

PARASHAH: B'har (On Mount)
ADDRESS: Vayikra (Leviticus) 25:1-26:2
READING DATE: Shabbat
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(Note: all quotations are taken from the **Complete Jewish Bible**, translation by David H. Stern, Jewish New Testament Publications, Inc., unless otherwise noted)

Let's begin with the opening blessing for the Torah:

***“Baruch atah YHVH, Eloheynu, Melech ha-‘Olam,
asher bachar banu m’kol ha-amim,
v’natan lanu eht Torah-to.
Baruch atah YHVH, noteyn ha-Torah.
Ameyn.”***

(Blessed are you, O' LORD, our God, King of the Universe,
you have selected us from among all the peoples,
and have given us your Torah.
Blessed are you, LORD, giver of the Torah.
Ameyn.)

This is **Parashat B'har**. **B'har** means "on (the) Mount (of Sinai)." The opening dialogue between HaShem and Moshe takes place on Mount Sinai. The subject of this very short parashah is the **Sh'mittah** and the **Yovel**. Sh'mittah is defined as the "release," or the "Sabbatical Year." In the Sh'mittah the land lay fallow every 7th year, and after the 49th year, (7x7) it lay fallow a 2nd year for the 50th year as well. This 50th year is known as the Yovel (Jubilee).

I am indebted to Orthodox Jewish author Greg Killian for the excellent Talmudic resources concerning the Yovel.

“Lucky Number Seven”

*I am not stating that I believe in any form of "luck" whatsoever. I am simply borrowing a popular phrase to serve my teaching purpose.

The number seven is very significant in biblical circles. Seven signals the act of completion and of perfection. The Talmud, that ancient compendium of Jewish thought, speaks about the cycles of "seven." In Tractate Sanhedrin it is found:

'Rav Kattina said, 'The world will exist for six thousand years, then for one thousand it will be desolate, as it is said, "The LORD alone will be exalted in that day" (Isaiah 2:11). Abaye said, 'It will be desolate for two thousand, as it is said, "After two days he will revive us; on the third day, he will raise us up, and we will live in his sight"' (Hosea 6:2).

And in another place it is found,

"It has been taught in accordance with Rav Kattina, 'Just as every seventh year is a year of sh'mittah [letting the land lie fallow], so it is with the world: one thousand years out of seven are to be fallow—as proved by the following three texts taken together [in which the key word is "day"]': "The LORD alone will be exalted in that day" (Isaiah 2:11); "A psalm and song for the day of Shabbat" (Psalm 92:1), meaning the day that is entirely Shabbat; and, "For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past" (Psalm 90:4).

And finally,

"The school of Eliyahu teaches: 'The world exists for six thousand years—two thousand of them *tohu* ["void"]; two thousand, Torah; and two thousand, the era of the Messiah. But because of our numerous iniquities many of these years have been lost.'"¹

Some fascinating insights will emerge hidden in the text if we dig for them. For instance, hidden within the Hebrew text of chapter 25, verses 1-7 we find the root letters "SH-B/V-T" שבת, which as a noun form the word for "Shabbat" and as a verb form the word for "rest," appearing exactly **seven** times! Imagine that: In **seven** verses a word that focuses on the **seventh** day principle appears **seven times!**

The Chazal (the Rabbis of antiquity) also found a noticeable connection between the Shabbat concept and the Yovel itself. Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitz'chaki) references these connections in his quote from the **Sifra**. But you don't have to be a rabbi to see this connection for yourself. Let us go to the text. Observe these quotes from the **Online Tanakh with Kitvei Talmidei HaMashiach**:

"Six days shall work be done: but on the seventh day is a Shabbat of solemn rest, a holy convocation; you shall do no manner of work: it is a Shabbat to ADONAI in all your dwellings (23:3)."

Notice the phrase "Shabbat to ADONAI." This phrase is repeated twice in our parashah at 25:2, 4:

"Speak to the children of Yisra'el, and tell them, When you come into the land which I give you, then shall the land keep a Shabbat to ADONAI. Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in the yield of it; but in the seventh year shall be a Shabbat of solemn rest for the land, a Shabbat to ADONAI: you shall neither sow your field, nor prune your vineyard."

¹ Talmud, *Tractate Sanhedrin* 97a-97b.

Nowhere else in the entire 5 books of the Torah do we find a festival named specifically as a “Shabbat to ADONAI.” Only the seventh day Shabbat and the Yovel enjoy this title. To be sure, we find both rest days occurring juxtaposed to each other in this passage:

“For six years you shall sow your land, and shall gather in its increase, but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the animal of the field shall eat. In like manner you shall deal with your vineyard and with your olive grove. Six days you shall do your work, and on the seventh day you shall rest, that your ox and your donkey may have rest, and the son of your handmaid, and the alien may be refreshed.” (Exodus 23:10-12)

But the connections don’t stop there! Let us keep looking. Turning back to the Creation Account in Genesis chapter one we find that the phrase “[it] **was good**” appears exactly **seven** times in relation to how God described the stages of each day’s work (cf. 1:3, **10, 12, 18, 21, 25**, and **31**). The pattern becomes apparent when we notice that this term is selectively applied twice to days **Three** and **Six**. What was created on day three?

Dry land and seas, grass, plants and trees.

And what was created on day six?

Man.

Now what two subjects occupy the attention of both the **Shabbat** rest and the **Yovel**?

Man (inhabitants) and the **Land** (that which grows on it). Observe this feature from these p’sukim (verses) of our current parashah. First the Land:

“But in the seventh year shall be a Shabbat of solemn rest for the land, a Shabbat to ADONAI: you shall neither sow your field, nor prune your vineyard. That which grows of itself of your harvest you shall not reap, and the grapes of your undressed vine you shall not gather: it shall be a year of solemn rest for the land.” (Lev. 25:4, 5)

And now its inhabitants:

“You shall make the fiftieth year holy, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all the inhabitants of it: it shall be a jubilee to you; and you shall return every man to his possession, and you shall return every man to his family.” (Lev. 10)

Isn't God's Torah a wonderful teaching instrument?

Jubilee

Finally, the commentary on this week's parashah by Ismar Schorsch, Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, will make an interesting addition to our study here. Speaking of the Yovel and its observance he carefully notes:

Nevertheless, as it stands, the sabbatical year borders on being utopian. Rabbinic literature is replete with material that attests to its observance in the breach. One homilist applied the verse, "Mighty creatures who do His [God's] bidding (Psalm 103:20)," to the exceptional few who heeded the web of self-denying injunctions. "Generally the performance of a mitzvah lasts a day [Shabbat] or a week [Pesah or Sukkot] or even a month [mourning]. But one that stretches out for a whole year? And this particular individual goes out and sees his field and vineyard abandoned and barren yet still pays his taxes obediently! Can you imagine any greater hero (i.e., "mighty creature," as in the verse) (*Vaykra Rabba* 1)?"²

In our additional observation not from the Talmud but from the text itself, we can clearly see that the Sabbath concept is one that deserves our attention. Our Heavenly Abba wants us to actualize a great and important spiritual truth tied into the lesson of "resting." What could be so important that the Holy One, blessed be he, placed this object lesson here so clearly for us to discover? Let us first examine the word Yovel. I shall then finish the commentary with some more thoughts about the Shabbat concept.

According to Strong's definition, the word is 3104 yowbel, yo-bale'; or yobel, yo-bale'; appar. from 2986; the blast of a horn (from its continuous sound); spec. the signal of the silver trumpets; hence the instrument itself and the festival thus introduced:-Jubilee, ram's horn, trumpet. We see here that the word is related to the sounding and responding of the trumpet. To be sure, the text of our parashah tells us that the sounding of the trumpet signals the Jubilee (Leviticus 25:8-13). Does the Jubilee apply to all peoples or just to 'Am Yisra'el? And if to 'Am Yisra'el, does it apply only when they are in the land, or does it apply without as well? Because of our 21st century removal from this biblical injunction, I shall rely heavily on the Talmud for a historical treatment of these concepts.

According to the Gemara, a later and larger commentary to the Talmud, compiled between the 3rd-6th centuries, the Jubilee only applies when all of the tribes are in the Land:

“But did they count the years of release and Jubilees [after the return from Babylon]? If even after the tribe of Reuben, the tribe of Gad and the half-

² <http://www.jtsa.edu/community/parashah/archives/5765/behav.shtml>.

tribe of Manasseh went into exile, the Jubilees were abolished, should Ezra in connection with whom it is said: The whole congregation together was forty and two thousand three hundred and three score, have counted them? For it was taught: When the tribe of Reuben, the tribe of Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh went into exile, the Jubilees were abolished as it is said: And ye shall proclaim liberty throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof, i.e., [only] at the time when all the inhabitants thereof dwell upon it, but not at the time when some of them are exiled. One might have assumed that if they were there, but intermingled, the tribe of Benjamin with that of Judah and the tribe of Judah with that of Benjamin, that even the [laws of the] Jubilee should apply, therefore it is said: 'unto all the inhabitants thereof', which means, only at the time when its inhabitants are there as [where] they ought to be, but not when they are intermingled! — Said R. Nahman b. Isaac: They counted the Jubilees to keep the years of release holy. That will be right in the view of the Rabbis who hold that the fiftieth year is not included, but according to R. Judah who holds that the fiftieth year counts both ways, why was that necessary [to count the Jubilees]? It would have been enough if the years of release alone had been counted! Hence [we must say], this is not in accord with the view of R. Judah."³

However, in contrast, the interpretation is that the Sh'mittah applies even if only one Jew is occupying the land. Were this not so, slaves would never be set free, as they awaited the arrival of the Yovel, since from antiquity, all of the tribes have not occupied the land. In fact the gradual dismemberment of the tribes of Israel started as early as the books of the Kings (2 Kings 10:29-33). For this reason, the Torah uses the word in plural form when referring to the Jubilee, but in singular when referring to the Sh'mittah. Nevertheless, kindness and freedom was to be proclaimed among slaves as the Gemara once again states: 'Our Rabbis taught:

'Because he is well with thee': he must be with [i.e., equal to] thee in food and drink, that thou shouldst not eat white bread and he black bread, thou drink old wine and he new wine, thou sleep on a feather bed and he on straw. Hence it was said: Whoever buys a Hebrew slave is like buying a master for himself.'⁴

An odd feature of the Yovel is its starting point. The text indicates that it is to begin with the sounding of the trumpet on Yom Kippur, a festival which we learned last parashah starts on the tenth of Tishrei. How can a Jubilee year begin in the middle of a month? The Talmud once again helps to explain this:

³ Talmud, Tractate Arachin 32b

⁴ Ibid, Kiddushin 22a

“AND FOR JUBILEE YEARS. [is the New Year for] Jubilees on the first of Tishri? Surely [the New Year for] Jubilees is on the tenth of Tishri, as it is written, on the Day of Atonement shall ye make proclamation with the horn? — What authority is here followed? R. Ishmael the son of R. Johanan b. Beroka, as it has been taught: And ye shall hallow the fiftieth year. What is the point of these words? [It is this]. Since it says, On the Day of Atonement [ye shall make proclamation], I might think that the year is sanctified only from the Day of Atonement onwards. Therefore it says, And ye shall sanctify the fiftieth year. This teaches that it is sanctified from its inception. On this ground R. Ishmael the son of R. Johanan b. Beroka laid down that from New Year to the Day of Atonement slaves were neither dismissed to their homes nor subjected to their masters, but they ate and drank and made merry, wearing garlands on their heads. When the Day of Atonement came, the Beth din sounded the horn; slaves were dismissed to their homes and fields returned to their original owners. And the Rabbis [— what do they make of this verse]? — [They say it teaches that] you are to sanctify years but not months.”⁵

Thus we see that the Jubilee is its own type of ‘new year’, commencing not ten days later on Yom Kippur, but rather on the first of the seventh month, as the Gemara explains:

‘But what of Jubilees which do not commence with the evening, and yet are reckoned in? — This follows the view of R. Johanan b. Ishmael the son of R. Johanan b. Beroka, who said that the Jubilee commences with the New Year. R. Shisha the son of R. Idi said: In fixing the number, [the Tanna] reckoned only New Years that are not inaugurated with some ceremony, but he does not reckon those that are inaugurated with a ceremony’.⁶

So, now it can be deduced that the Yovel year begins on the first day of the Jewish seventh month, Tishrei 1, but the slaves do not return to their own land till the trumpet (shofar) is sounded on the tenth day of the seventh month, Tishrei 10.

Working and Resting

All of this can seem fairly insignificant to us living with the Western mentality. But this was extremely important to those living in the Land, during the time of the TaNaKH when the Torah acted as the living Constitution as well as a daily guide for godly living. Here couched within this tiny parashah we see an awesome display of the mercy and compassion that HaShem has for all of his created subjects, whether they be Jew or non-Jew, slave or free!

⁵ Talmud, Tractate Rosh HaShana 8b

⁶ Ibid, Rosh HaShana 7b

The Torah paints a picture of work and rest, slavery and freedom, which spiritually amounts to life and death. How so? In the Renewed Covenant book of Galatians, Rabbi Sha'ul tell us:

“Don’t delude yourselves: no one makes a fool of God! A person reaps what he sows. Those who keep sowing in the field of their old nature, in order to meet its demands, will eventually reap ruin; but those who keep sowing in the field of the Spirit will reap from the Spirit everlasting life. So let us not grow weary of doing what is good; for if we don’t give up, we will in due time reap the harvest. Therefore, as the opportunity arises, let us do what is good to everyone, and especially to the family of those who are trustingly faithful.” (6:7-10)

The better first half of Leviticus chapter 25 uses **harvest language, sowing and reaping, working and resting** according to faith. To leave the ground unplowed for an entire year requires faith indeed—especially living in an agricultural land such as Isra'el! Today, our faith lies in the fact that we have **rested** from our **labors** of self-righteousness. Before our faith in Messiah, we **worked** year after year to meet our own needs. Our **harvest** was the **product** of our own hands. Consequently, it was a **harvest** of death.

But to place one’s trusting faithfulness in the atoning **work** of the Messiah Yeshua is to **rest** from one’s own **labors**! To be sure, without the faith of Messiah at **work** in our lives, we truly do not have a proper concept of **Shabbat**! To **rest** (the **Sabbath**) is to **cease working** in our own **fields**, and to begin **“resting”** in the **fields** of the **Master**! When we were in the world, we were **“slaves”** to sin! But now in Messiah Yeshua, we have experienced our spiritual **Yovel**! We are no longer **slaves** to sin! We have been **set free** by the power of his **Sabbath rest**!

What does the Torah say?

“What the Messiah has freed us for is freedom! Therefore, stand firm, and don’t let yourselves be tied up again to a yoke of slavery.” (Galatians 5:1)

And again in another place,

“So there remains a Shabbat-keeping for God’s people. For the one who has entered God’s rest has also rested from his own works, as God did from his. Therefore, let us do our best to enter that rest; so that no one will fall short because of the same kind of disobedience.” (Hebrews 4:9-11)

And finally,

**"Keep my Shabbats, and revere my sanctuary; I am ADONAI."
(Leviticus 26:2)**

Nahar Deah

The Ways of the Midrash - Mount Sinai and the Sabbatical

There is a well-known question from the Sages: "What is the issue of the Sabbatical doing together with Mount Sinai?" (Sifra, B'har, 1), a question based on the opening verses of the Torah portion of "B'har": "And God said to Moses on Mount Sinai saying ... when you come to the land that I give you and the last will rest a Sabbath to God" (Vayikra 25:1-2). Since all the commandments were given to Moses at Sinai, why here specifically is it mentioned that the principle of the Sabbatical Year was given at Sinai? In other words: what can we learn from the fact that the Torah mentions "Mount Sinai" here, with no apparent reason? And from here the use that is made of the question "What is the issue of the Sabbatical doing together with Mount Sinai?" in every case that the narrator wishes to point out two issue which stand side by side, where the connection between them needs to be clarified.

This question is characteristic to one of the methods by which the Sages interpreted the Bible: "Smichut Parshiyot" (Proximity of Issues). Behind this interpretive method lies the belief that the Bible is not a random and disordered collection of verses, chapters and issues, but rather a divine creation and therefore there is also meaning to the proximity of issues. The Sages therefore say that when reading the Bible one must also look at the additional meaning which arises from the connection between a verse and that which follows it, the connection between one commandment and another close to it, between two psalm or two stories. This method of exegesis is found hundreds of times throughout the literature of the Sages and in most cases they contain special literary idioms, such as "what does the issue of X have to do with Y" or "why are these found in close proximity." Sometimes these explanations seem to follow exactly the simple meaning of the text, but in many cases it is clear that the intention is to use them to give expression to the world of the philosophy and dogma of the Sages, in terms of both homiletic and Halakhah (Jewish Law). Here are two simple examples of interpretation based on "Smichut Parshiyot":

(A) "Rabbi [Yehuda Hanasi] says, why is the issue of the Nazarite found in close proximity with the issue of the "Sotah" (suspected adulteress) - to tell you that anyone who sees a Sotah in her disgrace will be careful to stay away from wine" (Babylonian Talmud, 63a). Chapter 5 of the book of B'midbar deals with the issue of the Sotah, whose husband suspects that she has betrayed him. In order to validate his suspicion, or invalidate it, so as to put the husband's mind at rest, the woman is brought to the priest

who evaluates her behavior through a complex and detailed ceremony, which eventually shows whether there was any truth to the husband's suspicions and if so "this woman will bear her sin" (verse 31). Immediately afterwards the Torah begins to deal with the question of a person who of his own free will accepts upon himself the burden of the Nazarite oath, which has as its fundamental principle the abstention from wine (verse 31). Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi learns, from the proximity between the story of the Sotah and the issue of the Nazarite, that wine was the main cause for the behavior of the Sotah, and therefore it is preferable to abstain from drinking it.

(B) The Midrash (B'resheet Rabbah 58:5) learns from the proximity of the story of the Akedah (binding) of Isaac (B'resheet 22) to the story of the death of Sarah (ibid, 23), that Sarah died due to her distress over what happened at the Akedah, and "therefore the Akedah and 'and the life of Sarah was' [first words of the story of her death] were placed in close proximity."⁷

The closing blessing is as follows:

***"Baruch atah YHVH, Eloheynu, Melech ha-'Olam,
asher natan lanu Torah-emet,
v'chay-yeh o'lam nata-b'tochenu.
Baruch atah YHVH, noteyn ha-Torah.
Ameyn."***

(Blessed are you O' LORD, our God, King of the Universe,
you have given us your Torah of truth,
and have planted everlasting life within our midst.
Blessed are you, LORD, giver of the Torah.
Ameyn.)

"Shabbat Shalom!"

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⁷ <http://www.jafi.org.il/education/torani/nehardeah/behah.html>