



Shabbat Table Talk Page

Overview

- **Parashah: Behar (בְּהָרַ, "On the mountain")**
- **Chapters: Leviticus 25:1-26:2**



בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ לַעֲסוֹק בְּדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה

– Torah Study Blessing –

Synopsis

Our Torah portion begins with the commandment that an Israelite farmer must let his land remain fallow every seventh year. This is called the “Sabbatical year” (or *Shemittah*). For six years, a farmer would be permitted to plant and harvest fields and vineyards, but during the seventh year no planting or harvesting was permitted, and all the inhabitants of the land could freely glean whatever the farmland produced naturally. Like the “double portion” of manna that fell on the sixth day of the week, God promised to give farmers a “double portion” of the harvest on the sixth year.

In addition, the people were told to count seven cycles of seven years – a total of 49 years – and to mark the arrival of the fiftieth year with blasts of the shofar on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). This fiftieth year would be a time of “Jubilee” (*yovel*) – a year of “release” for the land and all its inhabitants. Slaves would be set free, debts would be canceled, and the stewardship of the land would revert to its original titleholders. Moreover, since the harvest of the sixth year of the seventh cycle would be required to sustain the people for *two* years (i.e., the 49th and 50th year), God promised farmers that the yield of the harvest of the 48th year would be *three* times as great, so that the crops would sustain the people until the harvest of the year following the Jubilee year.

The Israelites were also given the duty to redeem (“buy back”) both land or persons that were sold because of financial hardship. For example, if a man was forced to sell some of his inheritance due to poverty, then one of his close relatives had the duty to acquire it so that it would not pass into the hands of strangers. This law, however, applied only to land, not to houses inside “walled cities” which were redeemable only one year after the date of sale. Moreover, the houses of the Levites were always redeemable, regardless of the amount of time that elapsed. In addition, if a man was forced to become a servant because of hardship, his “near kinsman” was bound to redeem him from his life of debt-servitude. The value of land was to be pro-rated according to the remaining number of crop years until the Jubilee, and no one was permitted to sell land and waive the duty to redeem it, since it belonged to God.

A poor brother may be hired as a respected servant, but he should never be treated as a slave. It is forbidden to lend him money at interest or sell him his daily food, and during the year of Jubilee he was to be released from all obligations. Any Israelite who became an indentured servant to a foreigner may be redeemed by his kinsmen. The portion ends with a general reminder to abhor all forms of idolatry, to keep God’s Sabbaths (holidays), and to reverence the sanctuary.



Basic Questions

1. How many years were farmers allowed to work the land before it must lie fallow? ¹
2. In the agricultural cycle of years, what is the seventh year called? ²
3. How do you determine the Sabbatical year? ³
4. During the Sabbatical year, are we allowed to harvest produce that grows by itself? ⁴
5. How were the people to survive during the seventh year if they could not harvest the land? ⁵
6. The Israelites were to count “seven weeks of years,” or 49 years, and then to declare what? ⁶
7. On what holiday was the “Jubilee” year to be declared? ⁷
8. What were the people required to do on the Jubilee year? ⁸
9. What did God promise as a reward of observing the Jubilee year? ⁹
10. If a person was forced to sell his land because of poverty, did he have to wait until the Jubilee year to get it back? ¹⁰
11. If a person sold his house in a walled city, would he get it back during the Jubilee year? ¹¹
12. Were the Levites allowed to sell their land? ¹²
13. Can Jews charge interest on loans they make to one another? ¹³
14. Can someone sell their land and forever waive the right to buy it back? ¹⁴
15. Who owns the land of Israel? ¹⁵

¹ For six years (the starting year was determined by a bet din, or religious court).

² Shemittah (שְׁמִטָּה), which is analogous to the Sabbath Day when we rest from our normal pursuits.

³ Take the current Jewish year and divide by seven; if there is no remainder, it is a shemittah year; otherwise it is not. Note that the date for the new Jewish year is Rosh Hashanah, on Tishri 1 (in the fall).

⁴ No. The land was to have complete rest (שְׁבִיטָה שְׁבִיטָה), though any naturally occurring produce became *free* for the taking (Lev. 25:5). Such produce is called *shevi'it* and cannot be bought, sold, or discarded.

⁵ God promised the harvest from the sixth year would sustain them for two years .

⁶ The “yovel,” or the “Jubilee Year.”

⁷ On Yom Kippur the proclamation of the Yovel was made at the sound of the shofar blast (Lev. 25:9).

⁸ Slaves must be set free, debts canceled, and the stewardship of the land would revert to its original titleholders.

⁹ God promised that the yield of the harvest of the 48th year would be three times as great, so that the crops would sustain the people until the harvest of the year following the Jubilee year.

¹⁰ Only if he (or a near kinsman) could not redeem it before then. There was a “pro rata” formula that determined how much money was required in order to redeem his land (Lev. 25:13-18).

¹¹ Not necessarily. The law of return applied only to land, not to houses inside “walled cities” which were redeemable only one year after the date of sale (Lev. 25:29-30).

¹² No, though they could sell (and later redeem) their houses at *any* time (Lev. 25:32-34).

¹³ No. “Take no interest from him or profit, but fear your God, that your brother may live beside you” (Lev. 25:36).

¹⁴ No, since God owns the land and the people are “strangers and sojourners” with Him there (Lev. 25:23).

¹⁵ God Himself (Gen. 12:7, 15:18-21; 17:7-8; Lev. 25:23; Jer. 2:7; 16:14-15; Ezek. 36:8-10; Joel 2:18; 3:2; etc.)



16. If a fellow Jew became destitute, what was the duty of his neighbor? ¹⁶
17. Provide some reasons for the mitzvah of Shemittah. ¹⁷
18. According to the sages, what year was the first Shemittah? ¹⁸
19. What should not be done on the Shemittah year? ¹⁹
20. What happened if Shemittah was not observed as God commanded? ²⁰

Discussion Topics

1. How important is the idea of a “sabbatical” to you? In what ways do you observe time to rest and trust in God’s provision for your life?
2. In Parashat Emor (last week), the Torah commands that we count 49 days leading from Passover to the holiday of Shavuot (“Weeks”), and in parashat Behar (this week), the Torah commands that we count 49 years leading to Yovel – the Jubilee Year. Discuss both the differences and similarities between these two commandments.
3. Why do you think that the Jubilee Year began on Yom Kippur rather than on Rosh Hashanah?
4. What connection do you see between the Sabbatical *day* and the Sabbatical *year*? How do both relate to the truth that God is our Creator and Provider?
5. A verse from our portion reads, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan, and *to be your God*” (Lev. 25:38), which the midrash interprets to mean that those who live outside the land of Israel are “as if they had no God.” Indeed, many laws of the Torah can only be observed while living in the land of Israel among the Jewish community (under a theocracy). Discuss how the practice of our faith is both connected to and independent of a community of faith...
6. The laws regarding the sale of land – and in particular, the prohibition of selling it “into perpetuity” – is *radical*. Land cannot be sold but only leased, which guaranteed the prevention of complete poverty and provided a check against the consolidation of power in the hands of a few. Discuss the implications of both the Shemittah and Yovel laws and how they would create a just and loving society.

¹⁶ To hire him as a respected servant. *Kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh*: “All Israel is responsible for one another.”

¹⁷ 1) To give the land a chance to become rejuvenated; 2) to give farmers a chance to exercise faith in God’s provision; 3) To enable farmers to study Torah or pursue other things; 4) to testify (like Shabbat) that God is the Creator.

¹⁸ Fourteen years after the conquest by Joshua the people were in complete control of the land, and therefore the first Sabbatical rest for the land occurred seven years later.

¹⁹ 1) Any action that shows ownership of the land (e.g., locking the gates of your farm); 2) Collection of debts.

²⁰ 1) Crops would not yield as much and 2) the people would eventually be exiled from the land (2 Chron. 36:21). The 70 years of Babylonian captivity were punishment for the 70 shemittot Israel failed to keep from the time they entered the land to the destruction of the first Temple (i.e., 490 years). During the captivity God caused the land to receive its appropriate rest by remaining desolate for 70 years.



7. God said we are to be “strangers and sojourners” with Him in this world (Lev. 25:23). This is a paradoxical phrase, since a *ger* (גֵּר) is one who is “just passing through,” like a visitor or tourist, whereas a *toshav* (תוֹשָׁב) is one who is a resident, like a settler or citizen. But how can someone be both a visitor and a resident of a place, or a stranger and a citizen at the same time? How can one “pass through” a place he is said to dwell? The phrase seems to suggest that God “settles” among those who are *exiles* in this world, but makes himself “strange” to those who “settle” here. *Discuss...*
8. The Scriptures state that “the world is built on *chesed*” (Psalm 89:2). Some of the sages have said that the reason for the prohibition of charging interest on a loan is because such “usury” creates personal gain from what should be an act of *chesed* (i.e., an act of kindness). They explain that the most important thing we have in life is time, and time is what puts everything into perspective. In truth, we should be sad at every passing moment, for each one brings us closer to “the day of reckoning.” But someone who lends money and charges interest has the exact opposite feeling. Every second that passes brings him joy, because he is making more interest on his money. Most western economies are built on the idea of extending credit to others and then charging interest for the loan. Discuss the ethics of charging interest on loans. How did Yeshua regard the “moneychangers”?
9. The law of shemittah is meant to attest that God is the Creator who truly “owns” all things. Surrendering our control and ownership of personal property and renouncing whatever outstanding debts are owed us takes considerable *bittachon* (faith). What do you think you “own” in this life, and how do you balance the sense of ownership with the idea of surrender?
10. The sages interpret the commandment, “You shall not wrong one another, but you shall fear your God” (Lev. 25:17) as “You should not *hurt the feelings* of one another, and you shall fear the Almighty.” Hurting another person through verbal or emotional abuse is called *ona'at devarim* (אִנְיָא דְּבָרִים). One who publicly embarrasses another so the person’s color changes (i.e., either blushes or turns ashen) is judged as if he spilled blood. Treating others with sensitivity and respect is a way of honoring God, and failure to observe the first half of the verse will lead to failure to observe the latter half. Discuss the idea that “respect precedes Torah.”
11. The negative command, “You shall not deceive your fellow man” implies the positive duty to be *truthful* with your fellow man. Being honest with others implies that we are being honest with ourselves; likewise deceiving others implies we are deceiving ourselves... *Discuss*.

For Next Week:

- Read Parashat **Bechukotai** (Leviticus 26:3-27:34)
- Read the Haftarah (Jeremiah 16:19-17:14)
- Read the New Testament (Matt. 21:33-46)

