

As you may be following, we're currently in the period of counting the omer, seven weeks of seven days, to complete the process of liberation and arrive at Mount Sinai. And in our parashah, Behar, we have a parallel process of counting seven sevens towards freedom.

Leviticus 25:8-10

וּסְפַרְתָּ לָךְ שִׁבְעַת שָׁבָע שָׁנִים שִׁבְעַת שָׁנִים שִׁבְעַת שָׁנִים וְהָיוּ לָךְ יָמֵי שִׁבְעַת שָׁבָע שָׁנִים תִּשְׁעַת
וְאַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה: וְהִעֲבַרְתָּ שׁוֹפָר תְּרוּעָה בַּחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי בְּעֶשְׂוֹר לַחֹדֶשׁ בְּיוֹם הַכִּפּוּרִים תִּעְבְּדוּהוּ שׁוֹפָר
בְּכָל־אַרְצְכֶם: וְקִדְשְׁתֶּם אֶת שְׁנַת הַחֲמִשִּׁים שָׁנָה וּקְרַאתֶם דְּרוֹר בְּאַרְץ לְכָל־יֹשְׁבֵיהָ יוֹבֵל הוּא תִהְיֶה
לָכֶם וְשַׁבְתֶּם אִישׁ אֶל־אֲחֻזָּתוֹ וְאִישׁ אֶל־מִשְׁפַּחְתּוֹ תָּשׁבוּ:

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 your holding and each of you shall return to your family.

Parallels in ancient Mesopotamia. Eric Toussaint writes that in a 1000 period, from 2400 bce to 1400 b.c.e. historians have identified 30 instances of public debt cancellation in the historical record, which were occasions of great festivity.¹ These were called “amargi” in ancient Sumerian – a word meaning – “return to mother” – as a time when everyone could go home; reclaiming either their own bodies or their land.

Similarly, in the Talmud, in Masechet Rosh Hashanah page 9b, in a discussion of these verses, Rabbi Yehuda says that the word “dror” which is translated as “freedom,” is related to the verb -d-r-h – meaning dwelling – someone is free when they are free to dwell wherever they want, rather than under the control of others.

But the rabbis in Talmud notice something else that is fascinating about this commandment: the Jubilee only happens when the people make it happen. Unlike Shabbat, say, which comes every week, whether we light the candles or not, the Jubilee is a

¹ <https://www.cadtm.org/The-Long-Tradition-of-Debt>

human construct – one they we are commanded to enact, but one that is entirely in our hands. So there's a great rabbinic argument about what effects a jubilee, since the verse I read mentions three things: sounding the shofar, proclaiming freedom, and letting people return to their holdings. The rabbinic argument is a rare moment when we see the rabbis acknowledge the limits of their authority:

It opens with a teaching: **The Sages taught** The words “**it shall be a Jubilee**” come to teach that **even when they did not release** property to its original owners, and **even when they did not sound** the *shofar*, it is nevertheless a Jubilee Year. . .One **might** have thought that **although they did not send** free the slaves it is also still a Jubilee Year. **Therefore, the verse states: “It shall be,”** - at least one of the essential *halakhot* of the year must be observed, and if not, it is not a Jubilee Year. This is **the statement of Rabbi Yehuda**.

Rabbi Yosei, on the other hand, agrees with Rabbi Yehudah that something needs to be done by humans to affect the Jubilee year, but disagrees about what it is. Perhaps disappointingly, he claims, “even when they did not release property to its original owners, and even when they did not send free the slaves, it is nevertheless a Jubilee Year” – as long as they sound the shofar.

He offers two reasons for this:

The first is that some day there may be no slaves (and presumably, no land transfers). But we should still have Jubilee, and there will always be a shofar!

If you don't like that (and he concedes you might not), he offers a second reason:

A court can enforce the sounding of the shofar - but a court cannot possibly track down every slave to free them.

I love how Rabbi Yosei first reason is based in an ideal vision: how to celebrate Jubilee in a world in which there are no slaves. He names this vision, but he also concedes a practical reality – how to celebrate jubilee in a world in which, not only are there slaves, not only is there economic injustice, but the rabbis of the Talmud, for all of their vision, have not very

much power to actually coerce slaveowners to free their slaves or landholders to release their holdings.

And yet, nonetheless, he says, we must still proclaim the jubilee, still sound the shofar, whose cry reminds us all of this ideal. We must use whatever power *is* in our hands to call out for freedom.

The majority of rabbis ultimately disagree with both Rabbi Yehuda and Rabbi Yosei and say, actually, we need all three elements: shofar, freedom, and return to land holdings, in order for the people to be affected. A jubilee is all or nothing.

This is one of those where I really appreciate the rabbis of the Talmud, and their discourse: they stay committed to the ideal, even as they acknowledge the reality that it may not come to be. The prophets teach that the Israelites did not observe the jubilee, and that was one of the reasons for our exile from the land. Perhaps if they'd taken Rabbi Yosei's position, and blown the shofar, they might have eventually gotten there.