

## **“Own it”**

**5-18-2012 Behar-Bechukotai**

My oldest friend Kate lived at home until she was 23 years old. Throughout college, she lived at home, and for a full year after graduating, as she desperately searched for a full-time job, she lived at home. But a mere six months into that job (once she found it), she moved out. And rather than doing what most of us did, searching on apartment rental sites and scouring craigslist, Kate bought a condo.

Renting never made sense to her - “Why pay someone money each month for something that isn’t yours?” she always said. “If you’re going to pay for something, you should own it.”

Now, I recently was reminded, while filling out the extensive paperwork necessary to intern with the US Navy’s chaplaincy program, that I have rented no less than seven different apartments since leaving for college eight years ago.

I wonder sometimes if I will ever own a home...an apartment...a piece of land of any sort. And to be honest, I worry a little bit about owning something so big. Sure, owning a home has very real benefits; the most tangible that comes to mind for me is that you can paint without having to get permission. But there are also different taxes to deal with, and various laws to adhere to, and the hassle of dealing with the plumbing all by yourself.

There may something legitimately frustrating about sending a large sum of money to a landlord each month, but I find it much more daunting to think about caring for a piece of property all on my own, where there is no one to blame but myself when something needs repairing or upgrading.

So I was pretty relieved this week to find that actually, according to the Torah and Jewish tradition, we don't really own land! Leviticus 25:23 tells us: *"v'haaretz lo timacher litz'mitut ki LI haaretz, ki gerim v'toshavim atem imadi."* "The land may not be sold in perpetuity, because the land is mine; you are but strangers, you are dwellers the way I see it/in my perspective." The speaker is God, and the point is that no matter how many times a piece of land may pass through the hands of various sets of human beings, ultimately the land belongs to none of them.

Ultimately, the land, and everything on it, belongs to God.

God's ownership of the land makes us God's leasees. In short, if we do not own the land, the land is not ours to "paint". God gets a rent check each season – after every harvest, the Israelites (as described in Exodus 23:19) are to bring their first fruits and the best of their flock to be offered to God.

Only after God received God's share could the Israelites expect, theoretically at least, a favorable crop. It was a way for the Israelites to acknowledge their role as lessee, a way to show that though the land had yielded fruit from which people would derive benefit, the origin of that fruit was the land, and the land was God's.

Now perhaps we should put into context the reason for this reminder. This week, in parashat **Behar**, the Israelites are instructed that every seventh year they are to refrain from tending the land, refrain from planting or tilling. This is called the sabbatical year, in direct connection with the idea of Shabbat. Every seven years, the land, Gods land, gets a yearlong Sabbath nap. And after seven sabbatical years, or once every 50 years, a Jubilee year is declared, and all Israelites are to return to their family allotment. In other words, no matter what land you may accumulate over 49 years, on the 50<sup>th</sup> all land returns to its original family.

A few points are worth noting here.

First, if God owns the land, there seems to be little point in squabbling over it – it isn't anyone's to squabble over!

Second, requiring all land to revert to its original family every 50 years makes it impossible for any human being to gain a land monopoly, in effect leveling the playing field.

We spend devote a lot of attention to owning things, or at least feeling that we own things. We learn that ownership is ideal – as my friend Kate puts it, why pay for something you do not own? Rabbi Mike Mellen, the former Director of NFTY, the Reform Jewish youth movement, teaches that giving teens the ability to “own” a piece of their learning experience, a piece of the programming they are a part of, makes them more invested partners than they would otherwise be. “Find something to own”, he says, “and OWN IT.”

Owning gives people a sense of control, a sense of power, a sense of responsibility.

But what do we really own? Things? Advertising campaigns bank on it, on the desire to own more and more. But we also know that things can be taken away easily - by floods, fires, thieves. I am about as classic a packrat as you'll find, but if every *thing* each of us owned disappeared tomorrow, *we* would (God-willing) still be alive, and we would need to find a way to make meaning in a world without "our" things.

Do we own jobs? Relationships? I used to speak about the teenagers I supervised as "MY KIDS". I never meant it in a biological way, obviously, but I did claim some ownership, some responsibility over them. A colleague of mine commented one day that he appreciated that habit of mine, that it made him feel like I really cared about the teens, to him, calling them "my kids" showed that I was truly invested in their well-being. But another colleague criticizes that type of talk, arguing that there is no room for ownership of other people, period end, and that calling a person "mine" implies ownership of said person.

According to midrash, we don't own anything. The midrash teaches us by comparing the hands of a newborn baby at the very beginning of life with those of a person who has just reached the end of his life. When a baby is born, his hands are tightly clenched – he comes into the world grasping for everything, wishing to own it all. But we all leave this world with our hands relaxed, open, in

acknowledgement of the fact that in the end, we can take absolutely nothing with us.

Pirkei Avot (6:9) tweaks this message a bit, stating that "nothing escorts the deceased into the grave except Torah and Mitzvot". Ah, so we do own Torah and mitzvot!

Wait.

What does *that* mean?

A week from tonight we celebrate Shavuot, which marks 50 days from the end of Passover, the finale to the Counting of the Omer. The rabbis long ago, perhaps as part of a desire to gain some ownership, some understanding of this mysterious holiday, determined that Shavuot also marked the date of the giving of the Torah to the people of Israel. Today, Shavuot is defined by that connection – in Israel and all over the world, it is tradition for Jews to spend the entire night studying, in honor of the receiving of the most sacred study material of all, the Torah.

Torah, and especially Leviticus, teaches us how to follow mitzvot, how to live Jewishly. The rabbis believed that everything belonged to God, the land and all that came from it. But we were GIVEN the Torah and the commandment to study that Torah.

So perhaps what we own IS study – study of Torah, study of mitzvot. Perhaps what we own is the trial and error of learning and relearning, interpreting and reinterpreting the text and the commentaries on the text.

Life is short, and ownership is fickle – there is never a guarantee that putting your name on something will ensure that it remains yours. But we do have the Torah, and we can pretty steadfastly say that it is ours. The study of it and the observance of that which we learn from it may well be the greatest responsibility the Jewish people has been tasked with. Study may well be simultaneously the most challenging and most rewarding thing we will ever “own”.

And as for the rest? As Hillel once famously said, “the rest is commentary, go and learn it.”