

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Behar Bechukotai
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Behar Bechukotai – Being an early investor

Investors are always looking for a good opportunity. If there is a new start-up company with a great idea, investors often like to get in early. In that way, they can ride the wave of growth and magnify their return on investment. However, they need to take care. Investing early can be risky and one should only take risks with money that they can afford to lose. There is an important rule of thumb when it comes to looking for a good investment – if it sounds too good to be true, then it probably is.¹

This week's Parsha of Behar focuses on the laws of Shemittah and Yovel – the Sabbatical year which occurs every seven years and the Jubilee which occurs every 50 years. These were special years which helped to refocus our attention away from finances, reset the economy and give people a fresh start. The wealthy landowner and the poverty-stricken indigent were on a level playing field – with the same rights to gather the fruits of the land.

Included amongst these laws of Shemittah and Yovel are a number of exhortations about treating each other fairly and supporting each other. One of those pasukim states as follows:

“If your brother becomes impoverished, and his hand falters in your proximity, you shall hold on to him, [whether he is a] convert or a resident, so that he can live with you.” (Vayikra 25:35)

In his commentary to this pasuk, Rashi explains that if we see someone starting to fall, we should assist him as soon as possible. We should not wait and thereby allow him to decline and fall down totally, because it then becomes much more difficult to pick him up again. Rashi quotes the Midrash² which compares this to the case of a heavy load that is about to fall off a donkey. While the load is still on the donkey's back, one person on their own can grab the load and steady it in place. However, after the load has fallen to the ground, it often takes a number of people working together to lift it up again.

This reminds me of an incident I saw many years. We had a new visitor to our Shacharit minyan. He was a fit and strong young man who did not often come to shul. He was honoured with Hagba – lifting the Torah after it was read and displaying it to the congregation. Even though he was quite strong, he really struggled to lift the heavy Torah scroll.³ After a number of attempts, and a bit of help, he was finally able to raise the Torah into the air. However, once it was up in the air, he had no trouble turning it around to show it to the community.

To pick someone up from ground level is hard work. It is much easier to support them while they are standing and stop them from falling in the first place. In a similar vein, the Gemara⁴ advises that it is better to daven to stay healthy, rather than to wait until we get sick and then to daven to get better. The spiritual merits required to overturn an illness are much greater than those required to prevent the illness from occurring in the first place. The Gemara explains that this is because once someone is already sick, the burden of proof is on him to justify why he should be healed.

¹ Don't worry, this is a Parsha sheet, it is not a guide for investors! Keep on reading and you will see why this introductory paragraph is relevant to this week's Parsha.

² Torat Kohanim 5:1

³ There is actually a technique to this – make sure to bend your knees and use the table as leverage. If done correctly you can lift a very heavy scroll even if you are not that strong.

⁴ Shabbat 32a.

We learnt above that an early investor can enjoy a larger than normal return on their investment. So too, if we get in early with our tzedakah and acts of kindness we can single-handedly accomplish wonderful things. We can prevent the recipient from falling in the first place and thereby earn a large reward for our mitzva. The return on our investment will be enormous but unlike a financial investment, it will be risk-free!

However, just as investors have to work hard to find a good investment opportunity, we also need to invest effort to find these early tzedakah opportunities. Successful people who suddenly find that they are going through a difficult period do not usually come knocking on doors asking for help. They are not used to the idea of seeking assistance from others. They might be embarrassed and find it emotionally difficult to ask. In order to find these opportunities, we need to look for clues that people need help. We also need to remember that the recipient will not be comfortable with receiving help and therefore we need to be very sensitive as to how we offer that help. Ideally, we can try to find ways to give someone the help they need but make it seem like they are doing us the favour.

For example, if one is in business, one might look for opportunities to send business to a struggling colleague. Or perhaps they might place a larger order for stock than they really need. The Gemara⁵ teaches us that the highest form of tzedakah is inviting the struggling person to become your partner or give them a loan. You provide the capital and they do the work. That way they feel that they are earning their own livelihood and they won't be embarrassed. However, the same principle applies even outside of the business world. Consider the following:

Rachel noticed that her next-door neighbours were going through a difficult time. The father had lost his job and things were quite stressful. Rachel made a point of asking the neighbour's children to help her with tasks around the house. The 13-year old daughter was often asked to babysit and to help with Rachel's new baby. The 11-year old boy helped tidy the garden and do odd jobs around the house. Rachel didn't really need the help, and to be honest, sometimes the kids were more trouble than they were worth! But they really appreciated the pocket money and their mother appreciated having them out of the house for a few hours at a time.

We can also try to get in early and help others with acts of kindness:

Shoshana noticed that her friend Leah was struggling in maths class. Leah was normally a very solid student, but she was going through a difficult time at home and she was finding it hard to concentrate in class. If things didn't improve soon, there was no way that she would pass the big test that was coming up soon. Shoshana wanted to help Leah before she failed the test and suffered the loss of esteem that would be much harder to recover from. Leah was not used to asking for help. So Shoshana asked Leah to do her a favour. Shoshana explained that she was struggling to focus on her homework and she would appreciate some company. Would Leah mind coming over after school and they could work through the homework together? Shoshana explained to Leah that the best way to learn new material was to try to explain it someone else. In this way Shoshana was able to give Leah the help that she needed and Leah thought that she was the one doing Shoshana the favour!

During these difficult times, many people in our communities feel lonely and isolated. Many are also struggling financially. There are many opportunities around us to put Rashi's advice into practice. We should look around for these opportunities to be "early investors" so that we can all reap the rewards of tzedakah and acts of kindness.

Let's try something this week:

1. Remember the lesson that Rashi teaches us – it is much easier to help someone when they are just starting to topple, before they fall completely.
2. Look around for early investment opportunities with your acts of kindness and tzedakah. Remember, these are risk-free investments!

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

⁵ Shabbat 63a.