

PARASHAT #94

Torah: Leviticus 25:1–26:2

Haftarah: Jeremiah 32:6–27

The parasha before us, although brief (basically one chapter), contains some of the most sublime principles of human dignity, equality, and justice found anywhere. In this parasha, we learn of the Sabbatical Year, giving the Land a rest while trusting God for a three-year provision of food. We are taught about the Year of Jubilee when debts are forgiven, slaves are set free, and property is returned to its original owner. As if this is not enough to “blow” most economies, the parasha concludes by encouraging and teaching the children of Israel to help their fellow Israelites when, or if, poverty hits them. Indeed, chapter 25 of Leviticus is the only code of practice on the subject of land tenure in ancient Israel that is preserved in the Torah. This unique collection of laws and commandments govern the permanent rights of landowners and the legalities of the sale and mortgaging of land.¹ Our approach to this parasha will centre our comments on the meanings of certain key Hebrew words:

- I. Shabbat: שבת
- II. Yovel: יובל
- III. Dror: דרור
- IV. Yamokh: ימוך

I. SHABBAT: שבת 25:1–7

Thus far in the Torah, the word Shabbat and its other related forms have been used over twenty-five times, and its occurrences are not over yet! It is perhaps one of the most frequent and basic teachings of Torah. Our present parasha opens with yet another aspect of this word. Only this time it does not refer to a specific *day* as in previous passages. Instead, **25:1–7** teaches about a seven-year *cycle* which the text calls a *Shabbat*.²

This Shabbat is not primarily designated for people like the seventh day Shabbat. This unique Shabbat is for the *land* that the Lord gave to the people of Israel. We are instructed to let the land rest every seventh year as a Shabbat for the Lord (**25:2**). What does all of this mean? What are some of the implications of this so-called Sabbatical Year?

A. Stop!

It seems obvious that the Lord purposely intended the Yovel Year to begin in the seventh month instead of the normal first month because of the clear symbolism of the “seventh,” picturing a year of absolute rest. The Sabbatical Year and the weekly Shabbat share several things in common.

First of all they share a common Hebrew meaning between them. The main idea of Shabbat as we have indicated elsewhere, is the idea of “ceasing.” Sometimes, it denotes “to rest”, but it is a rest not because of physical exhaustion necessarily, but because there is nothing else that can or should be done. It is a “stopping.”

We have already examined some of the implications of the seventh-day Shabbat rest. Since this seven-year cycle is also called a Shabbat, it would therefore follow that whatever can be said about the weekly day of ceasing could also be said concerning the seven-year rest. And whatever can be said about the nature of this ceasing can picture something about our relationship with the Holy One. Hence, by designating a cessation of work every seven years as well as every seven days, the Holy One is continuing to emphasize that the primary nature of our relationship to Him is that of complete

1. Baruch A. Levine, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus*, 168.

2. As we shall soon see, the text also refers to the 7th Year of this cycle as a “Shimittah Year,” a year of release. We will soon explain.

and absolute stopping — ceasing from all of our labours — not because we are physically tired but because they are finished for that moment.

Of course, this concept sounds rather simple, but in fact, it escapes most people! In both Jewish and non-Jewish circles many people are locked into a mind-set that tells them that they must be continually performing *mitzvot* or doing good works in order to begin, maintain, or earn a proper and eternal relationship with God. However, starting with the Torah's teaching about sacrifices and covenant and continuing with the teaching in the Apostolic Scriptures about the once-for-all sacrificial atonement accomplished by Yeshua, the message which God has been trying to communicate to sinful mankind is that all we need to do is simply rest our life, into His hands by faith. This is why Hebrews tells us, “Now we who have believed [in Yeshua] enter that rest...There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from His” (Hebrews 4:3,9–10).

In other words, our relationship with the Eternal One can be summed up in one phrase: a Shabbat rest! This rest begins by taking God at His Word, which is what faith means. If we take God at His Word concerning the completeness of Yeshua's atonement, we will realise that we must cease from all attempts to earn His approval and trust in what Yeshua has completed for us. That is what God's Shabbat is. It is so difficult for many people to grasp this, therefore, the Holy One has developed several teaching pictures communicating its essence.

B. The Lord's Shabbat

However, the similarity between the two kinds of Shabbats goes beyond that of merely a cessation. A careful reading of Leviticus 23 reveals the fact that there is at least one Shabbat associated with each of the mo'adim. Yet, none of these special Shabbat days are called a Shabbat “to the Lord”. The only exception is Leviticus 23:41 where we see that Sukkot is “a *festival* to the Lord for seven days in the year.”

In the case of the weekly Shabbat, it is called “the Lord's” because it was He who first “ceased from His work and rested”, as we are told in Genesis. Thus, Shabbat was God's idea from the beginning. He set the precedent. He established the pattern. He laid down the principle. However, in Leviticus 25, the “Lord's Shabbat” carries with it an additional feature: it is not first and foremost *people* that were the object of the Shabbat, but the *Land* was/is. This raises a provocative question: to whom does the piece of real estate called the “Land of Israel” belong? If the politicians could answer this question, it would solve the vast majority of contemporary world problems! All the politicians have to do is to read the Torah. The answer is clear — the Land of Israel belongs primarily neither to the Arab nor to the Jewish people. It belongs to The Holy One Himself! It is God's Land! He is its Proprietor! Because He owns this treasured real estate, God has the right to decide who may or may not live in it.

As we know, the Torah indicates that the Lord gave the Land of promise to the children of Israel to live in as an inheritance. With this in mind, the Shabbat Year “is a tribute from the Jewish people who periodically give back their homeland to the One from whom they received it. This expresses the conviction that the country can become the complete property of the people only insofar as God grants it to them”.³ Moreover, since God is the owner of this Land, He is the One who decides what should be done with the land. J. H. Hertz exhorts us in this regard when he says, “The land is not the absolute possession of man; it belongs to God and is to be held in trust for His purposes.”⁴

May we add an additional application of this idea of propriety? Since the Land belongs, in reality, to the Holy One, then those who are granted permission to live in it must live in it according to the conditions that He lays out and therefore the Torah is to be the rule of life for its residents. Furthermore, those who rule this Land may not give it to others whom the Lord does not designate as

3. Elie Munk, *The Call of the Torah: Vayikra*, 297.

4. J. H. Hertz, *Pentateuch and Haftarahs*, 531.

legal residents. This holds true no matter which generation is present here. It is especially valid in the current situation where there is an increasing inclination to permit others to rule sections of the Sacred Land whom the Holy One has not designated as valid proprietors. Only the children of Israel and those who are Torah observant sojourners with Israel may rule this Land.

C. The Lord our God, The King of the Universe

There is at least one more similarity between the weekly Shabbat and the Shemittah, or Sabbatical Year, described in our parasha. Based on rather fascinating evidence, both the seventh-day Shabbat and the Sabbatical Year remind us that the Lord our God is the Creator and King of the universe! Concerning 25:1–6, Nechama Leibowitz observes,

The first chapter of Genesis...is divided into seven passages...where (“that it was good”) appears seven times. Furthermore, in Genesis, the seventh passage, dealing with the seventh day, contains three successive verses, each one with seven words. Of course, all of these figures are based on the Hebrew wording. Finally, the number of words in the seventh passage is 35 = (5 x 7). That all this is just a coincidence is inconceivable. Indeed, many commentators consider that, similarly to the Sabbath Day, the remembrance of the Creation is the main reason for the Shemittah year of rest for the land.⁵

The significance of all this lies in the fact that since the Shabbat and the Sabbatical Year both signify that the God of Israel is the Creator of the Universe, then both would serve as “the genuine sign and symbol for the truth of God's existence and this is the most fundamental article of faith for every believer.”⁶

D. Shimattah

The Shabbat Year has another biblical name. In Deuteronomy 15:2, 9 and 31:10 the Torah refers to it as a Shimittah Year.” We see this in 15:9 where the title “Shabbat Year” and “Shanat Shimittah (שנת השמיטה)”, ‘The Shimattah Year,’ seems to be used interchangeably. What is meant by this strange term *shimittah*? We catch a glimpse of the meaning in 15:2 which speaks of “the release of debts.” Indeed, the nature of the expression has to do with a “remission of commercial debts, remission of private slaves, freeing security deposits”⁷ as well as other kinds of debts. Thus, the Shabbat year is also a year in which debts are released, giving people relief and a caseation of worry and concern from financial matters. In Israel today, most people use the term Shimattah rather than calling it a Shabbat Year. In addition, for whatever reason, it is also of interest to note that the teaching about the Shemittah Year is one of the few instructions that does not find its repetition when Moshe received revelation on the Plains of Moab in Deuteronomy. Furthermore, “According to our Sages, this law came into force only after the land had been conquered and divided, that is, fourteen years after it was occupied.”⁸ Hence, the twenty-first year of the Israelite entrance into Canaan was the first Shemittah Year.

E. Made for Man

Before we leave our discussion of the Sabbatical Year, there is another important point to make. Yeshua tells us that Shabbat was “made for man, not man for the Shabbat” (Mark 2:27). Among other things, this teaches us that the Shabbat has certain benefits for people if they observe it as unto the Lord. The same, therefore, would hold true regarding the Sabbatical Year. What benefits can the Sabbatical Year have for us?

5. Nechama Leibowitz, *New Studies in Vayikra*, 512–513.

6. *Ibid*, 514.

7. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (HALOT), 1558.

8. Munk, *The Call of the Torah: Vayikra.*, 287.

One obvious benefit is that the text indicates that the farmers get a whole year vacation! **25:4** indicates that every seventh year the farmers were not to sow, reap, nor prune for one year. In fact, **25:4** says that this year is to be “a Sabbath of solemn rest for the Land.” We should note that the same phraseology is also used to describe the rest on Yom Kippur, *shabbat shabaton* (שבת שבתון).

Another benefit to us is that the Sabbatical Year affords us an opportunity to see how much the Lord can increase our faith. Some would no doubt ask, “But how would we eat?” The answer is, Fear Not! God has this one covered! He tells us in **25:21**, “I will send you such a blessing in the sixth year that the land will yield enough for three years”. The Holy One has just finished commanding them not to sow nor reap in the sixth year. Then, as if He was reading the minds of all of those potential sceptics in Israel who cannot figure out where their food would come from, God then informs them that He would send a great blessing in the sixth year, so much so that they would still be eating that food even during the eighth year when they would be planting next. Gordon Wenham admits “The idea of a bumper crop to last three years in the sixth year may strike the Westerner as fanciful.” He suggests this is where “the institution of the sabbatical year provided a real test of Israel's faith in these promises.”⁹

Moreover, God also indicated that any produce the land produces naturally is permitted to be eaten. It is not for storage, it is just to be eaten. Rabbi Hertz confirms this by pointing out: “The fruit and grain which grew of itself in the Sabbatical Year might be picked and eaten but not stored. Grain growing of itself: i.e. without regular ploughing and sowing is not uncommon in Palestine [Israel]”.¹⁰ Barukh Levine in *the JPS Commentary* also agrees when he notes, “What grows naturally is for the taking, by man and beast...”¹¹ Furthermore, **25:5** speaks of “untended vines.” When this verse speaks of letting all vines go untended, it uses the same Hebrew word which is used to talk of the Nazarite in Numbers chapter 6 when he was not to cut his hair. The word is *nazir* (נזיר).

One more benefit of the Sabbatical Year is that by letting the ground rest for a year, it would tend to increase its health and ability to produce by replenishing it. Many have criticized the Jewish people for letting their land rest for a year, but in doing so, they “did not understand the meaning of this unique law, which, among other things, saved the soil from the danger of exhaustion.”¹²

A final benefit of the Shemittah year is that because people would be resting that year, there would be lots of time to study the Scriptures and be with the family. Again, we go to Hertz for elucidation on this point. He says, “In Deuteronomy 31:10f, we learn that the seventh year was, furthermore, to be utilized for national educational ends, and special measures were to be taken to acquaint the men and women, the children as well as the resident aliens, with the teachings and duties of the Torah”.¹³

Can you imagine spending a whole year just studying the Scriptures and being with the family?

II. YOVEL: יובל **25:8–22**

We have not yet finished studying the concept of seven. We have seen a weekly seven: the weekly Shabbat is on the seventh day. This is followed by the Shemittah Year, every seventh year. Now, in **25:8–22** we encounter yet another special event associated with seven: The Year of Jubilee, which comes at the end of every seven times seven years, every 50 years.

Although this unusual event is called in English the “Year of Jubilee,” its Hebrew name is called *Shanat HaYovel* שנת היובל. The English word “jubilee” is just a poorly transliterated form of the Hebrew word “yovel”. Sometimes, English translators change the “y” (י) sound in Hebrew to a “j”

9. Wenham, *Commentary on Leviticus*, 320.

10. Hertz, *Pentateuch and Haftarahs*, 532.

11. Barukh Levine, *JPS Torah Commentary*, 169.

12. Hertz, *Pentateuch and Haftarahs*, 531.

13. *Ibid.*

and a Hebrew “v” (ו) sound to a “b”. Hence, “yovel” then becomes “jubel”. But what does that label signify?

Unfortunately, the precise meaning of the Hebrew word *yovel* (יובל) is difficult to determine. The rabbis offer several suggestions. Rashi suggests the possibility that “yovel” means “ram's horn”, or another name for the shofar. Rabbi Akiva in B. Rosh Hashanah 26a also believed this. His evidence is that he heard the word “yovel” was used among the Arabs to speak of a ram. Rabbi Yisrael Herczeg, *ArtScroll's Rashi* commentator, also suggests that the Targum Onkelos understood “yovel” in like manner.¹⁴

However, commentators have other ideas about its meaning. For example, classic Jewish commentator, Ibn Ezra, understood “yovel” to mean, “set out” and the Ramban thought it means “freedom of movement”. Yet, Rabbi Munk asserts that the accepted halachic definition is that which was formulated by Rabbi Levi in Talmud Yerushalmi Berakot 19:13. He says that “Yovel refers to the horn of the chamois” [“a hoofed animal of mountainous regions of Europe, having upright horns with backward-hooked tips.”¹⁵]. Interestingly, Munk also informs us that some relate the term “yovel” to Jeremiah 17:8 “and spreads its roots to the river”. In this verse, “yovel is synonymous with a river or stream to which the roots of a tree planted at the water's edge will grow . . . This gives it the sense of a return to roots, meaning thereby that all the fields return to their original owners and each generation goes back to its original status.”¹⁶

In reality, it seems that “yovel” embodies both strands of meanings suggested by the sages above. However, the majority of thinkers seem to associate yovel with a ram's horn.

A. Yovel Basics

According to our passage three events significantly stand out as important features in the Yovel Year:

- 1) The release of all slaves
- 2) The return of all land to its original, ancestral owner from the descendants of Israel
- 3) The forgiveness of all debts.

B. Private Property in Cities and Levitical Property

For some reason, houses in towns do not seem to be subject to jubilee releases, “perhaps because even in those days redevelopment was fairly rapid in towns.”¹⁷ The designation of “villages with no encircling walls” in **25:31** is represented by the Hebrew word *hachtserim* (החצרים). Once again Levine helps us. He provides a further insight about this word. He says that *hachtserim* was originally a pastoral term, “synonymous with tents”. Citing some biblical references (Deuteronomy 2:23, Isaiah 42:11, Genesis 25:13ff), Levine says that in our context the reference to *hachtserim* were “primarily to agricultural villages, where there were houses, not tents, and fields, not pastureland.”¹⁸ Such property may be redeemed at will but must be released in the Yovel Year.

The Levites were not granted a specific land inheritance like the rest of the tribes. They were, however, given forty-eight cities with some surrounding pastureland that were scattered throughout the rest of the tribes. The reason for this may have been due to the fact that the Levites had important ministries that were needed to be performed among the Israelites and they therefore needed to live among the rest of the nation rather than have their own tribal area. The Torah makes an exception for the release of Levitical property within cities because of their special situation. If they were not granted ultimate redemption in the Yovel Year, it is conceivable that in the end the Levites may have ended up with no property of their own.

14. Rashi: *Vayikra*, *ArtScroll Edition*, 322.

15. *The American Heritage Dictionary*, 257.

16. Munk, *The Call of the Torah: Vayikra*, 301.

17. Wenham, *Leviticus*, 321.

18. Levine, *JPS Leviticus*, 177.

C. The Mount Sinai Connection

We are told in **25:9** that the Yovel Year is to begin with a shofar blast on Yom Kippur. Unlike the Shemittah Year which reminds us of creation, the sounding of a yovel clearly reminds us of Mount Sinai. For Exodus 19:13 tells us that a yovel was sounded and Exodus 19:16 says that a ram's horn (shofar) was sounded on Mount Sinai. (It should be of interest to note that **25:1** of our parasha reminds us that this teaching is taking place at Mount Sinai.)

Many Jewish commentators observe that all of the major events of the Yovel Year find their roots at Mount Sinai in Exodus 19:

Thus, the yovel contains three obligations: a) that the children of Israel be free, as at Sinai upon their release from Egyptian bondage, thus, "For to Me the children of Israel are servant" (**25:55**); b) that they do not sow nor harvest, just as at Mount Sinai there was no sowing or reaping; c) that all land revert to its original state, just as at Sinai, the children of Israel possessed no fields or vineyards.¹⁹

We think that this association of the Yovel Year with Mount Sinai is correct. In fact, we see even more significance. Just as at Mount Sinai the Yovel called the redeemed community to the mountain and to the Torah, which was given there, so the Yovel Year also calls us back to the roots of our freedom.

In the Yovel Year, the slave is free to be who he really is — a man who serves only the Lord God. The land is also free to be identified by its real owner, the Lord God of Israel. However, it is really by our identification with the Torah that we receive our true identity. It is the Torah that gives us freedom to walk in who we really are. The Yovel Year reminds us of that by calling us back to it.

D. Borrowing and Landing

The Torah permits borrowing if the need arises, but it does not permit the lender to charge the borrower interest to fellow Israelites, especially if the means for repayment of the debt are removed, i.e., inability to repay. The Hebrew word translated "being in straits", is *yamookh*. It carries the idea of being reduced, collapsing, or being made low.

E. The Torah of Freedom

Perhaps now we are able to understand more fully what James says in his letter to other Jewish believers in Yeshua. He encourages us to remember to follow the Torah. He compares the Torah to a mirror. If a person reads the Torah and does not do what it says it is like one who looks into a mirror, walks away and forgets what he looks like (James 1:22–25).

Do we hear what this is saying? The Torah is actually a description of what the righteousness of God looks like on planet earth. We also know that we, who are New Creations in Messiah, have been made the righteousness of God in Him. Therefore, the Torah is said to be a mirror in which we can see what the new "us" looks like. We need to know what we look like in order to know how to behave in a manner consistent with who we now are in Messiah.

In this analogy James refers to the Torah as the "*perfect* law that gives freedom [*italics mine*]". We should note that most translations of the Greek word *nomos* — νόμος, render it "law", but there are many times where it would be better translated as "Torah", especially when it refers to the Scriptures — such as in this passage in James. It is the Torah, or God's Word, which gives us the freedom to be who we are now.

Why does James refer to the Torah particularly, as that which gives "freedom"? Many people teach that anyone who follows the Torah is in bondage! If we import our knowledge of Leviticus 25 and its teaching about the Yovel Year into James 1, the answer is clear. If Torah is followed with the proper motives and in the power of the Spirit of God it enables us to walk a walk of freedom! It gives us the freedom to be who we are now as new creations, as redeemed people, as servants of the Holy One of

19. Leibowitz, *New Studies in Vayikra*, 530.

Israel. (See also Galatians 2:20 and 2 Corinthians 5:1 7.) We wonder if the letter of James was written in a Shanat haYovel?

Free to Be Who We Are

Shall we take this one step further? James himself does. He says in 2:12, “Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the Torah (NIV uses “law”) that gives freedom.” He is exhorting us to follow the Torah, like he and his followers did. He tells us that the Torah may function like a judge for us. It will ask us, “Did we believe the Good News of the living Torah, Yeshua the Messiah, and therefore live it out”? Did we believe the “mirror”? Did we remember what we looked like in the mirror, or forget and live like something other than what we really are — new creations and children of God?

All of this is based on the understanding that the Yovel Year connects us to Mount Sinai and the giving of the Torah which, if followed properly, gives the children of God the only real freedom mankind can know — the freedom to walk in who we are as children of God.

B. The Atonement Connection

We need to consider yet another important aspect of the Yovel Year. Why did the Lord have the Yovel Year begin on Yom Kippur? Why did it not commence on 1 Nisan in the spring when He Himself designated the New Year to begin (Exodus 12:2)? What is the significance of Shanat HaYovel beginning at Yom Kippur?

It seems that to understand what is going on here we need to remember that one of the primary themes for the Yovel Year is the theme of freedom. We have already examined two facets of freedom that the Yovel Year can teach us, freedom to be who we are in Messiah and freedom to follow the Torah. However, in order to walk in either of these freedoms, there is a primary, more fundamental freedom everyone must experience. This is the freedom from sin itself.

The Apostolic Scriptures teach us that we are all born sinners (Romans 3:23). Because we are born in such a state, we are therefore in bondage to that sin (Romans 6). Neither following the Torah nor any other religious teaching can free us from that bondage. Yeshua said that *He* came to set us free! Indeed, He did! The scriptures teach that if we would put our trust in the finished, perfect atonement accomplished by Yeshua, several things happen immediately. One thing that takes place is that He instantly changes us from the inside. The sinner who we were was put to death. At the same time He makes us who were sinners into new creations, a complete change of essential identity! In addition, he also breaks the bonds of our slavery to sin. We are now free because of His sacrifice!

Can we now see the connection between the Yovel Year and the Day of Atonement? “The Day of Atonement [and the Yovel Year] had much in common. The message of both was a new birth. The Day of Atonement freed man from slavery to sin and enabled him to start his life anew, at one with God and with his fellow man.”²⁰ It seems that God was painting another spiritual picture. He was teaching that there is no real freedom unless sinful man has his sins atoned for, but once this has happened, he has entered into a new realm of existence — real freedom to serve the Lord his God.

We now move to the third important Hebrew word in this parasha.

III. DROR: דָּרוֹר

Several Hebrew words can be rendered “freedom”. Leviticus **25:10** says that when the shofar is blown announcing the Yovel Year, we are to “proclaim liberty, dror (דָּרוֹר), throughout the land to all its inhabitants”. Hence, *dror* is the word chosen to talk about the freedom characteristic of the Yovel Year.

20. Hertz, *Pentateuch and Haftarahs*, 532.

Dror is a very rare word. In one of its rare uses in the Tanakh, Exodus 30:23, we can learn much about what the word seems to mean and why the Holy One chose this word, *dror*, to speak of the freedom in the Yovel Year. In Exodus 30:23, the Lord instructed Moshe to make the oil for the anointing of the High Priest. Among the elements in this oil was “flowing liquid.” The Hebrew reads *mur dror* (מִיֹּדֶרֶךְ). This can be rendered as myrrh *dror*, hinting that this liquid might be myrrh. In another place in the Tanakh, *dror* also carries the connotation of free-flowing, unhindered, or free running.²¹

The word *dror* can be contrasted with its synonym *hofshi* (חֹפְשִׁי). *Hofshi* is used in Exodus 21:2 in reference to the Shemittah Year where slaves also went free. However, there is a difference between the Shemittah Year freedom and Yovel Year freedom. This difference is indicated not only by the different Hebrew words used in each case (Exodus 21 and Leviticus 25) but also by what actually happened to the released slaves.

During the Shemittah Year the *hofesh* was only a qualified release since the slave, if he wanted, was permitted to stay on longer and remain with his master. It is interesting that in Modern Hebrew we often speak of a limited vacation from work or school as a “*hofesh*” (same word). We know that when the *hofesh* is over we will be back at it again. However, the emancipation in the Yovel Year was absolute. All slaves were to be set free, hence *dror* is used. It is an absolute freedom. It is a freedom as free flowing as the oil made from the free-flowing myrrh.

Slaves

Curiously enough, the Israelites were permitted to have slaves (as opposed to indentured slaves). This is mentioned in **25:44–46**. The slaves may be acquired from the nations around Israel and were to be considered personal property that could be passed down through the family as an inheritance. The implication here is that it was permitted to give the slaves harsher work than fellow Israelites. Why?

Let us propose a possible reason for this seemingly unfair treatment. In our opinion, this practice paints another Torah picture. We need to see Israel as a picture of the redeemed community, the people of God. Life in the family of God may become difficult at times, pictured by the practice of having indentured servants. However, it is nowhere as difficult as life *outside* of the family of God, pictured by the peoples of the nations around Israel who did not know Him. Life outside of the redeemed community is real bondage, a miserable bondage — a slavery to sin. The only way a slave could change his status was to become an Israelite, i.e. (in keeping with the picture we are painting) to become a believer in the Holy One.

Having said all of this does not mean that the Torah permitted inhuman treatment of slaves. Elsewhere in the Torah slavery is regulated and God instructed owners to treat their slaves with dignity and justice. Perhaps all of this can be illustrated by Galatians 6:10, “Therefore as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.”

Servants

In repayment of a debt the Torah permitted the practice of indentured servants. This is where the debtor gave himself and his family over to his creditor for the purpose of working off the debt. The Torah made sure that this practice would not be abused, by setting two limits to it. First, there was a time limit. He was to be an indentured servant until the debt was paid off or until the Yovel Year arrived, whichever came first. Secondly, there was a limit to the kind of treatment the indentured servant received. The creditor was to treat the indentured servant with the status of an employee and not that of a slave. **25:43** enforces this notion when it instructs the employer not to treat the indentured servant “ruthlessly”. This meant that the employer was not to treat the person as the Egyptians treated

21. BDB, 204.

the Israelites, with backbreaking labour. What the Egyptians did to the Israelites, Israelites ought not to do so to one another.

Unhindered to Serve God

Let us return to our thoughts about different words for freedom in Hebrew. We can see from the difference between these two words for freedom (*hofshi* and *dror*) that the liberty in the Yovel Year is *absolute* liberty, unhindered from any obligations or restraints. The servant himself was not allowed to remain with his master no matter how well he was treated. Why was this so?

The Lord gives us the answer in **25:55**. “For the Israelites belong to Me as servants. They are My servants, whom I brought out of Egypt. I am the Lord your God”. Through the Yovel Year, the Lord is painting the picture of the kind of freedom we have in Him. As we previously pointed out, He is giving us a reminder of the importance of remembering who we are as His children. We are not slaves to anyone or anything else; we are His servants. “In the yovel year the voluntary servant, who shuns freedom and responsibility, who acquires a master, is compelled to go free and serve the One whom it is legitimate to serve. He is relieved of the human bondage that he might submit to the yoke of heaven alone!”²²

Thus, the Yovel year is not a *hofshi*, but a *dror*, a year where we are running free without hindrance to be who He made us in Messiah — redeemed servants of the Redeemer Himself!

IV. YAMOKH: מוֹךְ (מוך)

The final significant Hebrew word in this week's commentary is also a rare word. It is used several times throughout chapters 25–27. BDB indicates that it could be translated as “to be low”, “depressed”, or “to grow poor”. Hence, *mookh* (מוֹךְ) speaks of Israelites (or anyone for that matter) who, for whatever reason, have become impoverished and unable to support themselves and, perhaps, have sold themselves into servitude in order to either pay back debts or just to survive. This is called “indentured servitude.” The instructions of Shemittah and Yovel are followed by teachings regarding how such relationships are to be conducted. To put it simply, the Torah regulates such relationships so that there is equal fairness to both the one who has become *mookh* (poor) and to the one who has become his master.

A. God is Earthly Minded

We have looked at the teachings of the Yovel Year and the Shemittah Year. Among other things we have noted how they picture what it means to be properly related to the Lord. For the most part, we have interpreted the regulations in this light, but there is another side to the coin. The Torah itself is a continual reminder that while we always look toward the Heavens, we also are to be earthly minded.

However, it is important to note that there is a connection between **25:1–43** (Shemittah and Yovel teachings) and the rest of the parasha. “The laws of Shemittah and Yovel are followed by the remedies provided for the rehabilitation of the impoverished. (Indeed, the Shemittah and Yovel laws similarly seek to redress the inequalities of wealth arising during the intervening Yovel years).”²³

In short, the rest of the parasha, based on the teachings and attitudes behind the Shemittah and Yovel, provides us with an incredible insight into the heart and mind of God. We see how much He cares for justice and equality among His people, so much so, that He provides detailed legislation for those who are unfortunate and who must rely totally on Him for justice and sustenance.

B. Not Mere Chattel

Nechama Leibowitz makes an important observation along these lines. She points out that there is one Hebrew word for both worker and servant ‘*eved*’ (עֶבֶד). She says,

22. Leibowitz, *New Studies in Vayikra*, 536.

23. *Ibid.*, 554.

servant signifies both the one who has sold himself or has been sold into servitude, as also the God-fearing servant of God. Indeed, the Messiah too is termed the “servant of the lord.” Thus, the institution of servitude in the Torah is in harmony with the altruism of the monotheistic faith. The servant is never reduced to mere chattel (mancipium); he remains an individual, a human being.²⁴

The Torah reasoning for all of this is found in **25:55**. The Holy One wants all servants to be treated and respected the same way He treats His servants.

CONCLUSION

How long will the conditions of poverty and need exist, especially among God's people? When will we know in fullness the complete meaning of freedom? When will the Torah of Liberty be taught and known throughout the earth? When will the realities of the salvation wrought by the atonement be fully experienced by us? When will there be no need to fear the sins of greed and selfishness which lie behind much of the need for the legislation in **Leviticus 25:14–17** and **35 ff**?

We believe that the teaching regarding the Yovel Year with its emphasis on freedom and the regulation of servanthood in the in-between years provides us with a clue to the answer. There is only one answer to all these questions — in the age of the Messiah! The Sages hint at this in the Talmud.

The Tanna [a classification of rabbis that flourished from the late second Temple period to around 200 CE] Rebe Eliyyahu taught: “The world is to exist six thousand years; the first two thousand years are to be void; the next two thousand years are the period of the Torah, and the following two thousand years are the period of the Messiah. Through our many sins a number of these have already passed (and the Messiah is not yet).”²⁵

The Prophets also speak about this. In Isaiah 61:1 we are told that the Messiah will bring release to the captives, or slaves. The word for “release” here is the term, *dror*, the same word as in Leviticus 25, which also speaks of the release of slaves in the Yovel.

When Messiah came the first time, He quoted Isaiah 61 and used it in reference to Himself and His ministry. This in essence, began the Messianic era. However, the Messianic era will reach new proportions when Messiah returns to earth and reigns as King of kings and Lord of lords. “The Jubilee, then, not only looks back to God's first redemption of His people from Egypt (Leviticus 25:38,55), but forward to “the restitution of all things”, “for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells (Acts 3:21, 2 Peter 3:13).”²⁶

We cannot wait to hear that shofar, can you?

24. Leibowitz, *New Studies in Vayikra*, 556.

25. B. Avodah Zarah 9a

26. Gordon Wenham, *Leviticus* (NICOT), 324.