

Parashat Behar בְּהָר

Torah: Leviticus 25:1–26:2

Haftarah: Jeremiah 32:6–27

God Will Be Known Through Shabbat

General Overview

The teaching in this week's parasha is perhaps one of the many proofs that the words that we are reading are the words of God Himself and not the product of man's invention. For surely, no human being born with an inclination toward sin inherited from his father Adam, would think of making part of the national constitution of a nation a teaching which seems to defy all normal standards of economy and flows against the tide of human societies throughout the world.

The parasha before us, although brief (basically one chapter), contains some of the most sublime principles of human dignity, equality, and justice found anywhere. In this parasha, we learn of the Sabbatical Year, giving the land a rest while trusting God for a three-year provision of food. We are taught about the Year of Jubilee when debts are forgiven, slaves are set free, and property is returned to its original owner. As if this is not enough to “blow” most economies, the parasha concludes by encouraging and teaching the children of Israel to help their fellow Israelites when, or if poverty hits them.

Exposition

Our approach to this sidra will be a little unusual. We will center our comments on the meanings of certain key Hebrew words:

- I. Shabbat: שַׁבָּת
- II. Yovel: יוֹבֵל
- III. Dror: דְּרוֹר
- IV. Yamokh: יָמוּךְ

In this excerpt from Parashat Behar, we will focus on section I, Shabbat.

I. Shabbat: שַׁבָּת

Thus far in the Torah, the word Shabbat or other derivatives from its Hebrew root, *sh-v-t* (ש-ב-ת), has been used over twenty-five times, and its usage is not over yet! It is perhaps one of the most frequent and basic teachings of Torah. Our present parasha opens with yet another usage of this word. Only this time it does not refer to a specific day as in previous passages. Instead, verses 1–7 of chapter 25 teach about a seven-year cycle which the text calls a *Shabbat*.

Moreover, this Shabbat is not primarily designated for people like the seventh day Shabbat. This unique Shabbat is for the land that the Lord gave to the people of Israel. We are instructed to let the land rest every seventh year as a Shabbat for the Lord (verse 2). What does all of this mean? What are some of the implications of this so-called Sabbatical Year?

A. Rest! Rest!

The Sabbatical Year and the weekly Shabbat share several things in common. First of all they share a common Hebrew root between them, *sh-v-t* (ש-ב-ט). The main idea behind this root is that of “to cease” and “to desist.”¹ Sometimes, it denotes “to rest.”

We have already examined some of the implications of the seventh-day Shabbat rest. Since this seven-year cycle is also called a Shabbat it would therefore follow that whatever can be said about the weekly rest could also be said concerning the seven-year rest. Hence, by designating a rest every seven years as well as every seven days, the Holy One is continuing to emphasize that the primary nature of our relationship to Him is that of complete and absolute rest, ceasing from all of our labours — not because we are physically tired but because they are finished for that moment.

Of course this concept sounds rather simple, but in fact most people escape it! In both Jewish and non-Jewish circles many people are locked into a mind-set that tells them that they must be continually performing *mitzvot* or doing good works in order to begin, maintain, or earn a proper and eternal relationship with God. However, starting with the Torah’s teaching about sacrifices and covenant and continuing with the teaching in the Renewed Covenant Scriptures about the once-for-all sacrificial atonement accomplished by Yeshua, the message which God has been trying to communicate to sinful mankind is that all we need to do is simply rest our souls, our lot, our life, into His hands by faith.

This is why Hebrews tells us,

Now we who have believed [in Yeshua] enter that rest...There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from His (Hebrews 4:3,9–10).

In other words, our relationship with the Eternal One can be summed up in one phrase: a Shabbat rest! This rest begins by taking God at His word, which is what faith means. If we take God at His word concerning the completeness of Yeshua’s atonement, we will realize that we must cease from all attempts to earn His approval and trust in what Yeshua has completed for us. That is what God’s Shabbat is.

B. The Lord’s Shabbat

However, the similarity between the two kinds of Shabbat goes beyond that of merely rest. A careful reading of Leviticus 23 reveals the fact that there is at least one Shabbat associated with each of the mo’adim. However, none of these special Shabbat days are called a Shabbat “to the Lord.” Only the seventh-day Shabbat and the Sabbatical Year share this designation.

In the case of the weekly Shabbat, it is called “the Lord’s” because it was He who first “ceased from His work and rested,” as we are told in Genesis. Thus, Shabbat was God’s idea from the beginning. He set the precedent. He established the pattern. He laid down the principle.

However, in Leviticus 25, the “Lord’s Shabbat” carries with it an additional feature: it is not first and foremost people that were the object of the Shabbat, but the Land. This raises a provocative question: to whom does the real estate

called the Land of Israel belong? If the politicians could answer this question it would solve the vast majority of contemporary world problems! All the politicians have to do is to read the Torah. The answer is clear — the Land of Israel belongs primarily neither to the Arab nor to the Jewish people. It belongs to The Holy One Himself! It is God's Land! He is its Proprietor! Because He owns this treasured Land, God has the right to decide who may or may not live in it.

As we know, the Torah indicates that the Lord gave the Land of promise to the children of Israel to live in as an inheritance. With this in mind,

The idea implied by the institution of Shemittah is completely evident: it is a tribute from the Jewish people who periodically give back their homeland to the One from whom they received it. This expresses the conviction that the country can become the complete property of the people only insofar as God grants it to them.²

Moreover, since God is the owner of this Land, He is the One who decides what should be done with the land. J. H. Hertz exhorts us in this regard when he says, "The land is not the absolute possession of man; it belongs to God, and is to be held in trust for His purposes."³

May we add an additional application of this idea of propriety? Since the Land belongs, in reality, to the Holy One, then those who are granted permission to live in it must live in it according to the conditions that He laid out, and therefore the Torah is to be the rule of life for its residents. Moreover, those who rule this Land may not give it to others whom the Lord does not designate as legal residents. This holds true no matter which generation is present here. It is especially valid in the current situation where there is an increasing inclination to permit others to rule sections of the Sacred Land whom the Holy One has not designated as valid proprietors. Only the children of Israel and those who are Torah observant sojourners with Israel may rule this Land.

C. The Lord our God, The King of the Universe

There is at least one more similarity between the weekly Shabbat and the Shemittah, or Sabbatical Year, described in chapter 25. Based on rather fascinating evidence, both the seventh-day Shabbat and the Sabbatical Year remind us that the Lord our God is the Creator and King of the universe! Concerning 25:1–6, Nechama Leibowitz observes,

Derivatives of the root שבת appear seven times, either as a verb or as a noun. This is reminiscent of the first chapter of Genesis, which is divided into seven passages, and where טוב כי ("that it was good") appears seven times. Furthermore, in Genesis, the seventh passage, dealing with the seventh day, contains three successive verses, each one with seven words. Of course, all of these figures are based on the Hebrew wording. Finally, the number of words in the seventh passage is 35 — (5 x 7). That all this is just a coincidence is inconceivable. Indeed, many commentators consider that, similarly to the Sabbath Day, the remembrance of the Creation is the main reason for the Shemittah year of rest for the land.⁴

The significance of all this lies in the fact that since both the Shabbat and the Sabbatical Year both signify that the God of Israel is the Creator of the Universe,

then both would serve as “the genuine sign and symbol for the truth of God’s existence and this is the most fundamental article of faith for every believer.”⁵

D. Made for Man

Before we leave our discussion of the Sabbatical Year, there is another important point to make. Yeshua the Messiah tells us that Shabbat was “made for man, not man for the Shabbat” (Mark 2:27). Among other things, this teaches us that the Shabbat has certain benefits for man if he observes it as unto the Lord. The same, therefore, would hold true regarding the Sabbatical Year. What benefits can the Sabbatical Year have for us?

One obvious benefit is that the text indicates that the farmers get a whole year vacation! Verse 4 indicates that every seventh year the farmers were not to sow, reap, nor prune for one year. In fact, verse 4 says that this year is to be “a Sabbath of solemn rest for the Land.” The same phraseology is also used to describe the rest on Yom Kippur, *shabbat shabaton* (שבתון שבת).

Another benefit to us is that the Sabbatical Year affords us an opportunity to see how much the Lord can increase our faith. Some would no doubt ask, “But how would we eat?” The answer is, Fear Not! God has this one covered! He tells us in 25:21, “I will send you such a blessing in the sixth year that the land will yield enough for three years.” Moreover, God also indicated that any produce the land produces naturally is permitted to be eaten. It is not for storage, just to be eaten. Rabbi Hertz confirms this by pointing out:

The fruit and grain which grew of itself in the Sabbatical Year might be picked and eaten, but not stored. Grain growing of itself: i.e. without regular ploughing and sowing is not uncommon in Palestine [Israel].⁶

One more benefit of the Sabbatical Year is that by letting the ground rest for a year, it would tend to increase its health and ability to produce by replenishing it. Many have criticized the Jewish people for letting their land rest for a year, but in doing so, they “did not understand the meaning of this unique law, which, among other things, saved the soil from the danger of exhaustion.”⁷

A final benefit of the Shemittah year is that because people would be resting that year, there would be lots of time to study the Scriptures. Again, we go to Hertz for elucidation on this point. He says,

In Deuteronomy 31:10f, we learn that the seventh year was, furthermore, to be utilized for national educational ends, and special measures were to be taken to acquaint the men and women, the children as well as the resident aliens, with the teachings and duties of the Torah.⁸

Can you imagine spending a whole year just studying the Scriptures?

¹ Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon* (“BDB”), 991.

² Elie Munk, *The Call of the Torah: Vayikra*, 297.

³ J. H. Hertz, *Pentateuch and Haftarahs*, 531.

⁴ Nechama Leibowitz, *New Studies in Vayikra*, 512–513.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 514.

⁶ Hertz, *op. cit.*, 532.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 531.

⁸ *Ibid.*