



The Fiftieth Year

Rabbi Hershel Schachter

The *yovel* year, when Jewish slaves are freed and property returned to its original owners, is observed every 50 years, following seven *Shemitta* cycles. However, there is a debate among the rabbis concerning the counting of the *yovel* year, as to whether the 50th year is considered a “blank” year, not belonging to any seven-year *Shemitta* cycle.

Rebbi Yehudah holds that the *yovel* year is also counted as the first year of the next seven-year *Shemitta* cycle, which means the year after *yovel* is already the second year of the next cycle. This contrasts with the Chachamim, the accepted opinion that holds that the *yovel* year is **not** part of any cycle; the next *Shemitta* cycle commences after the “blank” *yovel* year.

The Gemara (Arachin 32b) tells us that towards the end of the first *Beit HaMikdash* period after Sancheiriv exiled the shevatim of Reuven, Gad, and half of Menashe, the observance of the *dinim* of *yovel* were annulled. This is based on וְקִרְאתֶם דְּרוֹר בְּאָרְץ לְכָל יִשְׂרָאֵל, “And you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land unto all its inhabitants” (Vayikra 25:10, later inscribed on the Liberty Bell), which teaches that the laws of *yovel* are to be observed only when כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל עִלְיָהּ, “all its inhabitants are on [the Land],” and not after some of them have been exiled. The majority of the world’s Jewish population must be in Israel, and each tribe must be in its respective territory.

The Jewish nation and Israel enjoy a symbiotic relationship, each positively affecting the other. The fact that the majority of Jews reside in Israel gives

the Land a deeper holiness, and the laws of *yovel* then apply. Similarly, since Israel is considered our national homeland, it accomplishes a *tziruf* (combination) of the Jews living there, who are then considered the primary congregation of *Klal Yisrael*. This is in contrast to the Jews residing in exile, who are only classified as individuals.

David Ben Gurion used to say, “Whoever does not live in the land of Israel is not Jewish.” Since his concept of Judaism failed to recognize the individual Jew’s holiness and consisted only of the idea of Jewish nationhood, he was correct to state that the Jew in exile is “not Jewish.” We, however, who believe in a twofold holiness – the holiness of the nation and the holiness of the individual – recognize that the individual Jew’s holiness remains intact and obligates him in Torah and *mitzvot*, regardless of his location.

The Gemara continues to explain that even though the laws of *yovel* were no longer applicable at the end of the first *Beit HaMikdash* period, following the opinion of the Chachamim above, “they [continued to] count the *yovel* years [as blank years] to sanctify the *Shemitta* years [at their proper time].” The Rambam (*Hilchot Shemitta VeYovel* 10:3-4) cites the opinion of the Ge’onim that even though this was the case at the end of the first *Beit HaMikdash* period, this is not the practice to be followed currently, after the destruction of the second *Beit HaMikdash* (or during the 70 years of the exile in Babylonia). Nowadays, the *yovel* year should be totally ignored and we only recognize a continuous series of seven-year *Shemitta* cycles; we do not count a “blank year” in between.

Although the Rambam disagrees with this view in theory and holds that the *yovel* year should continue to be reckoned before commencing the next seven-year *Shemitta* cycle, he maintains that in practice, we should act in accordance with the opinion of the Ge’onim of Israel, who had continuously observed the laws of *Shemitta*, because “tradition and practice are great pillars in the determination of practical law.” The Ra’avad writes that we should follow the Rambam’s opinion in this case.

The Tanna’im in the Sifra (quoted by Rashi, Gittin 36a) further dispute whether the condition regarding the observance of *yovel*, כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל עִלְיָהּ, affects the *Shemitta* year as well. Rebbi maintains that *Shemitta* and *yovel* are interrelated, such that the observance of *Shemitta* can only be *d’oraita* (biblically binding) when it leads up to a *yovel* year. If we know in advance that *yovel* will not be observed because we lack the condition of כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל עִלְיָהּ, then the observance of *Shemitta* can only be a *d’rabbanan* (rabbinically binding).

The Gemara alludes to this debate, indicating in several places that the accepted opinion is in accordance with Rebbi (Mo’ed Katan 2b, Gittin 36a). This is the opinion of the majority of authorities – that *Shemitta* in our time is only rabbinically binding.

● Adapted from Rav Schachter on the Parsha II.

Rabbi Hershel Schachter is Rosh Yeshiva and Rosh Kollel at Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary of Yeshiva University.



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