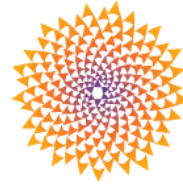


Land, Liberty, and Leviticus: Proclaiming Jubilee, USA 250 & Lev. 25



Adamah
PEOPLE · PLANET · PURPOSE

June 2026, R. Fred Scherlinder Dobb, for Jubilee USA

50: it's just a number, right? But it's a big one; a round, neat one. As turning 50 is a midlife big deal for a person, so *fifty* (and its multiples) hold both biblical and national significance – and those two are famously intertwined through the Liberty Bell.

Rung atop Philadelphia's Independence Hall when our democracy was birthed, it was cast with the words of Leviticus 25:10, from a passage mandating land stewardship, debt relief, and a thorough social resetting at every seven- and fifty-year interval: "Proclaim Liberty throughout all the Land Unto all the inhabitants thereof."

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (19th century) comments: "The fiftieth year is to be one of restitution and reclamation, a year of restoring and returning ... the *yovel* [Jubilee/50th] year is to effect also a social and political rebirth of the nation, with all its healing and restorative effects on the nation's domestic and external affairs, as a miraculous gift from the almighty grace of G-d." Through the ancient teachings of *shmita* [7th year] and *yovel* [50th], we learn that the Creator also endowed the land itself with certain inalienable rights – to rest, and renewal – along with all the creatures who dwell upon it.

We can now perform our own small 'reset' around the USA's 250th birthday – celebrating how far we've come, *and* acknowledging how much further we have to go, around land and liberty alike. The following texts, questions and expansions on that key verse in both Torah and American history (only the middle part of which made the Bell) may help. Read and reflect; discuss; enjoy and explore. Then we hope you will both go deeper, and more deeply commit: to democracy; to debt relief; and to the land itself.

[promotional materials will note: "You're invited to read and reflect on your own, or better yet, in a pairing or small group. Consider using this resource in a youth setting such as summer camp; for adult education; at a multi-faith gathering; or in worship – perhaps on a sabbath close to July 4th, or again around the Tishrei/September Jewish holidays, or Thanksgiving."]

AND YOU SHALL SANCTIFY THE FIFTIETH YEAR -- וקדשתם את שנת החמשים

To be clear this "fiftieth year," this Biblical Jubilee, was scarcely if ever practiced. Our text assumes an equitable 'original' distribution of land, which may never have happened. It ordains a most challenging second consecutive year, and *eighth* in every fifty-year cycle, of full cessation of agriculture. And it narrowly applies only while ancient Israel's Twelve Tribes are all in their ancestral regions—which hasn't pertained for some 55 *yovel* cycles.

So rather than a blueprint, it's a values-statement. The question before us is not if or how to make *yovel*//Jubilee happen today; it's how to bring the best of Leviticus 25's spiritual and ethical call into society, and onto our land, here and now. The United States' semi-quincentennial now occasions the conversation -- referencing the same biblical foundations invoked by this nation's founders, while celebrating that 'separation of church and state' they so wisely put in place – and encouraging us to think in long-term, multi-generational ways.

Consider this milestone, the *Semi-Quin-Centennial*: a half-century interval usually happens just once-or-twice-in-a-lifetime. It's at the longer end of the time-scales in which we operate. A scan, for context, begins with the day: "This is the day the Holy One has made".

Then there's the week, capped off with sabbath/shabbat. The Month (Lunar or Gregorian). The Season, in higher latitude climates; also known as the Quarter (with its attendant reports, like earnings, which set the pace of the market).

The Year. The Biennial. Rarer, the Triennial. The Quadrennial (Presidential, Olympics). The half-decade. Every 6th year (Senate). Every 7th year (Shmita/Sabbatical).

Now we're episodic. The decade. A generation, which often averages around a quarter century. Two of those, and we have our SemiCentennial, the Jubilee/Yovel.

And on, now in intervals that transcend a human life span: Century – that's three or four generations. Per Exodus 34:6-7, that's exactly how far forward G!d visits the iniquity of the ancestors unto the descendants -- נִצַּר הַסֵּדֶר לְאַלְפִים נֶשְׂאָ עֵן וְפָשַׁע וְחַטָּאָה וְנִקְהָ לֹא יִנְקָה פִקֹּד עֵן אַבֹּת עַל- נִצַּר הַסֵּדֶר לְאַלְפִים נֶשְׂאָ עֵן וְפָשַׁע וְחַטָּאָה וְנִקְהָ לֹא יִנְקָה פִקֹּד עֵן אַבֹּת עַל- בְּנֵים וְעַל-בְּנֵי בְנֵים עַל-שְׁלֹשִׁים וְעַל-רְבָעִים -- something that made little sense until learning that atmospheric carbon (released by us for our fleeting wants and needs, one time only) stays aloft and wreaks climate havoc for about a century, "to the third and fourth generation".

Twice that, two centuries or so, and we get the Seven Generations, whose future welfare (four Jubilees hence) Iroquois and other indigenous traditions insist we consider in our every decision.

Then the Roman numerals go from C to D to M, for Millennium – and to Epochs, Eras, and beyond. (Shortly, we'll explore "The Land Ethic" by Aldo Leopold; he devotes one section to "Thinking Like a Mountain", in those epochs and eras. The same passage in Exodus which sees guilt passed down three or four generations, has Divine *hesed* or loving-kindness extending *la'alafim*, into the *thousands* of generations. Theological and geological time rhyme, indeed).

For now – as we'll pause to do around each phrase of our venerable verse – let's consider:

- Though much of our life is lived in short-term intervals, hour to hour and day by day, clearly there's value in looking further back and farther ahead, as in shmita or yovel. How would you articulate the advantage, even the imperative, of *long-term* thinking?
- And a math moment: With ten digits (fingers), multiples of ten loom large here. But so do multiples of seven. Why so many sevens? And "Shmita squared, plus one, equals Yovel" -- a math motif we see elsewhere too, in the seven weeks of seven days between Passover and Shavuot (Pentacost). What's the significance of fifty as the "plus one," following "7 times 7"?

(and you all shall) PROCLAIM LIBERTY -- וקראתם דרור

The Talmud (first few centuries of the Common Era, tractate Rosh Hashanah, page 9b) already addresses this unusual word *dror*, ‘liberty’. Rashi, the key 11th century commentator, asks “What is the etymology of this term, דרור, freedom?” -- and answers from Talmud, “A free person is like one who may dwell (דור) at an inn — meaning that they may reside in any place they please, and they are not under the control of others”. *Dror* therefore implies liberty of residence.

A generation later, Ibn Ezra comments, “The meaning of the word *deror* is known; it means liberty. As *the flying swallow* (*deror*, in Prov. 26:2) refers to a small bird that produces music when it is free -- however, if taken captive, it refuses to eat and starves to death.”

And in the mid-13th century, Ramban [Nachmanides] concludes his commentary to our verse saying that *d’ror* (liberty) comes from *dor* (generation), specifically Eccl. 1:4, “one generation passes and another generation comes” -- דור הילך ודור בא.

Modern scholarship has uncovered the Babylonian *duraru*, “which resembles *d’ror* both in sound and meaning.” Clearly (per the Reform Plaut Humash, revised, p. 857), “the biblical author drew on ancient traditions and memories when formulating proposals for economic and social reform... among [these] various peoples, the god was deemed the sole owner of the land; but the consequence was generally drawn that, for practical purposes, the land belonged to the god’s earthly representative (the king) or to the priests. Only the Jubilee law of Leviticus gives a democratic application of the principle.”

So, we consider:

- Which of these etymologies do you find most *plausible*; and which, most *meaningful*?
- There’s a classic distinction between “freedom from” (i.e. lack of restraints), and “freedom towards” (i.e., to pursue purpose or mission). President Franklin Roosevelt’s famous “Four Essential Human Freedoms” speech had two of each (freedom *for* speech and expression, and *for* worship; freedom *from* want, and *from* fear). Where on that for-versus-from continuum does the biblical *Dror*/Liberty fall?
- And what is freedom, if news and enforcement of it has not yet reached you? Consider Juneteenth: the pro-slavery Confederate States of America had surrendered in April 1865, but only on June 19th did the Union make clear in the last state (at Galveston TX) that slavery was truly over. (Ibn Ezra on Lev. 25:9 had noted that proclamation must occur “in all the roads,” to which Hizkuni adds, “at all major highway junctions.”)

THROUGHOUT ALL THE LAND -- בארץ

From Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* (1854) to Marjorie Stoneman Douglas’ *River of Grass* (1947) to Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974), thoughtful Americans have elegized various ecoregions in this great land, placing the self and the human community in the

necessary context of a much larger whole, rooted in holy ground. Forester-philosopher Aldo Leopold's 1949 *Sand County Almanac*, in particular, stands out as a core American document.

Leopold starts "The Land Ethic" chapter by noting (p. 204, gender-adjusted) that all great ethical systems share the premise "that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts. One's instincts prompt the individual to compete for their place in that community, but one's ethics prompt them also to co-operate (perhaps in order that there may be a place to compete for). The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land." And that land itself – this land; any land – "is not merely soil; it is a fountain of energy flowing through a circuit of soils, plants, and animals" (p. 216).

This circuit-of-the-whole is *land-plus* – unto which we "Proclaim Liberty" – with the fifty-year *yovel* being one key part of a land ethic that is held and practiced annually, daily, always.

From Leopold (p. 204): "A land ethic of course cannot prevent the alteration, management, and use of [natural] 'resources,' but it does affirm their right to continued existence, and, at least in spots, their continued existence in a natural state. In short, a land ethic changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for one's fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such. In human history, we have learned (I hope) that the conqueror role is eventually self-defeating..."

- So in light of Leopold – whose Land Ethic maxim (p. 225) was, "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise." -- how might we look afresh at America's founding documents, history, trajectory? Or in light of Woody Guthrie's classic lyric, "This Land is Your Land"?
- Proclaim liberty unto *which* land/s?! To what extent does, or should, the biblical *yovel* ideal hold up today, for any nation or state -- including the USA at 250; the Holy Land, where *yovel* began; and all the places formative for our family and friends? (Note, later Jewish law says that the *yovel* proceeds in the diaspora whenever it's operative in Israel – see Mishnah R"ח 9:2 [ל, בחו"ל], בזמן שנוהג בארץ נוהג בחו"ל, לומר לך, הא דכתיב בארץ, לומר לך, and [MT Shmita v'Yovel 10:8](#), etc).
- Leopold introduces themes of cooperation, respect, and peace; so does Jewish tradition. Ha'Emek Davar says that 'Liberty throughout the Land' "includes the soldiers of war, who leave their homes to guard in the service of the ruler and the matters of state; in the Jubilee year they [too] return to their homes and ancestral land". Sefer HaChinuch (330) says "with this commandment of the counting of forty-nine years, they will distance themselves from stealing land of their fellows and they will not covet it in their hearts; in that they know that everything returns to the one to whom G!d wills it." How then would you incorporate peace, cooperation, and respect into the 'national reset' that is *yovel*?
- From what other American greats do you take nature inspiration? A short list of modern voices might include Mary Oliver, Terry Tempest Williams, Barry Lopez, Marge Piercy, Maya Angelou, Wendell Berry, Rachel Carson – who would you add? Compare notes...

UNTO ALL THE INHABITANTS THEREOF -- לכל יושביה

All its inhabitants, full stop. The Torah often singles out groups for special inclusion, to drive this point home – groups who might not otherwise be enfranchised. Shabbat is a day of rest not only for the wealthy but *for* their servants, *for* the pack animals, *for* the immigrant or stranger (*ger*) in your midst – the one whom Lev 19:34 commands us to act toward in loving ways. Or Deut. 29:9-11, where the plural “you all” specifically extends to the underpaid laborers, wood-choppers and water-drawers, in the covenanting. The widow, the orphan, the landless, the stranger, the poor – all deserve what liberation theology now calls the “preferential option.”

On the very day of the USA’s first yovel, two key framers and founders both passed away, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. Two years later, Andrew Jackson was elected, carrying Native American removal and extirpation – and full-throated unapologetic racist defense of chattel slavery – to new heights. What, to an Indigenous person, is the Fourth of July? Half a yovel later, in 1852, Frederick Douglass asked similarly, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?”:

“I say it with a sad sense of the disparity between us. I am not included within the pale of glorious anniversary! Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us. The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common. The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought light and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn.”

Of course, unjust and unsustainable structures ultimately harm the oppressors as well as the oppressed. The Conservative Etz Chayim chumash brings a Hassidic text in its commentary on our verse: “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 (*P’nei Y’hoshu-a*). 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’.” Let us now ask, in our time:

- Who, today, are among these ‘protected classes’ -- implicitly covered under “liberty for all”, but not yet enfranchised? What structures do we need to rethink and reset?
- And in the more-than-human realm, what “rights of nature” could or should we extend, to ensure the continuance of all other species – also expressions of Divine creativity, also ‘inhabitants’, on whom human life ultimately depends? And what role does debt (another key yovel theme) play in driving today’s biodiversity crisis; and what can we do about it?

IT SHALL BE A JUBILEE FOR ALL OF YOU -- יובל היא תהיה לכם

The word *jubilee* likely originated with the Hebrew *yovel*, proceeding through Greek (*iōbēlaïos*) and Latin (*jūbilaeus*) into English – with influence from an originally separate late Latin *jūbilāre*, connoting a wild shout (Merriam-Webster online). So the depth of the fiftieth-year freedom for all, and the perennial possibility of whoops of joy, conjoin in today's 'jubilation.'

While celebrating an anniversary like USA's 250th with jubilation/joy, let us not lose sight of the solemnity, vulnerability, and intensity of the radical rest and redemptive reset that Leviticus 25 ordains.

The Hebrew itself is far from clear. Rashi (11th century) says it's , על נשם תקיעת שופר , "with reference to the 'sounding of the shofar'," since at Sinai the ram's horn is called *yovel*. Ibn Ezra (12th century) proposes a different meaning, to dispatch or send (כמו שלוח) – centering the experience of the slaves, whose chattel status comes to an abrupt end on the fiftieth year, when they are sent home. And Nachmanides (13th century) as usual takes issue with both these prior voices, linking *yovel* to the returning itself. As summarized by the Tur Ha'Arokh: "a 'return' to one's roots, one's family, need not be understood only in physical terms, bodily return, but as something more profound" -- something more mystical; more redemptive -- ובל לא לדבר אחר לא -- תזרעו ולא תקצרו אבל תהיה קדש ותשובו איש אל משפחתו להיות לכולכם יובל כשמה --

Bachya ibn Pakuda (14th century) builds on this: "The word Yovel implies that everything and everybody has to return to their original state, i.e. ownership and family" -- זהו לשון יובל כי כל . דבר ודבר יובל אל אחוזתו ואל משפחתו וע"ד הקבלה יובל היא מלשון -- ירמיהו י"ז:ח') ועל יובל ישלח שרשיו, וירמוז כי כל הדורות יובלו אל הסבה הראשונה, ולכך נקרא היובל בשם דרור : "The word יובל is derived from the expression , ועל יבל ישלח שרשיו, "sending forth its roots by a stream" (Jeremiah 17:8) -- a hint that all the succeeding generations are traced back to their original roots, to the prime cause which determined their development. This is the reason why the Yovel is called , דרור "freedom," a reminder of when humanity was free from sin. All of humankind originated with the pool of [pure] souls at G'd's disposal, and eventually this is where the souls will return to."

In light of all this: How might we best balance the 'wild shout' and joyousness of jubilation, with the deep implications and high stakes of the Jubilee? Where can we see society's "USA 250" effort getting the balance right; and where might we suggest correctives?

Another thorny issue, on "It shall be a Jubilee, for you" -- this applies , לישראל לבדם , "to the Israelites alone" (as Ibn Ezra tersely comments) -- for as outlined many verses later, liberty and jubilation go only to indentured *Israelite* servants, and *not* to slaves of foreign ancestry. Oh, the parallels in American history, where the founders' specifications too often contradicted their high ideals! How might we, in lifting up Jubilee ideals in the 21st century, do better?

And for those of us who are advocates: Sforzo (16th century Italy) uses 'yovel' to remind us of the stick as well as the carrot. "All of you will also be free of subservience to other nations. This is the opposite of Jeremiah [who warned us, 34:17]: 'because you have failed to proclaim freedom for your kinsmen and countrymen as I have commanded, I proclaim your release -- declares the Lord -- to the sword, to pestilence, and to famine.'" How can social and ecological

advocates who see “the fierce urgency of now” (MLK), hold full awareness of the consequences of inaction, and still effectively communicate empowerment and motivation?

And more positively: “a jubilee it shall be FOR YOU”, might also be read as an imperative, even a blessing – LET it be a jubilee, for YOU! How can you make this anniversary yours, and ours – personally; nationally; communally?

Our verse finally finishes – yes, all this has been *one* biblical verse, Leviticus 25:10! --

**AND EACH PERSON SHALL RETURN TO THEIR ANCESTRAL HOLDING,
AND EACH TO THEIR FAMILY SHALL RETURN
ושבתם איש אל אחזתו ואיש אל משפחתו תשובו**

Every *seventh* year is a cyclical time of rest for the land (Ex. 23:10-11) -- this ‘sabbatical’ is the land’s Sabbath, its own G!d-given Shabbat (Lev. 25:1-7) -- a time of debt remission (Deut. 15), and of communal re-covenanting (Deut. 31). It is like pressing an ecological and economic “soft reset” button, rhythmically even seven years, across a human lifespan. It is known as *shmita*, ‘radical release.’ We hope you’ll learn more about it (see lots, with the simple search “Adamah shmita”!), and join the shmita-consciousness-movement. The next shmita year is in 2028-29.

Every *fiftieth* year – far rarer, and still more intense – *yovel*-time asks us to press a “hard reset.” Full remission of all debts; an end to nearly all forms of servitude. Return every land parcel to its original owners (who putatively had once obtained it ethically and equitably); restore opportunity and hope, along with family and micro-community. It may never have happened – and Leviticus’ instructions may be unwieldy and unworkable – but what an ideal!

Analogy: a game of Monopoly. Everyone starts off equal. With each tick of the clock and roll of the dice, a mix of luck and skill yields inequities. Someone becomes rich, and puts hotels on Boardwalk and Park Place; another lands there, and is suddenly bankrupt. Game over, right? Now imagine playing again, the next day, when yesterday’s winner says: “ok, I had \$5786 in the bank and all the railroads and utilities; you’d mortgaged all your properties, and still owe me \$613 – let’s pick up there, and keep playing!” After a few rounds, this is hardly fun and games.

Debt remission is a moral issue of the highest order. Religious voices today – Muslim *sharia*, which forbids compounding interest altogether; Catholic proclamations of jubilee, and efforts at debt-for-nature swaps; Native American gift economies (read Robin Wall Kimmerer’s recent *The Serviceberry*); shmita and yovel – are united in Leviticus 25’s ethical and spiritual aims. (Adamah, alongside numerous other faith groups, is part of a great, holy, aptly-named interreligious network: “JubileeUSA.org” -- get to know its vital work!).

- What about those who never had, or who permanently lost, their lineage’s ‘ancestral holding’? (Ha’Emek Davar on 25:10 says “even if one has no ancestral land, they go back to their main family, and all the family heads are [at least] gathered together.)

- Consider family dynamics. and gender implications: how to fairly choose across kids' two or four or more lineages, as grand/parents reach a half-century? (Numbers 30 set women's rights to inherit property; yet Num. 36 limits them to marrying within their tribe).
- What are some positives -- and negatives -- for multi-generational living in one locale?
- What do you or your congregation *now* do – and what *else* can or *might* you do – to help alleviate the crushing burden of debt, borne by certain classes, races, and hemispheres? And how might “debt for nature swaps” advance both global conservation and greater human flourishing?
- And *when* do freed people return? Reading the Torah carefully, Jewish tradition infers that servants and slaves are to be freed on Rosh Hashanah of the Yovel year, but only begin the journey home ten days later, after Yom Kippur. Why might that be? Let that question be food for thought – and a chance to revisit *all* these thoughts – again this Fall....

The theological basis for all this is given just a few lines down --

Says the Holy One (in Leviticus 29:23):

“THE LAND MUST NEVER BE SOLD BEYOND RECLAIM -- FOR THE LAND IS MINE; YOU ALL ARE STRANGERS AND TEMPORARY RESIDENTS, BY ME”--

וְהָאָרֶץ לֹא תִמָּכַר לְצִמְתָּת כִּי־לִי הָאָרֶץ כִּי־גֵרִים וְתוֹשָׁבִים אַתֶּם עַמִּדִּי

Jewish wisdom (like that of so many other great faiths) often amplifies, sometimes corrects, and is occasionally challenged by modern American thought and practice. Adamah believes that the two are stronger together: Jefferson with Genesis; Aldo Leopold with Leviticus; the Declaration and Annie Dillard with Deuteronomy. For democracy of and by and for the people to succeed over the long-term, we also need the “democracy of the trees.” In this semi-sesqui-centennial year, may we draw on the inherent sanctity of Creation to develop a renewed commitment not just to the rights of all Americans, but of all people, of nature, and of future generations.

Yovel and *Shmita* lead us to think of long-term time, of generational time, in intervals vastly longer than quarterly earnings reports or biennial electoral cycles. Perhaps contemplating 2026 as Jubilee can help us recognize this sweet land of liberty for the *terra sancta* that it is – and help us develop the civic knowledge and skills to better protect it, for the benefit of all who follow.

The question we leave with, then, after this lengthy loving look at Leviticus 25:

- How can we help this land that we love to *remain* vibrant, and free, for many generations and semi-sesqui-centennials to follow? What goal (if any) is greater or holier than that!?

Made possible with the generous help of A More Perfect Union – JewishDemocracy.org

For more along these lines, see Adamah.org