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The Power to Sacrifice  
Shabbat Behar 5774

I read in the news this week that my alma mater Stanford has decided to divest from coal power plants and any company that makes its money from coal. Now, Stanford has a long history of divesting from companies that it believes engage in immoral practices, most notably in the 1980s when it divested from Apartheid South Africa. Lest we think that this is just an economic practice of the privileged few in the ivory tower, I want to talk about another divestment movement, one of the oldest I can think of. I'm talking about the Abolitionists, the 19<sup>th</sup> century social movement to eradicate slavery in the United States. They believed so strongly in their cause that they boycotted cotton and refused to buy any clothes made of it, because they knew that it was produced by slave labor. Think about that for a moment. Think about all the clothes you are wearing now. Are any of them not made of cotton? Back then, if you didn't buy cotton, your wardrobe would consist of linen or wool—neither of which were at all comfortable, particularly in the summer. These Abolitionists made a huge sacrifice of comfort to live out their beliefs—beliefs that history would prove were moral ones. This points to a very important truth: in order to live out our morals and live out our Jewish

beliefs, we have to make sacrifices for the greater good, and sacrifice is not easy.

Sacrifice is not an easy concept for us in the age of consumerism. We have never been asked in recent years to ration our food or send our youth into the draft for a greater good. After all, when the US went into recession after 9/11, we were told that the most patriotic thing we could do was to go out and buy cars and support the economy. The most romanticized objects that we have—our iPhones and our tablets—are made under horrible working conditions in China, but we still flock to the Apple store like a crazed mob when the newest model comes out. Sacrifice is no longer a value that we have as a society; the values that drive our culture all too often revolve around the value of the all-mighty dollar.

However, I strongly believe that sacrifice is an important part of our identity as Jews. In *parashat Behar*, we learn about the laws that God gave to Moses about how we treat our land and property. Most prominent of these is the law of *Sh'mita*, or the Sabbatical year. Every seven years, we are commanded to not sow seeds and harvest from our land. It is to lie fallow. The thing that immediately sticks out about this is that observing the law of *Sh'mita* is a very substantial sacrifice. It basically disallows us from taking advantage of 15% of the potential of our land. In fact, the historical evidence

shows that in actuality, the people of Israel rarely, if ever, kept this law.

Perhaps it was a pie in the sky imagining of how an ideal society operates. In Midrash Leviticus Rabbah, Rabbi Isaac declares that he could find no mightier person than one who willingly and without complaint allows his vineyards and fields to lie fallow while still paying his taxes.

*Sh'mita* might be a costly sacrifice to ask of us, but it is also a necessary investment that we should take seriously. We know from agricultural science that periodically allowing farm land to lie fallow is necessary for regenerating the fertility of the soil. During the Great Depression, the farmers of the Midwest and South did not adhere to this warning because they saw the price of their food drop from the devastating deflation of the times. To make up for the loss, they farmed the land to such excess that they drained the soil of everything, turning fertile earth to sand that the winds could blow away in the Dust Bowl. *Sh'mita* imparts us with the important lesson that unbridled exploitation of our land leads to economic and environmental disaster.

But ultimately there is another more fundamental piece of wisdom that *Sh'mita* teaches us. When it comes down to it: we do not ultimately own our land; the earth belongs to God. We learn in Genesis that as humans, we can cultivate the land and care for it, even dominate it. But we cannot own it. The *Sh'mita* law, therefore, teaches us that we cannot exploit the land to ruin

beyond repair, because it is not our possession. While a high GDP and a robust economy are important, consumerism for its own sake is not a value that can hold our society together. Ultimately there are values and truths more important than the economy.

Cultivating a value of sacrifice is not just a Jewish value, it's also something essential to our survival. I want to tell you three stories related to this. Story number one: out in Coalinga, California, where agriculture is king, William Bordeaux, the executive of Harris Ranch told reporters about the state of his ranch. Because of the drought, Harris Ranch had to idle thousands of acres of grasslands for their cattle. Because of a horrible food shortage for their livestock, they had to sell much of their herd at a loss to other states. They also hired 1000 fewer workers this season. Not only has the drought hit the economy, cost jobs, and devastated the bottom line, but it has also left our once fertile Central Valley drier, browner, and more polluted.

A second story. Out in Unalakleet, Alaska, the local economy is dependent on the land. The springtime brings delicious berries and the salmon run up the local river. However, in recent years, the changing climate has altered the salmon route, disrupting the fishermen who make their living off the river. Moreover, warmer climates have brought invasive species, including thick brush that has completely eliminated the possibility for berry picking. In sum,

these changes have completely decimated the local economy, and many people have had to move away from the homes they have lived in for decades.

A third story. A recent UNICEF report tells us about a four-year-old boy named Adnan. Adnan fled his home in Syria with his family to Lebanon when a mortar attack destroyed his home. He and his family have been living in poverty in a refugee camp. His mother speaks about his emotional scarring from the experience, saying that this poor little boy is afraid of everything. He cries all night, and he is terrified when his parents leave him for a second. UNICEF estimates that there are 2 million children like Adnan—scared, traumatized, and many of them orphaned by the barbaric civil war in Syria.

These three stories, either directly or indirectly, show us that Global Climate Change, in all of its manifestations, has very real and disturbing effects on us humans. This isn't just an issue about the polar bears, we are also suffering. The extreme weather that Climate Change causes has made the California weather drier and more arid. Experts say that our future is bleak, as the abnormality of this year could quickly become the norm instead of the exception. Climate Change has made Alaska and the Arctic much warmer, making the spring come earlier every year, completely disrupting the long established cycles of nature. And yes, even the Syrian Civil War is indirectly related to Climate Change. A horrible drought in Syria several years ago

destroyed the rural agricultural livelihood of much of Syria's population. Without water, they could not farm, so many of them migrated to the urban areas. However, when the government provided these climate refugees with no support, it fanned the flames of revolution of a dispossessed populace standing up against a privileged and unsympathetic ruling elite. Yes, the Arab Spring and the particulars of Bashar Al-Assad were major contributors to the Civil War, but the environment and socioeconomic situation of the country were also a significant factors at play.

The UN in recent days released a chilling report on Climate Change, which set off new alarms all over the world about this problem. Climate change is no longer something that will happen in a number of years, it is happening now, wreaking havoc in our world, from draughts to hurricanes, from polar vortexes to fatal heat waves, from diseases to human armed conflict. It is the severity of this problem, a problem that I believe is the most vexing moral dilemma of our time, that makes me see the wisdom of our texts. We have been treating the earth as though we own it, as though we can trash it without consequence. But we can't. Parashat Behar reminds us that we do not own the land, and if we destroy our earth, no one will come and repair it after us.

I know that not all of you here agree with me on climate change. We might have our differences on this issue, but whether or not you believe that Carbon

levels in our atmosphere and Climate Change are man-made or not, I want to suggest that there is still an area that we might find common ground, as there is a tremendous opportunity that we are poised to take advantage of from this issue. Just like President Kennedy, who stood on the brink of the Space Age when he called on America to begin the moon-landing project and launched America through shared determination and sacrifice to unthinkable realms of excellence, so do we have the opportunity to reshape our economy into a green one. The technology exists, and it is promising, and it has the power to create millions of jobs. And it will also shift our society away from fossil fuels that either come from questionable sources in the Middle East, or from potentially dangerous methods like fracking. But in order to take advantage of this, we have to make painful policy adjustments and substantial sacrifices. Yes, they are expensive; yes, some people will lose their jobs or suffer economically. No one said that major societal change is easy, but in the end, it can and will benefit us.

An old midrash I love tells the story of an old man who was planting a fruit tree. A passerby stops the man and asks him: "Why do you plant this tree? You will surely not live to enjoy the fruit of this endeavor." The old man turns to him and responds that when he was young, he enjoyed the fruit trees planted by those who came before him. Now he is planting a tree so that those

who come after him might enjoy the same kindness he received. We have all inherited the most precious of all possible gifts: living on this beautiful and majestic planet. We cannot take that for granted. Just like the old man, we have to pay it forward for the sake of the future generation. We have to pay it forward by educating each other about the environment, by learning about carbon sequestration and solar panels and biofuels and renewable energy, by making greener choices, and by supporting policies and technologies that will cut back on emissions. Because ultimately, our success or failure as a society and as Jews depends on how we respond to the call to sacrifice. I hope that our relationship with God and Torah will endow us with the wisdom not to exploit this planet for economic success to the point where we can no longer save it. As the great sage Dr. Seuss said in The Lorax: “Unless someone like you cares an awful lot. Nothing is going to get better. It’s not.” To Dr. Seuss, I will add, that perhaps if we do care an awful lot. We can accomplish so much of what we ought.

Shabbat shalom.