Behar: Vayikra (Leviticus)

What's it all about?

On Mount Sinai, God teaches Moses the laws of the Sabbatical year, letting the land lay fallow every seventh year with its produce free for all to take. Also, each fiftieth year is declared a Jubilee year, on which all agricultural work ceases, servants are set free, and ancestral estates that have been sold return to their original owners. Also taught are laws against fraud and usury.



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> “You may sow your field for six years, and you may prune your vineyard for six years, gathering in the land’s produce, but in the seventh year, the land must be given a complete rest; this is its Sabbath in honor of God.”

Take a deeper dive

In this week's parsha, we learn about the Jubilee year: **Every 50 years, we're taught, we get to go back home and reclaim our ancestral property, even if it's been sold in the meantime.**

It's an idea many of us can find moving. Imagine having your childhood home sold for whatever reason, and no longer having access to the backyard where you spent hours playing catch with your parents or to the bedroom where you experienced so many of your seminal childhood moments.

We get very attached to our homes, which is why it bears noticing that the word the Torah uses for property is "achuza." This, Rabbi Yitzhak Meir Alter, the founder of the Gerrer Hassidic dynasty who is better known as the Chidushei HaRim, explains, is meaningful. "There is nothing a person owns," he wrote, "that he feels more attached to than real estate, which is why we call it achuza," from the Hebrew root achaz, or to hold on to something or be held by something.

The rabbis of the Talmud understood this idea very well. In Tractate Pesachim, Rabbi Ami delivers an interesting and very related ruling: **only people who own land are obligated to ascend to the Temple in Jerusalem during the three annual pilgrimages.**

At first blush, this ruling seems, well, a touch discriminatory. We get that owning real estate is great and all, but why should only folks who own houses get to experience the great joy of the pilgrimage? There's a deep and hidden wisdom here that is at the core of our very parsha and that applies to so many of us moderns as well.

Imagine, the Israeli rabbi Gad Shachtman taught us, a few young siblings sitting on their living room rug and playing Monopoly. The games goes long—Monopoly usually does—and their father walks in and says "hey, it's getting late, go to bed and you can finish the game tomorrow." The children comply, but later that night, their mother walks in and sees the huge mess on the carpet. She assumes dad was simply careless about cleanup, and, sighing, bends down and puts all the pieces away in the box. The next morning, the children awake and are horrified to discover that their game has been packed up. "But mom!" they complain, "I had this boulevard or that, and so much money! This isn't fair!"

This, Rabbi Shachtman explained, is precisely our emotional state of mind. Like the kids in the story, we assume that the buildings we own are real buildings, and that the money we have is real money. And in doing so, we neglect to realize the deeper truth, **which is that everything we think we own is truly HaShem's.**

Rabbi Pinchas Menachem Yustman, the Chidushei HaRim's nephew, taught us that this is why the rabbis of the Talmud ruled that **only home owners should make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem because they are far more likely to feel that what they own is theirs by right, they are commanded to leave their homes so that they may remind themselves that they truly own nothing more significant than monopoly money, and that God is the only true owner of everything.**

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