

Behar/Behukotai
May 12, 2007
“The poetry of life”
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Would you notice one of the world’s greatest violinists playing some of the world’s greatest masterpieces on one of the finest instruments ever fashioned by human hands – if the artist was playing in the subway, in the midst of rush hour as you hurried by?

Gene Weingarten, a staff writer for the Washington Post was determined to find out. The idea was born awhile ago, when he left a crowded metro station and noticed a ragged-looking man playing the keyboard. The musician was quite good, but no one paid him any attention. So Weingarten asked himself, “What would happen if one of the greatest violinists alive, playing on a Stradivarius worth several million dollars, was plunked down in the same place? Would anyone stop to listen? Would anyone take the time to recognize the genius, the soaring beauty of the playing?

Weingarten approached Joshua Bell, one of the finest classical musicians in the world. Bell, 39, is a consummate violinist who plays before awestruck crowds across the globe. His instrument is a violin crafted by Antonio Stradivari in 1713, at the end of the Italian master’s career. Bell purchased the violin at an auction several years ago, for 3.5 million dollars. Bell and his violin are musical mastery at its absolute height. Bell was intrigued by the stunt – and on Friday January 12, 2007 at 7:51 in the morning, only three days after Bell had filled the house at Boston’s stately Symphony Hall where merely pretty good seats went for \$100 and two weeks before he was to appear at the Music Center at Strathmore in North Bethesda, where he would play to a standing room only audience so respectful of his artistry that they stifled their coughs until the silence between movements – in between Josh Bell appeared in the Metro Stop at L’enfant Paza Station in Washington DC. He positioned himself against a wall beside a trash basket, he was dressed in a long sleeve t-shirt and a Washington Nationals baseball cap. From a small case he removed a violin, placing the open case at his feet, he shrewdly threw in a few dollars and pocket change as seed money, he swiveled it to face pedestrian traffic, and he began to play. What do you think happened? Do you think they noticed?

Well, before I tell you what happened – allow me to digress for a moment and tell you about today’s torah portion and a couple of the dumbest ideas that Judaism ever came up with. I’ll get back to Josh Bell – trust me – but first I want you to explore today’s torah portion which contains – several of the dumbest ideas ever proposed by Judaism -- or at least that is what the Romans had to say about them and they did know a thing or two about building a civilization. The Roman’s mocked these particular ideas, they literally laughed at us when they heard these particular Jewish concepts and they insisted that no one would ever, could ever build a society based on ideas like this.

The ideas to which I refer are found at the outset to the torah reading for this Shabbat morning – Bhar/Behukotai – specifically the opening of *B’har*, Leviticus chapter 25 which introduces us to the institution of the *Shmita* – the Sabbatical Year, the law that requires us to allow the earth to lie fallow once every seven years – and it speaks of the *Yoveil*, the Jubilee year, when land reverted to its original owners – even though it may have been lost in the interim through debt or an inability to pay off loans – after 50 years it reverts to the original owner; and the torah also reminds us this morning of the requirement to observe *Shabbat*, the Sabbath day.

I can't imagine three institutions more intrusive in the daily life of the average person – and neither could the Romans when they heard about them – they mocked us and characterized us as a lazy people. Can you imagine taking off one day out of seven to refrain from productive work? Can you imagine shutting down agriculture in an agrarian society for an entire year once every seven years? And the idea of land reverting back to original owners and disrupting all kinds of legal and financial arrangements once every fifty years? Unthinkable – ridiculous – absurd.

And yet one has to wonder – as ridiculous as these institutions seem – which society can be visited only by searching through archeological ruins and studied only in history books? I'll give you a hint – it ain't us! And which is alive and well and flourishing more than two thousand years later? I'll give you another hint – it ain't the Romans!

So maybe *shmitah*, *yoveil* and *Shabbat* deserve a little more of our time before we, like the Roman's of old, dismiss their relevance to a modern world that is all about efficiency, productivity and control.

Who is in control of your life? You are – of course. I mean you decide what you will do, where you will go – you are in control of all the major decisions regarding how you want to live your life – aren't you? I mean after all who determined that you would wake up, get dressed and come to shul this morning – it was you wasn't it? We would certainly like to think we are in control—but the torah comes to each us: think again.

No matter how hard a person may work at making a living, he is commanded to stop once a week, once every seven years and again once every forty-nine years and let go. And you must stop, no matter what the state of things may be. When the candles are lit on Friday night, or when the 7th year arrives, we put down our tools, we set aside our extravagant plans, and we rest – and for someone who accepts the torah, you have no choice.

Besides the fact that these institutions are all based on the number seven, they also teach us an important lesson about the nature of life. Simply put - we do not have as much control over life as we think we do. *Shnat Hashmetah*, the Sabbatical year, and *Shnat Hayovel*, or the Jubilee year, teaches us that the earth does not belong to us. We are merely settlers on the land or as the Bible puts it, we are *gerim vâ=toshovim imadi*. אYou may not sell the land in perpetuity because you are merely tenants on My land!@ says the Lord. Can you imagine what such a philosophy sounded like to an agricultural based society? Can you imagine what it meant to tell a nation of farmers - the land is not yours it is Mine?

We call the purchase of land, אreal estate@ because nothing seems more real or permanent than the ownership of land. Yet periodically our ancestors were commanded to allow the land to return to its original אland Lord.@ (That seems like an especially appropriate term for God -- He is the divine Land Lord!) The Sabbatical year and the Jubilee year were great equalizers: the best of plans had to be balanced by the interests of the society at large. And the reason this could happen is because the land does not belong to us - no matter how much you paid for it, no matter how much you worked it, no matter how much you thought you owned it!

Did you know that to this day - you can not purchase land in the modern State of Israel? Nope - the Holy Land cannot be bought or sold because it is not ours to own - it belongs to God - rather the land is administered by the JNF and individuals can אrent@ it for automatically renewable

leases of 75 or 150 years - I forget which it was. You cannot own, you cannot control that which ultimately does not belong to you.

Time does not belong to us, either. [^]Seven days you shall work, but on the seventh day you shall rest.[@] I love the feeling that comes with the arrival of Shabbat on Friday night. No matter how busy we may be, when the hour of candle lighting arrives everything comes to a halt. We only control that hour to the extent that we can make it earlier if we so wish -- not later. As we light the candles I can almost hear a collective sigh of relief from the entire Jewish people as the candles are lit. Time no longer belongs to us - and you know what - it is nice to let go, it's nice to take a break from being in the driver's seat.

We put away the day timers, the palm pilots, and the calendars. We are now living on God's time.

In his book, [^]This is My God[@], Herman Wouk talks about the power of Shabbat in his life. At no time was this as clear as it was on those occasions when he was working on a Broadway play. No matter how chaotic things might be in the theater and no matter how close to catastrophe the play may seem to be, Wouk would pick up and leave for home on Friday afternoon to prepare for Shabbat. For twenty-five hours everything would stop. He would become a father and a husband and a Jew once again. For twenty-five hours he was not in control, not calling the shots. And no matter how near collapse the play was when he left on Friday afternoon – it was in no worse shape when he returned on Saturday night – but he was refreshed, at peace and ready to renew the work at hand. Such is the power of Shabbat; such is the wisdom of letting go.

OK – end of digression. Let us return to Josh Bell who had just taken his violin out of his case – there he was dressed in his long sleeve t-shirt, standing next to the trash basket in the Metro station in Washington DC and he began to play – complex, breathtaking masterpieces that have endured for centuries. Bell put his heart and soul into his music, coaxing pristine resonant notes from his instrument. He played six pieces in 43 minutes. And during those 43 minutes, 1,097 people walked by the virtuoso. How many do you think stopped and took notice?

Seven! Only seven out of 1,097 stopped to hear the music for more than one minute. Twenty seven tossed in some money while hurrying on. The rest --- well the rest rushed by, totally oblivious to what they were missing. They did not know how to stop. They did not know how to let go.

There were a number of very revealing details of this study. As they reviewed the video tape and if you would like to see portions of it for your self you can check it out at: (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/04/04/AR2007040401721.html>) they noticed that a couple of minutes into Josh Bell's performance a woman and her pre-schooler emerge from the escalator. The woman is walking briskly and, therefore, so is the child. She's got his hand. "I had a time crunch," recalls Sheron Parker, an IT director for a federal agency when she was later shown the video. "I had an 8:30 training class and first I had to rush Evvie off to his teacher, then rush back to work, then to the training facility in the basement." Evvie is her son, Evan. Evan is 3 years old. You can see Evan clearly on the video. He's the cute black kid in the parka who keeps twisting around to look at Joshua Bell, as he is being propelled toward the door. "there was a musician," Parker says, "and my son was intrigued. He wanted to pull over and listen, but I was rushed for time. " So Parker does what

she has to do – you can see it clearly in the video, she deftly moves her body between Evan's and Bell's, cutting off her son's line of sight. A common maneuver familiar to most parents who have used it at one time or another. But, as they exit the arcade, Evan can still be seen craning to look. When Parker is later told what she walked out on, she laughs, "Evan is very smart!"

The poet Billy Collins once laughingly observed that all babies are born with knowledge of poetry, because the lub-dub of the mother's heart is an iambic meter. Then, Collins said, life slowly starts to choke the poetry out of us.

That my friends is the secret of *Shabbat*, and *Shmita* and *Yoveil* – if life slowly chokes the poetry out of us – Shabbat is the antidote- Shabbat is the day that puts the music back into life.

The journalist, Gene Weingarten said that this story got the largest and most global response of anything he had ever written. Over 1000 comments came from around the globe. More than 10% of those who wrote in said that the article made them cry. Cry for the deadened souls that couldn't stop to appreciate the beauty that surrounded them. Cry for the lost moments, the opportunities that slip through our hands never to return. Cry for the rush of life which sucks up the essence of life itself.

As I read this story, I found myself contemplating how I would have reacted had I been at the L'enfant Palza station in D.C. that Friday morning. *Surely*, I thought, *surely I would have noticed the brilliant music, even if I was rushing past on my way to work. How could I not have been one of the select few who grasped that this musician, this music, was different?*

But then as I sat in my office yesterday, also on a Friday morning, typing this sermon, preparing for Shabbat and a hectic weekend at Beth Shalom – I realized that I had rushed to get to the office early, I had hurried through the couple of blocks from my house to the shul and I had been surrounded by the tantalizing beauty of spring. As I had exited my house the peonies and were in full bloom, the trees were spreading their green leaves. I had passed by irises, their deep purple heads nodding in the soft breeze. The air was fresh and wet from an early morning shower and above, the clouds were clearing out, giving over to a rich blue sky. But, in my haste, I saw none of it. I was deaf to the music surrounding me on all sides.

Thank God for Shabbat. Today I had time – all the time in the world – and as I walked to shul this morning I noticed all the things I had missed yesterday – as I leisurely walked to shul this morning I enjoyed the sights and sounds of spring. Today, I am in no hurry – I have no place to be but right here – so I will take the time to enjoy the *hazen's davening*; the chanting of a young woman celebrating her bat mitzvah. I'll make a l'chayyim at Kiddush and leisurely joke with friends and exchange stories of the week gone by. And I will walk home with my wife and my son enjoying the beauty of a remarkably brilliant spring day.

"A couple of the dumbest ideas Judaism ever came up with?" I don't think so! The Roman's didn't get it and that is why their civilization lay in ruins – but for the last 2000 years we Jews did get it and thanks to Shabbat, the poetry of life has not been lost on us – I hope it won't be lost on you either. *Shabbat Shalom.*

And as for the land, the same can be said to be true. What we give up is an acknowledgment of whose really in charge in our lives.