

Shabbat for a Holy People and a Holy Land

A D'var Torah on *Parashat B'har* (Leviticus 25:1 – 26:2)

By Marc Goodman

“Vay'dabeir Adonai el-Moshe b'har seenai leimor....”

“Adonai spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying....”

***Parashat B'har* - a Summary**

Parashat B'har prescribes what have come to be known as the “Law of the Sabbatical Year” and the “Law of the Jubilee Year.”

- **Law of the Sabbatical Year** – The “Law of the Sabbatical Year” states that the land that Israel is to possess may not be sown in every seventh year. The people may, however, eat what the land produces on its own in the seventh year. The seventh year is called a Shabbat of complete rest for the land, a Shabbat of Adonai.
- **Law of the Jubilee Year** – The “Law of the Jubilee Year” states that after seven times seven (49) years, the Israelites are to sound the shofar and declare a Jubilee Year — a year of redemption. The Jubilee Year is to follow the (seventh) Sabbatical Year, and the following are prescribed:
 1. The land is to lie fallow. (Unsown in the Sabbatical Year preceding the Jubilee Year, the land would rest for two consecutive years).
 2. All agricultural land that has been sold by its owner is to be returned to its owner or his family/tribe.
 3. All Hebrew slaves are to be freed.

Parashat B'har concludes with an admonition against idol worship, and commands to keep God's Shabbatot (Sabbaths) and to venerate God's sanctuary.

***Parashat B'har* – a Question**

As mentioned above, the concluding verses of *Parashat B'har* (Leviticus 26:1-2) are an admonition against idol worship; they command us to keep God's Shabbatot and to venerate God's sanctuary. Beginning with Leviticus 26:3, *Parashat B'chukotai* describes how God will bless Israel if it follows God's laws and faithfully observes God's commandments. There seems to be an inherent connection between the two concluding verses of *Parashat B'har* and the opening verses of *Parashat B'chukotai*. (Plaut organizes the verses of Torah thematically, and he includes Leviticus 26:1-2 with *Parashat B'chukotai* in his presentation of the “Blessings and Curses” theme.)¹ Why

¹ W. Gunther Plaut, ed., *The Torah, A Modern Commentary* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981).

then did the Rabbis assign Leviticus 26:1-2 to *Parashat B'har* and not to *Parashat B'chukotai*?

Shabbat and Redemption

The major themes in *Parashat B'har* are Shabbat and redemption. Just as God has ordained a Shabbat for the people and instructed them concerning its observance,² God now ordains a Shabbat for the land, and God instructs its stewards (the people) concerning its observance. By including the verse about keeping God's Shabbatot in *Parashat B'har*, the Rabbis kept Leviticus 26:2 with a parashah that is largely about Shabbat, and they emphasized that the people are responsible for the observance of both Shabbatot.³ Just as God's people are to be renewed by their Shabbat, so God's land is to be renewed by its Shabbat.

But what about redemption? Does the Jubilee redemption have anything to do with Shabbat and renewal?

A Nation of Priests – a Light Unto the Nations

God will establish law on earth by bringing the People into the Land. The confluence of God's people living in God's land following God's laws and faithfully observing God's commandments will establish a "nation of priests." God will establish God's law on earth by establishing a "nation of priests" to serve as a "light unto the nations."

Just as God is specific about the laws and commandments for the "nation of priests," God is also specific about the nation's structure. The "nation of priests" will consist of a confederation of tribes, each of which has hereditary land holdings. But the land holdings will not be the property of the tribes. Rather the tribes will hold the land in stewardship for God.

Given the necessity of tribal stewardship for the proper structure of God's "nation of priests" and recognizing that, in the normal course of human events, title to land holdings will change hands, God must establish a way to periodically get back to the ordained order. This is in fact the purpose of the Jubilee Year. God will ensure the ongoing proper structure of the "nation of priests" by asserting God's ownership of the land (redemption) and restoring it to its proper stewards (the tribes) every 50 years.

Just as God owns the Land, God also owns the People (both collectively and individually). And just as God's land is to be restored to its rightful owner in the Jubilee Year, so are God's people are to be restored to their rightful owner in the Jubilee Year. A Hebrew slave would necessarily serve a master

² Exodus 31:12-17

³ According to Plaut, the Sabbatical Year was observed even in rabbinic times. Plaut, *op cit.*; p. 941.

other than God. The redemption and restoration of Hebrew slaves to their rightful owner (God) will free them to follow God's laws and faithfully fulfill God's commandments, thus ensuring the ongoing proper operation of the "nation of priests."

Shabbat and Renewal, Jubilee and Restoration

Shabbat is the means by which God's People and God's Land are renewed. Just as Shabbat renewal restores the vigor of the people and the land, Jubilee redemption restores the vigor of the "nation of priests," re-establishing its proper order so that it can pursue its mission as a "light unto the nations."