

Parashat Behar

Private Joe Walker is one of the most loved characters of that great TV classic series - Dad's Army. Second youngest in the Walmington-on-Sea platoon next to dopey Pike, Walker was a lovable rogue who was a constant thorn in Captain Mainwaring's side, perpetually making sarcastic, cheeky, witty comments while the latter was grandstanding and pontificating during his serious lectures. And yet, there was no questioning his loyalty to the platoon and to his leader. In fact, in many episodes it was Walker's dubious 'market connections' that often served to save the day for Mainwaring and the platoon. And yet, though appreciative of such positive end results, it's true to say that Captain Mainwaring was never wholly at ease with Walker's stated occupation of "Wholesales supplier". Indeed Mainwaring was often critical of Walker's cheerful willingness to operate outside of the law and or use tactics that he considered were simply not 'cricket' - even though they often brought positive results. Mainwaring was an adherent of 'the straight bat,' and Walker was most definitely a little crooked; lovable, but still crooked. Private Walker was constantly on the lookout for opportunities to make a few bob, and could normally be found trying to sell such things as petrol coupons and black market foodstuffs to his platoon comrades, usually at high prices and from dubious sources. Although Captain Mainwaring was often willing to turn a blind eye when it suited him in order to avail himself of Walker's hard to get items, like, in one episode, a bottle of whiskey, it often turned out to be the case that goods supplied at exorbitant prices by Private Walker's 'wholesale supplies' were not quite as described and certainly sub-standard. Take for instance the episode in which Private Walker supplied the platoon with its own mascot - The Big Parade - in which Mainwaring has the great idea that the platoon should acquire a fierce ram as its mascot which would lead them in the forthcoming Walmington-on-Sea parade. Private Walker naturally offers to supply for a fiver. But instead of providing a ram, the epitome of masculinity and strength, the platoon is supplied with a skinny, pitifully thin goat that ends up eating Captain Mainwaring's now returned five pound note!

You see, as much as we love the character of Private Walker the reality was that he was, to use the terminology of the day, a spiv. Although many people during the war and afterward until the end of rationing, found that like Captain Mainwaring they could not get by without the dubious services of the spiv, the simple fact was that the spiv was someone on the make, someone who was profiteering from the misery of war and taking advantage of people in order to do it. The dire circumstances in which people lived in the 40s and 50s meant that they were somewhat inevitable and necessary while at the same time they represented a reprehensible element in human nature. In November 1946 the journalist Warwick Charlton reflected the general view of spivs when he wrote in an article for the Daily Express: "The spivs' shoulders are better upholstered than they have ever been before. Their voices are more knowing, winks more cunning, rolls (of bank-notes) fatter, patent shoes more shiny. The spivs are the "bright boys" who live on their wits. They have only one law: Thou shalt not do an honest day's work. They have never been known to break this law." A few months later in 1947 Mr Frederick Lee Labour MP for Manchester Hulme in a debate about the Economic

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Situation brought up the subject of spivs: "I do not know," he said, "whether the word "spivs" is a Parliamentary expression, but it seems to me that in these days we are suffering from a curse of "spivs" that have never found, and do not want to find, a method of getting anything without working for it. It seems to me, however, that a very large number of people in the gaming saloons one can see around London are getting "a very good living, thank you" without much thought or work." That was Private Walker to a tee. He was a man who, for some curious reason and in spite of being more than eligible to be drafted, somehow found a way of staying out of the army. He was happy to let other men do the dirty work of actual fighting and dying, while he stayed at home profiteering from black market goods. In reality the spiv was a leech who undermined the wartime economy and literally cashed in on human misery. Indeed, it was only after the end of rationing in the 1950s and the commensurate withdrawal of the spiv from general society that the characterisation in British cinema of the spiv as lovable rogue, ala Private Walker, took over from that of the immoral criminal low life. The characterisation of the spiv in British cinema thus transitioned from David Attenborough's reprehensible Pinkie in Brighton Rock to George Cole's lovable Flash Harry in St Trinian's. But then, as they say, nothing boosts nostalgia like the failure of memory!

And yet it's not that spivs totally disappeared with the ritual burning of the ration books in 1954. They may have withdrawn from the centre of British life, but they very much still existed around its outskirts and in more recent years, with the advent of global recession in the late naughties until today, have made something of a resurgence. As the Urban Dictionary tells us, the spiv is "A flashy, slick operator who makes a living more from speculation or profiteering than from actual work. The kind of guy who wears a shiny medallion, goes bankrupt from a dodgy swampland development scheme, but still has a big house in his wife's name." When we reframe Private Walker and his ilk in the garb of our modern time suddenly he's not funny any more. The modern spiv is still trading on human misery and exploiting the vulnerable. Modern spivs like Jimmy Nicholson who, according to the North East's Chronicle Live, "was the head honcho of a team of conmen who advertised themselves as above board gardeners but were actually lowlife criminals." He ran "businesses under various names, including Oakland Trees and Bushes, and Woodland Tree Services and Driveway Cleaning, both based in Ashington. He would target areas by dropping leaflets through doors purporting to be from a legitimate and trustworthy firm." "One 77-year-old woman was even repeatedly driven to the bank and made to withdraw £14,000 for the heartless crooks. Despite paying that £13,800, an expert later calculated the actual value of the work done to be no more than £2,800." Many more such stories were told in court and Nicholson was sent to prison early last year for 16 months. Rogues aren't so lovable are they when it's closer to home and to our times. In fact they are the cause of much human misery and destroy lives. One of Nicholson's victims spoke to this effect of how she had been "left feeling vulnerable, less trusting than before and insecure in her own home and said she was angry as she believes the fraudsters were targeting the elderly as she lives in a bungalow. She added: "He took advantage of me."

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The fact that the 'spiv' is still with us shouldn't surprise us though should it? We cannot deny the allure of ill-gotten gain, which has been a regretful part of human nature since time began. That is why the Bible rails against it in all its sorry forms. The primary activity of the spiv - taking advantage of people in their vulnerability - is regarded throughout the Bible as a particularly heinous act. Rather than working for a living the spiv aims to live an easy life by profiteering from those who do. The Wisdom of Mishlei therefore says that, "Treasures gained by wickedness do not profit, but righteousness delivers from death." (10:2); "Better is a little with righteousness than great revenues with injustice." (16:8). "He who increases his wealth by charging exorbitant interest amasses it for someone who will bestow it on the poor." (28:8). Mishlei's attitude is that profiteers like this will eventually be paid back for their injustices, for even if they manage to evade the long arm of the law in this age, they will certainly face Hashem's judgement in the next. The story of Hananyah and Shappirah in Acts 5 is a sobering working out of Mishlei's point of view. As we read, "But there was a man named Hananyah who, with his wife Shappirah, sold some property and, with his wife's knowledge, withheld some of the proceeds for himself; although he did bring the rest to the emissaries. Then Kefa said, "Why has the Adversary so filled your heart that you lie to the Ruach HaKodesh and keep back some of the money you received for the land? Before you sold it, the property was yours; and after you sold it, the money was yours to use as you pleased. So what made you decide to do such a thing? You have lied not to human beings but to God!" On hearing these words, Hananyah fell down dead; and everyone who heard about it was terrified." Acts therefore underscores the message of Mishlei: profiteering and the lazy, greed driven indifference to the human impact of profiteering that enables it, are not only extremely reprehensible but will have eternal consequences. In fact Mishlei 1:19 fits the context of Hananyah and Shappirah's story perfectly. "So are the ways of all greedy for gain — it takes the lives of those who get it." No wonder the community in Jerusalem were terrified! Perhaps they realised, as we all may realise when we reflect on our lives, that no one is completely free from the inclination to greed. I am sure that no one here is a spiv, but the temptation to take more than our fair share when it comes to many aspects of life, is something that we are all afflicted with simply because we are human. That's why Rav Shaul was so hard on the Corinthians with regard to their post-service meals. His comments about what Christians have lifted from the text and call 'communion' are actually framed within the context of an Oneg - a post service meal such as we regularly enjoy. Apparently some people at the front of the lunch queue were taking far more than their fair share, which meant that those at the back had little to nothing on their plate. He wanted people to understand just how pernicious this was reminding them of the fact that the whole point of their eating together was not to fill the belly, but to participate in a sacred act of community. Rav Shaul's perspective in this matter was unquestionably influenced by the practice in Temple times of the communal eating of the sacrificial peace offering. Eating the peace offering was not about filling the belly but about being joined together as a community in a mystical union with God. In as much as Yeshua was for Rav Shaul the very incarnation of the shlamim sacrifice, it stood to reason that whenever the community ate together after a service they were, being joined together in this mystical union. So when individuals at the front of the

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queue piled their plates high they not only left those at the back with nothing to eat, but they effectively also disrespected the One in whose name they had gathered. Indeed, as we see, just as in Mishlei and in Acts 5, Rav Shaul declared that it was because of this many in the Corinthian community were ill or had even died, "Therefore, whoever eats the Lord's bread or drinks the Lord's cup in an unworthy manner will be guilty of desecrating the body and blood of the Lord! So let a person examine himself first, and then he may eat of the bread and drink from the cup; for a person who eats and drinks without recognizing the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself. This is why many among you are weak and sick, and some have died! If we would examine ourselves, we would not come under judgment. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined, so that we will not be condemned along with the world. So then, my brothers, when you gather together to eat, wait for one another. If someone is hungry, he should eat at home, so that when you meet together it will not result in judgment."

The consistent view of the Biblical writers from Bresheet to Revelation is that greed; taking more than your fair share; profiteering at other people's expense and being indifferent to the consequences for others is a thoroughly reprehensible thing. The Bible throughout therefore exhorts us to practice another way - to choose a path of sensitivity to one another; to look after each other's needs; to take no more than we are due; and to make sure that we structure our community and wider society along the lines of equity and fairness. Thus it is that in our parashah this week we read the following, ""If you sell anything to your neighbor or buy anything from him, neither of you is to exploit the other. Rather, you are to take into account the number of years after the yovel when you buy land from your neighbor, and he is to sell to you according to the number of years crops will be raised. If the number of years remaining is large, you will raise the price; if few years remain, you will lower it; because what he is really selling you is the number of crops to be produced. Thus you are not to take advantage of each other, but you are to fear your God; for I am Adonai your God." Although these mitzvot are given in relation to the yovel I was struck upon reading them by how pertinent they are for every day life. If we excise for a moment the reference to the Yovel we are left with, "neither of you is to exploit the other," and "you are not to take advantage of each other." These two statements say much about the kind of lives we are to live and the kind of society we ought to seek to establish. Indeed, in as much as the passage also promises us that if we do then, "you will live securely in the land," it warns us about the destructive effects to human relationships and therefore to wider society of tolerating any kind of greed and profiteering. When someone takes two slices of cake they may leave someone else with none. When someone pulls the wool over someone else's eyes and knowingly sells them something far in excess of it's value then they not only defraud the other but they humiliate and demean them. When loan sharks like Wonga make huge profits from people on the back of their poverty they are not only humiliating and demeaning them but they are creating stresses in society which can only result in social unrest. When rapacious companies fail to pay their employees a fair wage for a fair days work while giving huge bonuses to their directors they are doing the same. When huge multi-national corporations

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fail to pay their fair due of tax in their companies of operation they are doing the same. Social unrest resulting from an unfair world and leads inevitably to the rise of extremism on the left and on the right, and you only have to look at the genocides of the Twentieth Century to see what such extremes can do. So what the Torah is saying is that you can only hope to live securely in a *fair world* in which no one is taking advantage of or exploiting the other. In this and in so many other matters of life the Torah sets the parameters but doesn't tell us exactly how this may be achieved but leaves the actual working out to us. In the light of this we perhaps therefore ought to ask ourselves whether we are agents of equity and fairness? I hope so, for as Yeshua said, 'Blessed are the peacemakers.' Those who take more than their fair share in any walk of life whether it be our actions as individuals, or that actions of big business, countries or even continents, are doing the opposite. When we look at the problems of the world in this respect we can naturally be overwhelmed, but that is no reason to throw our hands up in despair and give in. If we learn anything from the long and winding path of the Biblical texts we learn that change can come as a result of the cumulative actions of committed individuals. It is because of this that when Yochanan the Immerser was asked what repentance looked like, he said, "Whoever has two coats should share with somebody who has none, and whoever has food should do the same." Tax-collectors also came to be immersed; and they asked him, "Rabbi, what should we do?" "Collect no more than the government assesses," he told them. Some soldiers asked him, "What about us? What should we do?" To them he said, "Don't intimidate anyone, don't accuse people falsely, and be satisfied with your pay.""