

Torah Table Talk

Creating a Just Society From the Ground Up

Parshat Bahar Leviticus 25:1 – 26:2

Parshat Bahar deals with two institutions: the Sabbatical year and the Jubilee year. The Torah commands the people of Israel to allow their land to lie fallow every seventh year. Elsewhere we are also told that all outstanding debts were cancelled in the Sabbatical year. After seven cycles of seven years, the people were to mark the Jubilee year in the fiftieth year. All Israelites slaves were to be set free, land was to be returned to its original owners, and the land was to lie fallow again.

The Sabbatical and Jubilee years had both social and theological implications. They served as a reminder that everything was a gift from God and no one had absolute right to his property. Furthermore, these institutions served as a way of redressing the inequalities in society by rebalancing the social order.

Henry George: Moses, a Lecture

Moses saw that the real cause of enslavement of the masses of Egypt was what has everywhere produced enslavement, the possession by a class of the land upon which and from which the whole people must live. He saw that to permit in land the same unqualified private ownership that by natural right attaches to things produced by labor would be inevitably to separate the people into the very rich and the very poor, inevitably to enslave labor.

1. How do you think the Sabbatical and Jubilee years work to redress the inequalities that were a natural outgrowth of any society?
2. Do you think these institutions were “practical?” What problems do you think they would create in society?
3. In what ways was the Jubilee year different from and similar to communism?
4. What should we do as a society to redress the economic and social inequalities that exist today? Do you believe we have a moral responsibility to do so?

Leviticus 25:10

You shall hallow the fiftieth year. Proclaim liberty (*Dror*) throughout the land for all its inhabitants. It shall be a Jubilee for you; each person shall return to his holding and each of you shall return to his family

1. The words “proclaim liberty through the land to all the inhabitants thereof,” which appear on the liberty bell are borrowed from this chapter in Leviticus. Why do you think the founding fathers of America choose this verse? What does it

- mean in its original context and how was their interpretation of the verse different from its original meaning?
2. The word *Dror* is translated as “release” instead of “liberty” in many modern translations of the Torah? Why?
 3. What relevance does the Jubilee year have for society today?

P’nai Yehoshua

Proclaim liberty through the land to all its inhabitants: It is not written “to all its slaves” but rather “to all its inhabitants.” (Shouldn’t the verse proclaim liberty to all those who are enslaved?) A nation in which there is no freedom, even to a tiny minority of its inhabitants, all its citizens are considered to be enslaved. Freedom can only be appreciated when it is shared by everyone in society. Slavery is a type of disease which afflicts not only the slave but the master as well. This is what the sages, of blessed memory, meant: “One who acquires a slave acquires a master for himself,” (Kedushin 20). When we liberate slave all of society becomes free.

1. The P’nai Yehoshua was writing a time when slavery for the most part no longer existed in European society. Why do you think he made this comment? What other ills can we apply this same insight to beside slavery?
2. Where does slavery still exist today in the world? If you do a search on line you might be shocked to learn that slavery is very much alive in the contemporary world not only in places like Africa but even in Israel and America where there is trafficking in sex slaves and forced child labor. See <http://www.antislavery>.

Glossary

P’nai Yehoshua - (1680–1756), Rabbi Joshua ben Joseph Falk was a well known Polish Torah Scholar; He was rabbi and Halachic authority. His commentary on the Shulchan Aruch was called the P’nai Yehoshua.

Henry George: A well known political thinker, 1839 – 1897

How to use Torah Table Talk

1. *Read the sheet out loud to one another. Discuss what it has to say.*
2. *Focus on the text in the box. It is taken from Biblical, post-biblical and modern Jewish sources. What does it mean? How does it make you feel?*
3. *Try to answer the questions following the text.*
4. *This is not a test and there are many correct answers and interpretations to each question. Share your ideas with one another. Be open and honest in sharing your ideas.*

***“All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind
and a desire to grow a Jewish soul.”***