

Restoring the Nation's Pristine Nature

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This week's parsha of B'har deals essentially with two topics: The seventh year, Sh'mita, and the fiftieth year, Yovel, also known as the Jubilee year. In both years it is forbidden to work the land (Vayikra 24:4-5 and 25:11). However Yovel differs in that it also contains the additional requirements of freeing slaves and returning land to its original owner.

We are accustomed to refer to the law of resting the land in the seventh year as Sh'mita - and yet that word does not appear in our parsha, not even a single time. In its place the word Shabbat is used; strikingly, no less than seven times.

It may be suggested that the term Shabbat, in contrast to the term Sh'mita, conveys the spiritual element wrapped up in the observance of Sh'mita. Rav Kook zt"l parallels the concept of Sh'mita to the impact of the weekly observance of Shabbat: "The quality of life can only be improved through the affording of a breathing space from the bustle of everyday affairs. The individual recovers from the influence of the mundane at frequent intervals, every Shabbat day... what the Shabbat achieves regarding the individual, the Sh'mita achieves with regard to the nation as a whole

(Introduction Shabbat HaAretz).

The Sh'mita year provides rest and revitalization for the nation.

What then is the meaning of Yovel? Rabbi Kook suggested that the Sh'mita cycles are a prelude to the ultimate ascent to be achieved in the fiftieth year.

The Torah itself indicates a distinct correlation between Sh'mita and Yovel. The Torah does not say to count the fiftieth year, rather the Torah requires counting seven cycles (Vayikras 25:8). "And you shall count for yourself seven cycles of sabbatical years, seven years seven times; the years of the seven cycles of sabbatical years shall be for you forty-nine years." An explicit interdependence exists between Sh'mita and Yovel. Only after the process of counting seven cycles of seven years can we sanctify the fiftieth year. There is a process of ascent that we are carrying out.

Rabbi Kook offers this beautiful explanation:

"...the Jubilee emanates a spiritual power which progressively gains momentum until it is possessed of sufficient vitality not only to tap the existing good stored in the life of the nation and preserve the character of life according to the pattern of the Sh'mita, but also to remedy the distortions and faults of the past, restoring national life to its original conception and its pristine freshness..."

(Introduction to Shabbat HaAretz).

The Ramban (1195-1270) proposed that the very meaning of the word Yovel means freedom: “In my opinion, Scripture does not refer to [this year] as Yovel on account of the blowing, but rather on account of the freedom that the fiftieth year brings of the inhabitants of the land...” (Vayikra 25:10).

The Yovel year is launched in striking fashion: with the sounding of the Shofar on the day of Yom Kippur. This clues us in to the true meaning of Yovel. If we understand Sh'mita as echoing the weekly Shabbat, then Yovel should be viewed as echoing the day of Yom Kippur. It is a return to our very nature, to our core. For example, when land is given back to the original owner we are returning to the way God first intended the land be apportioned. Man returns to his roots.

In the Yovel year, slaves are freed. Throughout his writings Rabbi Kook describes how the experience of freedom is not only relegated to slaves liberated from their master but it applies to each of us in our own lives. There are numerous ways that we find ourselves enslaved and subservient - often to social pressures and outside influences.

“The difference between a slave and a free person is not merely a matter of social position. We can find an enlightened slave whose spirit is free, and a free man with the mentality of a

slave. True freedom is that uplifted spirit by which the individual - as well as the nation as a whole - is inspired to remain faithful to his inner essence, to the spiritual attribute of the Divine image within him. It is that quality which enables us to feel that our life has value and meaning.” (Adapted from Ma'amerei HaRe'iya, Celebration of the Soul, pp. 141-143)

Similarly, to the yearly Yom Kippur when individuals undergo a personal teshuva, a 'return', a realignment, the Yovel year catapults the nation towards achieving the highest degree of purity; freedom from the external pressures of attaining wealth and the severe competitiveness that can cripple us. The Yovel year is intended to rouse Israel; purging the people from their emotional and psychological enslavements that hinder and impede growth.

In a word, Yovel is designated to the revival of the nation's inner spirit and to illuminating its core values so that her true light can radiate outward.

The number fifty in Jewish thought symbolizes the highest ascent which man is capable of obtaining. It is a number that symbolizes the human aspiration to enter the most lofty spiritual gate. It is a plane not easily attained. But this does not deter us. 'Although we are not required to complete the work, we are not free to desist from it (Pirkei Avot 2:21).'