Thinking Ahead, Far Ahead: Thoughts for Parashat Behar

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Behar
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In parashat Emor, we read: And you shall count for yourself (usfartem lakhem--plural)" seven weeks of the Omer. In this week's Torah portion, Behar, we read: And you shall count for yourself (vesafarta lekha--singular) seven Sabbath years. Why is the plural used when counting the weeks, and the singular used when counting years?

An answer: the commandment to count seven weeks is addressed to the public at large. The Torah assumes that people can keep focused on a mitzvah for seven weeks. However, when it comes to counting years for the sabbatical cycle, the Torah addresses itself to the sages of the great court--to individuals, not to the general public. Most people cannot stay focused for such a long span of time as a fifty year cycle. This commandment was aimed at those specially gifted individuals who are so wise and so visionary that they can think ahead and plan for the fifty year cycles.

It is understood that not everyone can dream great dreams, can stay clearly focused on the long span of the future. Yet, that is exactly what religious leadership is called upon to do. I would suggest that this is what every Jew is expected to aspire to do--even if it is known in advance that most of us will fall short.

Religious leadership needs to be in the hands of those who are great dreamers and visionaries, those who see the long view of Jewish history and destiny, those who are tirelessly committed to serving God and humanity with love, kindness, compassion, wisdom.

Our society has an overwhelming tendency toward short-term planning. Companies’ stocks go up or down based on quarterly profit reports; company executives face tremendous pressure to show immediate results. People want

instant information—via internet, iphones, facebook etc. The news is fed in quick, catchy sound bites. The media need to produce news, to attract advertisers and revenues. Few journalists have the time, inclination or luxury to actually study events in historical context, or to offer reasoned projections for the coming decades. Politicians and public personalities communicate by short twitter comments, or with slogans. They don't give us thorough analysis of the issues; they don't provide depth of context or logical projections for the future. They want to get re-elected. They can't worry about ten years from now or fifty years from now. And the electorate is equally impatient, concerned with the moment or the few months or years ahead.

This tendency has had a profound impact on religious life. People are demanding short term spiritual satisfaction. Sects and small religious groupings are multiplying at a rapid pace; each group attempts to satisfy a particular "market niche" among the public. Few seem to be thinking about the long-term viability of religion, or what constitutes a "healthy" religious organization. Rather, "success" is often measured by the prevailing business model: how many "customers" do we have? How much income did we bring in?

Who is thinking about our souls? Who is investing the time and thought to foster a religious life that is deep and strong, that can withstand popular pressures and market demands? Who is reminding us that when it comes to the human spirit, instant gratification is not the path to long- term growth and development?

The 19th century historian, Henry Adams, offered a distinction between a politician and a statesman. A politician listens to what the public is saying and then formulates policies in line with popular opinion. In contrast, a statesman formulates carefully thought-out policies, and then tries to persuade the public to adopt them. A politician seeks popularity and expediency, and is a slave of public opinion; a statesman seeks what is best--even if not popular—for the well-being of society, and attempts to shape public opinion accordingly. A politician speaks and acts for the moment; a statesman speaks and acts for the long-range good of the society.

Religious life, along with all other aspects of life, requires that we all try to be statesmen rather than politicians; that we all seek to think carefully about the past, about our current context, and about the future. The strategy of short term gratification is not one upon which to build a healthy society.

The Torah highlights the uniqueness of those individuals who can think beyond the framework of weeks, and who can envision terms of fifty year cycles. This is a challenge for each of us. We need to be thinking ahead, far ahead.

Angel for Shabbat