

WHERE HAVE THE YEARS GONE?

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The Torah constantly provides for repentance and redemption - for the God-given opportunity of a new start. In fact, the concept of teshuva, return and renewal, is one of the pillars of Jewish thought and attitude and is even built into its calendar cycle. It should therefore not be surprising to us that the Torah places such a concerted emphasis on the commandments of shmita (the seventh sabbatical year of the Jewish calendar's seven year cycle) and yovel (the fiftieth jubilee year of the Jewish calendar's larger fifty year cycle). For these two commandments symbolize, perhaps more than others, the continuing effort of the Torah to impress upon Jews the omnipresent possibility of change, of a new start, of ultimate renewal and spiritual refreshment. Only such a promise of renewal can strengthen and reinforce the quest for spiritual fulfillment which is such a part of Jewish life and hope. And therefore the commandments of shmita and yovel are very important to the understanding of the Torah's viewpoint of Jewish society and the future of general society as well.

The actual earth of the Land of Israel was also to be renewed and refreshed by the calendar years of shmita and yovel. The earth was to be allowed to lie fallow, untended and unworked and unexploited. Even though in the short run such a policy seems to be uneconomic and difficult of fulfillment, the long run message of rest for the land and rest for the farmer who tills that land has remained eternal and is even today a goal of Jewish society in the newly-renewed State of Israel. Many farmers and much land in Israel do/does observe the biblical commandments of shmita and yovel. The observance of these commandments has come to represent in a significant portion of Israeli society the fact of the renewal of our people and of the Land of Israel itself. The symbolism of renewal cannot be overemphasized in our century of destruction. The renewal of our land symbolizes the renewal of our people as well. Shmita and yovel have made a strong comeback in the last few years and continue to capture the imagination and participation of more and more of the Israeli population. It is all part of the painful and exhilarating challenge of the Jewish rebirth now taking place in front of our eyes.

There is yet another facet to the marking of shmita and yovel that bears thought and introspection. Shmita and yovel are two of the signposts of the Torah that mark the passage of time. We are often loath to recognize how time flies, how short our stay here on earth really is, how mortal and temporary we really are. "What happened to the last seven years?" is the question that the shmita year raises within us. The recent celebration of the State of Israel's fiftieth birthday adequately impressed us with the soul-searching angst that such an anniversary - the passage of a half century creates within us. What were the failures of those fifty years and what were its triumphs? What

lessons have we learned from the past fifty years that we can constructively apply to the next fifty years? Thus yovel gnaws at us and, simply by its existence, demands of us an honest assessment of our past and a renewed commitment to our improving future. Every year tens of millions of watches are sold world-wide. Yet we use these timepieces to really concentrate only on short-term time, on minutes, hours, at most, days and weeks; on "telling" time rather than meaningfully measuring time in eternal and cosmic terms. The Torah wishes us to deal with time more seriously, more dramatically. Time is the most precious commodity in life - it is absolutely irreplaceable. As such these commandments of shmita and yovel speak to us not only in the seventh and fiftieth years but at all times.

Shabat Shalom.

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