

Table Talk: Behar-Bechukotai

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You've probably heard of the "Giving Pledge," the push by Warren Buffett and Bill Gates to convince billionaires to give half their wealth to charity. It's an honorable idea. But why limit it to billionaires? Why shouldn't everyone donate half (or more) of their assets to charity when they die?

In *parashat* Behar-Bechukotai this week, God lays down the law of the land. Every 50 years, God tells Moses, all indentured servants should be set free and all land should return to its original owner. In addition, every seven years farmers should rest the land—no sowing, no pruning, no picking, no reaping. It's God's world; y'all just live here: That's the message.

Practically speaking, there are some problems with this, of course. Why would anyone buy land if they knew they were going to have to give it back after 50 years? How would people eat in the years in which they didn't plant or reap crops?

God says don't worry. Just do it.

What do we do with this hard-to-take advice in the modern world? Maybe it should inform the way we think about rich versus poor, owners versus renters, one-percenters versus the rest of us. Everyone wants to be comfortable. Everyone wants to help their children and grandchildren live comfortable lives. That's human nature.

But, in this Torah portion, God asks us to do the hard work of putting others ahead of ourselves. No one should be condemned to permanent poverty. No one should take advantage of the poor to build his or her own wealth. All of us are renters on this planet and all the money in the world won't change that.

So, as you sit down to dinner tonight, and use the expensive silverware your grandparents gave you, try these questions:

1. Is it fair to ask people to give away the money they've earned or the land they've purchased? Is this the same as collecting taxes?
2. Did you ever give away something you loved and thought you could never part with? How did it feel?
3. The word "mitzvah" means command, connection and good deed. What do these three definitions have in common and how do they relate to one another?



Table Talk



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