

Parashah Ninety-Four

Leviticus 25:1–38; Jeremiah 11:14–23; Matthew 5:38–42

notes by Tim Hegg

Our *parashah* this Shabbat teaches the laws of the *Shemittah* (שְׁמִטָּה), meaning “remission of debt”) or seventh year, as well as the *Yovel* (יּוֹבֵל) or the “Jubilee,” the 50th year or the conclusion of the cycle of seven *Shemittah* years.

The parallels between a number of “sevens” which HaShem has given us is interesting and worth noting. The first seven is the normal week with the Shabbat, the seventh day being symbolic of rest, harmony, and shalom. Pesach followed by the counting of the omer and Shavuot constitutes another “seven,” for after eating only matzot for seven days, seven weeks are counted with Shavuot coming on the 50th day (thus, “Pentecost”). The Sabbatical or *Shemittah* year is yet another grouping of seven, it being the seventh year in which the Land was to receive her rest. The Jubilee (*Yovel*) year constitutes the conclusion of yet another cycle of seven, namely seven *Shemittah* years and as such is the longest of all the cycles and parallels the Pesach/Shavuot cycle. This recurring motif of sevens has been the basis for the common teaching throughout the centuries that the history of our world will likewise follow the pattern of seven, each millennium being a day (=1000 years) with the millennial reign of Messiah constituting the seventh or sabbatical millennium. Even the Talmud contains references to Sages who viewed the ages as a cosmic week. For instance, R. Kattina said: “The world is to last six thousand years and one thousand it will be desolate, as it says, ‘and the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day.’” (b.*Rosh Hash.* 31a)

What principles are we to derive from the very fact that God has arranged these cycles in such parallel fashion? First, and perhaps foremost, is the obvious fact that God’s revelation of time as prescribed cycles teaches us that He is in control of time and its outcome. The passing years of our existence are not random or uncontrolled events, but are transcribed upon our lives by a loving and merciful God Who has good plans for us and Who is bringing about His will for our benefit and His glory. In a world that can often seem arbitrary and chaotic, it is necessary to regularly affirm that God is in control, and that He is working out His plan right on schedule. This is true as we consider the large picture (i.e., the history and future of mankind) as well as the events of our own, personal lives and world.

Secondly, God’s having revealed to us the scope of time in these parallel cycles of seven reminds us constantly that the goal to which His plan inevitably moves is that of peace, happiness, and shalom, things which can exist only in the realm of righteousness. The number seven throughout the Scriptures is viewed as a symbol of completeness—of fullness, of the way things ought to be. In this way, the weekly Sabbath, for instance, is to be a reminder of all that is right—of joy and shalom, because it is constantly to focus our attention upon the coming day when the final Shabbat is ushered in—the time of eternal rest and joy, the time of unending and unhindered fellowship and communion with our Master.

Our text begins with the interesting phrase וַיְדַבֵּר יְיָ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה בְּהַר סִינַי, “And Adonai spoke to Moses on Mt. Sinai.” Interestingly, nothing is said about the Jubilee year in the book of Exodus (though the seventh year is mentioned, Ex 23:11) and thus Moses wants all who read this passage in the subsequent writing of Leviticus to know that while the information was not communicated to the people at the first when instruction was given regarding the *Shemittah*, it nonetheless was given on Sinai and thus carries equal authority with the instructions perviously given.

Here is evidence that more was communicated to Moses on Sinai than simply the words given in the book of Exodus. That the Sages came to the opinion that even their own teachings (compiled in the Mishnah) were given to Moses at Sinai is stretching the concept too far, but we should learn from this opening line that all of the books of Moses reveal, to one extent or another, that which God related to him on the mountain.

Another interesting fact emphasized in our text is that the *Shemittah* as well as the *Yovel* are first and foremost for God's benefit, not man's. V. 2, ". . . the land shall observe a Sabbath rest unto HaShem" (ושבתה הארץ שבת ליהוה), "for Hashem" or "belonging to HaShem." Why? Why did the Land need a rest as far as HaShem was concerned? V. 23 gives us one answer: the Land, while given to Israel, still belongs to HaShem. The *Shemittah* year as well as the final *Yovel* reminds Israel time and time again that we are "renters" (as it were) and that the true owner of all things is our God (cf. Gen 14:19 קנה שמים וארץ, "owner of heaven and earth"). Therefore we are not allowed to take the Land and its produce for granted, nor are we allowed to treat it disrespectfully. The fact that the Land belongs to God is the only true basis for a biblical ecology in which the Land is cared for with His glory and honor in mind.

But this is true not only of the Land but also all that it produces. Since the Land belongs to HaShem, so does all of the food grown upon it. The *Shemittah* years and the *Yovel* remind us that the produce of the Land really is not ours either, for in these years it is considered ownerless, and thus anyone has the right to eat of it. When we say the *HaMotzi* (blessing before we eat) we affirm each time that the food we are about to eat belongs to God and He has graciously given it to us for our sustenance. To eat as though the food is actually ours (i.e., not to say the *berachah* (blessing) and acknowledge that it has come from God) is, in essence, to rob God of it, for we neglect to affirm His ownership of what we are about to eat. In the Sabbath years the farmer, apart from all of the labor of plowing, planting, cultivating, etc. was forced to live with the reality that the produce of his fields was still God's possession. Thus God has the right to give it to whomever He wills.

This principle of God's ownership emphasizes yet another reality, namely, we must view ourselves as "sojourners and residents with God" (v. 23). Our hearts are not to be set upon the things we possess, for in truth they are not ours—we are only using them. Such a mentality will keep our hearts from clinging to that which, in many instances, HaShem may lead us to give away. What is more, as Yeshua teaches us, we cannot love God as we ought (with all our heart, soul, and strength) if we also love possessions with a competing love. Being forced to let our possessions and real estate go at a prescribed time vividly reminds us that He is our "shield and great reward." It thus reminds us that we do not define ourselves by what we own (or by what we do not own), but we define ourselves as "residents with Him."

Perhaps one of the things that sets the *Yovel* year apart from all others is the requirement to return all real estate to its original owner as well as to let all slaves go free. The return of real estate is no doubt based upon the fact already mentioned, i.e., that the Land belongs to God. It could not be sold in perpetuity (v. 23) precisely because it belonged to God and His ownership of it must be constantly affirmed. The remission of slaves, however, adds a dimension to this concept of God's ownership, for it also indicates that all people belong to Him! Ezekiel states this outright when he writes: "All souls are mine . . ." (18:4). There is something fundamentally wrong with one man claiming ownership of another, for this might tend to negate the truth that God is the real owner of every soul, and every soul has a one-to-one obligation with His Creator to see Him as the primary owner—the One to whom each person must give first allegiance. Freedom goes hand in hand with

God's picture of righteousness and justice. Being enslaved is inevitably the result of the falleness of this world, something the *Yovel* intends to rectify.

The fact that the *Yovel* year dealt with the exchange of real property brought many legal questions to the table. "How should real estate transactions be handled in light of the devaluation of land as the *Yovel* approaches?" The instructions are given that both for land as well as for workers (servants/slaves), the value is to be reckoned by how many crops/years are left before the *Yovel*. In other words, the valuation system was to be based upon God's timetable. Here again, life was to be lived out with an eye to God's laws and therefore in submission to His plans and directions. If one had a heart to please God (i.e., to fear Him), he would thus not wrong his neighbor (v. 17).

Interestingly, the house or field purchased in the open land was to revert to its original owner at the *Yovel*, but the house purchased in a walled city could transfer ownership permanently. What does this tell us? Perhaps the emphasis is upon the fact that in the ancient Israelite society, the mainstay of the economy was agriculture. The arable land was therefore the economic basis, and one could, apart from the *Yovel* laws, eventually gain a monopoly in a given region and control the people through ownership of the fields. On the other hand, the cities contained primarily the artisans and craftsmen along with the Levites—needed professions but not the economic base that agriculture provided. Perhaps, then, the whole issue comes back to one individual having undue control of another (analogous to slavery). In the theocratic government of Israel, God was always to be viewed as King and one's life as ultimately in His care. To allow a few to monopolize the economy and thus to control the lives of others through their economic advantage would detract from the ultimate plan of God to be known as Israel's King and provider of all life's necessities.

But like all of God's appointed times, faith is required to obey the laws of the *Shemittah* and *Yovel* years. V. 19 states the truth, i.e., that the Land would sustain the people even during sabbatical years. But what of those whose faith was too weak to believe the direct statement of God? "If you say: What will we eat in the seventh year...?" God promises to send His blessing in the sixth year sufficient for a three year cycle (or perhaps for parts of three calendar years): "in the sixth year from Nisan until the end of the year, through the seventh year, and at least until Nisan of the eighth year, when the new winter crop will be fully grown." (Rashi) Regardless of how one reckons the three year statement, the point is clear: God will abundantly provide if His people will obey Him and walk in His ways.

But like any of these statutes that HaShem gives us to reveal Himself to us, we can foil the picture through our disobedience. If the *Shemittah* and *Yovel* years were given to teach us that God is the owner of all things, and that we are "sojourners" in His Land, eating from His table (so to speak), then if we withhold our help from our brother or sister who is poor, or if we try to take advantage of the coming *Yovel* year and sell the land for more than it is worth—what have we done? We have negated the very truth God intends for us to learn through the statutes and ordinances He has given us. Here we learn a valuable lesson! Many who view the Torah as having no lasting value comment that the Torah is external and devoid of the real spiritual, heart issues—issues that were emphasized by Yeshua and the Apostles. But once again we see such a perspective has missed the mark for lack of true study of the text. Here in our *parashah* the outcome of the *Shemittah* and *Yovel* laws is that we should treat our brother—our neighbor—with a heart of love! Thus, not only does the life of Torah obedience require an enduring faith in the God of Torah, it also teaches us how we are to treat others. That God would provide for each family in the sixth year an abundance to carry them through the Sabbatical year without a lack, becomes the pattern for how each of us

should treat our impoverished neighbor. If God supplies our needs, then, if we have the means, we should also be gracious to the members of our community who are also in need. The text is very straightforward: “If your brother becomes impoverished and his means falter in your proximity (עִמָּךְ), you shall strengthen him—whether sojourner or resident—so that he can live with you.” (v. 35). Rather than taking advantage of a brother who is impoverished, we are instructed (once again) to “fear God” and to lend without interest nor to make money on the transactions we have with him. We are to remember that God has graciously redeemed us from Egypt, and thus we have an obligation wherever possible to emulate the merciful and gracious acts of God by extending our help to the poor.

This verse (v. 35) is interesting as yet another indication of how the *ger* (גֵּר, “sojourner”) and the *toshav* (תוֹשָׁב, “resident foreigner”) were to be viewed by the people of Israel as they lived out the Torah. The Hebrew text, if read literally, is as follows: “And when your brother (אָחִיךָ) becomes poor and has little of hand with you, then you shall support him, sojourner and resident foreigner, that he might live with you.” Here, if the text is taken as it is, the *ger* and the *toshav* are called “your brother.” In this case, the non-Jew who has attached himself to Israel is viewed as though he were a “brother,” i.e., as though he were a native born Israelite, and he is to be treated with the same respect. Once again, the Torah upholds the issue of faith—obedience to the God of Israel, as the mark of true citizenship in the covenant. The promise of blessing upon the nations is lived out in ancient Israel as prescribed by the Torah, which always envisioned the ultimate blessing upon the nations.

Note how the text also describes the outcome of obedience that gives help to the poor of the community: “so that he can live with you.” Here we learn something very valuable indeed, and it is that the poor are to be valued as necessary for the community. And why? Because the one who is without economic strength may very well have spiritual strength and gifted talents which the community needs. Just because a person is poor in this world’s goods does not in any way mean he is not rich in wisdom, understanding, and gifts. If this passages teaches us anything about God’s economics, it teaches us that we are to overcome the natural tendency to receive the rich as highly valuable in our community while we treat the poor as common and without real worth. No—we must do all in our power to maintain the poor so that they can “live with us”—so that the wisdom they may have gleaned through their troubled circumstances might be added to the collective wisdom of the community, so that all may be enriched. But to take such a perspective is possible only when we have the mind of HaShem, for HaShem in no way despises the poor—rather, He loves and cares for them. If HaShem does this, then so should we, for our goal is to be holy even as He is holy.

This does not give anyone a reason to be poor! Laziness is not to be tolerated in God’s Torah community.

2Thess. 3:10 For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either. 11 For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. 12 Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Yeshuah Messiah to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread.

Yet there are times when, though one desires to work, he is not able. This may be because of

situations entirely outside of his control, such as sickness, or injury, or old age. But where one is able to work, one ought to work, even if that work is considered menial or lowly. Work is always honorable as long as it is done with a mind to honor HaShem.

Our Apostolic passage, which contains the words of Yeshua as He taught the people, emphasizes this same truth. Giving to others, or letting them borrow (in this case, without interest), is the expression of love that one has experienced from God Himself. If God has supplied our needs, we must be willing to help others as well. When we extend ourselves to those in need within our community, we only express to them what we ourselves have experienced from the Lord's hand.

This is Torah—living out what our Father has commanded us. And we discover that when we do, we are blessed doubly. Not only are we blessed in having something to give, but we are blessed again in the giving. *Zedekah* (a word which means “righteousness” but came to mean “giving to the poor” in rabbinic and Mishnaic Hebrew, and thus in Judaism from ancient times) is highly prized by the Sages. Perhaps one of the reasons the Jewish community has often been blessed economically is because she characteristically practices abundant *zedekah*. Throughout the cycle of the year, the festivals become a high-point for practising *zedekah* when a special effort is put forward to gather food and money to be dispersed to the poor. But there is another aspect of giving *zedekah*: it is to be given to those in need in such a way as not to embarrass them or demean them. This is what Yeshua was speaking of when He said that the right hand should not know what the left hand is doing:

Matt. 6:3 But you, when you do *tzedakah*, don't even let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.

Thus, the principles of our Torah text, rooted in the laws of the sabbatical (*Shemittah*) year, can be lived out in any place, at any time. We are called, therefore, to live our lives trusting that God will supply all of our needs as we obey Him. Moreover, we are to be gracious and open-handed to others, just as God is to us. If this is, in fact, our way of life, surely we will experience His continual blessing.