

## Parashat Behar: Between Freedom and Ownership

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Dear Friends,

The Jubilee year is an amazing, utopian concept! It is so amazing, that it was cancelled...

We are nearing the end of the book of Vayikra, the book of ancient Israelite holiness. It describes the human and Divine ideal. It teaches “love your neighbor”, but mostly, it teaches freedom.

**“You shall count off... seven times seven years... a total of forty-nine years. Then you shall sound the horn loud; in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month—the Day of Atonement—you shall have the horn sounded throughout your land and you shall sanctify the fiftieth year. You shall proclaim freedom 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... you shall not sow, neither shall you reap the aftergrowth or harvest the untrimmed vines, for it is a jubilee. It shall be holy to you: you may only eat the growth direct from the field.”** (Vayikra 25: 8-13)

The Shmitta is the seventh year, and the Jubilee is the 50th. Fifty is seven cycles of seven, plus one.

The Jubilee (called “Yovel” in Hebrew) is a complete “resetting” of the world. Lands return to their original owners, slaves are released, debts are cancelled. We begin again from scratch.

Shmitta and Yovel are not social mitzvot, as they appear at first. They do not deal with social justice in the regular sense. Shmitta, Yovel - and Shabbat - have a totally different purpose: Freedom!

Freedom does not mean carefree. Neither is it “fun”; in fact, it is challenging and difficult. The opposite of freedom is Egypt. Egypt, with its abundant food and material wealth, is carefree. Anyone wanting a life without worry, without anxiety and challenge, should stay in Egypt!

The key word in our parasha is “Dror”: **“You shall proclaim freedom (“dror”) throughout the land.”** A horn will be sounded throughout the land (on Yom Kippur) declaring that the time for “dror” - freedom - has arrived.

The original two-letter-root of the word “dror” is “d.r.”, which means “to dwell”. In the Jubilee year the shofar declares that we are all temporary dwellers on the land. We are not the owners of the houses we live in nor do we own the land we till; we do not own other people (slaves). Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch explains that the letters “t” and “d” are often switched, making it possible to read “dar” (dwell) as “tar” (tour). Hence, we are tourists in the land. The entire country is one big AirBnB.

The Exodus story is formative for the Jewish people. Freedom is our national DNA. Vayikra - the book of Israelite holiness - ends with an unequivocal call for total freedom.

3300 years have passed, and we must admit with great sorrow that our nation has not yet met this call. The Jewish nation has not fulfilled the ultimate task for which it was formed. Hillel the Elder, one of the greatest rabbis ever (the one who said “do not do unto others as you would not want others to do unto you”), saw that the Jubilee was stifling the economy, so he cancelled this radical commandment entirely.

This failure of ours, according to the following parasha - Bechukotai - is the reason for all of the hardships which befell Am Yisrael. The parasha warns us quite cruelly, that if we don't keep the commandments of Shmitta and Yovel, we will be exiled from our land. It promises that we will return to it, but only so as to try again. And again, and again.

The mitzvah of freedom - dror - maybe the most important one in the Torah. We are tested over and over, and we fail each time, until ultimately - it is hoped - we will learn; we will learn to apply this principle of freedom.

The issue of ownership of this land is the the essence of the conflict between us and our neighbors.

I, too, fail this test. I do not have a solution for this dilemma. I am not a free person. I don't know how to return to this land without fighting for it and defending our right to it day after day. I do not know how to settle the fervent Zionist within me with the radical freedom that the Torah demands of us. I don't know of any model of self-governance that is based entirely on “tourism” or rental. But I do know that this is what this parasha demands:

**“But the land must not be sold beyond reclaim, for the land is Mine; you are but strangers resident with Me...For it is to Me that the Israelites are servants: they are My servants, whom I freed from the land of Egypt, I the LORD your God.”**

(Vayikra 23: 23, 55)

This seems like an urgent issue. If we can't find an answer to the tension between freedom and ownership we might never know peace in our beloved land. But truly great lessons are learned slowly; the answers cannot be hastened, **“...do not awaken (or arouse) Love (redemption) until it wants!”** (Shir Hashirim 3:5)

About 600 years after the Torah proclaimed freedom, the prophet Hoshea was called to put a mirror in front of the Jewish people. He was commanded to marry a whore. At the climax of that book (Hoshea 2:18), it says: **“And in that day —declares the LORD— You will call [Me] Ishi, And no more will you call Me Baali.”** (Ba'al is the Hebrew word for “husband”, but it means “owner”, and is also the name of the local Canaanite god!). God is asking us for a new kind of relationship, one that is not based on ownership but on intimacy. Ownership is idolatry. Intimacy is Divine.

Vayikra is drawing to a close, but we will continue to discuss freedom and to seek it for many years to come.

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha