

# We Are Family

This week's parashah is called Behar, which means, "On the mountain," because our Parashah begins, in Leviticus 25:1: "The LORD spoke to Moses *on Mount Sinai*, saying, 'Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you come into the land that I give you, the land shall keep a Sabbath to the LORD.'"

All the commentators raise the same question: Why mention Mount Sinai now, specifically in the context of introducing the laws of the Sabbatical year? What does Sinai have to do with this mitzvah? We have seen many mitzvot over last several weeks: Shemini has its laws of clean and unclean animals; Tazria and Metzora contains the laws of human purity; Acharei Mot gives us the Yom Kippur service and forbidden relationships; Kedoshim instructs us how to be holy people; and Emor provides regulations for the priesthood and the cycle of Jewish holidays. There was apparently no need to mention in any of these cases where, geographically, these laws were given. But suddenly, when it comes to the Sabbatical year, the Torah needs to tell us that it was given at Mount Sinai. Why?

Rashi gives us the classic answer: Just as the laws of the Sabbatical year were given at Mount Sinai, with all its specific details, the Torah is communicating by this that all 613 mitzvot and every detail were given at Mount Sinai.

This answer just raises more questions. In particular, "But why the Sabbatical year?" By Rashi's logic, the mention of Mount Sinai could have been placed alongside any mitzvah. What is the specific connection between Sinai and the Sabbatical year?

The Chasidic commentator Sefat Emet answers this question in a novel way. He begins with a different question: If you continue down the parashah, why is the next topic to come up after the Sabbatical year and the Jubilee, the prohibition against financial abuse or price gouging, and then verbal abuse in general? As verse 14 says, "And if you make a sale to your neighbor or buy from your neighbor, you shall not wrong one another." This is a prohibition against any kind of commercial exploitation, including selling anything for substantially more than its market value. Then in verse 17, the Torah adds, "You shall not wrong one another, but you shall fear your God, for I am the LORD your God." The sages expound this verse as a blanket prohibition on any kind of verbal abuse, such as bullying, teasing, or demeaning people. Why do these prohibitions follow the laws of the Sabbatical year and Jubilee?

Sure, the Sefat Emet acknowledges that to avoid unfair business transactions, we must adjust our property prices according to the number of years until the Jubilee, and that's a connection. But still, these are two fundamentally different topics: interpersonal abuse versus the Sabbatical year. The transition is slightly jarring. What's the deeper message the Torah is getting at by adjoining the two?

## The Problem

We will come back to that in a few minutes. For more than a year now, I've been teaching through a list found in 2 Peter chapter 1 that describes a set of qualities a person should cultivate. And in

doing so, Peter says: “There will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Master and Savior Yeshua the Messiah” (2 Peter 1:11).

This is ultimately what we want more than anything. Our task is to seek the Kingdom of God. To do this we dedicate ourselves to personal and communal growth through Mussar teachings, biblical ethical principles. We want to do whatever it takes to hasten the Messianic redemption and heal the severely broken world we live in.

So far, we have covered the starting point: faith, and five of the seven steps along the way: virtue (meaning a good heart), knowledge, self-control, perseverance, and the last one we covered was godliness, better understood as *chasidut*. It’s the quality of not just doing the bare minimum required but really seeking to understand and fulfill God’s ultimate desires.

All these are important, but they operate on a personal level, on the individual. This is good because you have to *start* the redemption with yourself. But “every man for himself” is not the attitude that is going to bring us all the way to the kingdom. Because with all this refinement of self, we can still experience disunity, misunderstanding, and lack of mutual responsibility within our community. This creates feelings of isolation. It creates division, territorialism, factionalism, and distrust. It stunts our spiritual and communal growth, and ultimately, it delays the Messianic redemption we deeply long for.

## Brotherhood

Thankfully, Shimon Keifa has got us covered. So far, his recipe for redemption has been insightful and helpful. According to 2 Peter 1:7, the sixth quality is “brotherly affection.” The Greek word here is fun: φιλαδελφία, *filadelfia*, like the city in Pennsylvania that calls itself “the city of brotherly love.”

But we have a Hebrew word for this: אחֵיךְ *achvah*. Don’t confuse this with the similar sounding word *ahavah*, which means “love”—we will get to that. The word *achvah*, with the scraping *ch* sound, means “brotherhood” or “brotherly love” and comes from the word *ach*, brother, or *achot*, sister. It’s not a gendered term, sisters can also have *achvah*.

But how is *achvah* different from *ahavah*, from a more general kind of love or affection? This week’s Torah portion will help us out with that. It contains several mitzvot that speak of all Jewish people as *achim*, brothers. In fact, it goes out of its way to do so. Check out Leviticus 25:25:

If your brother becomes poor and sells part of his property, then his nearest redeemer shall come and redeem what his brother has sold.

The Torah first calls the poor man “*your* brother.” And then along comes the guy’s redeemer—his actual brother—and buys the land back, presumably, from you! The NASB is so bothered by this that it translates *ach* (brother) throughout this parashah as “countryman.” This completely eviscerates the point the Torah is trying to drive home by using this word: that Jews are not just compatriots; we are family.

This is why Jews are forbidden from charging interest to one another. Leviticus 25:35:

If your brother becomes poor and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall support him as though he were a stranger and a sojourner, and he shall live with you. Take no interest from him or profit, but fear your God, that your brother may live beside you.

There is nothing immoral about charging interest. It's necessary from a business perspective. It costs you to have your money tied up in loans. But *achvah*, brotherhood, means a sense of familial responsibility for one another. Helping a family member is not a business investment. Colleagues come and go. Friends move away and you lose touch. Neighbors, you help them out here and there, but they are not your responsibility. Brothers, sisters, family? That's a whole new level of connectedness. They are yours to take care of and to stand by through thick and thin.

The Torah tells us that Jews are brothers. In addition to that, our Master teaches us that all disciples are brothers.

But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers.  
(Matthew 23:8)

Throughout the writings of the Apostles, “brothers” and “sisters” is a favorite term that we disciples use for one another. Whether for Jewish disciples or for Gentile disciples, this is the way we see one another. We are a family. We are responsible for one another; we are required to take care of one another and to lift each other up, not just in thoughts and prayers, but especially in practical and financial ways.

Family members have a co-identity. What hurts one hurts us all. We mourn with those who mourn. We rejoice with those who rejoice. We don't let our family members go hungry. We don't let them become homeless. So this is a primary implication of *achvah*: as family members, we take care of one another. This sets us on the path to the kingdom.

## Arvut - Guarantorship

Another important mitzvah that uses the term “brother” came up a couple weeks ago, and it really helps us understand what *achvah* means. Leviticus 19:17 says, “You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him.”

Let's reason through what this means. A member of your community does something wrong. You might just do the Minnesota thing and be angry about it, and then cut off communication. But the Torah teaches that this is not an option. It is a mitzvah to rebuke, to call them out in an appropriate and loving way. To call for repentance. Why? “Lest *you* incur sin because of him.” What does it mean, “incur sin”? If your brother or sister is continuing in sin, you are responsible for it. If you do not at least protest or attempt an intervention, you are implicated by association.

There is an important saying found in the Talmud: כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל עֲרֻבִים זֶה בְּזֶה. “All Israel are guarantors for one another.” This concept appears in the Torah when Jacob is hesitant to allow Benjamin to go back to Egypt. In Genesis 43:9, Judah steps up and says, “I will be a pledge of his safety,” or “I will be his guarantor.” This is a legal term; he is now responsible for what happens to his brother.

An *arev* is the term in Jewish law for a co-signer on a loan. All Jews have co-signed on the same loan, sharing a single debt.

The concept of being an *arev* is called *arvut* or *arevut*: guarantorship. All Israel are guarantors for one another. According to the sages, this originates at Mount Sinai. Sefer Chasidim derives it from Exodus 24:3: “And all the people answered with one voice and said, ‘All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do.’” If there had been one person present who said, “No thanks, I’ll pass,” the Torah would never have been given. All Israel are co-signers for one another.

This is the principle that makes it possible in certain cases for Jewish people to do a mitzvah on another Jew’s behalf. For example, Friday night, a husband hears kiddush in shul. He has fulfilled his obligation; he doesn’t need to hear kiddush again. When he gets home, his wife, who was not at shul, is still obligated to hear it. Because he is legally a guarantor for her and all other Jews, the husband can recite it on her behalf. Because as long as there are Jews who have not fulfilled their duty, he, too, has not completely fulfilled his duty.

This has great benefits. Because of *arvut*, we all benefit from each other’s merit. But on the flipside, we all are culpable for each other’s sins.

In the next chapter of Leviticus, in next week’s parashah, it warns us about the consequences of violating the covenant, and in this context Leviticus 26:37 declares “They shall stumble over one another, as if to escape a sword, though none pursues. And you shall have no power to stand before your enemies.” The sages explain “stumbling over one another” as not literal, but stumbling over one another’s sins. This refers to people who had the power to protest when immorality infected their community, but they said nothing.

Someone might object and say that Yeshua does not support people condemning each other. “Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?” (Matthew 7:3), or “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone” (John 8:7). And this does reveal an important principle that our Master taught: do not excuse yourself from the call to repentance. Remember that he continues by saying, “go, and from now on sin no more” (John 8:11). “Take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.” This is brotherhood, *achvah*, and it is guarantorship, *arvut*.

He instructs us not to let sins and offenses go unresolved.

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. (Matthew 18:15)

*Arvut* is not just a philosophical or ethical principle; it is a legal concept that applies to Jews based on the covenant at Sinai. On a legal, halachic level, it is hard to make the case that *arvut* applies to the whole body of disciples. But the principle of *arvut* is expressed throughout the New Testament. Paul wrote in Galatians, the beginning of chapter 6:

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the Torah of Messiah. (Galatians 6:1-2)

But in any case, as we examine the quality of *achvah*, brotherhood, as a path to the kingdom, bear in mind that it's not a question of legalities. It is a character trait that we are being asked to cultivate in ourselves: a sense of responsibility for the physical, spiritual, and moral well-being of others. Don't ask, "am I responsible for this person?" Choose to be responsible for him or her. This is the path to the kingdom.

## Achdut

With this perspective on brotherhood in this parashah, let's revisit the questions I brought up at the beginning. Rashi asked, "What is the connection between the Shmittah and Mount Sinai?" The Sefat Emet countered, "What is the connection between Shmittah and the prohibition on monetary and verbal abuse?"

The Sefat Emet explains that the core principle at work in the prohibition of abuse is that the Jewish people must achieve *achdut* (unity), and that is why verbal abuse—something that seems to have nothing to do with the year cycles—is mentioned here. The word *achdut*, meaning "unity," comes from the word *echad*, meaning "one." The Sabbatical and Jubilee years can only be observed in the context of national *achdut* or unity. Verse 10 says, "And you shall ... proclaim liberty throughout the land to *all its inhabitants*," which is where the sages get the idea that the Jubilee year only applies when Israel is completely gathered into the land. And just as the weekly Shabbat brings about a mystical type of unity, so does the Shabbat of years. However, whereas the weekly Shabbat is fixed and eternal, a unilateral decree of God, the Sabbatical and Jubilee years depend on *achdut* (unity) and the sanctification of the court. Thus, it is *achdut* that makes the Sabbatical year rest possible.

The Torah tells us that exile comes as a result of the neglect of the Sabbatical and Jubilee years. The sages found that the exile comes as a result of baseless hatred, the failure to love your neighbor as yourself. According to the Sefat Emet, *achdut* is the thread that ties both concepts together. Unity brings redemption. The Sefat Emet's point makes it clear why unity is such a critical step in the path toward the kingdom.

This is why community is so essential. One cannot keep the Torah in isolation. One cannot seek the kingdom in isolation.

If you haven't read Beth Immanuel's vision and mission statements I recommend it. What is the difference between a vision statement and a mission statement? A vision statement describes what you want to see changed about the world. The mission statement explains what you are doing to make that change happen. So in the case of Beth Immanuel, the vision statement is fairly obvious. It starts by saying, "We want to see the Messianic Kingdom infiltrate our world," and then it goes on to describe what that would be like: recognition of Yeshua as King, the restoration of the Jewish people, all nations seeking God, no more antisemitism, knowledge of God, and world peace.

So what is our plan to make that happen: our mission statement is that we "provide a nurturing community for disciples of Yeshua who seek to practice a Messianic form of traditional Judaism in keeping with their Jewish or Gentile identity and devotion to Yeshua the Messiah."

Community is how we get there. This means being at peace with one another, personally. It means being involved with one another's lives. It means contributing to our community institutions: volunteering and using your skills or simply your presence and willingness to make our collective life productive. It means supporting ventures like our mikvah which will bring stability and growth to our kehillah. It means helping to bear the burden of moms with little children so this place can be a rock-steady environment for families to grow. It means showing up to pray together.

Let me rant for just a second. I've been a bit saddened lately by our prayer services. I think back to years ago, before we understood the concept of distinction, we could get a group of fifteen brothers, practically all Gentiles, for the Dag BaOmer crack-of-dawn shacharit davening.

Now, I recognize that synagogue prayer is not everybody's cup of tea. And I also recognize that distinction is a real thing, and even though every human is obligated to pray, we are not all obligated to pray in the Jewish way. People have practical and family situations that make attendance difficult, I get it. But let me state clearly that whether you are Jewish or Gentile, male or female, young or old, slave or free, you are wanted and needed at our prayer times. Whether or not you can help us reach the number ten has nothing to do with the value of your presence. We are here to enthrone the King of the Universe together in unity, and you belong as a part of that unity. Your presence and your voice strengthen and encourage us. You being here glorifies God and brings honor to our Master Yeshua. Covid has broken down many of our good habits, but it's time to recover lost territory and get back on track.

Our Master Yeshua prayed with deep emotion that we, his disciples, would achieve *achdut*, unity. This was his deepest desire for us because unity is the most foundational ingredient in redemption.

This is what the Sabbatical Year teaches us. During the Shmittah year, the produce of our fields in the land of Israel becomes ownerless. Anyone is free to come and help themselves to it. This situation provides a moment of clarity and a glimpse of the truth, that the entire world belongs to Hashem, and that whatever we have, it's because he gave it to us. This is the same reason Yeshua told the rich young ruler, "Sell everything you have and give it to the poor." Because that is the ultimate realization of a truth that is hidden behind a veil for most of us.

Brotherhood means realizing that we are all children of one Father. All of this was plain as day for Israel when they encamped at Mount Sinai, like one man with one heart. And that might really be the connection between Shmittah and Mount Sinai.

## Action

Let me summarize what we've covered. Brotherhood, *achvah*, means being there for one another. Helping shoulder the real-life burdens that we all face. Brotherhood means *arvut*, mutual responsibility, caring about another person's spiritual well-being. And brotherhood means *achdut*: oneness and unity. Joining together to form community, to be a single body, united in vision and mission and purpose.

But remember, we are talking about cultivating brotherly love as a character trait, as something that flows naturally from you. We do have obligations to one another that entail technical requirements

and such. But in the context of 2 Peter, *achvah* should simply describe the kind of person you are all the time. You are a brother, you are a sister. You behave in a brotherly or sisterly manner to everyone.

Like any of the middot you can develop this through conscious intention and self-reflection. Put it on your daily to-do list: behave with *achvah* throughout the day. At the end of the day, take an accounting. Were you a brother? Were you a sister? What did you do to help people practically? What did you do to strengthen people spiritually? Were you a unifying force in our community?

Not only will this benefit you personally, and our whole community, but it is a vital step toward realizing the Messianic redemption.

Without this tremendous *middah* of *achvah*, our community risks falling into patterns of disunity and isolation. Lack of brotherhood prevents us from achieving our mission and vision, and it delays the Kingdom.

By committing to fostering *achvah*, we create a community characterized by strong bonds, shared responsibility, and collective growth. This unity not only enhances our spiritual lives but also causes the Messianic redemption to break into our current world.

We are counting up the days to Shavuot and to receiving the Torah once again. We should also be reliving the experience of the Shlichim in the beginning of the book of Acts. Devoting themselves with one accord to prayer in the holy city. This unity is what made it possible for them to experience the *shefa rav*, the great outpouring when the holy day arrived. The writer of Hebrews compares the powerful and overwhelming Sinai experience with the revelation of Messiah, not in the Sinai desert but in Jerusalem:

“But you have come to Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering...”(Hebrews 12:22)

The writer says, “Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.” (Hebrews 12:28-29)

Then he adds, “Let brotherly love continue.”

I ask Hashem to bless you all and I ask you to bless me as well, that through cultivating this essential quality of brotherly love, *achvah*, we would bind our community together in unity like never before, as one big family, and that as Shavuot approaches, we would be ready once again to receive the Torah, and that with it our Father in heaven would pour out a *sheva rav*, an intense blessing, letting the kingdom break through in our little corner of the earth.