

B'har/Bechukotai D'var Torah
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Delivered May 15, 2015 at Temple B'nai Chaim

This week, we conclude the book of Leviticus. Tomorrow morning, two of our congregation's 7th graders will become B'not Mitzvah, daughters of the commandments, and share with our congregation the words of this week's double portion, B'har/Bechukotai. This double parashah includes a rather intense explanation of the relationship between our behavior and the rewards and punishments that we will receive. If we live according to God's commandments, we will have peaceful lives, plenty to eat, and protection from our enemies. If we reject God's commandments, our communities will be subject to disease, hunger, and war. When I discussed these portions with this weekend's B'not Mitzvah, both were, understandably, concerned about the apparent harshness of this system. I have to agree with them, when we take these verses literally, they can seem cold and unfeeling. Worse yet, if we use this model to understand our daily lives, it appears as if our Torah is telling us that those who suffer are the perpetrators of bad deeds.

It is only when we take a step back and ask what these verses are meant to teach us, that their true meaning becomes clear. The men who wrote these chapters, this book of Leviticus, were trying to address and explain the reality that they experienced. Their mechanism for understanding the world was through a relationship with God, and so that was the language that they used. But, if we take away that particular framing, we see that what they were really trying to tell us is that the behavior of one person impacts the entire world. By acting justly and morally, we are adding justice and morality to the world, and by acting selfishly or unjustly, we are only adding further corruption. On the most fundamental level, the authors of Leviticus are trying to tell us that in our lives the stakes are real and that we live in a world where our behavior ripples out from us, affecting the lives of more and more people.

This week we were reminded of the power that an individual's choices and actions have over the lives of others in the community. On Tuesday, two men who call themselves protesters forced their way into Temple Israel in Westport to interrupt a luncheon for the Friends of the Israel Defense Forces. The story has been covered in many local and regional news sources and blogs, and what I've found fascinating is the debate between those who have chosen to focus on the two men's stated intentions and those who focus on the actual reality of their behavior. In the comments sections of these stories, arguments go back and forth

over whether these men should be able to share their opinions, but I would suggest that these arguments miss the point entirely. Intentions are all well and good, but how we behave and the impact of our behavior are what determine if we are adding justice or corruption to our world. Our Torah portions this week point us to the fact that we are responsible for our choices and that each decision impacts our relationship with God and with our community. These two men can claim to have been misunderstood, but ultimately, they chose to behave in such a way as to deprive a group people of the tranquility, safety, and protection to which they were entitled. These men either forgot or willfully disregarded the knowledge that we are each responsible **to** and **for** one another. Their actions remind us that it isn't only in the Torah that individuals have the power to shape the experiences of many, many others.

It is interesting to note that the book of Leviticus does not end on the overwhelming but honest truth that we are responsible for one another. It goes on to address a seemingly mundane bit of community governance. Rabbi Naamah Kelman explains that the biblical authors or editors must have chosen to follow the Jewish practice of ending a sermon or a text on a comforting note, a *nechemta*. She writes, that, "Our Book of Leviticus cannot end with such difficult words, so a short, seemingly disconnected addendum is added, detailing vows, gifts, and dues. This summation brings us back to the daily lives of our ancestors and their daily interactions regarding property and livestock. It is as if some biblical "editor" wanted the last word: go about your business and let neither [the beauty of] messianic visions nor [the terror of] Divine retribution deter us." Knowing that our lives will be impacted and shaped by the choices of others can be overwhelming and even terrifying. What are we supposed to do in the face of such knowledge? I would suggest that the answer is a simple one. We are meant to follow the advice of the biblical editors and contemporary rabbis, and continue living- comforting one another and engaging in our communities. We are meant to go on- working to add justice and beauty to our world. We are meant to remember that even though the selfish and unjust choices of others can darken our lives, we have the power and ability to make choices that will bring light and wholeness to the lives of our community members, both near and far. I'll conclude tonight with the words we traditionally say at the end of every biblical book, "Chazak Chazak V'nitchazaek" "Be strong, be strong, and let us strengthen one another." Kein Yehe Ratzon. May it be God's will. Amen.