Paired Perspectives on the Parashah: Behar

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Behar:

Land, Cities, and the Illusion of Permanence

Parashat Behar presents a striking vision of property and ownership that challenges basic assumptions. Land in Israel may be sold—but never permanently. With the arrival of the Jubilee year, it returns to its ancestral owners: “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is Mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with Me” (Leviticus 25:23). At the same time, however, the Torah makes a surprising exception: houses in walled cities may be sold permanently, without reversion in the Jubilee year (25:29–30).

The Torah’s distinction between land and urban property reflects a deeper principle: land represents a divinely ordered reality that resists permanent human ownership, whereas cities represent human-created environments that lend themselves to the illusion of permanence.

The Land Belongs to God

At the heart of the Jubilee system lies a foundational principle: the land of Israel ultimately belongs to God. Israelites are not absolute owners of their land, but

temporary stewards. The cyclical return of land in the Jubilee year serves as a constant reminder that no claim to permanence is final.

Ramban notes a practical dimension to this law. Agricultural land is tied to livelihood and inheritance; its permanent loss would uproot families across generations. By contrast, houses—especially in cities—are less essential to long-term identity. A person may sell one home and relocate without losing a fundamental connection to livelihood or inheritance.

Yet the distinction runs deeper than practicality. As Amnon Bazak observes, the Torah restores land to the divinely ordained order established at the time of Israel's settlement. Land reflects God's structure; it must periodically return to its original framework. Houses in cities, by contrast, are entirely human constructs—built, modified, and rebuilt according to changing needs. Their permanence is not anchored in divine order in the same way.

The Torah thus distinguishes between what is fundamentally given by God and what is primarily created by human beings.

Three Models of Human Existence

This tension between divine order and human construction is already embedded in the earliest chapters of Genesis. The story of Cain and Abel introduces two archetypal modes of life: the farmer and the shepherd. Abel, the shepherd, lives lightly upon the land, moving with his flocks. Cain, the farmer, works the soil, cultivating and developing it.

After murdering his brother, Cain is condemned to a life of wandering, cut off from stable connection to the land. Yet his response is telling: he builds the first city, naming it after his son (Genesis 4:17). In doing so, he establishes a third model—urban life—defined not by dependence on the land, but by human construction and permanence.

We thus encounter three fundamental patterns of existence, each reflecting a different relationship between human beings, the land, and God. These three models—shepherd, farmer, and city-dweller—form a conceptual framework that will illuminate the laws of Behar.

• The shepherd, who lives with mobility and dependence, without fixed ownership;
• The farmer, who partners with the land through cultivation, yet is tempted to claim it as his own;
• The city-dweller, who constructs an environment increasingly independent of nature, fostering a sense of autonomy and permanence.

Each carries its own religious possibilities and dangers.

Egypt and the Culture of Permanence

These models help illuminate the Torah's portrayal of Egypt. Egyptian society is marked by an intense investment in permanence—monumental cities, pyramids, and elaborate preparations for the afterlife. It is a civilization that seeks to control time, nature, and even death itself.

Significantly, the Torah emphasizes that Egyptians despise shepherds (Genesis 46:34). When they enslave the Israelites, they compel them to build cities and work the land—imposing upon them a civilization rooted in control, production, and permanence.

In this light, Egypt represents more than political oppression. It embodies a worldview in which human beings seek to establish enduring structures that obscure dependence on God. Egypt represents the full development of the agricultural and urban impulses taken to their extreme.

The Ambivalence of Agriculture

R. Samson Raphael Hirsch offers a nuanced analysis of these modes of life. Agriculture, he observes, has been the engine of human civilization. It demands strength, ingenuity, and sustained effort, driving technological and cultural development. At the same time, it fosters a powerful sense of ownership and control. The farmer is deeply tied to the land—dependent on it, yet tempted to view it as his own domain.

This dynamic can lead in opposite directions. Agriculture can elevate human society, but it can also degrade it, reducing people to laborers and enabling systems of domination and slavery. It may even give rise to forms of nature-worship, as the forces that govern agricultural success become objects of reverence.

The shepherd, by contrast, lacks the stability and sophistication of agricultural life. Yet this very detachment from land and property can foster humility and spiritual openness. It is no accident that the patriarchs, Moses, and David are all shepherds before assuming leadership.

The Torah does not idealize one model at the expense of the others. Rather, it recognizes their positive features alongside their spiritual risks.

Correcting the Illusion of Ownership

We can now understand why the Torah treats land and urban property differently. Land represents a divinely ordered reality that precedes human ownership and therefore cannot be held permanently; it must return to its original framework. Cities, by contrast, are primarily human constructions, shaped and reshaped over time, and therefore more readily subject to permanent transfer.

The laws of Behar emerge as a corrective to the risks inherent in agrarian and urban life. When Israel enters its land, it becomes an agricultural society, developing fields, building homes, and establishing communities. With this development comes the danger of forgetting that the land—and life itself—ultimately belongs to God.

Shemittah and Yovel—the Sabbatical and Jubilee years—address this danger directly. By mandating periodic cessation of agricultural activity and the return of land to its original owners, the Torah disrupts the illusion of permanent human ownership. These institutions remind Israel that its prosperity is not self-generated, and that its relationship to the land is covenantal, not absolute.

Even the distinction between fields and walled cities reflects this tension. Fields revert, reaffirming divine ownership. Houses in cities may remain permanently sold, acknowledging the reality of human construction—but only within limits.

Cities in the Vision of Redemption

This ambivalence toward cities continues in prophetic literature. The prophet Zephaniah describes a purified people who live with simplicity and humility, while Micah speaks of the removal of fortified cities, which Radak interprets as a shift toward a more open and expansive mode of living (Micah 5:10; cf. Ketubot 110b).

Yet the prophet Isaiah offers a different vision. In his prophecy, Jerusalem becomes the religious center of the world, a city that draws all nations toward the service of God (Isaiah 2:2–4). Unlike the Tower of Babel—a human attempt to construct a self-sufficient world that excludes God—Jerusalem represents a sanctified city, one that integrates human society with divine purpose.

These contrasting visions reflect not a contradiction, but a productive tension. The Torah does not reject the city; it seeks to transform it.

Conclusion: Living Without Illusions

The laws of Behar challenge a deeply ingrained human instinct: the desire for permanence. Whether through land, buildings, or institutions, people seek to establish lasting control over their environment. The Torah, however, insists that such control is always partial and provisional.

By distinguishing between land and urban property, instituting cycles of release and return, and embedding these laws within a broader vision of covenant, the Torah teaches that human beings must live in the world without mistaking it for ultimate reality.

Holiness in this context is not withdrawal from society, but a disciplined engagement with it—one that resists the illusion of absolute ownership and continually reorients life toward God.