

PARSHAH SUMMARY & COMMENTARY

Behar

*Leviticus 25:1-26:2**Torah Reading for Week of May 11-17, 2003*

On Mount Sinai, G-d communicates to Moses the laws of the Sabbatical and Jubilee cycles:

When you come to the land which I give you, the land shall keep a sabbath to G-d.

Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in its fruit.

But in the seventh year shall be a sabbath of solemn rest for the land, a sabbath for G-d; you shall neither sow your field, nor prune your vineyard.

Even that which grows of its own accord in the field and vineyard may not be harvested on the *shmittah* year; instead,

The sabbath produce of the land shall be food for you,

and for your servant, and for your maid, and for your hired worker, and for your stranger that sojourns with you, and for your cattle, and for the wild beast in your land, shall all its increase be food

The *shmittah* years express our trust in G-d as provider:

And if you shall say: What shall we eat in the seventh year? Behold, we shall not sow, nor gather in our produce!

But I will command my blessing upon you in the sixth year, and it shall bring forth fruit for three years. You shall sow on the eighth year and eat yet of old fruit until the ninth year; until her fruits come in, you shall eat of the old store.

Jubilee

The seven-year *shmittah* cycle is part of a greater cycle—the 50-year jubilee cycle. After counting seven *shmittahs*—forty-nine years—

You shall sound the shofar on the tenth day of the seventh month, on the Day of Atonement shall you sound

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AND G-D SPOKE TO MOSES ON MOUNT SINAI, SAYING... (LEVITICUS 25:1)

What has the sabbatical year to do with Mount Sinai? Were not all commandments given on Sinai? But the verse wishes to tell us: just as with the Sabbatical year both its general principle and its minute details were ordained on Mount Sinai, so, too, was it with all the Commandments—their general principle as well as their minute details were ordained on Mount Sinai.

(Torat Kohanim; Rashi)

Rabbi Ishmael says: The general principles of the Torah were given at Sinai, and the details [when G-d spoke to Moses] in the Tent of Meeting.

Rabbi Akiva says: The general principle *and* the details were given at Sinai. They were then repeated in the Tent of Meeting, and enjoined a third time in the Plains of Moab (i.e., in Moses' narrative in the book of Deuteronomy).

(Talmud, Shabbat 6a)

WHEN YOU COME INTO THE LAND WHICH I GIVE YOU, THE LAND SHALL REST A SABBATH UNTO G-D (25:2)

Taken on its own, this verse seems to imply that “a sabbath unto G-d” is to be observed immediately upon entering the Land. But in practice, when the Jewish people entered the Land of Israel they first worked the land for six years, and only then observed the *seventh* year as the *shmittah* (sabbatical year)—as, indeed, the Torah clearly instructs in following verses.

The Torah is telling us that a *shmittah* is to both precede and follow our six

years of labor: to follow it on the calendar, but to also precede it—if not in actuality, then conceptually.

We find a similar duality in regard to the weekly seven-day cycle. The weekly Shabbat has a twofold role: a) It is the day “from which all successive days are blessed”—the source of material and spiritual sustenance for the week to follow. b) It is the “culmination” of the week—the day on which the week's labors efforts are harvested and sublimated, and their inner, spiritual significance is realized and brought to light.

But if every week must have a Shabbat to “bless” it, what about the week of creation itself? In actuality, G-d began His creation of existence—including the creation of time—on Sunday, which is therefore called the “First Day.” But our sages tell us that there was a primordial Shabbat which preceded creation—a Shabbat existing not in time but in the mind of G-d as a vision of a completed and perfected world.

Therein lies an important lesson in how we are to approach the mundane involvements of life. True, we begin with the material, for in a world governed by cause and effect, the means inevitably precede the end. But what is first in actuality need not be first in mind. In mind and consciousness, the end must precede the means, for without a clear vision of their purpose to guide them, the means may begin to see *themselves* as the end.

The spiritual harvest of a Shabbat or *shmittah* can be only achieved *after* a “work-week” of dealing with the material world and developing its resources. But it must be preceded and predicated upon “a sabbath unto G-d” that occupies the fore of our consciousness and pervades our every deed.

(The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

AND IF YOU SELL AUGHT TO YOUR FELLOW... (25:14)

Rabbi Yosse the son of Rabbi Chaninah said: Come and see how harsh are

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the shofar throughout all your land.

And you shall hallow the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout all the land to all its inhabitants thereof: it shall be a jubilee for you. And you shall return every man to his estate, and you shall return every man to his family.

In addition to being a year of emancipation, on which indentured servants are set free and ancestral lands revert to their original owners, the fiftieth year is also a year on which all work on the land ceases, as in the seventh year of each *shmittah* cycle.

Selling Land

The Parshah goes on to outline the Torah's laws on

commerce and property rights.

The ownership of movables—objects other than real estate and people—can be permanently transferred from one person to the other with a sale. The Torah only warns, " You shall not defraud one another."

But in the Land of Israel, where each tribe was allotted its province and each family its estate, "The land may not be sold for ever, for the land is Mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with Me."

So if a person becomes destitute and is forced to sell his estate, the "sale" is in fact only a long-term lease until the next jubilee year, at which time it reverts to the owner. Thus,

According to the multitude of years you shall increase its price, and according to the fewness of years you shall diminish the price of it; for what he sells you is a number of years of produce.

Furthermore, at any time (after two years from the time of the sale), the seller, or his close relative, has

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the results of [violating the provisions of] the seventh year. A man who trades in seventh year produce must eventually sell his movables, for it is said, "In this year of jubilee you shall return every man unto his possession," and immediately after it says: "If you sell aught to your fellow." If he disregards this, he eventually sells his estates, since following that it is said: "If your brother becomes poor, and sells some of his estate." Before he knows it, he is selling his house, for next it is written: "And if a man sell a dwelling house in a walled city" ... Before he knows it, he is compelled to borrow on interest, for next it is written: "And if your brother becomes poor, and his hand fail with you... Take no usury of him." And before he knows it he is selling himself, as it is said, "And if your brother becomes poor with you and sells himself to you" ...

(Talmud, Kiddushin 20a)

AND IF YOU SELL AUGHT TO YOUR FELLOW, OR BUY AUGHT OF YOUR FELLOW'S HAND, YOU SHALL NOT DEFRAUD ONE ANOTHER (25:14) ... AND YOU SHALL NOT DEFRAUD ONE ANOTHER; BUT YOU SHALL FEAR YOUR G-D (25:17)

The first verse refers to financial fraud. The second verse forbids verbal fraud—speaking hurtful words or giving bad advice. That is why the second verse adds, "but you shall fear your G-d," lest a person say: Who will know that my intention was to do him evil?

(Torat Kohanim; Rashi)

YOU SHALL NOT DEFRAUD ONE ANOTHER (25:14)

Legally, it is only forbidden to defraud one's fellow. But a Chassid must go beyond the letter of the law, and take care not to delude himself, either.

(Rabbi Bunim of Peshischa)

AND IF YOU SHALL SAY: WHAT SHALL WE EAT IN THE SEVENTH YEAR? BEHOLD, WE SHALL NOT SOW, NOR GATHER IN OUR PRODUCE! BUT I WILL COMMAND MY BLESSING UPON YOU IN THE SIXTH YEAR, AND IT SHALL BRING FORTH FRUIT FOR THREE YEARS... (25:20-21)

The question "What shall we eat in the seventh year?" is even more pressing in light of the fact that, the land having been depleted by five years of planting, the sixth year's yield is naturally *less* than average. Yet G-d promises that it will provide not only for a full year's sustenance, but also for the seventh year and beyond.

Our sages tell us that the seven-year *shmittah* cycle corresponds to the seven millennia of history. For six thousand years, man labors in the fields of the material world in preparation for the seventh millennium—a millennium that is "wholly sabbath and tranquillity, for life everlasting," the era of Moshiach.

Thus, the question "What shall we eat in the seventh year?" can be asked on the historical plane as well. If the spiritual giants of earlier generations—the Patriarchs and the Matriarchs, the prophets, the sages of the Talmud failed to bring about a perfect world, what can be expected of us? If the first five millennia of history could not provide for the universal Sabbath, what can be expected of us, we of the "sixth year," exhausted and depleted of spirit?

Yet the sixth year will be the one to yield and sustain the seventh. Precisely because our resources are so meager, our every trial and achievement is so much more meaningful, so much more precious to G-d. He therefore promises to command His blessing to our efforts, so that they shall nourish the sabbatical millennium and beyond.

(The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

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the option of "redeeming" the field from the buyer by giving him the equivalent value of the remaining years until the jubilee.

All of the above, however, does not apply to the sale of a home within a walled city. Such a sale can be "redeemed" during the first year only; if the seller or his relative do not exercise this right, it remains in the hand of the buyer, nor does it revert to its original owner on the jubilee year.

(Regarding the Levites, who did not receive estates in the Holy Land, only cities in which to live, the sale of a home in the city does return to the Levite owner on the jubilee year, "for the houses of the cities of the Levites—these are their estate among the children of Israel.")

Prohibition of Usury

If your brother grow poor, and his means fail with thee; then you shall support him. Be he a stranger, or a citizen; that he may live with you.

Take you no usury of him, or increase, but fear your G-d; that your brother may live with you.

You shall not give him your money upon usury, nor lend him your foodstuffs for increase. I am G-d your G-d.

The Indentured Servant

And what of the person so impoverished that he has nothing to sell but his own self?

If your brother who dwells by thee be grown poor, and

be sold to you; you shall not work him as a slave.

But as a hired servant, and as a citizen, he shall be with you, and shall serve you until the year of jubilee.

Then shall he depart from you, both he and his children with him, and shall return to his own family, and to the estate of his fathers shall he return.

One Jew can never be another's slave, for they are all G-d's servants:

For to Me are the children of Israel servants; they are My servants, whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt: I am G-d your G-d.

The Parshah of Behar ("on the mountain") concludes with a warning against idol-worship and yet another reiteration of the mitzvah of Shabbat.

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FOR THEY ARE MY SERVANTS, WHOM I TOOK OUT OF THE LAND OF EGYPT; THEY CANNOT BE SOLD INTO SLAVERY (25:42)

(Maharal)

At the time of the Exodus, G-d made freedom the inherent and eternal state of the Jew. From that point on, no power or force on earth can subvert our intrinsic freedom.

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THE FIFTIETH YEAR

Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard and gather its fruit. And the seventh year shall be a sabbath of rest for the land, a sabbath for G-d...

And you shall count for yourselves seven sabbaths of years, seven times seven years... a total of forty-nine years.... And you shall sanctify the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land and to all inhabitants thereof...

Leviticus 25:3-10

The number seven figures prominently in our reckoning and experience of time. Most familiar, of course, is the seven-day work/rest cycle that comprises our week, in reenactment of the original Seven Days of Creation when in six days, G-d made the heavens and the earth... and on the seventh day He rested. Each Shabbat thus completes a full revolution times original cycle, following which we start anew from *yom rishon*, the first day — as Sunday is called in the Holy Tongue.

This is why many Jewish life-cycle observances are seven-day affairs. Two seven-day festivals frame our year — Passover, which runs from the 15th to the 21st of Nissan, and Sukkot, occurring exactly six months later, on Tishrei 15-21. A marriage is celebrated for a full week of *sheva berachot* (seven blessings), and the death of a loved one, G-d forbid, is mourned for seven (*shivah*) days. There are the seven clean days of the *niddah* (menstruating woman); the seven-day training (*shivat yemei miluim*) of the Sanctuary, the seven-day purification period from ritual impurity, and numerous other “sevens”. Thus the freedom of Passover, the joy of Sukkot, the bond of marriage, the coming to terms with loss, and all these other features of Jewish life are assimilated in all seven dimensions of created time.

Our years, too, follow the cycle of creation: six workday years are succeeded by a sabbatical year of *shemittah* (suspension). In the Land of Israel, all

agricultural work is suspended on the seventh year and the lands produce is declared free for the taking for all. Also suspended on the *shemittah* year are all private debts and the terms of servitude of indentured servants.

Finally, our sages describe the whole of human history as a seven-millennia week, consisting of 6,000 years of human labor in developing G-ds world and a seventh millennium that is wholly Shabbat and rest, for life everlasting — the era of Moshiach.

The Kabbalists explain that the Seven Days of Creation embody the seven *sefirot* (divine attributes) which G-d emanated from Himself to define and characterize His relationship with our existence. So seven is not only the elemental number of time, but of every created thing and of the created reality as a whole. This is especially true of the human being, who was created in the image of G-d: the human character is comprised of seven drives (love, restraint, harmony, ambition, devotion, connection and receptiveness), mirroring the seven attributes which G-d assumed as creator of the universe.

Matter and Spirit

Each of the seven units of the week embodies the particular characteristics of its respective *sefirah*. But in more general terms, the cycle consists of two primary phases: mundanity (*chol*) and holiness (*kedushah*). Six days of mundane labor are followed by a day of spiritual rest; six years of working the earth, by a year of suspension and disinvolvement from the material; six millennia devoted to struggling with and developing the physical world, by a seventh millennium in which the sole occupation of the entire world will be the knowledge of G-d.

The Torahs word for holy, *kedushah*, literally means removed and apart. Its names for the seventh day, *shabbat*, and for the seventh year, *shemittah*, respectively mean cessation and suspension. For holiness requires complete disengagement from all material involvements. In order to experience the holiness and spirituality of Shabbat, we must cease all material labor; in order to touch base with the holiness of the land in the *shemittah* year, we must suspend all physical work upon its soil and all claims of ownership on its produce; in order to experience the divine goodness and perfection of our world in the age of Moshiach, we must first achieve a state in which there is no jealousy and no competition over

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its material wealth.

[This is not to say that Shabbat has no effect upon the rest of the week, that the *shemittah* year does not profoundly influence the farmers relationship with his land during the other six years of the cycle, or that the age of Moshiach is divorced from the work-day generations of history. On the contrary: the primary function of these sabbaths is to provide spiritual vision, fortitude and purpose to the mundane periods of their cycle. But in order to do so, they must be kept distinct and apart. It is only when the between the holy and the mundane are strictly enforced that we can experience holiness in our lives, and then extend its vision and influence to our mundane endeavors.]

Yet despite their transcendent nature, the seventh day, year and millennium are constituent parts of the cycles of creation. Materiality and spirituality might differ greatly — to the point, even, of mutual exclusivity — yet both are part of nature: both are governed by the framework of laws which define the created reality.

Indeed, the very fact that holiness demands the cessation and suspension of all things mundane, indicates that it, too, has its limits. It means that just as there exists a physical nature which defines and delimits the scope of physical things and forces, so, too, does the realm of the spiritual have its nature — its own set of laws which define what it is and what it is not, where it can exist and where it cannot, and how, and in what manner, it can make itself felt beyond its inviolate boundaries. So while the concept of transcendence seems the antithesis of definition, transcendence is itself a definition, for it defines (and thus confines) itself as beyond and distinct from the material.

This offers insight into of a key passage in the Torahs account of creation. In Genesis 2:2 we read: And G-d concluded on the seventh day the work that He had done. This seems to contradict the second part of that very verse, which reads: And He rested on the seventh day from all the work that He had

done. If the work of creation was concluded *on* the seventh day, then the seventh day was one of the days of creation; but if the seventh day is the day on which G-d rested from all the work that He had done, there were only six days of creation, and a seventh day of shabbat — *cessation* from work.

Our sages explain: What was the world lacking? Rest. When Shabbat came, rest came. Rest — transcendence and spirituality — is itself a creation. Though removed from the nature of the material, it is part of a greater nature — the nature of the created reality, which includes the realm of the spiritual as well as the realm of the material.

Eight

If the seven defines the natural reality, eight represents that which is higher than nature, the circumference that encompasses the circle of creation.

Seven includes both matter and spirit, both mundanity and holiness, both involvement and transcendence, but as separate, distinct components of the cycle of creation; the seventh dimension will exert its influence on the other six, but only in a transcendent way — as a spiritual, other-worldly reality that will never be truly internalized and integrated within the system. In contrast, eight represents the introduction of a reality that is beyond all nature and definition, including the definition transcendence. This eighth dimension (if we can call it a dimension) has no limitations at all: it transcends and pervades, being beyond nature yet also fully present within it, being equally beyond matter and spirit and equally within them.

So the covenant of circumcision, which binds the Jew to G-d in a bond that supersedes all nature and convention even as it pervades every nook and cranny of life, is entered into on the eighth day of life. The Sanctuary (*Mishkan*), whose role was to make the infinite reality of G-d an indwelling presence in the physical world, was inaugurated on the eighth day following a seven-day training period. The festival of Shemini Atzeret (Eighth Day of Retention), whose function is to internalize the transcendent encompassing light of the *sukkah*, occurs on the eighth day that follows Sukkots seven days. Seven *shemittah* cycles are followed by a jubilee year characterized by liberty (i.e. freedom from all bounds) rather than just suspension. And the messianic seventh millennium of history will be followed by the supra-historical World to Come (*Olam Ha-ba*), in

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which the divine reality will unite with the created reality in ways that we cannot even speculate upon in a world in which finite and infinite are mutually exclusive. In the words of the Talmud, All prophets prophesied only regarding the days of Moshiach; regarding the World to Come, No eye can behold it, O G-d, save Yours (Isaiah 64:3; Talmud, Berachot 34b).

Fifty

The eights in our lives come in two forms: eight and fifty.

For example, the two seven-day festivals, Sukkot and Passover, each culminate in an *Atzeret* — a one-day festival of retention whose function is to internalize the festivals achievements. But while the *Atzeret* of Sukkot immediately follows the festival, in effect constituting its eighth day, the *Atzeret* of Passover is the festival of Shavuot, observed fifty days after Passover, culminating a 49 (7 x 7) -day counting of the Omer.

For each of the seven components of the natural system has a natural system of its own — its own seven-phased cycle of immanence and transcendence, making a total of 49 elements and phases in the cycle of nature. Fifty is an eight which follows a thoroughly detailed development of the seven dimensions of nature in all its 49 sub-dimensions. Shavuot, the *Atzeret* of Passover, is such an eight: our exodus from Egypt marked the onset of a 49-day process in which we refined and perfected the 49 drives and impulses of our souls, thereby liberating ourselves from the forty-nine gates of impurity into which we sunk in the course of our enslavement to the most debased society in the history of mankind and entering into the forty-nine gates of understanding of awareness of and commitment to G-d. This 49-day process (reexperienced each year with our seven-week Counting of the Omer) culminated in the revelation at Sinai on Shavuot, when we were granted the Torah — the divine 50th dimension which supersedes and integrates all 49 dimensions of creation.

Another fifty is *yovel*, the jubilee year. Seven seven-year *shemittah* cycles, each culminating in a year of suspension and transcendence of the material, are followed by a fiftieth year of liberty in which all servants, including those who had sold themselves for lifetime labor, were set free, and all ancestral lands that had been sold reverted to their original owners. The jubilee year represents a state of true freedom in which, rather than just suspending the earthliness of the land, we free it of all the restraints of materiality.

Thus our experience of time (which defines practically everything we do and achieve) comes in various forms and configurations. There are times and situations in which we live our lives completely within the natural cycle of seven. There are times and circumstances in which we relate to the supernatural eighth dimension, but only in a general, abstract way. Finally, there are times and circumstances in which we access an eight that is a fifty — an eight that is experienced in all particulars and sub-particulars of our existence.

Three States of Jubilee

The *shemitta/yovel* cycle itself comes in three different forms, as dictated by the variant spiritual climates of different epochs in our history.

The Torah instructs that the jubilee year is to be proclaimed throughout the land and to all inhabitants thereof. The Talmud interprets this as a stipulation that the special laws of the 50th year are enacted only when the land of Israel is fully populated by the Jewish people. The only period in our history when this was the case was from the year 2503 from creation (1258 bce), when the Jewish people under Joshua completed their conquest and settlement of the Holy Land, until they were driven from it by Babylons armies 836 years later, with the destruction of the First Temple in the year 3339 (422 bce).

Seventy-six years later, with the partial return of the Jewish people to their land under Ezra (six years after the building of the Second Temple) the *yovel* count resumed — but this time only for the sake of calculating and implementing the sabbatical year seven times in each 50-year period. Since much of the Holy Land was not resettled, and a large part of the Jewish nation remained in exile, the jubilee year could not be observed. Nevertheless, a fiftieth year was counted following each seven *shemittah*-cycles, so that the sabbatical years should fall at their proper time. In other words, after the seventh sabbatical

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year, on year 49, of Ezras count, the next seven-year cycle could not begin until after a theoretical “jubilee” was proclaimed; thus, the next sabbatical year came eight years later (on year 57), *not* seven years later (on year 56).

Upon the Second Temples destruction in the year 3829 from creation (69 ce), this *yovel* count also ceased. The sabbatical year continues to be observed every seventh year (this year, 5761 on the Jewish calendar (2000-2001) is a *shemittah* year); but because we are in a state of *galut* (exile), deprived of the divine presence that manifested itself in the Holy Temple, we lack even the theoretical jubilee of the Second Temple Era. Today (as was the case in the period between the two Temples), our seven-year cycles run consecutively, without the half-century landmark of *yovel*.

Applied to the miniature universe that is man and the 49 chambers of his soul, these three eras represent three levels in our quest towards self-refinement and self-perfection.

The ideal model, which defined the lives of our ancestors in the First Temple Era, is one of seven *shemittah*-cycles which yield a 50th jubilee year. On the individual level, this means that a persons struggles to suspend and transcend the negative in himself are experienced as stages in the process of the complete transformation and liberation of his soul.

A lesser state was that of the Second Temple Era, which represented a intermediate state between *galut* and redemption. While a large segment of the Jewish people lived in the Holy Land, for much of these 420 years they were under the dominion of other nations. And while the Holy Temple facilitated G-ds presence in their lives, it was a lesser expression of the divine reality than the First Temple. Thus, the *shemittah*-cycles were not of the caliber to produce a full-fledged liberation. Nevertheless, they were permeated by the vision of perfection that the Jubilee year represents, as expressed by the fact that while the *yovel* was not actually observed, it set and defined the *shemittah*-cycles.

But in the more than nineteen centuries since the

Holy Temples destruction, we have been fully engulfed in *galut*: ours is an existence that obscures all but the faintest glimmer of purpose and direction. Our lives are, by and large, consumed by the struggle with evil; not only are our efforts at self-improvement confined to the narrow, seven-phased cycle of nature — we lack even the vision to see and appreciate their place within the context of a liberating jubilee.

Today, our lives are a seemingly endless chain of *shemittah*-cycles, with nary a jubilee in sight. Yet this blind struggle will yield the final and ultimate redemption, when, as Maimonides writes, Moshiach will arise and restore the sovereignty of David to its former glory and power, build the Holy Temple and gather the dispersed of Israel. In his days, all the laws will be restored: we will offer the sacrifices, and enact the sabbatical and jubilee years as commanded by the Torah. Then, our cycles of seven will yield the ultimate eight — the all-embracing perfection of the World to Come.

*Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe,
www.therebbe.org; adapted by Yanki Tauber,
editor@chabadonline.com*