

Behar/Be'chukotai: Making and Marking Moments

Ari Yovel, 5/16/2020

As soon as I saw that this parsha was available, on this date in particular, I knew I had to talk about it. In this parsha, we talk about the fiftieth-year jubilee– the Yovel– which some of you may have noticed is also my last name. Around the point in my life where I started to first get curious about what my surname meant, I coincidentally also started developing a curious skill which I still have to this day.

I can recall nearly all of the specific dates in which something significant happened in my life (sometimes also the exact time or day of the week, too). My family moved to the states from Israel on September 13th, 1997, and would later move back to Israel also on the 13th: July in 2011. March 4th of 2011 was the day my mom first told me about our return move, and precisely two years later (March 4th 2013), was when I was enlisted into the IDF. Last year involved two more important dates: I started taking testosterone June 13th, and had my chest surgery on the 15th of August, the day after my 25th birthday. I started sheltering in place on March 9th of this year. And today, at 9:45am, my college graduation ceremony was supposed to begin.

My family moved around a lot over the years, both internationally and locally, so I never really developed a concept of “home” as something rooted in a location. I don’t have a city I’d designate as my hometown, a single house I’d say was my childhood home. Instead, as I grew up I found that kind of grounding in these dates and times: the event had already happened, and so could not be taken away from me. To anyone else, that specific sequence of hours, days, months, and years, may just be a sequence of random numbers; to me, they are a touchstone timeline that tells the story of who I am and how I came to be.

The idea of an identity rooted in time is, in my opinion, a deeply Jewish one. Given our people’s extensive history of struggles with colonization, diaspora, and the constant need to relocate, basing our sense of personhood and peoplehood in land is a

mission that seems doomed to fail. But time belongs to no one— is owned by no one— is exclusive to no one— and therefore no one can banish us or be banished from it. What makes it ours is how we choose to mark its passing. Perhaps more than “where” (as in praying towards Jerusalem, or shaking a lulav in six directions), Judaism is rooted for me in a profound sense of when. The very first line of the entire Talmud begins with such a question on the first page of Masekhet Brakhot: “*From when, that is, from what time, does one recite Shema in the evening?*” Jews measure time in a way that is distinctly ours, with days that start in the evening, months that cycle with the phases of the moon, years whose turning is celebrated in the fall, and every five decades marked with a great liberation of people and property: the year of the Yovel.

More than making us Jewish, I feel that marking time, in some fashion or another, is what makes us human. For as long as humans have walked the earth we have found ways to keep track of the passage of time; one of the earliest known calendars, roughly 44,000 years old, is a bone with 29 incisions on it that has been used to track one’s menstrual cycle. In our era of quarantine, that seems more apparent than ever. So many people (myself included) are experiencing the way that without the natural rhythms of life to guide us, our days begin to blur together into an unidentifiable slurry in which the only coherent chronological concepts are yesterday, today, and tomorrow. What a challenge that last one is in a reality where we are so deeply cognizant of how our future cannot ever be taken for granted.

And yet, what a blessing it is to be Jewish right now: to access Jewish time at this time. While I already had the practice of welcoming in Shabbat with what are definitely officially permitted candles in my dorm, since we began sheltering-in-place I started broadcasting my Kabbalat Shabbat over Zoom to a small gathering of friends, both Jewish and not. They are from different parts of the country and widely varying backgrounds, but what brings us all together for an hour or two each week is the visceral human need to acknowledge the passage of time. When we do our weekly check-in at the start of each call (name, pronouns, and where you’re calling from), it’s a concrete signal to our brains that we’ve made it through another week. We may arrive at

Shabbat bright-eyed and bushy-tailed or we may be just barely dragging ourselves across the finish line, but the time remains the same either way.

That is what I keep telling myself, anyway.

I cannot deny that I am deeply bitter that at this moment, the meadow at the center of my college campus is not covered in chairs filled with family and friends, and later in showers of purple confetti (my class color). If I said that I wasn't upset or angry or grieving over the loss of my long-awaited opportunity to hear my name called and receive my diploma, I would be lying. But, like many people whose precious milestone moments are being stolen from them by this pandemic, I am trying to remind myself that the time itself is what matters. As painful as that lack of ceremonial closure may be, it does not erase or diminish all the work and growth and sacrifice that brought me to this point in the first place. There will be other times and places, in that unknown distant someday where we are allowed to gather and celebrate in person once more. G-d willing, I will be there for those. But no matter what happens after this crisis has passed, I will have my memories of this moment, where I shared with all of you my transition out of the fetters of undergraduate life into the wild uncharted paths beyond: a yovel for this Yovel.

Thank you for sharing this moment with me. May we make many more together as a community, wherever we are, in the years to come.