



The Fragrance of Freedom

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Parashat BeHar 5784

One of the hallmark Rabbinic interpretive techniques is the identification of parallel wording in two different sections of the Torah. In legal interpretation, this is the foundation for the second of R. Yishmael's "13 principles by which the Torah is interpreted": the *gezeirah shavah*, or "the rule of equivalence."¹ This principle, first quoted in the name of Hillel the Elder,² posits that if the same word or phrase appears in two distinct legal cases in the Torah, that is an indication that we can apply the parameters of one law to the other. The original and paradigmatic form of the *gezeirah shavah* was one in which the word in question appears only twice in the entire Torah.³ When there is only one other location that a linking word takes us to, then the inference from one context to the other becomes especially strong.

¹ See the Baraita de-R. Yishmael that opens the Sifra and that is in the Siddur before Pesukei de-Zimra.

² See Tosefta Sanhedrin 7:5 (at the end) for the list of "seven principles that Hillel presented before the Elders of Beteira" (often called "Children of Beteira"). See also Avot de-R. Natan (Version A) 37, and the stories in Yerushalmi Pesahim 6:1 / 33a and Bavli Pesahim 66a-b.

³ The example of the first *gezeirah shavah* that Hillel presented to Ziknei/Benei Beitera is given in the stories in Pesahim, where the people did not know whether or not the *pesah* lamb overrides (i.e. can be offered on) Shabbat (אם פסח דוחה את השבת אם לאו). They hear that someone has just come up from Babylon named Hillel who knows the answer. Hillel's proof that the *pesah* does indeed override Shabbat, because the word במועדו ("at its set time") is used in the a describing the *pesah* offering (Numbers 9:2) and also appears in the verse describing the daily offering (Numbers 28:2). So, since we know the daily offering overrides Shabbat, we can conclude that the *pesah* offering overrides Shabbat. Tosafot points out that these are the only two places in the Torah where the word במועדו appears.



This technique, so well-established in legal interpretation, can also be applied to the literary or poetic study of the Torah's language. The use of parallel wording to signal connections across disparate passages is one of the Torah's primary literary tools. And here, too, that signal becomes especially strong when the connection is forged by the **only two instances**⁴ of a word in the Torah. It is as if the two spots become tethered and able to transmit contextual information to one another.

That is true for one of the most prominent words in Parashat BeHar: דרור (*dror*). It appears in a verse that will be especially familiar to anyone who has visited the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia, which bears this inscription:

Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof. —Leviticus. XXV X

The word translated as “liberty” is *dror*, and it appears in the context of Parashat BeHar's laws of Yovel, the Jubilee Year:

ויקרא כה:ח-י

וּסְפַרְתָּ לְךָ שִׁבְעַת שָׁבוֹת שָׁנִים שִׁבְעַת שָׁנִים שִׁבְעַת שָׁנִים וְהָיוּ לְךָ יָמֵי שִׁבְעַת שָׁבוֹת שָׁנִים תִּשַׁע וְאַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה. וְהָעִבְרִית שׁוֹפָר תְּרוּעָה בַּחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי בְּעֶשְׂרֵי לַחֹדֶשׁ בְּיוֹם הַכִּפּוּרִים תַּעֲבִירוּ שׁוֹפָר בְּכָל אֲרָצְכֶם. וּקְדַשְׁתֶּם אֶת שְׁנַת הַחֲמִשִּׁים שָׁנָה וּקְרַאתֶם דְּרוֹר בְּאֶרֶץ לְכָל יֹשְׁבֵיהָ יוֹבֵל הוּא תְהִיָּה לָכֶם וּשְׁבוֹתֶם אִישׁ אֶל אֲחֵזְתּוֹ וְאִישׁ אֶל מִשְׁפַּחְתּוֹ תָּשֻׁבוּ.

Leviticus 25:8-10

You shall count for yourself seven *shabbatot* of years—that is, seven years, seven times—so that the seven *shabbatot* of years gives you a total of 49 years. Then you shall sound the *shofar*; in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month—the Day of Atonement—you shall have the *shofar* sounded throughout your land. And you shall hallow the 50th year.

⁴ In corpus linguistics, this phenomenon is called a *λεγόμενον* (*dis legomenon*).



You shall proclaim **dror** throughout the land for all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: each of you shall return to your holding and each of you shall return to your family.

After seven cycles of seven years⁵—each one punctuated by the seventh, Sabbatical year of release of land rights and debts—comes the 50th, Jubilee year, with an even greater level of release. Slaves are released from service, and everyone, throughout the land, is flung forth from where they have settled and returned to their tribal homeland. A mass scrambling takes place across the land—everyone is moving. That process is the response to the proclamation of “*dror*.”

So what is this *dror*? It was rendered on the bell as “liberty.” In the JPS Tanakh, the word is translated as “release.” Rashi quotes R. Yehudah from the Talmud (Rosh HaShanah 9b), who says that the word is related to “*dirah*,” dwelling—“כְּמִדְּרַי בִּי דִירָא” - it is like one who dwells (*medayar*) in a dwelling (*daira*)—and then adds: “שָׂדֵר בְּכָל מְקוֹם שֶׁהוּא רוֹצֶה וְאֵינוֹ בְּרִשְׁוֹת אֲחֵרִים” - meaning that he may dwell in any place he pleases, and is not under the control of others.”

Everyone seems to agree on a general connotation of freedom. But what kind of freedom is being proclaimed here?

In search of further nuance, we turn to the one other use of the word *dror* in the Torah. It comes in a much less prominent moment, buried in the midst of the intricate descriptions of the *mishkan* that take up much of the final *parshiyyot* of the Book of Exodus. We find the word used as part of the name of one of the ingredients in the oil that was used to anoint the High

⁵ The language here parallels the seven cycles of seven days that make up the counting of the Omer, which was described last week’s *parashah*: “וּסְפַרְתֶּם לָכֶם מִמַּחֲרַת הַשַּׁבָּת מִיּוֹם הַבִּיאָכֶם אֶת־עֹמֶר הַתְּנוּפָה שִׁבְעַת שָׁבָּתוֹת תְּמִימֹת” - Count for yourselves—from the after you brought the omer offering—the day after the festival—seven *shabbatot*.”



Priest. With this oil, God says, “you will anoint Aharon and his sons and sanctify them to serve me as priests (וְאֶת אַהֲרֹן וְאֶת בְּנָיו תִּמְשַׁח וְקִדַּשְׁתָּ אֹתָם לְכֹהֵן לִי), Exodus 30:30).

God gives Moshe a precise recipe for the mixture:

שמות ל:כג

וְאֵתָה קָח לָךְ בְּשָׁמִים רֹאשׁ מֶרְדְּרוֹר חֲמִשׁ מֵאוֹת וְקִנְמָן בְּשָׁם מִחֲצִיתוֹ חֲמִשִּׁים וּמְאֲתָיִם וְקִנְיָה בְשָׁם חֲמִשִּׁים וּמְאֲתָיִם.

Exodus 30:23

You take choice spices: 500 weight of *mor dror*, and half as much (250) of fragrant cinnamon, 250 of aromatic cane.

What does *mor dror* mean here? *Mor* is usually understood either as “myrrh,” a tree resin, or as “musk,” the glandular secretion of a deer.⁶ Either way, it is some form of perfume. So what is *mor dror*? How can a scent be described as “free”? The JPS translation here, “flowing,” is helpful—free as in “free-flowing.” That is how scent works, after all. We can smell perfume because actual particles are flowing through the air.

How does this version of *dror* affect our understanding of the freedom in Parashat BeHar? If we search for a shared **semantic** meaning between the two usages, we might say that the person granted *dror* during the Jubilee year is allowed to move about freely through the world just like a tiny particle moves in “free flow” through the air.

But remember, the *gezeirah shavah* principle also allows us to import some of the **contextual** meaning from one usage into another. This “flowing” freedom here describes something

⁶ See Ramban: “הסכימו המפרשים והרב רבי משה מכללם, כי המור הוא הנקרא מוסק” - The commentators—including R. Moshe [ben Maimon]—have generally agreed that *mor* is that perfume which is called musk.”



aromatic. And it is not just any fragrance: it is the oil used to anoint the High Priest, and all the vessels in our most sacred space. Smelling this myrrh and cinnamon blend would evoke a moment of consecration.

The freedom of the Jubilee was, so to speak, infused with the scent of holiness. To be present in that moment, to hear the sound of the *shofar* blast and the call for liberty, was to detect a new spirit in the air, to have one's senses stimulated and awakened to not just the moral imperative, but also to the sanctity of human freedom.

We have so far been searching for a better understanding of the proclamation of freedom (דרור) in Parashat BeHar by considering the image of flowing myrrh (מר דרור) from the anointing oil. But the *gezeirah shavah* principle also suggests that the transference of meaning can move in both directions. So what does the larger context of the Jubilee Year bring to our understanding of the anointing oil?

One thing it suggests is that the purpose of the anointing oil is not only to consecrate someone (or something) and render them fit for divine service, but also to dab them with a trace of freedom. That would mean the High Priest was anointed not only to bring holiness to the people, but also—when the occasion should arise—to call for their liberation.

That link between the two usages of *dror* in the Torah, the holy anointing and the call for freedom, is identified also by the prophet Yeshayahu, who says:

ישעיה סא:א

רוח א-דני ה' עלי יען מִשַׁח ה' אֶתִּי לְבָשָׁר עֲנוּיִם שְׁלַחֲנִי לְחַבֵּשׁ לְנִשְׁבְּרֵי לֵב לִקְרֹא לְשׁוֹבוּיִם דְּרוֹר וְלֹאֲסוּרִים
 פְּקֹחַ קוֹחַ:



Isaiah 61:1

The spirit of my Lord Eternal is upon me, because the Eternal has **anointed** me. I have been sent to deliver good tidings to the humble, to mend the broken-hearted, to **proclaim *dror***—release to the captives, liberation to the imprisoned.

May God send someone soon, to deliver us good tidings, to mend our broken hearts, to proclaim *dror*, liberty, throughout the Land and—please God—to release the captives and liberate the imprisoned.

