

Parshat Behar-Behukotai - 5770 - Aaron Leeper

The value of a person

What is the value of a person? In today's Parsha (Torah portion) we learn that each person has a monetary value attached to him or her. In Leviticus 27 it states that men and women of certain ages are worth a maximum of 50 shekels to a minimum of 3 shekels.

3 The value of a male from 20 year old to 60 year old shall be 50 shekels according to the sanctuary standard. 4 For a female, this value shall be 30 shekels. 5 For a person between 5 years old and 20 years old, the value for a male shall be 20 shekels, and for a female 10 shekels. 6 For a person between one month old and five years old, the value for a male shall be 5 silver shekels, and for a female 3 silver shekels. 7 For a person 60 years old and over, the value for a male shall be 15 shekels, and for a woman 10 shekels.

These values are set by the scriptures, or, when they are too high for a particular person to pay, by the priest whose duty it is to determine these values. So too, in this Parsha, values are set for animals, fields and houses. This chapter (Lev. 27) reads like a tax table. It is very dry and uninspiring, but is nevertheless an essential part of the Torah and is read each year (or in our case every 3 years because we follow the triennial reading cycle in our congregation). This is a double Parsha today. Were we to read the entire Parsha we would have a lot of reading to do. Both Parshat Behar and Parshat Behukotai are read in many synagogues throughout the world, but today here in Eshel Abraham we will only hear Leviticus 27 read. I would like to focus only on Parshat Behukotai in this sermon, but it was originally Parshat Behar that inspired me to request this opportunity to give this sermon.

I first asked you "What is the value of a person", but let me rephrase that question to ask,

"What is the value of a person's life?"

I will answer it with a story incorporating elements of Parshat Behukotai, and end with an explanation of why Parshat Behar inspired this sermon.

My father, Stanley Leeper (Shlomo ben Lev) of blessed memory, was born in 1925. When he reached the age of 18 in 1943 there was a great war raging in Europe. The tyrant who ruled Germany had written a book more than a decade earlier describing a plan that he was now putting into action. This book was available for sale in several languages and my father had acquired a copy. My father's blood boiled as he read it and made notes in the margins. That year, my then 18-year-old father was drafted into the United States Army and, after a brief time in training, was sent to Europe to fight the tyrant, and in his mind, to save the remnants of his people from annihilation.

Two 14-year-old boys, one named Sinai, the other named Yehuda, were living a tenuously secure life in Prague, Czechoslovakia when in 1943 this tyrant

gathered them up with their families and transported them to camps in Poland. The words in Parshat Behukotai from Leviticus 26, a section known as the Tochacha (rebuke), very much paralleled the life these boys led during the next two years. Were we to read the Tochacha today, the Torah reader would read this passage in a whisper only loud enough to just be heard.

Here are some of the horrors describes in the Tochacha:

22 I will send wild beasts among you, killing your children, destroying your livestock, and reducing your population, so that the roads will become deserted.

25 I will bring a vengeful sword against you to avenge my covenant, so that you will huddle in your cities. I will send the plague against you, and give you over to your enemies. 26 I will cut off your food supply so that ten women will be able to bake bread in one oven, bringing back only a small amount of bread. You will eat, but you will not be satisfied.

My father landed in France in March 1945. The tyrant's army had been pushed back and vast sections of Europe were in ruins and displaced victims were everywhere. My father, now 19 years old, was stunned to see so much destruction and misery. The classic cities of Europe were in ruins and synagogues throughout the continent were charred heaps of rubble with no living worshippers anywhere to be seen.

31 I will let your cities fall into ruins, and make your sanctuaries desolate. No longer will I accept the appeasing fragrance [of your sacrifices]. 32 I will make the land so desolate that [even] your enemies who live there will be astonished.

Some current scholars contend that the Shoah (Holocaust) was a direct fulfillment of the warnings and punishments found in the Tochacha. Most scholars contend that this is not so. For these two young boys, Yehuda and Sinai, that issue was a moot point. For them each day was a struggle to survive with ever-increasing hardships to endure and with no clue if, when or how it would end for them. To their tormentors, the lives of the prisoners only had value so long as they were able work.

Each day, somehow, these two boys kept their faith and prayed for the last part of the Tochacha to arrive:

42 I will remember My covenant with Jacob as well as My covenant with Isaac and My covenant with Abraham. I will remember the land.

44 Thus, even when they are in their enemies' land, I will not grow so disgusted with them nor so tired of them that I would destroy them and break My covenant with them, since I am G-d their Lord.

45 I will therefore remember the covenant with their original ancestors whom I brought out of Egypt in the sight of the nations, so as to be a G-d to them. I am G-d.

Two months after my father arrived in Europe the tormentors surrendered and fled the camps, abandoning their prisoners. The few who could walk left the camp where Yehuda and Sinai had been and surged into the nearest town, searching for bread. These boys, now 16 years old, too weak and ill to compete with the rest, walked in the opposite direction, to where it was rumored that American soldiers were stationed. Sinai reached these soldiers and asked if any of them were Jewish. My father, the only Jew in his unit, was pointed out to him. When Sinai asked him, "Are you a Jew?", my father did not answer in words. Instead he pulled his military issue prayer book out of his pocket and showed it to Sinai. Sinai collapsed in tears at my father's feet to see a well-fed uniform-wearing Jewish soldier. For Sinai and Yehuda, my father was their rescuing angel, but for my father, these boys were his mission fulfilled. He had saved two of his fellow Jews from the tyrant whose book he had read. The lives of these three young men were significantly changed from that moment on.

The day my father rescued Sinai and Yehuda was Shabbat Behar. Every year for the past 65 years, Sinai has marked Parshat Behar as the day his life was redeemed. Today, Sinai is a Rabbi in Israel and the head of a yeshiva in Mevaseret Zion. Today he will again be holding a special service marking the day he and Yehuda were rescued. Yehuda is a world-renowned artist. He lives in Jerusalem. He was a witness at the Eichmann trial. Yehuda will be there as always. Several years ago I also attended that special service as my father's representative. I will never forget it.

A passage in the Talmud (Sanhedrin 37a) says that whosoever saves a life, saves an entire world. My father is no longer with us, but there are grandchildren in this world today that would never have been born had my father not fulfilled his mission. I am proud of my father and of his magnanimous deed. When he was exactly the same age his grandson—my son and soldier, Shalev—is today, my father saved an entire world.

So what is the value of a person? What is the value of a person's life? Maybe today's Parsha can give a monetary value to each person based on their age and gender, but I don't think anyone can truly place a monetary value on a person's life. I believe it is more fitting to base the value of a person's life on their deeds in this world, on the number of souls they have touched and improved, and by the way those around them remember them and venerate them.

These are the qualities upon which it may be possible, somehow, to determine the value to a person's life.