

B'har

בהר

“On mount”

Leviticus 25:1 – 26:2

Torah Together



In this short portion, we are introduced to the commandments regarding the Sabbatical Year (**Shemittah**) and the Jubilee Year (**Yovel**), both unusual ideas. These two practices are radically different than anything typically observed in the world today and have interesting implications for how God originally intended that His people should live.

1. The Sabbath Year - 25:1-7

a) Where were the Israelites when God gave the commandments recorded in this chapter? Who were these commandments for? When were they to take effect?

The Israelites were still at Mt. Sinai, having been there since first receiving the law. (They have been at Mt. Sinai since Exodus 19.) These laws were for the entire nation when they came into Eretz (the land of) Israel.

b) The commandment described in these verses is known as *shemittah* in Hebrew. What was done to obey this command? What was the purpose of the command?

The law of Shemittah, or the Sabbatical year, required that the land be left uncultivated every 7th year, a sabbath for the land. No produce was to be harvested and sold for profit. In modern times, it has been shown to be good agricultural practice to allow farm land to lie fallow periodically. Obedience to this command would also teach dependence on God for one's sustenance.

c) What were the farmers and landowners to live on during this time? Who else was allowed to obtain their sustenance in this way? What guarantees did they have that there would be enough food for everyone (see verses 20-22)?

The owners of the land, as well as the poor, were to live off the produce that grew naturally on the land. (Exodus 23:10-11 commands that the poor among the people may also get food from the fields during shemittah.) In verses 20-22, God clearly promises a rich blessing during the 6th year enabling the farmers to live on it until harvest time in the 8th year.

Lessons of Shemittah

God ordained every seventh year as a “year of rest” for both the people and the land. God may have been teaching several lessons through this law. One might be faith in God to provide for our sustenance. In **Leviticus 25:20-22**, God answers this obvious concern of the Israelites. Can you think of other lessons that God might be teaching with the *Shemittah*?

Observing the Sabbath Year (*Shemittah*)

History seems to show that Israel did not do very well with keeping *Shemittah*, the sabbatical year. According to **Leviticus 25:1-7**, every seventh year, the Israelites were not to plant or harvest but instead to let the land lie fallow, living on whatever crops came up naturally. Not only that, but they could not enjoy any income as harvesting and selling were not permitted. Obviously, it would take a good measure of faith to observe this law.

In **2 Chronicles 36:20-21**, we are told of the conquest of Jerusalem by the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar:

“He [Nebuchadnezzar] carried into exile to Babylon the remnant, who escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and his successors until the kingdom of Persia came to power. The land enjoyed its sabbath rests; all the time of its desolation it rested, until the seventy years were completed in fulfillment of the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah.”

[Earlier, the prophet Jeremiah told the Israelites that they would spend 70 years in captivity in Babylon:

"This is what the Lord says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place."

Jeremiah 29:10]

If the Israelites had missed a total of seventy *shmettah* years, which were to be observed every seventh year, then they had not observed this command for $7 \times 70 = 490$ years. That's about half the time that they existed as a nation.



A Ram's Horn

The Hebrew word *yovel* literally means “the blast of a horn.” The **Year of Jubilee** was announced on Yom Kippur of the 49th year by “A *shofar* or trumpet blast of liberty.”

2. The Year of Jubilee - 25:8 - 26:2

a) In Hebrew, the word for jubilee is *yovel*. How often did the Year of Jubilee occur? Exactly when did it start and how was it announced?

The year of Jubilee, or Yovel, began after seven sabbath years had elapsed, or after 49 years. (There is some disagreement over whether it was observed during the 49th year or separately during the 50th year. Many argue that if it was observed on the 50th year, then the people would go for 3 1/2 years without produce which seems unreasonable.) Yovel was announced on Yom Kippur (Tishri 10) by the sounding of trumpets (or shofar) throughout Israel.

“. . . on the Day of Atonement sound the trumpet throughout your land. Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout your land. It shall be a Jubilee for you”

Leviticus 25:10

b) Several different actions took place during Yovel. Based on verse 10, what was the principle reason for the observance? How was this year like a regular Sabbath year?

Liberty was proclaimed throughout the land to all inhabitants. People were free to return to their families, debts were forgiven, and slaves were released. Like Shemittah, no crops were planted or cultivated during Yovel.

c) What happened to all agricultural land during the year of Jubilee? If land was sold, how was its value calculated? Did the ownership of the land change permanently? What was the reason for this? (Hint: see verse 23)

All agricultural land was returned to its original owner, that is, to the heirs of the clans and tribes to whom it was originally given. Thus land was never permanently sold; it was only leased for a maximum of 50 years. The value of the land was based on the number of years remaining until Yovel. In verse 23, God points out that the land is his and that the Israelites are his tenants. (This is an appropriate way for us to view all of our possessions.)

d) What did it mean to “redeem” land? In what ways could land be redeemed? What was the ultimate purpose or effect of this commandment?

Land was “redeemed” when it was returned to its original owner. This could be done in 3 ways. First, a relative of the seller could buy the land back or alternatively, the owner himself could buy it back. (The price was determined by the original price and the number of years remaining until Yovel.) Thirdly, during Yovel, the land automatically returned to the owner. Thus agricultural land always remained in the family of the original owners.

e) How were the rules of redemption different for houses in cities than for agricultural land and buildings? Why do you think they were different?

Houses within walled cities could be repurchased by the seller only during the first year after the sale. After this time, they became the permanent property of the buyer. Presumably, God considered houses in cities to not have lasting value compared to agricultural land. God evidently wanted the Israelite tribes to maintain permanent ownership of the land, not buildings.

Kinsman Redeemer

Most often, an Israelite would have to sell his land because he had somehow gotten into heavy debt. The term kinsman redeemer is used to describe the “nearest relative” in verse 25. This man had the responsibility to “redeem” or buy back the land that was sold by the original owner. The concept of kinsman redeemer is a good picture of *Yeshua* as Messiah: He has redeemed us by paying the debt for our sin and has thereby returned us to our original owner, God.

Scripture Link:

One of the features of *Yovel* was that Hebrew slaves were to be set free (see **Leviticus 25:54**).

Jeremiah 34:8-22 tells of the time when the southern kingdom of Judah did not honor this commitment. In this passage, Jeremiah tells the people of Judah that their failure to obey this command would lead to their destruction by the Babylonians.

f) How were the rules of redemption for the Levites different? Why do you think this was necessary?

The Levites had no agricultural land as an inheritance. Instead they were given 48 towns in Eretz Israel (see Numbers 35). Since these cities were to be their perpetual inheritance, they always had the right to redeem their houses in these cities. Also, each Levitical city had a prescribed amount of pastureland surrounding it which was also subject to redemption.

g) If a neighbor or fellow countryman fell on hard times and was unable to support himself, what was the Israelite commanded to do? If the neighbor was forced to sell himself to get out of debt, how was he to be treated? When was he to be released?

If a fellow Israelite fell on hard times, his countryman was expected to help him by making interest-free loans to him or by selling him goods at cost. (One could assume other ways of helping as well.) If he sold himself to an Israelite as a slave, he was to be treated well, and as opposed to non-Israelite slaves, he was to be released on Yovel.

h) What were the differences between slaves from other nations and Hebrew slaves? Why do you think God condoned slavery at all?

Hebrew slaves were not to be permanent possessions as was allowed with non-Hebrew slaves. This was true even if they were owned by non-Hebrews. It seems that God tolerated slavery because it was an essential part of the economy of the times. Even so, He insisted that Israelites were never to be enslaved again as they had been in Egypt. (The book of Philemon sheds more light on the issue of slavery in Yeshua's time.)

i) The ultimate degradation for a Hebrew was to be forced to sell himself as a slave to a non-Hebrew master. What rights did the Hebrew slave have in this situation?

A Hebrew sold to a Gentile always had the right of redemption and he was to go free at Yovel in any case.

j) Verses 26:1-2 seem to be somewhat an afterthought here. However the phrase "I am the LORD your God" repeated seems to emphasize their importance. Can you see why these verses might be appropriate here?

The reiteration of these commands seem to underscore the importance God places on these particular instructions: Worship no gods other than YHWH, observe the Sabbath, and treat his sanctuary (Tabernacle) as holy.

Digging deeper

1. The laws of *shemittah* and of *yovel* were for the Israelites when they dwelled in the land of *Israel*. What effect do you think these laws would have had on their society? Based on your knowledge of the history of Israel, how well do you think they obeyed these laws?

These laws would provide a very stable society. The ownership of land would remain evenly divided among the descendants of the various tribes of Israel and there could not be an accumulation of land by one person. Furthermore, shemittah would serve to remind people of their responsibility to those less fortunate and of their dependence on God. Historically, it is somewhat doubtful that Israel ever kept these laws, or at best, kept them for very long. They would have given Israel a unique status among the nations of the world. (See 2 Chronicles 36:20-21 for scriptural support.)

2. Does the story of Ruth shed any light on your understanding of the kinsman redeemer and right of redemption of the land?

In addition to the right of redemption of the land, the book of Ruth also provides insight into the law of levirate marriage (Deut. 25:5-10). Specifically, Ruth 3 & 4 relate to some of the rules of redemption.

The haftarah portion for this week also relates to the redemption of the land.

For further study, see

Haftarah : Jeremiah 46:13-28

Brit Hadashah : Luke 2:22-24; John 19:31-37; Acts 13:16-17;
Revelation 8:6 – 9:12; 16:1-21

Observing the Year of Jubilee (*Yovel*)

It is interesting to consider some of the implications of observing the Year of Jubilee. Notice that in God's plan, permanent ownership of the land of Israel was always to remain in the hands of the descendants of the original tribes as defined in the book of **Joshua**, chapters **13-21**.

(Actually, according to **Leviticus 25:23**, all of the land remained under the permanent ownership of God Himself and the Israelites were tenants.) If the Israelites had been obedient and not broken their covenant with God, today the different parcels of land as defined in the book of Joshua would still be owned and occupied by heirs of the original sons of Jacob.

The Year of Jubilee had significant financial implications as well. For any of several of reasons, an Israelite might want to sell all or part of his share of the family land. This was allowed, but it might be considered more a lease than a sale because when the next Jubilee Year came, the land reverted back to the original owner. Thus, the land was "sold" for the number of years until the next Jubilee Year. (God explained that the value of the land had to be calculated based on the number of years until the next Jubilee Year so that no one was cheated.) Such land could also be "redeemed" by the original seller or by a relative (someone in the same tribe). In this case, the original owner or his relative would pay the buyer for the value of the land until the next Jubilee Year. If this was not done, in the Year of Jubilee, the land reverted back to the original owner and everything started afresh. The same rules applied to the houses owned by the Levites in their various cities as they did not have tribal landholdings as their brothers did. (Houses in cities owned by non-Levites could be permanently sold with the seller having a one year period in which he could "redeem" the house, buying it back. After that one year period, the city house belonged to the buyer permanently.)

It was not uncommon in ancient Mediterranean culture for a person to become so indebted that he needed to effectively declare personal bankruptcy. A man would do this by selling himself as a slave and then working to pay off his debt. The correct observation of the Year of Jubilee had significant implications for such a person. First, if a Hebrew man sold himself as a slave, he was to be treated as a hired worker, not as a slave, who was treated as property. When the Year of Jubilee came, the man was to be released from his debt and servitude to return to his family and his ancestral land. In a worst case scenario, a Hebrew man might sell himself to a non-Hebrew, who didn't observe the Year of Jubilee. In this case, the Hebrew slave always retained the right of redemption: One of his relatives in his clan may redeem him by paying his debt. Even if the man was not redeemed, he was to be set free in the Year of Jubilee. This law played a central role in the story of Ruth. Furthermore, this is exactly what *Yeshua* did for us when He voluntarily died on the cross to pay the debt for our sins.

It is difficult to determine how serious the Israelites were about observing the Year of Jubilee. It seems clear that it was observed during the time of the United Kingdom and perhaps until the conquest and dispersion of the Northern Kingdom by the Assyrians in the 6th century bc, resulting in the Lost Ten Tribes of Israel. It is also likely that the Year of Jubilee was celebrated for some of the time after the reconstruction of the Temple during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. Today, many Jews regard it as inappropriate to celebrate the Year of Jubilee until God restores the whole house of Israel to their ancestral land. When the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel are reunited with the tribes of Judah and Benjamin (who now occupy the land), then it will be possible to observe the Year of Jubilee.