**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**THE PHILOSOPHY OF *SHEMITTA***

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**Shiur #27: *Yovel***

**The Counting**

After discussing *shemitta*, *Parashat Behar* dictates:

And you shall count for yourself seven sabbaths of years, seven years seven times over, and the seven sabbaths of years shall number for you forty-nine years.(*Vayikra* 25:8)

Certain aspects of *shemitta* are only mentioned in the context of *yovel*, such as the promise of a blessing in the sixth year to all those who abide by *shemitta*. Indeed, the fiftieth year has much in common with the seventh, but it goes further. It is heralded with shofar blasts and completely transforms society. Ancestral lands that have been sold are returned to their initial owners, and all servants are set free. This is a national "reset" far more radical than what happens every seven years, delineating the socioeconomic ideal.

The counting of 49 followed by a sanctified 50th is not unique to *shemitta*. The mitzva of counting the omer for 49 days after Pesach in order to arrive at the festival of Shavuot presents the same model. The Maharal and others explain that seven is the number of nature, while eight goes beyond. Thus, the fiftieth unit, following seven periods of the natural cycle of seven, allows one to move beyond mundane limitations.

However, there are differences. *Torat Kohanim* notes that the Torah tells us to count the omer in the plural but count towards *yovel* in the singular, a mitzva performed by the court. Rav Hirsch explains:

By counting the omer, the individual… pays homage to God and acknowledges Him as Creator and King. On this basis, man strives seven times toward moral freedom, rendering himself worthy of receiving the Torah (on the fiftieth).

By counting the sabbatical and jubilee years, the nation signals that the seven sabbatical cycles recognize God as the owner of its land. On this basis, it strives seven times toward internal political freedom, rendering itself worthy of the rebirth of the state in the jubilee year.

Thus, *shemitta* years are essentially part of a larger process, helping the nation appreciate and inculcate *yovel*’s lessons. Let’s take a deeper look:

And you shall sound a blast on the shofar in the seventh month on the tenth of the month; on Yom Kippur shall you sound the shofar throughout your land. And you shall sanctify the fiftieth year, and you shall proclaim liberty (*deror*) in the land for all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you, and each man shall return to his estate, and each man shall be returned to his family. The fiftieth year shall be for you a jubilee; you shall neither sow nor harvest that which grows by itself in the field or in the vineyard. For it is the jubilee, it shall be holy to you; you shall eat the produce of the field. In this year of jubilee, each man shall return to his estate. (*Vayikra* 25:9-13)

Are blowing the shofar, freeing servants and restoring lands the be-all and end-all of *yovel*? They seem to last a moment, not a year. Additionally, the Torah refers to *yovel* as a year of *deror,* liberty, for all the inhabitants of the land, a statement prominently displayed on America's Liberty Bell. This applies even though only the ancestral lands and servants are returned, something which clearly will not directly affect everyone. How does *yovel* proclaim a message of freedom to all the inhabitants of the land?

**A Fifty-Year Reset**

Rav Meir Tzvi Gruzman (*Kara Shemitta*) notes that fifty years is a sufficient time period for many nations to lose sight of three primary details of their character. If the nation continues on a path of self-destruction, it is liable to lose all aspects of its unique heritage. The Jewish nation is forged upon leaving Egypt, as the Israelites are freed from bondage and became servants of God. 50 days later they receive the Torah on Sinai and are given a religious direction. After arriving in the Land of Israel and conquering it, the territory is divided according to tribes and families.

Thus, there are three pillars of the Jewish nation. The pillar of faith recognizes God as the One who took the nation out of Egypt, as in the first of the Ten Commandments. The second pillar is the social construct: "For the Israelites are my servants" (*Vayikra* 25:55), not servants to others. The third has religious and economic elements: dividing the land by tribes.

Fifty years is a sufficient period of time for various societal changes to eat away at these pillars. Time comes with comfort for some and economic turmoil for others. *Yovel* is a return to one's roots every fifty years, during which, on the national, religious, societal and economic levels, the Torah calls for a return to the basics. Fields are returned, servants are freed, and the realization that "For the land is Mine,” i.e., that God is the owner of the land, is made apparent to all. This allows for the creation of a nation reinvigorated and renewed by understanding its roots.

Since its messages go beyond the particular actions that occur during it, its proclamation frees the entire nation, not only the servants and those who have sold their land. It is a year of sanctity which can elevate everyone to a higher level, through its social, economic and religious messages.

One might add that the message of *yovel* is clearly not supposed to be viewed as a momentary or even a one-year lesson. The fact that the count up to *yovel* occurs over a period of seven *shemitta* cycles is indicative of the fact that *yovel* is something we are always working towards. As ancestral lands are returned during *yovel*, any sale of land is essentially rental for the remaining years to *yovel*, and any overcharging will violate the prohibition of *ona'a.*

The fields are not merely economic holdings, but an indication of one's deeply-rooted familial and tribal connection to the land (see *Sichot Le-sefer Vayikra*, Rav Nebenzahl, *Parashat Behar*). Their return has much more than financial implications.

In fact, the Torah refers to the freedom of *yovel* being proclaimed “for all its inhabitants,” which the Talmud explains limits the application of *yovel* to years when all inhabitants of the land are living by tribe in the Land of Israel. For this reason, *yovel* is not practiced now and hasn't been since the period of the Second Temple. Its message is too broad to be limited to a small part of the nation.

To get a better handle on *yovel*, we will try to order our analysis conceptually and begin with the unique date of its commencement.

**Yom Kippur**

One would expect that the *yovel* year, much like the seven *shemitta* cycles that precede it, would begin on Rosh Hashana, the first of Tishrei. However, the Torah clearly tells us that the unique laws of *yovel* begin on the tenth of that month, on Yom Kippur. The shofar is ordinarily associated with Rosh Hashana, and the unique prayers of the day are arranged around it. However, when it comes to *yovel*, the shofar blast proclaiming a return of man to his estate and to his family is sounded on Yom Kippur. Why?

The Rambam (*Hilkhot Shemitta* *Ve-yovel* 10:14) explains:

From Rosh Hashana until Yom Kippur servants were not sent to their homes nor were they subjugated to their masters, and fields did not return to their owners. Rather, the servants would eat, drink and celebrate, with crowns upon their heads. When Yom Kippur came the Court would sound the shofar, the servants were sent to their houses and the fields returned to their owners.

HaRav Aharon Lichtenstein *zt"l* notes that the Yom Kippur of the *yovel* year is multifaceted, as it is both the normal day of *teshuva* that characterizes Yom Kippur of any year; as well as a special Yom Kippur which serves as a Rosh Hashana where through the blowing of the shofar the reality that all are familiar with is totally transformed. "It was a Yom Kippur representing economic revolution, social rehabilitation, a reorganization of the status quo."

*Teshuva*, often translated repentance, is literally return. It is the primary aspect of Yom Kippur every year and *yovel* as well: "The personal dimension of *teshuva* is thus combined and intertwined with a process on both a public and personal level: ‘You (plural) shall return each man to his estate’ — it is a process of simultaneously returning and being returned. Each aspect nourishes and is nourished by the other. The outward strengthening combines with soul-searching, and the entire day — through this combination and intertwining — overflows with national and spiritual majesty and power."

**The Unique Shofar**

The various shofar blasts of Tishrei are compared to each other (*Rosh Hashana* 33b), but there are differences, as the Mishna (*Rosh Hashana* 3:5) discusses, in the provenance of the shofar itself.

On Rosh Hashana, most Rishonim maintain, there is a mitzva to hear the shofar (as our *berakha* on the shofar recognizes). It is both a call to *teshuva* and a device of *tefilla,* for bringing the prayers of the nation to God. On the other hand, the Rambam notes that the mitzva of shofar during yovel is a mitzva of blowing, incumbent upon every individual, and is very different than the shofar blowing of Rosh Hashana (Positive #137):

It is well-known that this shofar blowing for the jubilee is only to publicize the emancipation, and is part of the proclamation mandated by the verse "And you shall proclaim liberty in the land." It is not like the shofar blowing of Rosh Hashana, which is "a remembrance before God," while this is to designate the freeing of servants…

However, if this is about notifying the public, why is it an individual mitzva? The Chinnukh (331) answers this question by explaining the difficulty involved in freeing one's servants:

As for the root purposes of the precept, it is known that the sound of the shofar arouses the heart of human beings, whether to peace or to war. Now, the matter of releasing a servant who has served his master a great amount of time is very difficult in the eyes of his master. Therefore, to inspire the heart of people about the matter, encourage their spirit, and adjure them about the mitzva, the shofar is sounded, so that they will realize that this is something standard throughout the land, and that all must do so. For this reason, we are all commanded regarding this mitzva; there is nothing that will so encourage the heart of human beings as something done by everyone, as the saying of the wise man goes: "The suffering of many is consolation.”

The shofar empowers each individual with the message of freedom and awakens all to the power of the period. It allows for the social message to become a reality for everyone and allows all masters to realize their limitations and present a global message of freedom and real allegiance to God. The Chinnukh's message is a very pertinent one. Peer pressure is a powerful motivator. People can manage to bear difficulty when they recognize others are in the same boat. Moreover, the shofar echoes in every ear so all may recognize the social disruption others may experience. Not only is *yovel* a national experience, it makes people realize how they are affected by their surroundings, and they would do well to choose surroundings that are positive (a message oft-repeated by the Rambam).

Additionally, the Chinnukh continues, there is a message to the servant himself:

Moreover, the servant himself will also be aroused to go out, like all the servants, from the possession of his master whom he loves, and as a result the precept will be fulfilled that all should return to the domain of the Master and Ruler of All.

*Yovel* frees those servants who decided to stay with their masters after completing their six years of indentured servitude. They convinced themselves that they were not capable of taking care of themselves, and they needed the protection and special treatment that the Torah requires masters to give to the Hebrew servant. Now, as they are propelled into their own realm, they will have to deal with the difficulties of society. The Torah tells them that they can break free, and if they recognize their true Master, they can also build homes of their own and become productive members of society.

**The Blowing of the Courts and Individuals**

The Torah mentions the blowing of the shofar twice, first in the singular and then in the plural. Based on what we have seen above, the singular tense is a requirement that the act be done by the court, on behalf of the unified nation, while the plural is a call for each individual to do so. Indeed the Talmud (*Rosh Hashana* 9b, codified by the Rambam, ibid. 10:10) rules that there is a double obligation: first the court blows the shofar, then each individual. Still, the Minchat Chinnukh (331) sees this as superfluous. He maintains that the courts have no specific obligation above others; rather the ruling teaches us that the court must blow (even though it isn't involved in the freeing of servants or the return of agricultural lands), but not before individuals do.

Based on what we have seen, however, we may suggest otherwise. The entire discourse of the nation has to be altered to leave room for a new outlook and enable the social revolution *yovel* calls for. The courts blow the shofar first to recognize and proclaim the communal message, but specifically due to the societal message, everyone individually must then take part in the proclamation in order to transform the atmosphere and pave the way for the true revolutionary steps of *yovel*.

On the individual plane as well, the servant who has decided to remain in servitude, must realize that he has one master, and that is God; but this individual calling is not merely for one who serves a human master. Most individuals lose their own decision-making abilities in certain situations and are "enslaved" to certain people or realities. The shofar is a call for liberty, to realize that servitude to anyone other than the Only One is useless. Come to think of it, there is no better day for such an approach than Yom Kippur, the day upon which we wipe away our sins and return to God.

In truth, however, this is a day with aspects of both Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashana. While both are days of *teshuva*, they differ in approach. On Rosh Hashana, no individual sins are mentioned; rather the focus is upon identifying one's true self. Rosh Hashana is the anniversary of the creation of the world and one re-creates his or her world by identifying who he or she is and wants to be. With the shofar, man exhales the "breath of God" that was blown into him on this very day. If the shofar is to be maximized, one must connect it to a commitment to the coronation of God. The shofar of Rosh Hashana and the repentance of Yom Kippur — for individual sins, among the community — form the ultimate day of *yovel*, allowing individual, communal, and national recognition of true identity, rootedness and recognition of the mastery of God.

In the words of Rav Hirsch (*Vayikra* 25:9), this is also apparent in the two sounds that come out of the shofar, the staccato *terua* and the unwavering *tekia*:

This call is sounded in the Name of God by the Great Court, which represents the nation as a whole; it is then continued by every one of the people and spreads throughout the land. For it is a call from God into the midst of the country. It calls everyone and everything to the Master of all. Its purpose is to release the shackles of social bondage, in which everything is bound, *terua*. And it restores everything to pristine social conditions, *tekia*.

**The Agricultural Laws of *Yovel***

Although *yovel* shares many agricultural laws with *shemitta*, the two years are not the same. The Rambam rules (ibid. 10:15-16):

The law of letting the land rest for the *yovel* year is the same, in all respects, as the law for the *shemitta* year: whatever agricultural work is forbidden in the *shemitta* year is forbidden also in the *yovel* year, and whatever is permitted in the *shemitta* year is permitted also in the *yovel* year; whatever labor incurs a penalty of flogging in the *shemitta* year incurs the same penalty in the *yovel* year. Similarly, the laws governing the consumption, sale, and removal of the produce in the *yovel* year are the same as the laws of the *shemitta* year in all respects.

The seventh [year] is greater than the *yovel* year in that the seventh cancels debts, while *yovel* does not; the *yovel* year is greater than the seventh in that *yovel* emancipates indentured servants and restores land to its original owner… The *yovel* year releases the land at its beginning, while the seventh cancels debts only at its end, as we have explained.

HaRav Aharon Lichtenstein notes that there is reason to believe that even the agricultural *mitzvot* only share a general resemblance, but the particulars are different.

Indeed, the Minchat Chinnukh *(*335:1) notes two differences between *shemitta* and *yovel* in the framework of agricultural prohibitions. He claims that the sabbatical elements of agricultural restrictions, which according to some prohibits a non-Jew from working a Jew's land, may only apply during *shemitta*, not during *yovel*. A second distinction accepted by the Rambam (although seemingly not by the Chinnukh) is that while this agricultural work is proscribed by both negative and positive commands for *shemitta, yovel* carries only a positive commandment. Additionally, during *yovel* all the agricultural prohibitions are grouped into one mitzva, while during *shemitta* fields and orchards have different negative commands.

The relationship between *shemitta* and *yovel* is seemingly also connected to a number of other issues. *Sefer Ha-terumot* (45:4, cited by the Baal Ha-maor) maintains that there is an obligation to sanctify the *shemitta* year as well. This is based on the assumption that *yovel* and *shemitta* constitute a single unit, each being dependent upon the other.

Additionally, there is a Talmudic dispute (*Nedarim* 61a et al.) as to whether the *yovel* year is counted in the *shemitta* cycle, i.e., whether this fiftieth year is the first year counting toward the next *shemitta* or is essentially a year zero.

**Distinguishing between *Shemitta* and *Yovel***

The primary distinction between the laws of *shemitta* and *yovel*, however, might be a direct outgrowth of their diverse forms of *kedusha*. The seventh year is *shabbat ha-aretz*, and much like Shabbat, its *kedusha* is rooted in stone. *Yovel,* though, is something which must be consecrated. The people, through the court, must actively sanctify the fiftieth year, as the verse states (25:10).

Based on *Torat Kohanim*, the Meshekh Chokhma develops a fascinating distinction between *shemitta* and *yovel*. The latter doesn't come if it is not observed properly. It calls for the nation to rise to the occasion and to actively sanctify the period. The Meshekh Chokhma notes that this is akin to the *kedusha* of *Yom Tov*, and requires the court and the people's input in order for it to apply.

In next week's lesson, we will begin with his comments and see how *yovel* transforms the nation's outlook and sets the framework for a redeemed society on so many different levels.