

This week's parsha includes Behar, in which we receive the laws of Shmita, or the sabbatical year. Although this is a fascinating topic with important implications for the economic and ecological problems of today, I would like to take this opportunity to discuss cycles in general, viewing the sabbatical year as just one of many such cycles in the Torah.

Many view Jewish law and tradition as burdensome and legalistic, but I would like to propose a different interpretation, one based on this idea of cycles and drawing from the thought of Plotinus—a Greek philosopher widely considered to be the last great thinker in the ancient Platonic tradition. He believed that all of reality emanates and flows from a principle he called “the One.” This principle, also called “G-d” or “the Good,” is an incomprehensible and transcendent unity, existing even beyond the plane of being. This entity, like the sun, releases light outward, and this light forms the world as we know it as it flows farther from its source.

Plotinus believed that our lives in relation to the One could be described through the metaphor of a dance. As living, ensouled beings, we collectively participate in a great circular dance. In the middle of this dance stands a conductor—Plotinus' symbol for the One. As we dance, we have two options. First, we can choose to face away from the conductor, that is, from the One, and occupy ourselves with distractions and illusions. Alternatively, we can turn to face the One. We can gaze upon this Unity and model our dance, that is, our lives, on its shining example. In this way, we can lead meaningful and beautiful lives.

So what, then, are Jewish laws and traditions? They are, quite simply, the steps in this great universal dance. Just as all dances have steps and cycles in order to guarantee their beauty and flow, so too does the Jewish tradition provide the choreography for a meaningful life. It is only by turning to face the Good and by engaging intentionally in the cycles of our tradition that we can find lives of purpose, harmony, and unity with G-d. Thank you and Shabbat Shalom.