

Introduction: Behar Sinai

Our *parasha* deals with various laws regarding land and regarding buying and selling: the rules of the Sabbatical year, when it is forbidden to work the land; the rules of the Jubilee year, when all lands return to their original owners, and indentured servants go free; the prohibition of mistreating one's fellow in business; and the laws regarding what happens to an Israelite who has needed to sell his ancestral land, or even to sell himself into indentured servitude. Our poet begins his poem by praising the Torah's commandments as precious, and then quickly goes through most of the laws in the *parasha*.

Conspicuously absent from direct treatment in the *parasha* is the instruction of scripture that when an Israelite has become poor, and needs to sell his ancestral field (Leviticus 25:25–34), or even sell himself into indentured servitude (Leviticus 25:47–55), the closest relative should “redeem” the field, or the indentured servant, and thus restore the poor Israelite to a position of freedom on his own property. Though our poet does not explicitly discuss these laws, he alludes to “redemption” at the beginning and end of the poem, addressing God as “redeemer”, who redeems Israel from their oppressors and their difficult situations. It is clear that he means to evoke a connection to the verses about “redemption” of the field and the indentured servant. This is especially appropriate, because this is a *piyyut* for the second *qedusha*-verse, “Go'alenu”, which addresses God as “our redeemer”.

Rabbanite poets, too, in their poems for Parashath Behar Sinai, addressed God as “redeemer”, and prayed for Him to redeem His people; see, for example, the poem “Aḥaré Nimkar” by Baruch ben Samuel of Mainz, published in A. M. Habermann, “Liturgical Poems by Baruch bar Shmuel of Mainz” (Hebrew), *Studies of the Research Institute for Hebrew Poetry in Jerusalem*, 6, pp. 83 ff.; this poem is recited in Rabbanite communities of German extraction.

פיוט לקדושה השנייה ("גאולנו") לפרשת בהר סיני, חתום "אהרן" בארבע השורות הראשונות; והכל חורז בחרוז אחיד.

אֵין כְּמוֹהָ גְּאֹל יִשְׂרָאֵל | דָּר בְּשִׁחְקִים:
הוֹרִיתָ לָנוּ בְּהַר סִינַי | מְצוֹת וְחֻקִּים:
רְפוּאוֹת לֵב הֵם | רְצוֹן הָאֵל מְפִיקִים:
נִפְתַּת יִטְפוּ | וּמְדַבֵּשׁ הֵם מְתוּקִים:
בְּמַעֲבֵה הַחֹסֶד וְהַרְחָמִים | יְצוּקִים:
קָרַבְתָּנוּ לְעִבּוֹדְתֶךָ | חֻקֶיךָ לְהַקִּים:
נִשַׁשׁ שָׁנִים | נִזְרַע בְּאֲרָקִים:
וְהַשְׁבִּיעִית שְׂבֵת לִיהוָה | אֵהָב צְדִיקִים:
תְּבוֹאֲתָה לְכָל חַי | מְלֵאִים וְרִיקִים:
וּלְקַדֵּשׁ שָׁנַת הַחֲמִשִּׁים | נְהִיָּה עֹסְקִים:
לְקַרְא דְרֹר | אִישׁ לְמִשְׁפַּחְתּוֹ מְחַבְּקִים:
יֻבַּל הִיא | לְהוֹבִיל לְאַחֲזָנֶתָם רְחוּקִים:
וּמְכַר וְקוֹנֵן | בִּישָׁר מִחֲזִיקִים:
וּמָה וְדָל | אִישׁ כְּפִי כָחוּ, לָהֶם מַעֲנִיקִים:
וְלִנְטֹשׁ מִשָּׂא כָּל יָד | מְמַצּוּקִים:
מֵה־נִּפְלְאוֹ דְבָרֵי אֵל | בְּצִדְקָתְךָ חֻקוֹקִים:
רַחֲמֵי לֹא כָלוּ | מֵאַשֵּׁר בּוֹ דְבָקִים:
וְלֹא יִתְמוּ | לְגֹאֵל בְּנֵי הָעֹשׂוֹקִים:
חֲזוֹן מִיַּד עֹשֶׂקִיהֶם | בְּכָל עֵת לָהֶם מְצִיקִים:

◇ חזון: ואז

יֵאמְרוּ גְּאוּלַי יִהְיֶה | אֲנִשֶׁר גְּאֹלָם מִיַּד־צָר: (תהלים קז:ב)
קָהֵל: גְּאֹלָנוּ יִהְיֶה צְבָאוֹת שְׁמוֹ קָדוֹשׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל: (ישעיה מז:ד)

***Piyyuṭ* for the second *qedusha*-verse (“Go’alenu”) for Parashath Behar Sinai, signed “Aharon” in the initials of the first four lines. The entire poem is monorhymed in the syllable –*qim*.**

None is like You, O redeemer of Israel,¹ who dwells in heaven,
You instructed us commandments and statutes on Mt. Sinai,²
They are healing for the heart; they bring out God’s will.³
They drip honeycomb-honey, and are sweeter than nectar.⁴
They are firmly founded in the most excellent⁵ mercy and compassion.
You have brought us near to serve You,⁶ to uphold Your statutes.
Six years may we sow the land,⁷
And the seventh is a Sabbath unto Adonai,⁸ who loves the righteous;⁹

¹ **O redeemer of Israel.** The conclusion of this poem leads into the *qedusha*-verse “Our redeemer...”; the poet prepares the way for this already in the first line, by addressing God as redeemer. The language of

² **On Mt. Sinai.** The opening of our *parasha* emphasizes that these laws were given at Mt. Sinai: *Adonai spoke to Moses on Mt. Sinai, saying.* (Leviticus 25:1)

³ **They bring out God’s will.** We have translated the word *razon* in accordance with its post-Biblical meaning, “will, desire”. However, it is possible that the poet means it in the Biblical sense, “appeasement, pleasure”, as in Proverbs 8:35 (et passim in Proverbs) from which he has taken the expression “bring out Adonai’s *razon*”. (See Gad. B Sarfatti, *In the Language of My People: Essays on Hebrew* (Hebrew), Jerusalem: The Academy of the Hebrew Language, 1997, p. 105.) If the word *razon* means “will” here, then the lines says that the commandments are a fulfillment of God’s will; but if it means “appeasement, pleasure”, then the line means that observing the commandments bring enjoyment to God.

⁴ **They drip honeycomb-honey (*nofeth*), and are sweeter than nectar (*devash*).** The words *nofeth* and *devash* both mean “honey”, but *nofeth* is specifically honey from a honeycomb, whereas *devash* can refer also to fruit-nectar. The phrase *they drip honeycomb-honey* is taken from Song of Songs 4:11, which is interpreted in Rabbinic literature as referring to the words of the Torah (see, e.g., Song of Songs Rabbah ad loc.); and the phrase *are sweeter than nectar* is taken from Psalms 19:11, where they refer explicitly to the laws of God’s Torah.

⁵ **Most excellent.** Hebrew *ma’avé*, a word which appears once in Scripture, in I Kings 7:46, and is evidently from the word ‘av, “thick”. Aaron ben Joseph comments in his commentary on that verse: “This means in fat (or: lush) land, which has no stones or crevices, but rather the nicest clay.” Here, he is saying that God’s mercy and compassion, on which the Torah is based, are the best possible. Furthermore, he extends the metaphor of earth by saying that the Torah is “firmly founded” mercy and compassion, as if the latter were the ground on which the Torah were set up.

⁶ **You have brought us near to serve You.** Cf. the Rabbanite prayer *Atta Behartanu* for the festivals, which contains the line: “You have sanctified us with Your commandments, and You have brought us near, O our king, to serve You.” (Philip Birnbaum, ed., *Daily Prayer Book: Ha-Siddur HaShalem*, Hebrew Publishing Company, 1949, p. 655)

⁷ **The land.** Hebrew *araqim*, a plural of the Aramaic form *arqa* found in Jeremiah 10:11. Authors of *piyyuṭim* have long been making Hebrew words out of this Biblical Aramaic word; see Shulamit Elizur, “The Incorporation of Aramaic elements in Ancient Palestinian Piyyuṭim” (Hebrew), *Lěšonénu* 70 (2008), p. 336, note 14

⁸ **Six years may we sow the land, / and the seventh is a Sabbath unto Adonai.** Leviticus 25:3–4, from the opening of our *parasha*: *Six years shall ye sow the land [...] but on the seventh year, the land shall have a Sabbath of Sabbaths, a Sabbath unto Adonai [...].*

⁹ **Who loves the righteous.** Psalms 146:8.

Its produce is for every living thing, whether full or empty.¹⁰
And we should be occupied with sanctifying the fiftieth year,
To proclaim liberty, [such that] each man will embrace his clan;
It is a Jubilee, to bring distant people [back] to [the land of their] inheritance.¹¹
And [we must] hold on to uprightness in selling and buying,¹²
And give gifts – each in accordance with one’s means – to the indigent and poor,¹³
And reject taking up any hand from [someone in] difficulty.¹⁴
How wondrous are God’s words, which are inscribed in justice;
His compassion is never depleted from the people that cling to Him,¹⁵
And it will never be over,¹⁶ [but rather will] redeem His oppressed children
Cong. From the hand of their oppressors, who give them trouble at all times.

Cantor. And then –

Those redeemed by Adonai will say that He has redeemed them from the hand of the
enemy. (Psalms 107:2)

Cong. **Our redeemer, Adonai Zeva’oth is His name, the Holy One of Israel.** (Isaiah
47:4)

¹⁰ **Whether full or empty.** For people (who are full of speech) and animals; or for rich people and poor people.

¹¹ **Sanctifying the fiftieth year, / to proclaim liberty, [such that] each man will embrace his clan; / it is a Jubilee, to bring far people [back] to [the land of their] inheritance.** Leviticus 25:10: *And ye shall sanctify the fiftieth year, and ye shall proclaim liberty in the land, to all its inhabitants; it shall be a Jubilee for you, and each man will return to his inheritance, and each man will return to his clan.* The words “Proclaim LIBERTY Throughout all the Land unto all the Inhabitants Thereof”, from the King James Version of this verse, are inscribed on the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia; this fact gives the verse more contemporary significance to today’s Americans.

¹² **Hold on to uprightness in selling and buying.** Leviticus 25:14: *When ye sell a sale to thy fellow, or buy from thy fellow, do not oppress each other.*

¹³ **And give gifts – each in accordance with one’s means – to the indigent and poor.** Leviticus 25:25–55 deals with helping people who have fallen into situations of poverty, though these verses never explicitly speak of giving gifts of charity.

¹⁴ **And reject taking up any hand from [someone in] difficulty.** The syntax is difficult. *Tuv Ta’m* explains the line as referring to a different aspect of the Sabbatical year, mentioned not here in Leviticus 25, but in Deuteronomy 15, namely, forgiving loans. If so, the line would be saying that we must not force a debtor to give the “raising of their hand”, i.e. payback, after the Sabbatical year cancels the loans. The line would yield this meaning more easily if we would emend *massa*, “lifting up”, to *mašshé*, the word used for “loan” in Deuteronomy 15:2.

¹⁵ **People that cling to Him.** Cf. Deuteronomy 4:4: *And ye, who cling to Adonai your God, are all alive today.*

¹⁶ **His mercy is never depleted [...] and it will never be over.** Cf. Lamentations 3:22: *Adonai’s mercy is not over, for his compassion is not depleted.*