

# PARSHAS BEHAR - TO BE OR NOT TO BE

*by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein*

## **To Be Or Not To Be<sup>1</sup>**

*You shall sanctify the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land for all its inhabitants. It is a Yovel, and it shall be so unto you. You shall return each man to his ancestral heritage, and you shall return each man to his family.*

Which is it? Does Yovel exist because it "is," meaning that its special nature is simply inherent in its position in the march of the years? Or is Yovel's significance a product of the way it is observed by Man, becoming a true Yovel only when it "shall be" treated as one?

The Torah is not wracked with indecision. By choosing both expressions (and echoing them twice more in the next pesukim), the Torah tells us that both aspects of Yovel are legitimate.

The word "yovel" means to "bring." Furthermore, it has the connotation of a proper, suitable bringing - of bringing in the manner that it was designed to bring, just as the produce of the earth is "yuval," or the earth bringing forth that which it was created to produce. The Yovel year brings us back to where we belong - physically, to the portion of the Land that was designed to belong to us, and spiritually, to a place where we function as a Torah-nation in proper relationship to the Land and to each other. This "is" the very nature of Yovel, and inheres in its occurrence. It is a time for regenerating ourselves and reconstituting ourselves as a people. Responding to its nature, we are called upon by the Torah to fully make it a Yovel year by acting according to its promise and its blessing. By doing so, Yovel also "becomes."

We have seen this before. Yom Kippur is inherently a day of kapparah, a wonderful gift from G-d designed to allow us to renew and reconstruct ourselves, and to restore our closeness with Him. When we become aware of the potency of the day, we are expected to respond to its promise by refraining from melachah and the five kinds of proscribed pleasure.

While Yom Kippur wipes clean the slate of our individual transgressions, Yovel erases the disparities that create tension in a nation. In the decades leading up to Yovel, differences between people weaken the social fabric of the people. While all started on more or less the same footing upon entering the Land, gradually inequities set in. Some are more successful than others. Some become rich, others poor. Economic classes come into being, each with its own culture. Webs of dependence rob some of their dignity and others of their humility.

During all those years as well the political fortunes of the people wax and wane. The security of the nation is linked to strategic alliances to other people, which sometimes hold and sometimes do not.

Yovel sets the clock back. We revert to a simpler, purer social structure that gives everyone a more or less equal stake in the Land. The political life of the people is also simplified, once again returning to the consciousness by our ancestors that our security and well-being are products purely of our relationship with Hashem. This refreshing of both the internal and external aspects of national life rejuvenate the people, and allows their observance of the Torah to shine as a beacon, attracting the attention of others. They in turn learn about the institutions of national life that HKBH has taught us are associated with G-dliness. Those institutions are ultimately mankind's only guarantors of freedom and justice.

This national rebirth is only successful if Klal Yisrael does its part. It is called upon to set slaves free, to restore land ownership to its original state, to allow the land to lie fallow as in a shemitah year, and to announce the Yovel year with the sounding of a shofar. When Klal Yisrael fulfils its role in the Yovel, it can expect all the other benefits of a national regeneration that can only come from Hashem.

When they do not, the consequences are dire. As Yirmiyahu [2] warned, "You did not hearken to Me to proclaim freedom, every man for his brother and every man for his fellow; behold I proclaim you to be free...for the sword, for pestilence and for famine..." In other words, Hashem offers Klal Yisrael a choice of either fully becoming through Yovel the model of G-d's people they ought to be, or to free themselves entirely of His protection. (This offer relates to them only as a full, national entity. For this reason, Yovel does not apply unless the whole nation lives on the land, in contradistinction to the days of the second beis hamikdash - and even the latter days of the first - when some of the shevatim were exiled from the land. Moreover, the people have to be arrayed throughout the land according to the plan of its original division among the shevatim. The point of Yovel is to regenerate the original plan of a Torah people living on the land according to its Divine assignment, and with every important subgroup making its essential contribution to the national good.) In the latter case, they can expect all kinds of terrible consequences that they had previously avoided through Divine Providence.

Yovel turns out to be an all or nothing proposition. It can turn the nation into a working example of a G-dly people, successfully carrying His word to the rest of the world. Passing up the opportunity, however, effectively triggers an opt-out clause, leaving them to fend for themselves against all that the natural world and the hostility of men can throw at them. In that case, they can also instruct the world - in the futility of trying to survive without G-d.

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1. *Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Vayikra 24:10*

2. Yirmiyahu 34:17

