



B'HAR

Anniversary, Birthday, Jubilee!

My father, may he rest in peace, worked for many years in the garment industry. He worked hard, and there were times when he was without a job. I remember how happy we were as children when he found secure employment in a company which manufactured ladies' apparel, known as "Jubilee Blouse Company".

I was very young at the time, and had no notion of what "Jubilee" meant. All it meant to me then was that Daddy had a regular paycheck, was happy with the company and working conditions, and respected his boss, a Mr. David Zeiger, as a "real gentleman". "Jubilee" was a good thing.

All that was a long time ago, and I have since come across the word "Jubilee" countless times. But I remained a bit confused about the real meaning of the word until I read a penetrating address given not long before the Holocaust by one of its

most distinguished victims.

Let me begin by telling you about my confusion, and then I'll introduce you to the teachings of a great man.

The word "Jubilee" appears repeatedly in this week's Torah portion, B'har (Vayikra 25:1-26:2):

"You shall count off... a total of 49 years. Then you shall sound the horn loud... you shall have the horn sounded throughout your land.

"And you shall hallow the fiftieth year. You shall proclaim liberty 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.

"That fiftieth year shall be a Jubilee for you...

"For is a Jubilee. It shall be holy to you..."

Even the casual reader of this biblical text "gets it" - There is a fifty-year cycle in Judaism; that fiftieth year is called "Jubilee"; it is a year in which various observances apply; it is a holy year; and it is a year which celebrates freedom and liberty.

What does the word "Jubilee" itself mean? Not an easy question to answer, and even the earliest commentators disputed its definition.

For Rashi, the word means "a ram's horn", a shofar. It is a year of great

sanctity and major significance, but it is named for one ritual act: namely, sounding of the shofar on the Yom Kippur of its inception.

Ibn Ezra, with his characteristic brevity, and Ramban, at greater length and in exquisite detail, disagree with Rashi. They concede that in some contexts the Hebrew word for "Jubilee", Yovel, indeed refers to the shofar. However, they insist that in our text the word means "release", as Ibn Ezra believes; or as Ramban asserts, it means "to lead", perhaps "to guide", or "to cause to return". During that year, all are released from bondage, and all lands in Israel are returned to their original owners. For these latter commentators, the year is named "Jubilee" because of the theme of freedom and not because of the sound of the shofar which heralds its beginning.

But why, then, is the term "Jubilee" regularly applied to birthdays of individuals and to anniversaries of social institutions? We have all received many more than a few invitations to the "Jubilee" celebrations from friends, alma maters, local hospitals, and even the municipalities in which we live.

I was privileged to learn a deeper definition of the term when I recently read a collection of the public addresses of a most unusual man: Rabbi of early 20th century;

Chief Rabbi of Bessarabia; member of the Romanian Parliament; and a victim of the first German bombardment of his home city in July, 1941. His name was Rabbi Yehuda Laib Tsirelson.

Several of these addresses carried titles such as "Upon the Jubilee of the Local Hospital", or "The Jubilee of the Free Loan Society". One of is entitled "Upon the Jubilee of the Yeshiva of Kishinev."

Rabbi Tsirelson begins this latter speech by insisting that such gatherings may have been appropriate for the hospital or free loan society celebrations but are not entirely appropriate for the yeshiva. He argued thus:

"Why do we celebrate anniversaries? We do so when, some years in the past, a group of people undertook an endeavor which entailed great risks and for which ultimate success was dubious. For example, we started a hospital but were never quite sure that it would be viable. Could we find the proper personnel? Would it be accredited by the anti-Semitic authorities? Would patients feel comfortable enrolling there?"

"Or, we started a free loan society, but were never certain that we could raise the requisite funds to meet the needs of all the poor in our community.

"If, after ten years or twenty years, these institutions still function-and function well, that's cause for celebration. Hence, a Jubilee celebration.

"But when one inaugurates a Torah institution, a yeshiva, there can be no doubt that it will succeed. We have God's own promise that the Torah is eternal. If a Torah institution lasts ten years or twenty or fifty, it is no wonder and no occasion for amazement or astonishment. Why, then, a celebration?

"The answer is that whereas in the case of the hospital or the free loan society we were celebrating the fact that those institutions persisted and endured, in the case of this, the 75th anniversary of our yeshiva, we are not celebrating the fact that the Torah persisted and endured. It will always endure.

"Rather, we are celebrating a Jubilee in the true meaning of the term. We are celebrating the freedom and liberty which Torah brings to the Jewish people, and to mankind. 'Only he is truly free who occupies himself with Torah.'

"We are adhering to Ramban's understanding of 'Jubilee' as a term which means 'leading,' 'guiding,' and 'causing us to return.'

Success of our local hospital and our great institutions of charity deserve anniversaries. Only our yeshiva, and other similar projects, deserve the term 'Jubilee'."

Rabbi Tsirelson's teaching is one well worth taking to heart. The term "Jubilee," like so many other grandiloquent terms, is often cheapened by being applied to important, but basically mundane, occasions. It is best reserved for occasions which celebrate those achievements that guide us ethically, lead us spiritually, and return us to the divine goals of freedom and liberty.

As I read this week's parsha, the warm memories that I associate with the Jubilee Blouse Company will surely still be there. But after a moment's reflection, I will also recall the powerful message of a great rabbi who, despite his 81 years, died before his time. 🕯