

The Sabbath reminds us that God created the world

Credit: Shabbat Shalom: Insights on the Weekly Torah Portion from the Heart of Biblical Israel

The Sabbath reminds us that God created the world and we are commanded to rest one day each week, to stop our activities of work and creation and devote ourselves to God.

This week’s portion opens with the laws of the Sabbatical year and the Jubilee. The first section describes the Sabbatical year:

When you come into the land that I give you, the land shall observe a Sabbatical year for the Lord. For six years you may sow your field and for six years you may prune your vineyard; and you may gather up its crop. (Leviticus 25:3,4)

The words used in this section are all related to the Sabbath or “Shabbat” as it is known in Hebrew, and parallel the words found in the Ten Commandments regarding the observance of the Sabbath.

In the Ten Commandments we read: “Six days you shall labor, and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates” (Exodus 20:9-10).

In this week’s portion, we read: “For six years you shall sow your field, and for six years you shall prune your vineyard and gather in its fruits. But in the seventh year there shall be a Sabbath of solemn rest for the land, a Sabbath to the Lord. You shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. You shall not reap what grows of itself in your harvest, or gather the grapes of your undressed vine. It shall be a year of solemn rest for the land” (Leviticus 25:3-5).

The English translation, however, does not do justice to the extent to which the concept of Sabbath, through the recurring use of the Hebrew word Shabbat, is stressed in this passage. The Hebrew is as follows: “But in the seventh year there shall be a Shabbat Shabaton for the land, a Shabbat to the Lord. . . . It shall be a year of Shabbaton for the land.” The Hebrew Shabbaton, a derivative of the Hebrew word Shabbat, is used to denote solemn rest.

This passage, therefore, is all about the Sabbath. But rather than discuss the Sabbath that we observe each week, as we rest on the seventh day, this Sabbath refers to the land, the year of rest that must be observed in the seventh year.

The Jubilee is a further Sabbath. After seven Sabbatical years, there is a fiftieth year of Jubilee. In addition to the celebration, the blowing of the trumpets, there is a profound

message of freedom and restitution implicit in the Jubilee.

The verse inscribed on the famous Liberty Bell in Philadelphia, symbol of the freedom the US has always prided itself on, is found in this section: “And you shall consecrate the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you, when each of you shall return to his property and each of you shall return to his clan” (Leviticus 25:10). Loans taken in previous years are forgiven, land transferred in previous years is returned to its rightful owners, keeping the tribal territories inviolate. This is truly a declaration of freedom – for any man who sold his land or any man sold into slavery to relieve a debt, is now free again. This freedom is endowed upon us by God!

“The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine. For you are strangers and sojourners with me” (Leviticus 25:23). Providing further understanding of the reversion of the land to its original owner, this verse extends beyond the context of real property transactions. This verse tells us, in no uncertain terms, that the Land of Israel belongs to God. Our presence in the land must be in line with His guidelines and His restrictions. And those restrictions include a verse in Deuteronomy: “and when the Lord your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them, then you must devote them to complete destruction. You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them” (7:2). The words “show no mercy to them” are a translation of the Hebrew “Lo Techanem.” An alternative translation of those words, found in the Talmud is: “do not give them a place,” or do not enable the nations to have a place in the land. This is consistent with the verse in our portion – the land belongs to God and only He has the right to determine who can take possession of it.

The Sabbath reminds us that God created the world and we are commanded to rest one day each week, to stop our activities of work and creation and devote ourselves to spiritual pursuits. The land does the same in the seventh year and reverts to its original owner in the 50th year, after seven Sabbatical cycles. The message is the same – the land belongs to God and only He can determine who may possess it, who may cultivate it and when.