



# Parshat Hashavuah

## Parshat Behar-Behukotai May 20, 2006

### Liberty Throughout the Land

Does slavery exist in America? This was the provocative subtitle of a 2003 report in *The New Yorker* magazine about the conditions faced by tomato pickers in Immokalee, Florida. According to the article:

*Immokalee's tomato pickers are paid as little as forty cents per bucket. A filled bucket weighs thirty-two pounds. To earn fifty dollars a day, an Immokalee picker must harvest two tons of tomatoes, or 125 buckets.*

*...workers are usually employed by labor contractors who can exert near-absolute control over their workers' lives; besides handling the payroll and deducting taxes, they are frequently the sole source of their workers' food and housing which...they provide for a fee.*

*Workers are reluctant to discuss abusive situations with employers for fear of losing their jobs...Workers often borrow money from loan sharks back home at interest rates as high as twenty-five percent a month. If they are deported the loan is foreclosed. Frequently, homes are put up as collateral, so deportation can be a calamity for the entire family.*

*All these factors combine to create in South Florida what a justice department official calls "ground zero for modern slavery."*

This week's Torah portion, *Behar-Bebukotai*, discusses agricultural slavery and how to prevent it from reaching across generations. The *parshah* presents its vision of an economy that periodically corrects the imbalances created by normal market functioning. The mechanism for this correction is the 50-year sabbatical cycle, marked by periodic breaks in economic activity and a country-wide redistribution of land during the jubilee year at the end of the cycle.

Redistribution of land!? But doesn't that usually take a revolution to implement? Indeed, the jubilee year is one of the Torah's most revolutionary ideas.

According to Leviticus 25:10, every fifty years we are commanded to *proclaim release throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof* (words many of us know from the inscription on the Liberty Bell). What is the nature of this release? *Each of you shall return to his holding and each of you shall return to his family's land.* (Leviticus 25:11)

In other words, the Torah recognizes that over the course of years, some families may fall into debt and be forced to sell their ancestral land to creditors. In this way, some people will become dispossessed tenant farmers and some will become wealthy land owners. To place a limit on this kind of social stratification and to ensure that no one becomes permanently dispossessed, the Torah provides a fresh start every fifty years. Debts are cancelled (see Deuteronomy 15:1) and land is redistributed back to its original owners.

A description of how debt can trap a family in poverty is provided in Leviticus 25:25-55, which Biblical scholar Jacob Milgrom calls "three stages of destitution."

First (verses 25-28), an Israelite farmer is forced to sell part of his land to cover his debt. If he cannot buy back his land, a relative can do so for him, and that relative retains ownership of the land until the jubilee year.



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Second, if crops fail on the remaining portion of the farmer's land, he may need to take out a loan to buy seed for the next year's crop. If the farmer defaults on the loan, he loses the remaining portion of the land retains the right to work it as a tenant farmer. If his crops succeed, he may earn enough to buy back the land (verses 35-38).

Finally, if the farmer cannot pay off the loan, he loses all claims to the land and he and his family become the ancient-day equivalent of migrant workers, dependent on the landowner for wages and survival (verses 39-40).

Were it not for the jubilee year, this process would easily lead to the permanent impoverishment of large numbers of people. The jubilee rescinds debt, restores land, and makes it possible for families to regain the means for economic self sufficiency.

What relevance does this ancient concept have for us today? For one thing, it teaches that there needs to be a viable path out of debt for individuals and societies whose economic progress is stuck in what Columbia University economist Jeffrey Sachs calls "the poverty trap." Sachs argues that ending extreme poverty in the world is possible if we can help the poorest of the poor get even one foot onto the ladder of economic development, but notes that development is often blocked by huge debt burdens that prevent the kind of savings and capital investments required for economic sustainability and growth.

This week's Torah portion provides a mechanism to break the cycle of poverty and dispossession through the jubilee year. However, since at least the time of the destruction of the Temple, the jubilee system has not been observed. In its absence, we might ask ourselves what we can do to fulfill the spirit of this teaching. Helping societies and individuals get out from behind the burden of debt that forecloses the possibility of economic advancement is one step, and protecting workers from exploitation as they struggle to support themselves is another.

On this last point, preventing exploitation of workers is often difficult and risky, but there is good reason to persist in these efforts. Not only is it the right thing to do, but it often really works. For example, last year the *New York Times* reported that the workers of Immokalee waged a successful four-year campaign to convince Taco Bell, one of the main buyers of tomatoes from the area, to pay a penny more per pound for Florida tomatoes and to adopt a code of conduct that would allow Taco Bell to sever ties to suppliers who commit abuses against farm workers. They are now setting their sites on forging agreements with other buyers as well.

For these workers, whose fate is described nearly word for word by this week's Torah portion, and for the millions like them throughout the world, Jewish values require the modern-day equivalent of the jubilee year: a way to prevent dispossession and destitution from becoming the inheritance of families and countries over generations. Our work to keep the door to economic development open for all people proclaims liberty not only for the poor, but – because our fates are surely bound up with theirs – throughout the land and to all the inhabitants thereof.

## **About this commentary**

AJWS publishes a weekly Torah Commentary that explores a social justice theme in the Torah reading for the upcoming Shabbat. It reflects the ideas and opinions of the author and not necessarily those of American Jewish World Service or its partner organizations.

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