

From the Rabbi

June 2017

*“Yovel, or Hard Reboot”*

On the eve of Shavu’ot we huddled over ancient texts and cheesecake. The cheesecake was marvelously fresh and sweet. The texts, on the other hand, reminded us of what has become stale on our tongues.

To wit, we looked at commentaries on the concept of *“yovel.”* *Yovel* translates as “jubilee,” as in the Torah’s fifty-year cycle of rebooting the entire economic profile of ancient Israel so as to avoid monopolies on land holdings. See Leviticus 25, *Par’shat B’har Sinai*.

No scholar believes that the *yovel* was actually ever carried out. It was too radical and unworkable. Other accommodations were made for Israelites who had lost their land to debt, drought, famine, illness, or mismanagement. Everyone was taken care of by the social weal, but a universal returning of homesteads to their original owners was not in the cards.

However, the *idea* of *yovel* became a guidepost for the entire Torah. The concept of reviewing and re-setting personal and societal goals every fifty years or so became a touchstone of the Torah’s teaching. The texts we grappled with during our Shavu’ot

night of study helped us to think about what the Torah of *yovel* might mean in our own time, fifty years after the hard reboot of Jewish identity in June of 1967.

In the spring of that fateful year, collective Jewish morale had reached a new low. Our precious experiment of an independent, self-sufficient Jewish state was in peril. Shoah survivors shuddered, fearing the worst. Mass graves were dug in Tel Aviv. The nations of the world stood by. For Jews around the world, it was not clear what it would mean to consider oneself a Jew going forward.

The Six-Day War ensued. As quickly as it started, it ended. Israel seemed to have triumphed miraculously. Not only did it survive without help from abroad, but it suddenly found itself sitting atop the lands of our precious Jewish history. All of the places described by Isaiah, Amos, the Psalms, and the Song of Songs were now under Israel's control. The Old City of Jerusalem, seat of our two ancient Commonwealths, was ours to govern. Broad borders would provide strategic depth. Historic sites would be ours to visit. This was more than the Zionists had ever dared to dream.

Along with those benefits came the responsibility of administering military governance over a million people who had lived as subjects of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. They were Palestinian Arabs, and they had no interest in becoming part of the Zionist dream.

Fifty years later, after numerous wars, intifadas, reigns of terror, diplomatic blunders, missed opportunities, human rights atrocities, reneged promises, broken agreements, broken treaties, and broken dreams, Israel still finds itself with both the benefit of access to our historic territory and the albatross of occupation.

In spite of it all, Israel has gone on to build itself up as a dynamo of culture, economics, technology, and military prowess. Many of its conflicts over religion and state, rich versus poor, capitalism versus socialism, and the very meaning of a secular Jewish state would be at the forefront with or without the fact of the occupied territories. The occupation alone does not cause or cure what would have been the central problems of Israel in 2017.

And much of our Jewish identity today relies on the shot of confidence we received in June 1967. We cower less – or not at all – in a world where a plucky Israel prevails. And I for one treasure the fact that I have trekked with so many students over the stones of the Kidron, the Hinnom Valley, the Temple Mount, the Mount of Olives, and the plaza of the Kotel countless times over the last half century, along with the great holy sites of Islam and Christianity, a trek made possible only by the events of that fateful week long ago. The geography of the *total* Land of Israel is in our psyche.

But the daily fact of civilian Jewish settlements crisscrossing the orchards and population centers of another people eats like a cancer at the conscience of Israel,

and by extension the whole Jewish people. It fuels international outrage, much of it justified, though much of it the product of latent anti-Semitism looking for a new way to express itself in our time.

For Jewish educators like me, it is profoundly difficult to impart to young Jews both an unconditional love for Israel and an unflagging embrace of Jewish moral values. People my age know how to live within the parameters of paradox. Teaching that sort of balancing act to young, idealistic students is quite another thing. It is a challenge we will not shirk from. Yet, it will only get harder unless and until our people worldwide embrace the notion of “hard reboot” and begin to rethink the big picture; unless and until we Jews admit that we have aided and abetted terrible evils even while we have built a dynamic Jewish reality.

Here is where *yovel* comes in. *Yovel*, a central idea in our Torah and throughout the history of Jewish ethical and religious thought, tells us that our very survival depends on a willingness to re-think the way we do our Jewish business. *Yovel* makes us ask: Is our entire approach to co-existence unworkable? Is our arrangement among religious factions and between our religious and secular identities unsustainable? Is our balance between Israel and Diaspora mutually supportive or mutually detrimental? Or some of both? These are the kinds of questions we need to dare to ask ourselves, even as we keep one eye on the ever-present forces that would have us disappear entirely.

How shall we be self-defensive and at the same time self-critical? How shall we protect ourselves while simultaneously questioning the very core of our assumptions? How do we show our youth that we are unafraid to look at hard truths, and to let our search lead us both to reaffirmation and to *teshuvah*? How do we embolden our youth to do the same while not letting them fall into some kind of post-Jewish abyss?

These are among the biggest Jewish questions of our time. Just as we prod one another to stand symbolically at Sinai each year on Shavu'ot to re-hear the frightening words of the One of Being, so let us use this *yovel* – this fifty-first year of our new Jewish consciousness - to encourage each other to begin talking through the next phase of our lives together as Jews and as ethical human beings.

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