

This week we finish the book of Leviticus. As many of you have heard me point out, the relatively obscure and sometimes even offensive notions of the priestly duties, separations between the sacred and ordinary, and purity and impurity that make up the bulk of Leviticus are quite relevant to the challenges of our moment.

But Leviticus does not end with more descriptions of the rituals around the mishkan, the tabernacle and the ritual rites. The double portion or the weekend, Behar-Behukotai, which closes the book, focuses exclusively on legislating about agricultural cycles, debt, and slavery – and the punishments for if we don't manage those things well. These are topics that our society would consider “non-religious” aspects of life, although of course the ancients knew no such distinction.

Chapter 25 of Leviticus specifically describes first, the *shmitta*, sabbatical year, every seventh year, in which the land would not be cultivated and would be treated as ownerless, that all humans and animals might equally access its wild bounty. This Coming year, beginning at Rosh Hashana will actually be a *shmitta* year, so I hope to study this concept more with you. And then, starting in Chapter 8, it describes the *yovel*; the jubilee year:

“You shall count off seven weeks of years—seven times seven years—so that the period of seven weeks of years gives you a total of forty-nine years. Then you shall sound the horn loud; in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month—the Day of Atonement—you shall have the horn sounded throughout your land and you shall hallow the fiftieth year. You shall proclaim release throughout the land for all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: each of you shall return to his holding and each of you shall return to his family.”

The jubilee was a kind of last resort. Ideally, as the chapter goes on to describe, if person became destitute and had to sell off their land, or (God forbid) had to sell themselves or their children into slavery to pay off a bad debt, the community

had a responsibility to redeem both the land and the people, gathering the money to pay it off in order to reclaim liberty and livelihood for their neighbors and kin. The person also retains the right to redeem themselves and their land if they can somehow earn the money. But if no human redeemer comes along, the Jubilee exists to create a clean slate every fifty year, freeing slaves, reuniting lost children with families, and restoring everyone to their ancestral landholding.

As Rabbi Yitz Greenberg explains it, this not a particularly radical vision: “The Torah recognizes private property and upholds it by prohibiting stealing, unfair exchanges, or seizing others’ possessions by cheating, or moving boundaries without payment. But private property and marketplace economics inevitably lead to inequality and the creation of a class of permanently poor. The Torah fights this by prohibiting taking interest on loans and by calling on family to help individuals avoid falling into poverty. When individuals are driven by economic pressures to sell their land, the Torah instructs family and redeemers to help them regain their land and capacity to produce income. . .

. . . Despite all these special efforts, inevitably some land will be lost to some families and a permanent landless class mired in poverty will emerge. Therefore in this fiftieth year, the Jubilee year, all the land is redistributed back to the original families. Thus every family can start over again with a guaranteed source of income. Permanent poverty is prevented.”<sup>1</sup>

As we read these texts, it is easy to get caught up in the detailed logistical questions of “Is this feasible?” “Did this happen?” “How could this happen?” To the first two of those questions, the answer is yes, at least, we know that period blanket debt waivers, proclamations of manumission and restorations of land holdings were practiced in ancient Mesopotamia, often in conjunction with festivals, the coronation of a new king, or prevent civil unrest.

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<sup>1</sup> From "Judaism's Utopian Vision of Universal Equality" by Rabbi Yitz Greenberg at <http://hadar.org/torah-resource/judaism%E2%80%99s-utopian-vision-universal-equality#source-10295>

For those who want more details about this, I highly recommend David Graeber's book *Debt: the First 5000 Years*. Torah's innovation is not in creating the concept, but in standardizing it as something that occurred on a set schedule, regardless of the political context; on, we might say, God's agenda rather than that of a human king.

And the reason for this is explicit, also laid out in the chapter: as far as Hashem is concerned (and states in Verse 23), "the Land is Mine – so it may not be sold in perpetuity. Similarly, the Israelite people may not become hereditary slaves to other humans, as Hashem expresses in verse 55, "Because it is to Me that the Israelites are servants: they are My servants, whom I freed from the land of Egypt, I Hashem your God.

So as we consider the concepts of *Shmita and yovel* for our own time, I want to suggest that we move away from the specific logistics described in Torah, to focusing on the larger communal and spiritual questions it raises. Because the language of Torah was imagining an agrarian society, with largely self-sufficient clans on small holdings. As Nigel Savage, the Founder and CEO of *Hazon*, a leading Jewish environmental organization wrote this week:

"Agriculture, twenty centuries ago, wasn't "farming." It was life – what today is encompassed by economics, culture, politics, education, and so on. And so the teachings on shmita, the more you scratch them, turn out indeed not to be about farming, but rather the big issues that we (still) have to figure out today. How do we relate to time? What's the balance between work and rest? How do we do multi-year planning? How much is enough? How do we redress societal inequalities as, inevitably, they arise? What obligations do we have towards those who have less than us? What are or should be the boundaries between humankind and animals? What's the proper role of debt in a healthy society and how do we ensure the availability of credit? [quote cont]

Shmita doesn't just address and critique how we live in the world today; it also – in the course of doing this – actually teaches us what Jewish tradition is about; what, indeed, it means to be Jewish.”<sup>2</sup>

And I would suggest that it also fundamentally is about how we understand our place in the world and what we are doing here. As Rabbi Shefa Gold writes about Behar:

“So often we try to build a sense of security by acquiring possessions. Our search for security often becomes an impossible drama of “never enough.” As we acquire more wealth, nicer clothes, better computers, bigger homes, more knowledge — security continues to elude us. We are conditioned to become consumers as insecurity pushes us to acquire MORE.

*Behar* teaches us about a different kind of security that comes not from having, but from forging a deep relationship.”<sup>3</sup>

As Rabbi Gold reminds me, the act of *considering* Shmita and *Yovel* force me to face some important questions: if I had to release everything I've material acquired after 50 years, what would be my relationship to acquisition? If the land is not mine, but belongs to God, what is my relationship to it? And If I, in fact, have been liberated *so that I can be a servant of Hashem* – what am I doing with that charge?

And so ends Leviticus, with a reminder that holiness is not just in tabernacle and Temple, but in the land, and in ourselves; if we will only honor that holiness.

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<sup>2</sup> Email from hazon.org on May 6, 2021

<sup>3</sup> From "Behar" by Rabbi Shefa Gold at <https://www.rabbishefagold.com/behar/>