B'HAR

25 The LORD spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai: 3Speak to the Israelite people and say to them:

When you enter the land that I assign to you, the land shall observe a sabbath of the LORD. Six years you may sow your field and six years you may prune your vineyard and gather in the yield. But in the seventh year the land shall have

The Pursuit of Holiness (continued)

PRINCIPLES OF LAND TENURE (25:1–26:2)

Chapter 25 is the only law code on the subject of land tenure in ancient Israel that is preserved in the Torah. It governs the permanent rights of landowners and the legalities of the sale and mortgaging of land. There are also laws regarding indebtedness and indenture, a system of repaying debts through one’s labors, and the commandment regarding the jubilee year.

SABBATICAL YEAR AND JUBILEE (vv. 1–23)

2. the land shall observe a sabbath

The land is personified. It, too, tires and requires rest (see Exod. 23:10–11).

3. six years you may prune your vineyard

Pruning was essential for ensuring the growth of the grapes. There were two prunings each year: one in the winter, or rainy season, when the shoots that had not produced grapes the previous year were snipped off, and the second in June or July, when the new blossoms had already appeared.

4. Allowing the land to lie fallow every seventh year reduced the amount of sodium in the

At the heart of this parashah is the visionary concept of returning land to its original owner at the end of a 50-year cycle. This prevents the polarization of society into two classes: wealthy, powerful landowners on the one hand and permanently impoverished people on the other. In an agrarian society, a farmer who sold all the land to pay debts had no prospect of ever being anything other than a servant. Nor would a servant’s sons ever rise above that level. Anticipating the human misery and social instability this would lead to, the Torah provides a plan. In the 50th year, families would reclaim the land they had held originally and later sold. Behind this plan are two religious assumptions. Because all the earth and all of its inhabitants belong to God, human beings cannot possess either the land or the people in perpetuity. And no human being should be condemned to permanent servitude. Some critics have seen this as a utopian plan that never was put into practice, but archaeologists have found records of deeds from the late biblical period containing references to the number of years remaining till the jubilee year. Rook taught that the purpose of the jubilee was primarily spiritual, not economic. It came to restore the sense of unity that once prevailed in Israel and to restore self-respect to the person who had sunk into poverty and a sense of failure. Even as the weekly Shabbat enables people to define themselves in noneconomic terms, the sabbatical year and the jubilee enable an entire society to put aside economic competition and the practice of defining a person’s value in economic terms alone.

CHAPTER 25

1. Why does the Torah emphasize that these agricultural laws were promulgated at Mount Sinai? Perhaps because at Sinai no one owned any land yet, and no one could object that the law deprived people of what they had worked to acquire. It is easier to propose a visionary system of equality when all start out equal. Another interpretation: Just as Sinai was the smallest of the mountains but the words spoken there changed the world, so the people Israel, among the smallest of the nations, presents a vision of social justice that has the power to change the world.

4. The Holy Land, like the holy people who
a sabbath of complete rest, a sabbath of the LORD: you shall not sow your field or prune your
time. 8You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your un-
trimmed vines; it shall be a year of complete rest
for the land. 9But you may eat whatever the land
during its sabbath will produce—you, your
male and female slaves, the hired and bound
laborers who live with you, and your cattle and
the beasts in your land may eat all its yield.

8You shall count off seven weeks of years—
seven times seven years—so that the period
of seven weeks of years gives you a total of forty-nine years. 9Then you shall sound the horn
loud; in the seventh month, on the tenth day
of the month—the Day of Atonement—you
shall have the horn sounded throughout your
land and you shall hallow the fiftieth year. You
soil, especially in areas where the land was
irrigated.

5. aftergrowth of your harvest  That which
grows naturally the following season from seeds
that fell to the ground during reaping.
untrimmed vines  Hebrew: nazar; or "forbidden
vines" (cf. Num. 6:1–21).
6. hired . . . laborers  Hebrew: sakhar, which usu-
ally refers to a laborer who works for wages.
bound laborers  Hebrew: toshet, which often
designates a foreign "resident," a merchant or
laborer.

will inhabit it, needs a Shabbat to replenish its
self and bear witness to God's ownership of it.
Chapter 26 threatens that if the people Israel
do not live by God's ways, the Land will be
devastated by enemies and "make up for its sabb-
ath years" (Lev. 26:34). The prophet Jeremiah
predicted 70 years of exile in Babylonia to make
up for the 70 sabbatical years the people
neglected during their approximately 500 years of
living in Israel (see 2 Chron. 36:21).

7. The reference to beasts symbolizes the
freedom characteristic of the sabbatical year. Hu-
mans and beast are free to roam about and gather
their sustenance.

9. The sounding of the shofar five days be-
fore the autumn harvest festival of Sukkot (even
on Shabbat) served to proclaim the advent of the
jubilee.

10. hallow  Hebrew: kiddish (sanctify, hal-
low), customarily used to convey the sanctifica-
tion of Shabbat. The use of this verb in connection
with the jubilee creates a parallelism between the

6. you may eat whatever the land during
its sabbath may produce  Sometimes the
wealthy don't believe that poor people are ac-
ually suffering, suspecting that they are just
too lazy to provide for themselves. Let the
wealthy undergo the experience of not know-
whether there will be enough to eat, and
their attitudes will change.

HALAKHAH L'MA-ASEH
25.5. You shall not reap  Restrictions on working the land and purchasing agricultural produce during sab-
batical years refer solely to the Land of Israel. Some still observe these restrictions in Israel today. The Va-ad
Halakhat (Law Committee) of the Masorti/Conservative Movement in Israel has ruled that in modern
times the laws of the seventh-year produce (sh mitzat) are neither biblically nor rabbinically required but are con-
laws by letting one field lie fallow as the sh mitzat field, and that they give a percentage of their income to

the poor, because that was the original purpose of the law.
shall proclaim release throughout the land for all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: each of you shall return to his holding and each of you shall return to his family. 

11. That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you: you shall not sow, neither shall you reap the aftergrowth or harvest the untrimmed vines, for it is a jubilee. It shall be holy to you: you may only eat the growth direct from the field.

12. In this year of jubilee, each of you shall return to his holding. When you sell property to your neighbor, or buy any from your neighbor, you shall not wrong one another. In buying from your neighbor, you shall deduct only two occasions. The jubilee year is to be hallowed just as Shabbat is hallowed.

release Hebrew: d’ror, usually translated “freedom, liberty.” It is related to the ancient Akkadian word anduraru, which refers to an edict issued by Mesopotamian kings when they ascended the throne. As a gesture of royal benevolence and power, they would proclaim a moratorium on debts and indenture, thereby releasing those bound by servitude.

jubilee Hebrew: yovel, which means both “ram” and “ram’s horn.” The 50th year is called “jubilee” because its arrival is announced by sounding the ram’s horn.

each of you shall return to his holding This refers primarily to families who had been unable to repay their loans and were evicted from their homes and farms due to foreclosure. This situation is projected in verses 13–17 and 25–28.

10. proclaim release This clause is inscribed on the Liberty Bell. Some commentators derive the word d’ror, “release,” from the Hebrew root dar, “to dwell,” and understand it to mean the freedom to live wherever one wants.

for all its inhabitants The jubilee year brings freedom not only to the slaves but also to the slave owners, freeing them from the dehumanizing situation of having such power over other human beings. We find a similar insight in Eccles. 4:1: “I further observed . . . the tears of the oppressed, with none to comfort them; and the power of their oppressors—with none to comfort them.” Hirsch understands the word the word for “jubilee” (yovel) to mean “a summoning home” of the rightful owners of the land.

14. you shall not wrong one another This rule, specifically applied to real estate sales, is expanded by the Talmud to include all commercial transactions. Egregious overcharging is grounds for canceling an agreement (BT BM 47b). The Midrash extends the concept still further to include wronging a person with harmful words (Lev. R. 33:1). This includes reminding a repentant sinner of his or her former misdeeds and asking a merchant the price of something when you have no intention of buying. Pious persons do not deceive even themselves.
for the number of years since the jubilee; and in selling to you, he shall charge you only for the remaining crop years; the more such years, the higher the price you pay; the fewer such years, the lower the price; for what he is selling you is a number of harvests. Do not wrong one another, but fear your God; for I the Lord am your God.

You shall observe My laws and faithfully keep My rules, that you may live upon the land in security; the land shall yield its fruit and you shall eat your fill, and you shall live upon it in security. And should you ask, “What are we to eat in the seventh year, if we may neither sow nor gather in our crops?” I will ordain My blessing for you in the sixth year, so that it shall yield a crop sufficient for three years. When you sow in the eighth year, you will still be eating old grain of that crop; you will be eating the old until the ninth year, until its crops come in.

But the land must not be sold beyond reclamation, for the land is Mine; you are but strangers resident with Me. Throughout the land that you hold, you must provide for the redemption of the land.

that was “sold” would revert to its original owners at the next jubilee.

The Israelites are urged to act out of fear of God, especially in matters whose norms are not easily enforced.

SECURITY AND ABUNDANCE (vv. 18–22)

This section interrupts the continuity of legislation governing the sabbatical and jubilee years. It is an exhortation to obey God’s laws and commandments, with the promise of security and abundance as a reward for such obedience.

live upon the land in security That is, the people will not fear invasions.

Along with security will come fertility and abundance.

20. This verse projects the anxiety of the people.

21–22. The response to the people. Until the crop of the eighth year is harvested, you will have sufficient food from the “old” crop, namely, that of the sixth year.

23. The text returns to its original subject: the inalienable status of the land.

ADDITIONAL LAND TENURE AND INDENTURE LAWS (vv. 24–55)

24. This general statement is followed by a series of situations in which the rule applies. The effect of this law is to obligate the purchaser to accept the redemption payment of the original owner.

23. you are but strangers resident with Me Even the Israelites are but God’s tenants, resident aliens in the Land. Only if they live up to the terms of the Covenant will they endure there.
29 If your kinsman is in straits and has to sell part of his holding, his nearest redeemer shall come and redeem what his kinsman has sold. 30 If a man has no one to redeem for him, but prospers and acquires enough to redeem with, he shall compute the years since its sale, refund the difference to the man to whom he sold it, and return to his holding. 31 If he lacks sufficient means to recover it, what he sold shall remain with the purchaser until the jubilee; in the jubilee year it shall be released, and he shall return to his holding.

32 If a man sells a dwelling house in a walled city, it may be redeemed until a year has elapsed since its sale; the redemption period shall be a year. 33 If it is not redeemed before a full year has elapsed, the house in the walled city shall pass to the purchaser beyond reclaim throughout the ages; it shall not be released in the jubilee. 34 But houses in villages that have no encircling walls shall be classed as open country: they may be redeemed, and they shall be released through the jubilee.

35 As for the cities of the Levites, the houses in the cities they hold—the Levites shall forever have the right of redemption. 36 Such property as may be redeemed from the Levites—houses sold in a city they hold—shall be released through the jubilee.

37 The object of redemption is to restore the property to one’s relative, who would retain possession of the land within the clan. The redeemer himself or herself would not possess the land.

38 One who wished to redeem land he or she had sold was required to pay the purchaser the value of the rest of the lease.

39 In the ancient Near East, towns and cities had a special status in regard to tax exemptions and legal prerogatives. Arable land and pastureland were the economic mainstays of an agrarian society and accounted for most of the employment, in addition to their value as the source of food. The artisans and those we would today call members of the service professions, which often included members of priestly families, lived in the towns.

40 villages Hebrew: hatzerim, which refers to agricultural villages with houses and fields, not tents and pastureland.

41 The urban dwellings of the Levites within their cities are to be released on the jubilee. They are redeemable, unlike other urban dwellings, which are subject to a different law, according to verse 31.

42 This verse concerns urban dwellings that...
34. The unenclosed land about their cities cannot be sold Perhaps this restriction is related to the sustenance the Levites derived from such plots of land, the only one they possessed.

35. If your kinsman, being in straits Literally, "if your kinsman stumbles." This prompted the Sages to comment that it is easier to support a person and hold him or her up when the person first begins to stumble than to pick the person up after he or she has fallen (Sifra). It is easier to prevent poverty than to cure it.

36. Let him live by your side as your kinsman This verse is the source of the famous ruling by Akiva: If two men in a desert have enough water to keep only one of them alive, the possessor of the water may drink it all rather than share it and condemn both to die of thirst. Our neighbors are entitled to live alongside us, not instead of us (BT BM 62a).

38. The God who gave the Israelites a land of their own and freed them from the servitude of Egypt now commands them, in turn, to prevent conditions of servitude among their own people.

In the context of the Levites holding the land and being unable to sell it, the verse aims to prevent their economic hardship. The verses also discuss the rights of a kinsman in distress and the responsibilities of those around them to assist, reflecting on communal support and the prevention of poverty.
39 If your kinsman under you continues in straits and must give himself over to you, do not subject him to the treatment of a slave. He shall remain with you as a hired or bound laborer; he shall serve with you only until the jubilee year. Then he and his children with him shall be free of your authority; he shall go back to his family and return to his ancestral holding. — For they are My servants, whom I freed from the land of Egypt; they may not give themselves over into servitude. — You shall not rule over him ruthlessly; you shall fear your God. Such male and female slaves as you may have—it is from the nations round about you that you may acquire male and female slaves. You may also buy them from among the children of aliens resident among you, or from their families that are among you, whom they begot in your land. These shall become your property: you may keep them as a possession for your children after you, for them to inherit as property for all time. Such you may treat as slaves. But as for your Israelite kinsmen, no one shall rule ruthlessly over the other.

42 For they are My servants By redeeming the Israelites from Egyptian bondage, God acquired them as “slaves.” God’s claim has priority.
45 Your property In ancient law, slaves often were regarded as having a legal status parallel to that of land. Just as the land was a “holding” to be handed down within families, so were slaves.
46 The rights granted to Israelites over their non-Israelite slaves, like those they had over the Land, were permanent.
indent alien among you, or to an offshoot of an alien’s family, 48 he shall have the right of redemption even after he has given himself over. One of his kinsmen shall redeem him, 49 or his uncle or his uncle’s son shall redeem him, or anyone of his family who is of his own flesh shall redeem him; or, if he prospers, he may redeem himself. 50 He shall compute with his purchaser the total from the year he gave himself over to him until the jubilee year; the price of his sale shall be applied to the number of years, as though it were for a term as a hired laborer under the other’s authority. 51 If many years remain, he shall pay back for his redemption in proportion to his purchase price; 52 and if few years remain until the jubilee year, he shall so compute: he shall make payment for his redemption according to the years involved. 53 He shall be under his authority as a laborer hired by the year; he shall not rule ruthlessly over him in your sight. 54 If he has not been redeemed in any of those ways, he and his children with him shall go free in the jubilee year. 55 For it is to Me that the Israelites are servants: they are My servants, whom I freed from the land of Egypt, I the LORD your God.

**INDENTURE TO A NON-ISRAELITE**

**(v. 47–54)**

48. **right of redemption** The clan of the Israelite indentured to a non-Israelite bears the responsibility for redeeming its kinsman.

One of his kinsmen shall redeem him This is the order of obligation to redeem kinsmen within the clan: brothers, then uncles and cousins, then other blood relatives. These could even include grandchildren, also considered blood relatives in the laws of Lev. 18:10.

49. **of his own flesh** A clan is usually a fairly large unit, and not all relatives within it are of the same blood.

50. **compute** The computation is in terms of wages over a period of years.

53. To allow a fellow Israelite to remain indentured to a gentile would be a cruel humiliation. One was not permitted to remain indifferent in such a situation, which could lead to the forfeiture of land that had been mortgaged to debts and its seizure by non-Israelites.

54. The last recourse is the jubilee, when all other efforts have failed.

48. The obligation of a kinsman to redeem a relative from bondage to a non-Israelite would become the source in postbiblical times of the obligation to ransom Jews taken captive (**pidyon sh’vuyim**). Communities would go to great lengths to save their fellow Jews in that situation, even selling Torah scrolls to redeem hostages. In the last three decades of the 20th century, successful efforts were undertaken by the Jewish community to bring Jews out of Ethiopia, Syria, and the former Soviet Union. The guiding principle is "all Jews are responsible one for another" [kol Yisra-el arevim zeh ba-zeh].
26 You shall not make idols for yourselves, or set up for yourselves carved images or pillars, or place figured stones in your land to worship upon, for I the Lord am your God. 2 You shall keep My sabbaths and venerate My sanctuary, Mine, the Lord’s.

POSTSCRIPT (26:1–2)
2. Instead of worshiping improperly, Israelites should attend God’s legitimate sanctuary.

CHAPTER 26

1-2. Why this denunciation of idolatry at this point? And why are Shabbat and the sanctuary mentioned as contrasts to idol worship? It is suggested that these verses raise the question: Is the visible world all there is? Or is that which is real but invisible ultimately the greatest reality? Hoffman considers these two verses, which seem to be an arbitrary postscript, as a deliberate echoing of the Decalogue, serving to introduce the theme of loyalty to the Covenant, which will be the subject of the book’s concluding chapters.

* For the haftarah for this portion, see p. 758.