Not Somebody Else! Us!: Thoughts for Shabbat Behar-Behukotai

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This week's Torah portion discusses the laws of the sabbatical year, when farmers must let their land lay fallow. This "rest" for the land is a demonstration that the land belongs to the Almighty, not to us, and that we depend on the Almighty for our sustenance. In relating the laws of the agricultural sabbatical, the Torah states: "And if you will say, what shall we eat the seventh year? behold, we may not sow, nor gather in our increase?; then I will command My blessing upon you in the sixth year and it shall bring forth produce for the three years [sixth, seventh and eighth years]" (Vayikra 25:20-21).

The Me'am Lo'ez, the classic Judeo-Spanish Torah commentary, wonders why the Torah presented this information in terms of a question and answer i.e. q. what will we eat if we can't engage in farm work? a. don't worry, God will provide extra on the sixth year. It could simply have stated: keep the laws of the sabbatical and God will provide abundant harvests on the sixth year, so that you will have enough food to carry you through the next few years. Why did the Torah record the question--what will we eat on the seventh year?

The Me'am Lo'ez suggests that the question--what will we eat?--is a reflection of our anxiety and concern. A moral lesson of the sabbatical year is that we are supposed to worry about our sustenance. Even if we normally have enough to eat, at least once in seven years we become deeply nervous that we might not have enough food. We are driven to ask: if we can't plant our crops, how are we going to feed ourselves and our families? That very question forces us into the existential understanding of what poverty is. Although we might ask the question only once in a sabbatical cycle, poor people have to ask this question every day of their lives. Each day, they wonder how they will provide food for themselves and their families. By making us ask the question and feeling the dread of impending hunger, the Torah teaches us to empathize with the constant plight of the poor. By feeling this dread ourselves, we will be better able to understand the predicament of those who lack their daily food, and we will be more compassionate in providing for them.

It is a normal human tendency to assume that problems belong to "somebody else", and that "somebody else" will solve them or deal with them in some way. The Torah challenges us to internalize problems of others, and take personal responsibility for helping make things better. If there are poor and oppressed people, we are not supposed to leave them to "somebody else", but rather we need to feel their pain ourselves and see how we can help. We can empathize with them only if we actually feel their sufferings and anxieties in our own selves.

This is true not merely when it comes to empathizing with the poor, the downtrodden, the ill. It is true about social responsibility in general. People want there to be synagogues and schools, hospitals and medical research, social justice agencies etc.--but they sometimes think that these institutions will be maintained by "somebody else". They do not assume personal responsibility for these institutions and causes.

If we want certain institutions and causes to be supported for the benefit of society--then we need to look in the mirror and realize that we are the ones who need to step forward. We need to feel a personal challenge and responsibility.

If we are to have a better world, it will come about through our own assumption of personal commitment, our own idealism, our own determination.

We cannot and should not assume that "somebody else" will take care of everything for us. The answer is not "somebody else". The answer is: us.

Angel for Shabbat