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Understanding Torah Society

Part 14 – Land ownership and stewardship – a closer look at the shemittah and jubilee

Vayyiqra (Leviticus) 25:23

“And the land shall not be sold in perpetuity; for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with Me.”

As the Creator, YHWH is the owner of the land—all land. He assigns the stewardship of His land to whomever He chooses. Once He assigns the stewardship of His land to a group of people, He expects certain things on how His land is to be treated. If His land is not treated according to what He expects, then the people to whom He has assigned stewardship lose that stewardship, at least in the very minimum, for a season, and in some cases, permanently.

B’midbar (Numbers) 26:53-55

53 “Unto these the land shall be divided for an inheritance according to the number of names.

54 To the more you shall give more inheritance, and to the fewer you shall give less inheritance; to every one according to those that were numbered of him shall his inheritance be given.

55 Notwithstanding, the land shall be divided by lot; according to the names of the tribes of their fathers they shall inherit.”

The words “inheritance” and “inherit” have a slightly different connotation in Torah than one understands these words in the West. In the West, one would understand that when a person inherits some property, then the ownership of that property passes on to the person who inherits it. However, that is not the case in Scripture when dealing with land. As we showed above, and there are many more passages of Scripture, YHWH is the owner of the land. Therefore, when the Torah speaks of inheritance, it is not the ownership which is being passed down to the next generation. Rather, it is the stewardship which is being passed down to the next generation. The English word “inherit” is translated from the Hebrew word נָחַל *nachal* – to move downward.

YHWH commands that the stewardship of His land be divided by lot, and that the stewardship of that land be perpetual throughout the generations of Israel. However, because she did not keep His stewardship as assigned by Him in a way that was pleasing to Him, He removed them from His land.

Dibre Hayamim Beit (2nd Chronicles) 36:20-21

20 And them that had escaped from the sword He carried away to Babylon; and they were servants to him and his sons until the reign of the kingdom of Persia;

21 to fulfill the word of YHWH by the mouth of Yirmeyah, until the land had enjoyed its shabbatot; for as long as it lay desolate it kept shabbat, to fulfill seventy years.

YHWH is serious about His people keeping and obeying each and every one of His Torah commandments. Each commandment carries with it its own particular discipline if not obeyed. Disobedience to the Shemittah is expulsion from His land in order for the land to have the rest which it has missed.

In [part 7](#) of this series, we examined the Shemittah as it relates to a person; specifically, that all debts are released every seven years. However, we did not really examine the Shemittah as it relates to the land, which is what we shall do in this study.

Shemot (Exodus) 23:10-11

10 “And six years you shall sow your land, and shall gather in the increase thereof:

11 but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow; that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the beast of the field shall eat. In like manner you shall deal with your vineyard, and with your olive grove.”

YHWH commands that the land is to be worked for six years, and then in the seventh year the land is to lie fallow. To lie fallow means that it is not to be worked, such as plowing. Likewise, the vineyard and the olive grove are not to be worked, either. In this case, this means that the vines and the trees are not to be pruned.

Furthermore, what grows of its own in the field and the fruit that the trees and vines produce during the seventh year is food for the poor and the beasts of the field.

Vayyiqra chapter twenty-five gives us many more details about the shemittah and the jubilee. Let us examine this chapter carefully.

Vayyiqra (Leviticus) 25:1-5

1 And YHWH spoke unto Moshe in Mount Sinai, saying,

2 “Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, ‘When you come into the land which I give you, then shall the land keep a Shabbat unto YHWH.

3 Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in the fruits thereof;

4 but in the seventh year shall be a Shabbat of solemn rest for the land, a Shabbat unto YHWH; you shall neither sow your field, nor prune your vineyard.

5 That which grows of itself of your harvest you shall not reap, and the grapes of your undressed vine you shall not gather; it shall be a year of solemn rest for the land.”

The shemittah is to be a Shabbat shabbaton. This means that the land is to experience a complete rest. The land is not to be worked in any way and the vines and trees are not to be pruned during the seventh year. And this happens every seven years.

Vayyiqra (Leviticus) 25:6-7

6 “And the Shabbat of the land shall be for food for you; for you, and for your servant and for your maid, and for your hired servant and for your stranger, who sojourns with you.

7 And for your cattle, and for the beasts that are in your land, shall all the increase thereof be for food.”

That which grows of itself in the field and upon the vine and upon the tree can be eaten. In verse five above, YHWH tells us we are not to gather these items. If one cannot gather them, then how can one eat them? The idea of gathering is for the purpose of stockpiling and preserving, or for trading and selling. The idea of gathering is in quantity. When YHWH tells us that we may eat of that which grows of itself, He simply means we may go out and collect enough for that day's meals. We may not go out and gather in order to preserve it or barter it.

Vayyiqra (Leviticus) 25:8-13

8 “And you shall number seven Shabbats of years unto you, seven times seven years; and there shall be unto you the days of seven Shabbats of years, even forty-nine years.

9 Then shall you send abroad the loud shofar on the tenth day of the seventh month; in the Day of Atonements shall you send abroad the shofar throughout all your land.

10 And you shall hallow the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof; it shall be a jubilee unto you; and you shall return every man unto his possession, and you shall return every man unto his family.

11 A jubilee shall that fiftieth year be unto you; you shall not sow, neither reap that which grows of itself in it, nor gather the grapes in it of the undressed vines.

12 For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy unto you; you shall eat the increase thereof out of the field.

13 In this year of jubilee you shall return every man unto his possession.”

Now YHWH switches from teaching about the shemittah to teaching about the jubilee. The remainder of the verses, that is, from verse 8 through verse 34, is dealing with the jubilee. It is very important to understand this context, for YHWH teaches us a couple of things, and if one does not fully grasp its context within the jubilee, he will miss something very important.

YHWH commands that we are to do a count of the shemittah years. This count is the same type of count one does in counting the omer: seven weeks of days, plus one day, equaling fifty days. However, in this case, it is seven cycles of seven years, plus one year, or fifty years. Then the count begins again.

Please note verse ten above in which YHWH states that it is a whole year which is to be hallowed and set-apart as the jubilee. Just as a shemittah is a whole year, so too, is the jubilee a whole year in length!

There can be a little bit of confusion as to how one counts years. This confusion can enter into one's mind if he is not a farmer, or if he does not understand agriculture in a rudimentary sense. Let us explain.

Shemot (Exodus) 12:2

“This month shall be unto you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year to you.”

Of course, YHWH is speaking of the month of Aviv, when the barley is in the green ear. This is in the spring. This is the time of the barley harvest.

On the surface, one would think that one should count the years as beginning in the spring. However, it is not quite that simple. This new year begins how one determines all the festivals throughout the year. However, this new year is not the only new year in Scripture. There is another new year which is also important to understand.

Please prayerfully consider the harvest of the barley in the spring during the month of Aviv. This harvest, of necessity, had to be planted months earlier. In fact, it was planted in the previous fall around the time of the fall feasts. You see, the seventh month is also the beginning of a year; it is the beginning of the agricultural year. It is upon this cycle which the shemittah and the jubilee are counted. The shemittah and the jubilee are not counted from Aviv.

How do we know this? Please note Vayyiqra 25:9 above once again. YHWH states that it is upon the Day of Atonements – Yom HaKippurim, that Israel is to declare the jubilee. Therefore, it is also upon this day that we are to count the Shemittah—seven times seven plus one.

If a farmer does not plant his seed at this time, he will have nothing to harvest in the spring in the month of Aviv. The planting of seed is a new beginning. The planting of seed is the beginning of a new year. This is the agricultural year. The month of Aviv is the new year for determining the mo'edim. We need to be prudent in being able to see this difference and keeping these two separate as YHWH commands us to do.

If one attempts to count the shemittah from the month of Aviv, he cannot come out right in his count. Thus, when he counts the jubilee, he will be off as well. There is a verse below, which is extremely important, in that, it shows us something that many do not see in the counting of the jubilee (verse 21). Before we examine that, let us examine these other verses first.

Vayyiqra (Leviticus) 25:14-18

14 “And if you sell anything unto your neighbor, or buy of your neighbor's hand, you shall not wrong one another.

15 According to the number of years after the jubilee you shall buy of your neighbor, and according unto the number of years of the crops he shall sell unto you.

16 According to the multitude of the years you shall increase the price thereof, and according to the fewness of the years you shall diminish the price of it; for the number of the crops does he sell unto you.

17 And you shall not wrong one another; but you shall fear your Elohim; for I am YHWH your Elohim.

18 Wherefore you shall do My statutes, and keep My ordinances and do them; and you shall dwell in the land in safety.”

Crops can be bought and sold according the jubilee cycle. This means that however many years there are left in the jubilee cycle, one can buy or sell. For example, let's say that there are fifteen years left before the next jubilee. This means that if one wanted to or needed to sell his crops off of his land, he would do so for fifteen years. He could do so for no more than this, for in the year of jubilee, all debts are to be released. No contracts of such a nature can extend past the year of jubilee.

Please also note that YHWH states that if His people want to dwell in His land safely, then they must do so according to His statutes and His ordinances.

Vayyiqra (Leviticus) 25:19-22

19 “And the land shall yield its fruit, and you shall eat your fill, and dwell therein in safety.

20 And if you shall say, ‘What shall we eat the seventh year? Behold, we shall not sow, nor gather in our increase;

21 then I will command my blessing upon you in the sixth year, and it shall bring forth fruit for the three years.

22 And you shall sow the eighth year, and eat of the fruits, the old store; until the ninth year, until its fruits come in, you shall eat the old store.”

Once again, it is important to note that the context of these verses is dealing with the jubilee. You will see in just a moment why this context is important to realize.

Please let us prayerfully and carefully consider verse 21. In verse eleven above, YHWH commands us that the jubilee year is to be like a shemittah year, that is, there is to be no sowing of the fields and no pruning of the trees or vines. In reality, this is what is supposed to happen. The seventh cycle of shemittah arrives and the seventh shemittah is observed. This is the 49th year. The next year is the jubilee which is also to be observed in the same fashion as a shemittah. There is to be no sowing or reaping of the fields, except that which was described above.

Again, let us remind ourselves of the count of the omer. In the count of the omer, we count seven complete weeks. A complete week consists of first day (Sunday) through Shabbat (Saturday); this is a complete week. After counting seven complete weeks, the next day is Shavuot and a high day, a Shabbat. This makes two Shabbatot together, the weekly Shabbat followed immediately by the high Shabbat.

Likewise, if the shemittah is counted and observed properly, then after the seventh yearly Shabbat, it is followed immediately by the jubilee, also a Shabbat of land rest, making two land Shabbatot in a row. Now, reexamine verse 21 once again.

21 then I will command my blessing upon you in the sixth year, and it shall bring forth fruit for the three years.

On a normal shemittah year we do not really need to have three years' worth of food, only two. However, because this context is about the jubilee, then this passage makes a lot more sense. In the sixth year of the seventh cycle, YHWH blesses us with enough food in that harvest to go through two years of the land lying fallow, the seventh shemittah and the jubilee, back to back.

These passages together illustrate to us the need to keep everything in context and to understand the cycles of the agricultural year.

Vayyiqra (Leviticus) 25:23-24

23 "And the land shall not be sold in perpetuity; for the land is Mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with Me.

24 And in all the land of your possession you shall grant a redemption for the land."

Once again he reminds us that this is His land. As we showed in the beginning of this study, if Israel does not properly follow this cycle, she shall be expelled from YHWH's land. He expects us to keep and observe her shemittah as well as the jubilee.

Vayyiqra (Leviticus) 25:25

"If your brother be waxed poor, and sell some of his possession, then shall his kinsman that is next unto him come, and shall redeem that which his brother has sold."

In [part 7](#) of this series, in which we dealt with social welfare, we discussed this passage showing that it is important that we watch over one another. If a brother gets into a bind, we are commanded to help him out of that bind.

Vayyiqra (Leviticus) 25:26-28

26 "And if a man has no one to redeem it, and he be waxed rich and find sufficient to redeem it;

27 then let him reckon the years of the sale thereof, and restore the surplus unto the man to whom he sold it; and he shall return unto his possession.

28 But if he be not able to get it back for himself, then that which he has sold shall remain in the hand of him that has bought it until the year of jubilee; and in the jubilee it shall go out, and he shall return unto his possession."

If a man's circumstances change so that he becomes able to redeem that which he lost, then he is to redeem it. Now this supposes one thing that may not be readily apparent, and that is, the one who is holding the property must allow it to be redeemed. He cannot withhold the

property from redemption if it is able to be redeemed. Once again, this is according to the year of jubilee, the fifty year cycle.

Vayyiqra (Leviticus) 25:29-34

29 “And if a man sells a dwelling-house in a walled city, then he may redeem it within a whole year after it is sold; for a full year shall he have the right of redemption.

30 And if it be not redeemed within the space of a full year, then the house that is in the walled city shall be made sure in perpetuity to him that bought it, throughout his generations; it shall not go out in the jubilee.

31 But the houses of the villages which have no wall round about them shall be reckoned with the fields of the country; they may be redeemed, and they shall go out in the jubilee.

32 Nevertheless the cities of the Levites, the houses of the cities of their possession, may the Levites redeem at any time.

33 And if one of the Levites redeem, then the house that was sold, and the city of his possession, shall go out in the jubilee; for the houses of the cities of the Levites are their possession among the children of Israel.

34 But the field of the suburbs of their cities may not be sold; for it is their perpetual possession.”

There are some special commands concerning houses in cities. If a house is in a walled city, it may only be redeemed for the space of one year. However, if the house is in an unwalled city, then it is treated in the same way as the fields and must return to its owner in the jubilee year. The Levites may redeem their houses at any time.

The land belongs to YHWH. He has commanded us to let the land sit idle every seventh year. We are to count this cycle in groups of seven. Then in the seventh year, we add one more year for the jubilee, to make a fifty year cycle. Then the count begins again after the jubilee year is over. The count of these cycles of years begins and ends on Yom HaKippurim, the Day of Atonements.

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