

The Torah: A Women's Commentary

Parashat B'har

NUMBERS 25:1–26:2

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Parashat B'har Study Guide Themes


Theme 1: Balancing Need and Obligation—Sabbatical Laws for the Land

Theme 2: Balancing the Economic Scale—Laws Protecting the People from Poverty

INTRODUCTION

 *Parashat B'har* contains laws that establish a sabbath for the land every seventh year, as well as a sabbath for the land in the fiftieth year. These regulations protect the land from overuse by allowing it to lie fallow. Although there were practical reasons for this custom in ancient agriculture, the text makes clear that the Israelites are to observe these rules in the Land of Israel because God is the ultimate owner of the land. The sabbath for the land, like the Sabbath commanded for the Israelites (Exodus 31:16–17), emphasizes that God's universe includes a sabbath for the entirety of God's creation. In addition, the jubilee legislation in *parashat B'har* seeks to protect community members who fall on hard times from permanently losing both their means of livelihood and their freedom. In the ancient world, economic hardship often led to the loss of one's land and a downward economic spiral that could end in indentured servitude. Although neighboring peoples had similar rules to prevent the rich from exploiting the poor, ancient Israel was unique in establishing these laws on a theological foundation. In Leviticus, ethics and social justice are inextricably bound to ritual, not separate from it, thus expressing what it means for Israel to be a holy people. The laws in *parashat B'har* emphasize not only that the land belongs to God, but that the fate of the land and the fate of the people cannot be separated.

BEFORE GETTING STARTED

 Before turning to the biblical text and the questions presented below, use the introductory material in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* to provide an overview of the parashah as a whole. Draw attention to a few key quotations from the introduction to the Central Commentary on pages 747–48 and/or survey the

outline on page 748. This will help you highlight some of the main themes in this parashah and give participants a context for the sections they will study within the larger portion. Also, remember that when the study guide asks you to read biblical text, take the time to examine the associated comments in the Central Commentary. This will help you answer questions and gain a deeper understanding of the biblical text.

THEME 1: BALANCING NEED AND OBLIGATION—SABBATICAL LAWS FOR THE LAND



Parashat B'har introduces the idea that, like people, the land must have sabbath rest. Just as God blesses the Sabbath day and makes it holy (Genesis 2:3), the people are to make the jubilee year holy. Unlike the weekly Shabbat that the Israelites must observe wherever they are, the sabbath of the land can only be observed in the Land of Israel. The laws regarding the sabbath of the land and the jubilee laws, which are found only in this parashah, emphasize that—like the people—the land belongs solely to God. The sabbatical laws balance the people's need to derive sustenance from the land with their obligation to God.

1. Read Leviticus 25:1–7, which describes laws concerning the sabbath of the land.
 - a. What system of caring for the land does this passage establish? How does this compare with Exodus 23:10–11?
 - b. In what ways does the command to observe a sabbath for the land differ from the command to observe Shabbat (Exodus 23:12)?
 - c. What, in your view, motivated the creation of a sabbatical for the land?
 - d. What are Israelite households permitted and not permitted to do in relationship to their land during the sabbath of the land? What concerns do these rules raise regarding the poor? How do Leviticus 19:9–10 and 23:22 address these concerns?
 - e. For whose sustenance is the landowner responsible, according to Leviticus 25:6–7?
2. Read Leviticus 25:8–16, which describes how to determine the jubilee year and the goal of the laws concerning the jubilee year.
 - a. According to Leviticus 25:8–9, how is the jubilee year determined? The number seven is significant in the Torah. Compare its use in these verses to Genesis 2:2–3, 29:18–21, 29:27–28, 41:1–7, and 41:25–32. How do these verses help you to understand the significance of the number seven in determining the jubilee year?
 - b. According to the comment on Leviticus 25:10, “jubilee,” the Hebrew word *yovel* (here translated as “jubilee”) also means “a ram” or “a ram’s horn.” What is the relationship between the word from which the fiftieth year takes its name and how the year is to be proclaimed (25:9)? Where

- do we see remnants of this in contemporary Jewish practice?
- c. What is the purpose of the jubilee system, according to Leviticus 25:10–12?
 - d. The Hebrew verbal root *k-d-sh* (meaning “to consecrate” or “set apart”) appears twice in these verses, in Leviticus 25:10 (“you shall hallow”) and 25:12 (“It shall be holy”). Compare the use of the root in these verses with its use in Genesis 2:3. What can we learn from this comparison about the significance of the fiftieth-year jubilee?
 - e. According to the Central Commentary on Leviticus 25:13, what was the view of land holdings in Israelite society?
 - f. In your view, what is the purpose of the rules for buying and selling land in Leviticus 25:14–16? What is the assumed relationship between the individuals described in these verses? How does this differ from the Torah’s commands in Exodus 22:20 and Leviticus 19:33?
3. Read Leviticus 25:17–24, which describes the rationale for the laws of the jubilee year as well as pragmatic concerns about the economic consequences of the jubilee system.
- a. The phrase “do not wrong one another” appears in verses 14 and 17; the second repetition adds “but fear your God.” What is the relationship, in your view, between the admonition not to wrong one another and the fear of God?
 - b. According to 25:18–21, what rewards will accrue to the people if they follow God’s commands?
 - c. In your view, what would have been the benefits and challenges of observing the laws of the jubilee year?
4. Read Post-biblical Interpretations by Judith Z. Abrams (pp. 760–61).
- a. How do the Rabbis interpret the repetition of the command “you shall not wrong one another . . . Do not wrong one another, but fear your God” (25:14, 25:17)?
 - b. What is the connection between this interpretation and how the Rabbis view the kind of relationship a husband should have with his wife? In your view, how might the changing nature of marital relationships and the advancement of women allow us to expand on the rabbinic view?
 - c. How does the legend of Rabbi Eliezer and his wife, Imma Shalom, illustrate the power of hurt feelings in rabbinic tradition?
 - d. Can you think of a situation in which your own hurt feelings, or those of others, caused harm?
5. Read the Contemporary Reflection by Lori Lefkowitz (pp. 762–63).
- a. How can *parashat B’har*, according to Lefkowitz, lead us to examine the

- balance between people's needs and obligations?
- b. How does the Torah teach us that the earth, in Lefkowitz's words, is "an expressive organism"?
 - c. How does the *yovel* (jubilee) serve as a call to restore primal order?
 - d. What is the relationship between the biblical commandment for release connected with the *yovel* and the idea that we should *limnot yameinu* (count our days)?
 - e. How can *parashat B'har* guide us, according to Lefkowitz, to examine the often excessive demands we make of ourselves in our society? In what ways can these demands be particularly difficult for women?
 - f. What measures have you taken or might you take in your own life to avoid the consequences of depletion?
6. Read "The First Wriggle" by Elaine Feinstein, in *Voices* (p. 764).
- a. Can you describe a moment in your own life in which you had a similar sense of freedom to the one the poet describes in the first stanza? What was this sense of freedom like for you?
 - b. What is the relationship between "freedom" and the poet's statement that "life will form, wherever there's opportunity"?
 - c. How does this sense of freedom and the resulting opportunity relate to the idea of "release" in Leviticus 25:10?

THEME 2: BALANCING THE ECONOMIC SCALE—LAWS PROTECTING THE PEOPLE FROM POVERTY



The laws of *parashat B'har* seek to provide a safety net to guard hereditary land holdings and to ensure economic stability. Just as the sabbatical laws protect the land from exploitation, the laws protecting land holdings and the laws protecting Israelites from debt-slavery prevent exploitation of the people by their fellow Israelites. These laws make clear that the people must manifest their holiness as God's freed servants through both ritual and ethical behavior. Just as God redeemed the Israelites from slavery, so must they redeem their kinsmen from economic ruin.

1. Read Leviticus 25:25–28, which describes laws to protect land holdings, and 25:48–49, which explains who must redeem an indentured Israelite.
 - a. Whom must help the person who is forced to sell his property because of poverty? According to 25:48–49, what is the genealogical order that governs who will assist the relative forced to sell his holding?
 - b. The Central Commentary on 25:25, "redeemer," explains that the Hebrew root ג-ו-ל, "to redeem," refers here to "a family member with means, who is obligated to 'bail out' destitute relatives." The term is used repeatedly in these verses (vv. 25, 26, 48, 49). Compare

the use of the root in these verses with its use in Exodus 6:6, where it describes an action by God. How does this comparison help us to understand who is responsible in ancient Israelite society for the welfare of the disadvantaged?

- c. According to Leviticus 25:26–27, what is the rule for a person without a redeemer who is able to redeem the land himself? What are the rights of the original owner of the land? How is the price for redeeming the land early to be determined?
 - d. According to the Central Commentary to these verses, what concerns gave rise to these laws?
2. Read Leviticus 25:35–46, which describes laws to protect against debt-slavery.
- a. What is the purpose of the laws described in 25:35–38?
 - b. What circumstances, according to the Central Commentary, might have forced farmers in the ancient world to take loans? How do the laws regarding loans in these verses compare with the interest rates for loans in Mesopotamia? What, in your view, would have been the impact on farmers of these two approaches to loans?
 - c. The Hebrew word *ger* in 25:35 (translated here as “resident aliens”) refers to someone with no inherited rights. Compare the use of the word *ger* in this verse with its use in Leviticus 19:33. How does this comparison help you to understand the position of the person described in Leviticus 25:35?
 - d. Compare Leviticus 25:38 with 25:17. What are the similarities and differences between these verses? In your view, what is the significance of where these verses are located in the *parashah*? What do these two verses add to your understanding of the jubilee laws?
 - e. Leviticus 25:39–43 describes laws related to those whose poverty forces them into debt-servitude. What is their status in the households of their kin?
 - f. The phrase translated as “they, along with any children” (25: 41) literally means “he and his sons with him.” What does this translation reflect about how the translator interprets the masculine language in this verse? What insight does the Central Commentary to this verse give about the inclusion of women in this legislation?
 - g. Compare the word translated as “ruthlessly” (Leviticus 25:43, 25:46) with its use in Exodus 1:13. How does the use of this word in the Exodus text, where it describes the harsh labor the Egyptians imposed on the Israelites, help you to understand its use in Leviticus 25:43 and 25:46, where it describes the impact of debt-servitude?
 - h. What is the law concerning the status of indentured foreign slaves in

Leviticus 25:44–46? How does this compare with how foreigners are to be treated, according to Exodus 12:49? According to the Central Commentary on Leviticus 25:44–46, how does later rabbinic tradition interpret the rule in these verses regarding the Israelites’ possession of slaves “for all time”?

- i. Leviticus 25:44 refers to both male and female slaves, the second place in this parashah to do so (see 25:6–7). Compare this verse with Exodus 21:2–11, which also discusses the treatment of female and male slaves. In your view, why does the Leviticus text mention female slaves at this point?
3. Read the Another View section by S. Tamar Kamionkowski (p. 760).
- a. What is the utopian vision behind the biblical system of the jubilee year? In what beliefs is this vision grounded? What are your views of these beliefs?
 - b. According to Exodus 21:2–6, what are the circumstances under which male Hebrew slaves can be freed? What are the rules in these verses regarding the wives of Hebrew slaves? According to Kamionkowski, the description in Leviticus 25:41 of how kin who become indentured servants should be freed in the jubilee year can literally be translated as “he and his children with him shall be free.” What questions do these two texts raise for you about the differences between how the Torah views male and female slaves?
 - c. What is the evidence that women may have been recognized as active participants in redeeming relatives sold to non-Israelites and in redeeming ancestral lands?
4. Read “Childhood in the Shtetl” by Golda Meir, in *Voices* (p. 764).
- a. What can we learn about the concerns of women living in poverty from Meir’s recollection of growing up in the Ukraine?
 - b. How does Meir’s perspective shift once she becomes a mother?
 - c. What is your reaction to Meir’s comment that “there was no justice anywhere”? How does this parashah address the economic issues related to justice?
 - d. In what ways does this parashah address issues related to hunger?
 - e. In your view, what is the relationship between being a mother and providing food for one’s children? To what extent do you think that mothers have a different perspective from that of fathers in this regard?
 - f. If you or someone you know has had experiences similar to the ones Meir describes, what was their impact? How do those experiences influence your understanding of this Torah portion?

OVERARCHING QUESTIONS

As you study these parts of the *parashah*, keep in mind the following overarching questions. If time permits, conclude the class with these broader questions:

1. The sabbatical laws in *parashat B'har*, according to Lori Lefkowitz, can serve as a warning against amassing more things, as well as a reminder against warring over real estate. How does the pressure to acquire material things and real estate present itself in your life and in the life of your family? If you have successfully resisted this pressure, how have you done so? If you have children, what have you taught them about the role of material things in their lives?
2. *Parashat B'har* outlines a fixed system that would adjust economic imbalance every fifty years—a system that would not depend on the largesse of rulers. The responsibility for maintaining this system falls on the people, who must take appropriate measures so that their kin do not become permanently impoverished or fall into indentured servitude. How does this view of the consequences of economic imbalance and the responsibility to ensure social justice compare with how our own society addresses these issues?

CLOSING QUESTIONS

1. What new insight into the Torah did you gain from today's study?
2. What other new insights did you gain from this study?
3. What questions remain?



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