

Our Dvar Torah this evening is brought to you by the number 7. This week's Torah reading combines with our year cycle via the magical number 7, and the even more magical number 49 – seven times 7. The double parashah Behar-Behukkotai opens with the instructions regarding the shmitta year, in English, the Sabbatical year. It starts with the line “God spoke to Moses on Mt. Sinai.” - Behar Sinai, hence the name of Parashat Behar. Why does it begin with this? Medieval commentator Rashi suggests that this indicates that all of the laws of Leviticus were given while Moshe was still receiving revelation on Mt. Sinai. Revelation culminates, in effect, with the instructions for the sabbatical.

The sabbatical is first mentioned in Exodus 23, as a time when earth's produce is ownerless, and all people are free to enjoy the abundance of the harvest. Here in Leviticus 25, there is an additional meaning offered - that the prohibition on owner's working their land is because the land itself deserves rest. That full rest only comes when not just humans, but all of creation get a chance for renewal. Not only do servants get to rest as they do on Shabbat, but indentured servants are freed. As Shmitta is a radical expansion of the idea of Shabbat, so too is the Yovel, the Jubilee, at the end of each 49 year cycle, an expansion of Shmitta. In the Jubilee year, all slaves go free. All property that has been sold returned to its original owners. Rabbi David Seidenberg, author of *Kabbalah and ecology*, notes that in Chapter 24, verse 4, the sabbatical is called a *Shabbat Shabbaton* - a “Sabbath of Sabbaths.” “One might say,” he writes, “that Shabbat is just practice for Shmitah and Jubilee.”

In the jubilee, we are reminded of the tenuousness of ownership, as God commands, “The land may not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine, and you are just gerim and toshavim imadi” strangers and sojourners with me.” The Jubilee is a radical re-organization of the social order that prevent structures of inequality from becoming too entrenched, and remind us bluntly that even the landholding citizen is not so different from the immigrant stranger.

Meanwhile, we are also nearing the end of our 49 day count towards Shavuot, after seven weeks. Shavuot will begin at the end of next Shabbat, Saturday evening of May 19th. Shavuot is in some ways a mini-Jubilee, a festival of the abundance of the grain harvest. And this year, I realized that perhaps that is why we read the book of Ruth on Shavuot. What Ruth has in common with the cycles described in Parashat Behar Behukkotai is a vision of an equalization, a merging of the poor immigrant widow and the landowner.

There are many ways to read the book of Ruth. It is like a prism, refracting different colors as it is turned. Hold it to the light at a certain angle, and it refracts a story of unwavering loyalty. Turn it another way, and it refracts the kindness of strangers. Another way; a model for conversion. Another way, a hint at a lesbian relationship.

All of these are valid, sometimes necessary readings. But Ruth is also, vitally, the story of a poor immigrant woman, a woman who has to scrape and do manual labor in order for her mother-in-law and herself to survive. It wasn't taught that way to me, but this year, I was shocked to realize how related Ruth is to some of the most pressing issues of our time.

This year, Shavuot coincides with the opening of the Poor People's Campaign (PPC), organized 50 years after Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called for the original Poor People's Campaign prior to his assassination. According to its website, the PPC "is uniting tens of thousands of people across the country to challenge the evils of systemic racism, poverty, the war economy, ecological devastation and the nation's distorted morality." Between Mothers' Day and the end of June, tens of thousands of people will rally and commit acts of civil disobedience at our national and state capitals in order to show "the human and economic costs of inequality" and demand work towards a society in which "justice and equality are a reality for all."

The first week of the Poor People's Campaign, from May 14th-19th focuses on how poverty particularly affects women, children and people with disabilities. The second week focuses on the intersection of poverty, xenophobia and racism. These are real problems. According to the website of the campaign, over half of the children in the United States – 51.9 % - that's 38.2 million children, are poor or low income, meaning that they are living in houses that struggle to provide their basic needs. Over the past 30 years, rents have gone up faster than income in nearly every urban area of the country. In 2016, there was no state or county in the nation where someone earning the federal minimum wage could afford a 2-bedroom apartment at market rent. The first two weeks of the Poor People's Campaign address how disproportionately poverty affects those who are already vulnerable for other reasons. And Shavuot comes at the cusp of those two weeks, with its reading about Ruth, a poor immigrant woman struggling in an unfamiliar culture.

In Chapter 2 of Ruth, she meets Boaz, a wealthy landowner, by gleaning in his field. Gleaning refers to the practices of picking over the left and forgotten stalks and sheaves of grain, which landowners are commanded multiple times in Torah to leave for the stranger, the widow and the orphan. And Ruth is two out of those three. It turns out that Boaz, the owner of the field, is a distant relative of her dead husband, and so in the end she marries him and has a child who turns out to be the ancestor of King David, from whose line the long-awaited messianic ruler is supposed to descend.

And so the story of Ruth subverts the distinction between the poor and the wealthy, the native and the immigrant. Where the two meet and unite is where the promise of redemption takes root.

And so Shavuot and Parashat Behar-Behukkotai have more than just the magical numbers 7 and 49 in common. What they have in common is a hint at a vision for an equalized society, where the boundaries blur between the rich and the poor, between the native citizen and the foreign-born immigrant, between the roles of men and women.

We need that vision today. I hope some of you will join me in getting involved with the Poor People's Campaign. It is not too late to register to join an action in Salem even for this Monday, and there are 5 more weeks beyond that. If it does not make sense for you to participate in civil disobedience, there are many other ways to support the vision. It won't be the Biblical Shmitta, but the more people participate, the closer we can come to fulfilling the instruction regarding the Biblical Jubilee in Leviticus 25:10: "Proclaim Liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants."