

## Torah From a Mussar Perspective

### *Parshat Behar-Bechukkotai* – Leviticus 25:1 – 27:34

Rabbi Eric S. Gurvis

This Shabbat we close out this year's reading of *Sefer Vayikra* - the book of Leviticus with yet another double-portion. Our journey through the laws of holiness and sacred rituals brings our book to a close, as we next turn to *Sefer Bemidbar* - the book of Numbers.

Leviticus chapter 25 introduces a number of very important concepts. These concepts take their place alongside what we've read thus far in the book. Taken together, they seek to instruct us in elevating ourselves, our lives, words, and deeds towards ever higher degrees of *kedushah*/holiness. In Leviticus 25:17 we read a verse which seems like it could have just as easily been in the litany of *mitzvot* in Leviticus chapter 19 which we know as "The Holiness Code." If one reads that chapter carefully, our verse is reflected there in a number of the teachings. We are commanded:

וְלֹא תוֹנוּ אִישׁ אֶת־עֲמִיתוֹ וְיִרְאַתָּה מֵאֱלֹהֶיךָ כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

Do not wrong one another but fear your God; for I, THE ETERNAL ONE, am your God.

This *mitzvah* seems especially relevant in our time. It has been of interest throughout the ages. Looking at it through a *Mussar* lens, we find a number of applications of this foundational teaching. In *Orchot Tzaddikim*, chapter 8 we are taught:

Anyone who causes pain to their fellow transgresses a prohibitive command, as it is said: "And you shall not wrong one another but you shall fear THE ETERNAL ONE " (Lev. 25:17).

The phrase "you shall not wrong," concerns wronging by words (*Talmud Baba Metzia* 58b). Our Rabbis, of blessed memory, said: "All gates are closed to hearing accusations against the repentant except the gate of wronging a fellow Jew" (Ibid. 59a). Therefore, one should be very careful not to cause pain to their companion in any way — not by deeds and not by words.<sup>1</sup>

Some translations render the word "fellow" in the text as one's "fellow Jew." However, just a few paragraphs later in *Orchot Tzaddikim* we are taught that this is not just about not wronging fellow Jews:

"You shall not deal with your fellow as a creditor does" (Exodus 22:24), means not to cause pain to the borrower. And the lender should even avoid walking by the borrower when they know that the borrower has no money with which to pay back the loan, (*Baba Metzia* 15) for the lender distresses the borrower with this kind of conduct.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Orchot Tzaddikim* 8:6

And we have been warned to remove from our souls the quality of cruelty, as it is written: "You shall not afflict any widow or fatherless child" (Exodus 22:21), and it is also written: "You shall not wrong one another and you shall fear your God" (Lev. 25:17).

We are commanded to return to the poor their collateral article as is written: "If you take the garment of the poor as collateral you shall restore it to them before the sun goes down" (Exodus 22:25), as it is said: "And it shall be when another cries to me that I will hear, for I am gracious." Likewise, it is said: (Exodus 22:20), "And you shall not wrong nor oppress a stranger."<sup>2</sup>

In *Sha'arei Teshuvah*, Rabbeinu Yonah Gerondi takes the principle to an even more severe level, teaching:

One who torments and pains a widow or an orphan - whether with robbery, or fraud or shame or any type of pain - is liable for death at the hands of Heaven.

. . . It is stated (Exodus 22:21-23), "You shall not ill-treat any widow or orphan. If you do oppress them, I will heed their outcry as soon as they cry out to Me. And My anger shall blaze forth and I will put you to the sword . . . One who pains another transgresses a negative commandment - as it is stated (Leviticus 25:17), "One shall not oppress their fellow."<sup>3</sup>

To be sure, the notion of verbal wrongs has been a significant part of the way in which commentators through the ages have interpreted the verse, based on *Baba Metzia*. If we think about it, in our divisive and challenging times, we find ourselves surrounded by too many examples of verbal wrongs. As is so often the case with verbal wrongs, we can find abundant inspiration and guidance from Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, also known as the *Chofetz Hayyim*. In his work, *Sefer Sh'mirat HaLashon*, he teaches:

[In Leviticus 19 we are taught:] "Do not go talebearing among your people," (Leviticus 19:17), "Surely you must reprove your neighbor, and not bear sin because of them." [Later, in Leviticus 25:17 we are taught]: "Do not wrong one another", which relates to verbal wronging, which is also in the category of evil speech.<sup>4</sup>

Would that we could impress upon those in positions of power in our time the profound importance of these teachings and help them see just how poisonous so much of public discourse is today. Indeed, this should be a priority for each of us.

---

<sup>2</sup> *Orchot Tzaddikim* 8:8

<sup>3</sup> *Sha'arei Teshuvah* 3:24

<sup>4</sup> *Shemirat HaLashon*, Book II 3:2

However, as we reflect upon this lesson from our portion and the teachings of our commentators, each of us should first examine our own words, deeds and actions. To be sure, our study and practice of Mussar should leave an impact upon those around us and the world beyond. Yet, as students of Mussar, we know that we must begin within.

**FOR FOCUS:**

- As is so often the case with the *mitzvot* in Leviticus 19, our verse holds a balance: “Do not wrong one another but fear your God; for I, THE ETERNAL ONE, am your God.” How do you interpret the second part of the verse as it relates to the command, “Do not wrong one another?” (Leviticus 25:17)
- Upon which *middot* can you lean as you strive to fulfill the teaching in Leviticus 25:17?
- Which *middot* present a challenge or stumbling block as you strive to fulfill this *mitzvah*?