

Sermon by Rabbi Eliezer Hirsch
Behar-Bechukotai “Our Walk”
5/16/20

First, I'd like to send congratulations to Miriam and Jacob Zemon, upon the birth of a baby boy. The bris will take place over Zoom at 1:30pm tomorrow, Friday. Mazal tov!

We are saddened to inform the Mekor Habracha community of the passing yesterday of Mekor member Melvin Miller z'l, husband of Eunice Miller. The virtual Shiva details are TBD. May Eunice and family be comforted among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.

Our double parsha this week opens with the words *B'har Sinai*, which seems fitting for this period leading up to Shavuot, when we commemorate the day we received the Torah on Har Sinai. However, the topic addressed at the outset of the parsha is the mitzvah of *shmita*, the sabbatical year, which seems entirely unrelated to Har Sinai. So Rashi asks his famous question, *Ma inyan shmita etzel har sinai? What does shmita have to do with Har Sinai?* Good question, but there's something even more perplexing. **Nowhere** in the Torah does it tell us that the events at Mt. Sinai took place on Shavuot!

All references to Shavuot are in the context of agriculture, such as *chag hakatzir*, the reaping festival, or *yom habikurim the day of first fruits festival*, or *chag hashavuot*, the festival of weeks based on the Omer barley offering on the 2nd day of Pesach, which ends with the *lechem tenufa*, a wheat offering on Shavuot.

And I think it is no coincidence that the story of Ruth that we read on Shavuot took place during *zman hakatzir*, during the harvest, in a city called *beit lechem*, literally, *the house of bread*. I could go on. But there is no mention anywhere of receiving the Torah. Why would the Torah neglect to tell us that Shavuot is the anniversary of what is arguably the most significant event in Jewish history?

As we've discussed before, the narrative of the original *B'har Sinai* is presented in Parshat Yitro immediately following the story of Moshe and his

father-in-law, Yitro. While some commentators point out that the sequence is not correct chronologically, it makes sense nonetheless, because Parshat Yitro teaches about *derech erez*, *literally translated the way of the land*, another agricultural reference. But its significance is much deeper. Although *derech erez* has several interpretations, its most basic meaning is *to have respect for other people*.

This imperative is so important that the Midrash tells us that *derech erez kadma l'torah*, *the way of the land comes before Torah*. In other words, the way you live your life is about much more than adherence to religious rituals. The Torah is not simply what's known as a *lifestyle*. It should be integral to who you are, as life itself and like the air you breathe.

Possibly for the same reason, there is no mention of the World to Come in the Torah. Many commentators ask why, and the Rambam in Hilchot Teshuva implies that if you focus on the World to Come, you inevitably become the kind of person who treats this world simply as a means to that reward, instead of something precious for its own sake. That's also why the Mishnah reminds us in Avot 4:5, that

אל תעשם עטרה להתגדל בהם, ולא קרדום לחפור בהם *Don't use Torah as a crown to glorify yourself, and don't use Torah as a shovel*. Our relationship with the Torah should not be transactional, something we learn and keep simply out of expedience.

This is also a truth expressed by the Jews at Har Sinai when they declared, *Naaseh V'nishma We will do and we will listen*. Many commentators ask, *how can you do, before you hear what to do*. In this regard, I always mention the gemarah in Mesechet Shabbat 88a, which quotes the malachei hashareit, servant angels of God who asked, מי גילה לבני רז זה *Who revealed this secret to the Jewish people? What secret were they alluding to? The secret that the Torah is your essence, your life*. Like the Malachei Hasharet, we should aim to be like an exceptional butler – someone of that caliber does not need a list from his employer to specify every detail of his work because he has what we call a *professional identity*, and he strives to live up to it. So that's why Shavuot has no specified date. The gemarah teaches that that it could fall on the 5th, 6th or 7th day of Sivan. I think the Torah is emphasizing that there is **no such thing as Torah Day**.

And that's the message in our second parsha, which says, *Im Bechukotai Yeileichu, If you walk in my statutes.* What does it mean to *walk in statutes*? Rashi explains that it means *hevu ameilim batorah, you should toil in Torah.* Because Torah is not a duty you perform, in a segmented part of your existence.

The Torah stays with you, in your journey through life, *teileichu*, just as God commanded Avraham -- *lech lecha, to be sure to **walk** through life.*

And this is what the Mekor community exemplifies. It goes without saying that we are grateful to have our shul's physical space – goodness knows, it was hard won. We cherish the times when we can be together, and God willing, we'll be congregating there again soon. But our Mekor congregation understands that just like Shavuot and Torah, our rituals and prayers and sense of community need not be confined to a particular place or time, as long as we remember to continue *our walk*. Shabbat shalom.