the reality of what it is.

Behar opens in Leviticus 25 with the land-based instructions about the Shmita/sabbatical year, and then moves on to discussing the Jubilee year, every fiftieth year, at the culmination of seven shmitot, seven cycles of seven year. Verse 10 describes the essence of the Yovel: “You shall proclaim *dror* (translated as either liberty or release) throughout the land for all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: each of you shall return to your holding and each of you shall return to your family.

The text goes on to legislate how no land can ever be permanently sold, only leased for up to fifty years, because in the jubilee, everyone returns to the holdings originally assigned to their clan.

Imagine knowing that your family *belonged* to a place for thousands of years, that no matter what travels you did, or what set-backs you experienced, your family could reset to that place every 50 years.

As we were road-tripping back to Eugene, we got on a kick of playing Hebrew version of select Disney songs for our daughters. One song surprised me by bringing me to tears, every time I heard it: “There you Are” from Moana. The Hebrew lyric that always got me was, “באיי יש כל מה שצריכים” “On this island, there is everything we need.” For those who have not seen the movie, the whole song is an entire village expressing to the protagonist, Moana, how deeply she belongs there, how there is no need to go elsewhere.

I cannot, personally, imagine what such belonging would feel like, as a diaspora Jew. My daughters were born in a place I had never even visited until adulthood. I was born in a different place than my parents were born. This trend goes back at least five recorded generations in my family.

Belonging to a place can be a burden, too. Moana yearns to travel the open sea, and Parashat Behar discusses the pitfalls of belong: the burden of stewarding land. The burden of being bound to the consequences of a bad harvest or a drought; which are what cause people to lose their land.

And there is the moral burden of belonging to a place, as is articulated in verse 25, when Hashem says, “the land must not be sold beyond reclaim, for the land is Mine; you are but strangers resident with Me.” Our belonging is dependent on how we behave as tenants and stewards.

The chapter goes on to describe the terms of this belonging: the way we take care of our neighbors. The Jubilee is a last resort in a system that expects that people will take care of each other, as indicated in verses 25-28, which suggest that if someone is forced to sell their land or has it seized, first a relative or neighbor should redeem it. If there is no one to do that, the original landholder retains the right to buy it back whenever they raise sufficient funds. And only if neither of those options occurs, does the original landholder wait until the Jubilee to return.

Rabbi Aviva Richman wrote this week, “The Torah itself is aware of the impracticality, particularly around Yovel (the Jubilee year), when people will wonder what they will eat after neglecting agriculture for two years in a row. It seems impossible that the system of Shemittah and Yovel was practiced ever in Temple times.”¹

The Jubilee is indeed a radical ambition, but I suspect that in setting up the Jubilee as a last resort, Torah is pointing us to an even more radical vision for society: one in which people are so attuned to taking care of each other that a divinely-mandated Jubilee is unnecessary.

¹https://mechonhadar.s3.amazonaws.com/mh_torah_source_sheets/RichmanParashatBeHar5782.pdf?utm_campaign=Dvar%20Torah%205782&utm_medium=email&_hsmi=213528898&_hsenc=p2ANqtz-hOB5vXnSJXGEP4X4ufNgzTndKCCgDD8ndYKdRZ2Xroe-FW64JNgRBrm6MGzIQn_qKafo0XxBIGowp1CC8ooY0kdsX8A&utm_content=213528898&utm_source=hs_email

During the past months, I began reading the book *The Dawn of Everything*, a collaboration between archaeologist David Wengrow, and anthropologist David Graeber, Z"l. On pages 47 and 48, as they describe the indigenous American critique of European culture in the 18th century, they write: "In all societies, [there's] a feeling that if another person's needs are great enough (say, they are drowning), and the cost of meeting them is modest enough (say, they are asking for you to throw them a rope), then of course any decent person would comply. Baseline communism of this sort could even be considered the very grounds of human sociability, since it is only one's bitter enemies who would not be treated in this way." - and I'll break quote to add that Torah explicitly commands us to treat even our enemies in this way. – Back to Graeber and Wengrow:

"What varies is just how far it is felt such baseline communism should properly extend.

In many societies – and American societies of that time appear to have been among them – it would have been quite inconceivable to refuse a request for food. . . ."

These sentences hit me hard: what if we felt that anyone being hungry when there is food around is as morally untenable as anyone drowning when there is rope around? That is the society that Torah is demanding in Parashat Behar. Reading those sentences, I realized how far my own moral sensibilities are from what Torah expects of me. And arriving back in Eugene, I have been discussing with Jacob how we can hold ourselves accountable to that moral sensibility. Tents, about there is plenty to do.

Belonging is tricky, and tenuous. There are all sorts of ways to be shaken from it. But at the same time, ultimately, the terms of belonging in Parashat Behar are *not* about whether we were born on the same plot of land as our ancestors: they are about whether we choose to understand ourselves as responsible for the well-being of the land and the people around us, in the place where we are. As I return from my shmita time, to this beautiful and challenging place, I hold myself to that commitment.