

Behar-Behukotai 5767

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I was, unfortunately, disturbed by the news that came out of Tel Aviv this past week of a man, a motorcyclist, Moshe Hai-Yisraeli, who was killed when his motorcycle collided with a truck at a busy junction near Tel Aviv. Unfortunately, motor vehicle accidents are not rare on the busy streets of Israel. What made this case troublingly different was that for more than a minute following the crash, in the course of which the victim seems to have been immediately killed, motorists traveling on that road merely swerved around the scene, continuing along to their destinations, seemingly paying no notice to the tragedy that had just occurred in front of them. For more than a minute, no one pulled over to report the accident, no one stopped to call EMS, no one paused in their travels to see if Moshe Hai-Yisraeli was still alive, or to try to help him. Israeli police are seeking out those drivers who continued driving, using footage from surveillance cameras that record that intersection, not to arrest them, but to gather information, to try to find out why they did not stop.

Police could, by all rights, arrest these drivers. In 1998, the Knesset passed the *Lo Ta'amod al Dam Rei-ekha* Law, which requires witnesses to a life or bodily health-threatening situation to extend assistance whenever

possible. This should not be confused with a similar law we know from our own society—the Good Samaritan Law—which protects from prosecution those who choose to help someone in need. It takes a truly progressive society not only to protect those who choose to help, but also to require them to extend their hands in assistance. This law takes its name from a *mitzvah*, which we read in fact two weeks ago. Vayikra 19:16 reads: לא תלך רכיל בעמך לא תעמד על דם רעך אני ה'—Do not deal basely with your countrymen. Do not stand by the blood of your fellow: I am Adonai. This verse represents one of the central *mitzvot* contained in the Holiness Code, the section of the book of Leviticus that began in chapter 19. The *mitzvot* of this section deal with all facets of life: ritual practices, economic and business laws, how we treat the poor and the ailing, and interpersonal relations. The goal of the Holiness Code, it seems, is the creation of a society that values and engenders holiness, largely through legislating how we treat one another.

We'll move now to this week's parasha, which is in fact two: *Behar* and *Behukotai*. These *parashiyot* comprise the end of the Holiness Code and its coda. I'd like us to hone in on that final section, the final chapters of the book of *Vayikra*. After these 7 plus chapters of the Holiness Code, through which a sort of blueprint for an ideal society has materialized, we are left with a choice—whether or not to pursue these ideals and follow these

instructions. This is not necessarily the easiest choice to make. After all, we may perceive avoiding idolatry as a bit of a no-brainer, but how easy is it really to pay down the debts of our neighbors, as we are commanded in *Parashat Behar*, or to refrain from planting our fields every seventh year? *Parashat Behukotai* comes and presents incentives and disincentives for making the right decision. If we take the words of the previous teachings to heart, and strive to create this ideal society living under God's laws, then God will respond in kind, bringing us blessing of all sorts. However, if we fail to follow these laws, we will be cursed. These curses will affect our health, our families, our political stability—the earth itself will close up to us, starving us and killing our livestock.

These threatening words of rebuke are harsh, and hard to stomach. We don't even want to consider the possibility that they could be our lot. The suffering society that the curses of *Parashat Behukotai* describe has little in common with the society of holiness described in the previous 7 chapters. Traditionally, we acknowledge this dissonance by reading these curses, as well as the ones that appear toward the end of Deuteronomy, quickly, in a lowered voice. If we zip through them, reading them but only in a whisper, then maybe we'll be spared their terror.

Tel Aviv, thank God, has not been stricken with the maladies described in this section of *Parashat Behukotai*. However, it would not be inappropriate to refer to a society in which people drive by a dying man, ignoring his suffering, as cursed.

But out of this list of curses that will befall us if we do not take these *mitzvot* to heart comes a remarkable, often quoted, gem of a midrash. When chapter 26:37 threatens that the constant fear that will overcome Israel will lead people to stumble over each other, *Sifra to Parashat Behukotai* explains that כל ישראל ערבים זה לזה—All Israel are ערבים for each other. This adage is usually translated as “All Israel are responsible for one another,” and often invoked as a source for promoting unity and solidarity among all Jews. However, the word ערב means a guarantor, someone who vouches for us, who takes on a financial obligation to help us if we can not pay our own debts. And if we look at the laws and instructions that bookend the blessings and curses of *Parashat Behukotai*, we find that this midrash makes a lot of sense.

In the chapters leading up to the blessings and curses, we learn of the many ways that we are responsible for acting as guarantors for one another. If any of us falls into financial distress, and is forced to sell our homes or our

land to help pay our debts, the rest of us bear the responsibility to redeem the sold property. If the financial situation is so dire that we are forced to indenture ourselves into servitude, our masters are obligated to treat us with respect, to redeem us from the degradation and humiliation that come with being enslaved. Following the blessings and curses, we learn still more of our guarantor responsibilities. In this case, it is we who are the guarantors for God, changing our material pledges to the upkeep of the *mishkan* into money, so that we can help sustain the ritual structure of the community.

The ways in which these *parashiyot* are calling upon us to act as ערבים, as guarantors, closely mirror the different instructions given to us in the Holiness Code. Our task as guarantors is largely financial, but it stretches beyond the economic, touching on our ritual and interpersonal lives as well.

Being guarantors for one another implies a financial obligation, yes, but also a profound moral one. By following the instructions in these most recent chapters of Vayikra, by caring for each other during the difficult times described in our Parasha, we, the guarantors, have the power to transform our community into one that is truly blessed. The motivation to follow these instructions then, does not lie in the incentives laid out by the blessings and curses. The real incentive is in the potential to work toward a community

that above all else cares for its members, as that is the foundation of holiness. To live in a community committed enough to the prosperity of its members that we are willing to be guarantors for one another—that is truly a blessing.

May it be God's will that that is our path.