

Parashat Behar Bechukotai

פרשת בהר-בחוקותיי

Kehillat YOZMA 5767

In this week's Torah portion, we read "וישן מפני חדש תוציאו" (Leviticus 26:10) („, and you shall bring forth the old from before the new"). This phrase describes economic prosperity in a picturesque way - the harvest is so plentiful, that there is no room (or even need) to keep the previously harvested crops, and one must dispense with the old in order to make room for the new. Over time, this phrase has been taken out of its original agricultural context and given a wider cultural meaning - - in the clash between old values and new, the out-of-date traditions are forsaken for the newer and more modern ones. The underlying message is clear – each generation should make way for its own new traditions by divesting itself of the old traditions and values of the past.

But is this true?

This is of course an extreme view, reflecting an almost revolutionary approach. Of course, one can also interpret the phrase in a way that gives preference to the new, while not totally disregarding the old. YOZMA's own Rabbi Kinneret Shiryon has taught our community this moderate approach, as can be seen in her choice to name the community **יזמ"ה** which is an acronym for "יהדות זמננו מורשת העם" (Judaism of our time; Heritage of our people). This name is an expression of the fertile tension found between tradition (heritage of our people) and innovation and renewal (Judaism of our time).

The Talmudic legend found in the tractate *Masechet Hagiga* (3:1) describes a meeting between *Rebbe* Yehoshua, a Mishnaic scholar, and his students after they have heard a lecture by another rabbi in the *Bet Midrash* (House of Learning). So as not to insult their teacher, the students tell *Rebbe* Yehoshua that they did not hear anything new in the *Bet Midrash* - thus reassuring their *rebbe* that only he teaches them new ideas. In response, *Rebbe* Yehoshua is quoted as encouraging his students to find something new in what they heard in the *Bet Midrash*, saying "אי אפשר לבית המדרש בלא חידוש". (There can be no *Bet Midrash* without renewal and innovation). One can interpret this as a call for new ideas – yet not at the expense of the old, but rather a renewal that is nurtured by the old tradition and in turn enriches it.

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Rabbi Moshe Sofer (1762 – 1839), also known as the "*Hatam*" Sofer, championed the more extreme approach against modernization, fueled by his great anxiety over the spirit of change eclipsing the modern world. The *Hatam* Sofer faced two great changes in the Jewish world; changes that he viewed as threat to the Judaism that he knew: assimilation and reform. The Reform movement spearheaded changing the face of Judaism, by adapting Judaism to the world of Western values. The *Hatam* Sofer feared that integrating these new values into Judaism, even in the smallest degree, might well result in Judaism's downfall. Yet, with his own statement "חדש אסור מן התורה" (Anything new is forbidden by the Torah), he sentenced Judaism to stagnation, annihilation and ruin.

What exactly does his statement mean?

Like the statement above "וישן מפני חדש תוציאו" („, and you shall bring forth the old from before the new") from this week's Torah portion, the *Hatam Sofer's* statement also has agricultural origins. The phrase's origins are found in the prohibition from eating the crop of the new year (referred to in the *Mishna* as "new"), before making the *Omer* sacrifice. The *Hatam Sofer* took this commandment out of its original context and claimed that the prohibition on the "new" was meant as a prohibition on anything new (simply by virtue of its being new) and a sanctification of any existing custom (simply by virtue of its being old). His stance ultimately led to the birth of the extreme Orthodox – *Haredi* branch of Judaism which to this day professes an exacting preservation of Judaism as it was in the past and a fierce rejection of any modernization or change.

The moderate Orthodox, led by Rabbi Shimshon Rafael Hirsh (1808 – 1888), joined the Reform in their opposition to the *Hatam Sofer's* views. Many of the objectors claimed that the *Hatam Sofer's* statement was ironically in and of itself a new approach, as there had always been change and renewal in the Jewish world that had always contributed to Judaism's success and development and even sustained its very existence.

On a personal note, it was exactly eight years ago when I completed the selection process as a *shaliach* (emissary) to North America. Anat, Amit, Omri and I left for Milwaukee, Wisconsin with the goal of bringing our "Eretz-Israel" world and values to the Jewish community there.

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Along the way we met many special people, some of them here with us tonight. The entire process was for us much like Yonatan Gefen's poem "איך שיר נולד" (How a Song is Born) – at first a bit painful and then later it took on a life and independence of its own.

From Israelis who had lived their entire lives secularly, steering clear of anything carrying even the smallest whiff of religious indoctrination, we became Jews. In North America, we were exposed to a rich and exciting Jewish world filled with the old and the new seamlessly intertwined and in constant and free-flowing dialogue with one another. We discovered a new reality in which Judaism does not just belong to the *Hatam Sofer's* Haredi followers; nor to those Orthodox groups interested in making political "hay" of their Judaism to obtain government funding and political favors. We discovered a wide Jewish spectrum that belonged to us as well. We discovered a Judaism where we had from whom to learn and where we had a say.

From being the bearers of the secular, pioneering, Zionist message to the Jewish Diaspora; carrying seemingly obvious answers as to our future, we discovered Judaism's beauty – ironically "there" – across the ocean. We were reminded of the "ברית הראשונים" (the covenant with our ancestors) (Leviticus 26, 45), and we metaphorically took down from our "attic" our contract with the people of Israel and its heritage.

We suddenly began to internalize the meaningful chorus of the Israeli singer Arik Einstein's famous song "אני ואתה נשנה את העולם" (You and I can and will change the world), even extending it to include the ability to change our country and our own private reality.

As Yigal Alon said "עם שאינו מכבד את עברו, ההווה שלו דל, ועתידו – לוט בערפל" (A nation that does not respect its past, most certainly has a weak present and a murky future). We are all involved, daily, in the fulfillment of a Jewish vision where the old is renewed and the new is sanctified.

Kathy - thank you for allowing us to discover this reality and to value it once again. And thank you to everyone for accompanying us on this journey.

Shabbat Shalom - Nir Barkin