

## **Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah – Behar-Bekhukotai**

As I set down to write this week, I was stuck. The Torah portion presents a really tough argument on theodicy (the study of evil). I could go on about how the text speaks of God, as though God were a child who was happy when getting his/her way, and throwing temper-tantrums when not. This is one of those weeks when I know that the text's rules for living as part of the community and reality have almost nothing in common. It would seem that if we could read this Torah text literally, then bad things could never happen to good people. Certainly bad things happen to people who are devout in faith. Even more certainly, people who feed on insecurities and gain wealth by oppressing others often do not usually live in excruciating pain.

Likewise, I could talk about the people who, in reading this text literally, use it to abuse others. As I have said before, I do not believe that the earthquakes around the world are the responsibilities of a pact with Satan. I do not believe that the attack we suffered on September 11 was God's punishment for our liberal Supreme Court. I also do not believe that the Biblical promises regarding Israel are related and inherited by a twenty-first century Israeli government, nor do I accept that the Israeli government is to be held unaccountable for its actions, because "God is on Israel's side."

There is too much conversation on both themes in the news and on the airwaves. I do not want to add to the madness, but I do want to point out that limiting our understanding of the source of creation to one who gets his feelings hurt and takes his toys home seems overly simplistic, and I cannot accept that we always get what we deserve (good or bad) and that sometimes, stuff happens because it does. Faith is what helps us hold ourselves together while we find ourselves "knee deep in the hoopla."

As I wrestled with the various points through which I might attack this text, my phone beeped telling me that I had a message. It was my two younger daughters wanting to make sure that we were going to have dinner together. The smile that came over my face was wonderful. It affirmed that Jews can put any conundrum aside for the sake of food. More importantly, the moment put the difficult theodicy problem of this text into perspective. I certainly do not follow the ritual prescribed by the literal text. I also do not believe the Torah was intended to ever be a checklist of observance. Despite these "heresies, I have been blessed with incredible children. I have probably been guilty of hurting other people in my life, and yet, I consider myself wonderfully blessed to have the family, congregational family, community, and career that I do. There has to be some hybrid – gray area where the text can speak and yet not have an ultimate final say that oppresses or condemns us as though the world really were black or white exclusively.

In reading thousands of years of commentary, I have seen Rabbis and ministers use this text to justify every possible response from God from a longing for us to return to a final condemnation of all humanity. Somewhere in between I find a lot of writers who end up somewhere in the middle. The text, for them is not a call to obeisance before God. It is not really even about theodicy. Every time I get stuck in my problems, I find reminders of what else is out there and how I really could be suffering. In looking at a text that is so dogmatic, I focus not on God's jealous might, but on the reality that the jealous dogma is not my reality. The absolute condemnation is not my fate. In fact, I understand that the text is

so polarized that it screams at us to really examine our lives and determine where the curses and the blessings fall in the balance. I open email every day from people with whom I am acquainted who live in war and famine ravished lands. I am always brought to tears as I read in their notes (or hear in their voices when we speak) the hope that still resounds within their hearts and heads. As I read/hear their news, I cannot help but cry, as I think about the relatively minor concerns that I too often – that we too often blow way out of proportion. Face it -- so much of what we fight about ultimately does not matter, except for our immediate gratification or power. And, on this, I know that the text has to speak as a metaphor. Despite all the pain that exists in this world, God has not been ripped it apart. We are still in the batter's box swinging at still more pitches. Even where we falter, we set our alarm clocks for the next day. Even where we have been hurt, we show up for the next engagement. It seems to me that the text is a reminder that the world is not black and white, that it still is a place filled with blessings. Our obligation is to go out and find them – and share them. Shabbat Shalom.