B’HAR

25 The Lord spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai: 

1. Speak to the Israelite people and say to them:

   When you enter the land that I assign to you, the land shall observe a sabbath of the Lord.

2. Six years you may sow your field and six years you may prune your vineyard and gather in the yield. 3. But in the seventh year the land shall have

The Pursuit of Holiness (continued)

PRINCIPLES OF LAND TENURE (25:1–26:2)

Chapter 25 is the only law code on the subject of land tenure in ancient Israel that is preserved in the Torah. It governs the permanent rights of landowners and the legalities of sales and mortgages of land. There are also laws regarding indenturedness and indenture, a system of repaying debts through one’s labors, and the commandment regarding the jubilee year.

SABBATICAL YEAR AND JUBILEE (vv. 1–23)

2. the land shall observe a sabbath

The land is personified. It, too, tires and requires rest (see Exod. 23:10–11).

3. six years you may prune your vineyard

Pruning was essential for ensuring the growth of the grapes. There were two prunings each year: one in the winter, or rainy season, when the shoots that had not produced grapes the previous year were snipped off, and the second in June or July, when the new blossoms had already appeared.

4. Allowing the land to lie fallow every seventh year reduced the amount of sodium in the

At the heart of this parashah is the visionary concept of returning land to its original owner at the end of a 50-year cycle. This prevents the polarization of society into two classes: wealthy, powerful landowners on the one hand and permanently impoverished people on the other. In an agrarian society, a farmer who sold all the land to pay debts had no prospect of ever being anything other than a servant. Nor would a servant’s sons ever rise above that level. Anticipating the human misery and social instability this would lead to, the Torah provides a plan. In the 50th year, families would reclaim the land they had held originally and later sold. Behind this plan are two religious assumptions. Because all the earth and all of its inhabitants belong to God, human beings cannot possess either the land or the people in perpetuity. And no human being should be condemned to permanent servitude. Some critics have seen this as a utopian plan that was never put into practice, but archaeologists have found records of deeds from the late biblical period containing references to the number of years remaining till the jubilee year.

Kook taught that the purpose of the jubilee was primarily spiritual, not economic. It came to restore the sense of unity that once prevailed in Israel and to restore self-respect to the person who had sunk into poverty and a sense of failure. Even as the weekly Shabbat enables people to define themselves in noneconomic terms, the sabbatical year and the jubilee enable an entire society to put aside economic competition and the practice of defining a person’s value in economic terms alone.

CHAPTER 25

1. Why does the Torah emphasize that these agricultural laws were promulgated at Mount Sinai? Perhaps because at Sinai no one owned any land yet, and no one could object that the law deprived people of what they had worked to acquire. It is easier to propose a visionary system of equality when all start out equal. Another interpretation: Just as Sinai was the smallest of the mountains but the words spoken there changed the world, so the people Israel, among the smallest of the nations, presents a vision of social justice that has the power to change the world.

4. The Holy Land, like the holy people who
a sabbath of complete rest, a sabbath of the Lord: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard.

5. **aftergrowth of your harvest**  That which grows naturally the following season from seeds that fell to the ground during reaping.

6. **untrimmed vines**  Hebrew: *nazir*; or “forbidden vines” (cf. Num. 6:1–21).

7. **bared . . . laborers**  Hebrew: *sabbir*, which usually refers to a laborer who works for wages.

8. **sabbatical years**  Hebrew: *sabbath*. The term is often designated a foreign “resident,” a merchant or laborer.

5. **But you may eat whatever the land during its sabbath may produce**  Sometimes the wealthy don’t believe that poor people are actually suffering, suspecting that they are just too lazy to provide for themselves. Let the wealthy undergo the experience of not knowing whether there will be enough to eat, and their attitudes will change.

6. **untrimmed vines**  Hebrew: *nazir*; or “forbidden vines” (cf. Num. 6:1–21).

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10. **hallow**  Hebrew: *kidshah* (sanctify, hallow), customarily used to convey the sanctification of Shabbat. The use of this verb in connection with the jubilee creates a parallelism between the jubilee and the sabbatical year. The reference to beasts symbolizes the freedom characteristic of the sabbatical year: Humans and beast are free to roam about and gather their sustenance.

9. **The sowing of the shofar five days before the autumn harvest festival of Sukkot (even on Shabbat) served to proclaim the advent of the jubilee.**

10. **hallow**  Hebrew: *kidshah* (sanctify, hallow), customarily used to convey the sanctification of Shabbat. The use of this verb in connection with the jubilee creates a parallelism between the jubilee and the sabbatical year. The reference to beasts symbolizes the freedom characteristic of the sabbatical year: Humans and beast are free to roam about and gather their sustenance.

39. **Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary**

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shall proclaim release throughout the land for all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: each of you shall return to his holding and each of you shall return to his family. 11 That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you: you shall not sow, neither shall you reap the aftergrowth or harvest the untrimmed vines. 12 For it is a jubilee. It shall be holy to you; you may only eat the growth direct from the field.

13 In this year of jubilee, each of you shall return to his holding. 14 When you sell property to your neighbor, or buy any from your neighbor, you shall not wrong one another. 15 In buying from your neighbor, you shall deduct only two occasions. The jubilee year is to be hallowed just as Shabbat is hallowed.

**jubilee** Hebrew: *yovel*, which means both “ram” and “ram’s horn.” The 50th year is called “jubilee” because its arrival is announced by sounding the ram’s horn.

**each of you shall return to his holding** This refers primarily to families who had been unable to repay their loans and were evicted from their homes and farms due to foreclosure. This situation is projected in verses 13–17 and 25–28.

**10. proclaim release** This clause is inscribed on the Liberty Bell. Some commentators derive the word *da'im*, “release,” from the Hebrew root *dar*, “to dwell,” and understand it to mean the freedom to live wherever one wants.

**for all its inhabitants** 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'nai Y'shuv'-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.” Hirsch understands the word the word for “jubilee” (yovel) to mean “a summoning home” of the rightful owners of the land.

**14. you shall not wrong one another** This rule, specifically applied to real estate sales, is expanded by the Talmud to include all commercial transactions. Egregious overcharging is grounds for canceling an agreement (B'r BM 47b). The Midrash extends the concept still further to include wronging a person with harmful words (Lev. R. 33:1). This includes reminding a repentant sinner of his or her former misdeeds and asking a merchant the price of something when you have no intention of buying. Pious persons do not deceive even themselves.
for the number of years since the jubilee; and in selling to you, he shall charge you only for the remaining crop years; the more such years, the higher the price you pay; the fewer such years, the lower the price; for what he is selling you is a number of harvests. Do not wrong one another, but fear your God; for I the Lord am your God.

You shall observe My laws and faithfully keep My rules, that you may live upon the land in security; the land shall yield its fruit and you shall eat your fill, and you shall live upon it in security. And should you ask, “What are we to eat in the seventh year, if we may neither sow nor gather in our crops?” I will ordain My blessing for you in the sixth year, so that it shall yield a crop sufficient for three years. When you sow in the eighth year, you will still be eating old grain of that crop; you will be eating the old until the ninth year, until its crops come in.

But the land must not be sold beyond reclamation, for the land is Mine; you are but strangers resident with Me. Throughout the land that you hold, you must provide for the redemption of the land.

that was “sold” would revert to its original owners at the next jubilee.

The Israelites are urged to act out of fear of God, especially in matters whose norms are not easily enforced.

SECURITY AND ABUNDANCE (vv. 18–22)

This section interrupts the continuity of legislation governing the sabbatical and jubilee years. It is an exhortation to obey God’s laws and commandments, with the promise of security and abundance as a reward for such obedience.

18. live upon the land in security That is, the people will not fear invasions.

19. Along with security will come fertility and abundance.

20. This verse projects the anxiety of the people.

21–22. The response to the people. Until the crop of the eighth year is harvested, you will have sufficient food from the “old” crop, namely, that of the sixth year.

23. The text returns to its original subject: the inalienable status of the land.

ADDITIONAL LAND TENURE AND INDENTURE LAWS (vv. 24–55)

24. This general statement is followed by a series of situations in which the rule applies. The effect of this law is to obligate the purchaser to accept the redemption payment of the original owner.

23. you are but strangers resident with Me Even the Israelites are but God’s tenants, resident aliens in the Land. Only if they live up to the terms of the Covenant will they endure there.
25. If your kinsman is in straits and has sold 525 part of his holding, his nearest redeemer shall come and redeem what his kinsman has sold.
26. If a man has no one to redeem for him, but prospers and acquires enough to redeem with, 526 he shall compute the years since its sale, refund the difference to the man to whom he sold it, and return to his holding. 28If he lacks sufficient means to recover it, what he sold shall remain with the purchaser until the jubilee; in the jubilee year it shall be released, and he shall return to his holding.
29. If a man sells a dwelling house in a walled city, it may be redeemed until a year has elapsed since its sale; the redemption period shall be a year. 30. If it is not redeemed before a full year has elapsed, the house in the walled city shall pass to the purchaser beyond reclaim throughout the ages; it shall not be released in the jubilee. 31. But houses in villages that have no encircling walls shall be classed as open country; they may be redeemed, and they shall be released through the jubilee. 32. As for the cities of the Levites, the houses in the cities they hold—the Levites shall forever have the right of redemption. 33. Such property as may be redeemed from the Levites—houses sold in a city they hold—shall be released through the jubilee.

HALAKHAH ‘U’MA-ASEH
25:25. If your kinsman is in straits Jewish law requires extending help to people in financial straits so that their economic condition does not worsen. According to Maimonides, helping people help themselves become financially independent is the highest form of tz’dakah (charity, or literally, righteousness) (MT Gifts to the Poor 10:7–14).
34. the unenclosed land about their cities cannot be sold

Perhaps the reason for this restriction was related to the sustenance that the Levites derived from such plots of land, the only ones they possessed.

35. you hold him as though a resident alien

Those who mortgaged their land or sold it to another became, in a real sense, tenants on their own land.

36. Let him live by your side

This verse is the source of the famous ruling by Akiva: If two men in a desert have enough water to keep only one of them alive, the possessor of the water may drink it all rather than share it and condemn both to die of thirst. Our neighbors are entitled to live alongside us, not instead of us (BT BM 62a).

38. The God who gave the Israelites a land of their own and freed them from the servitude of Egypt now commands them, in turn, to prevent conditions of servitude among their own people.

HALAKHAI L’MA-

Aseh

25:35. you hold him The Joint Social Action Commission of the Rabbinical Assembly and of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism has published a Rabbinic Letter to articulate the theological convictions underlying the Torah’s concern for the poor and to apply them to modern measures for alleviating the plight of the poor (Dorff, “You Shall Strengthen Them”).

39 If your kinsman under you continues in straits and must give himself over to you, do not subject him to the treatment of a slave. 40 He shall remain with you as a hired or bound laborer; he shall serve with you only until the jubilee year. 41 Then he and his children with him shall be free of your authority; he shall go back to his family and return to his ancestral holding.—42 For they are My servants, whom I freed from the land of Egypt; they may not give themselves over into servitude.—43 You shall not rule over him ruthlessly; you shall fear your God. 44 Such male and female slaves as you may have—it is from the nations round about you that you may acquire male and female slaves. 45 You may also buy them from among the children of aliens resident among you, or from their families that are among you, whom they begot in your land. These shall become your property: 46 you may keep them as a possession for your children after you, for them to inherit as property for all time. Such you may treat as slaves. But as for your Israelite kinsmen, no one shall rule ruthlessly over the other. 47 If a resident alien among you has prospered, and your kinsman being in straits, comes under his authority and gives himself over to the rest.

39. An Israelite indentured to another Israelite must not be treated as a slave. 40. as a hired or bound laborer. The indentured Israelite has the legal status of an employee. 41. Indentured servants often lived on the estates of their masters. With the jubilee, land was restored to its original owners and indentured servants were released. Thus indentured Israelites had a home, once again, to which they could return. 42. For they are My servants. By redeeming the Israelites from Egyptian bondage, God acquired them as “slaves.” God’s claim has priority. 43. ruthlessly. Hebrew: b’ירוק. The word recurs in verses 46 and 53. Except in Ezek. 34:4, it appears nowhere else in the Bible outside of the account of Israel’s enslavement in Egypt. It apparently means a particularly rigorous kind of work. Maimonides suggests that it refers to work done not to benefit the master but to exhaust and humiliate the slave, work done only to emphasize the master’s power over the slave (MT Slaves 1:6).
indent alien among you, or to an offshoot of an alien’s family, 48he shall have the right of redemption even after he has given himself over. One of his kinsmen shall redeem him, 49or his uncle or his uncle’s son shall redeem him, or anyone of his family who is of his own flesh shall redeem him; or, if he prospers, he may redeem himself. 50He shall compute with his purchaser the total from the year he gave himself over to him until the jubilee year; the price of his sale shall be applied to the number of years, as though it were for a term as a hired laborer under the other’s authority. 51If many years remain, he shall pay back for his redemption in proportion to his purchase price; 52and if few years remain until the jubilee year, he shall so compute: he shall make payment for his redemption according to the years involved. 53He shall be under his authority as a laborer hired by the year; he shall not rule ruthlessly over him in your sight. 54If he has not been redeemed in any of those ways, he and his children with him shall go free in the jubilee year. 55For it is to Me that the Israelites are servants: they are My servants, whom I freed from the land of Egypt, I the Lord your God.

**48. right of redemption** The clan of the Israelite indentured to a non-Israelite bears the responsibility for redeeming its kinsman. 

**One of his kinsmen shall redeem him** This is the order of obligation to redeem kinsmen within the clan: brothers, then uncles and cousins, then other blood relatives. These could even include grandchildren, also considered blood relatives in the laws of Lev. 18:10.

**49. of his own flesh** A clan is usually a fairly large unit, and not all relatives within it are of the same blood.

**50. compute** The computation is in terms of wages over a period of years.

**53.** To allow a fellow Israelite to remain indentured to a gentile would be a cruel humiliation. One was not permitted to remain indifferent in such a situation, which could lead to the forfeiture of land that had been mortgaged to debts and its seizure by non-Israelites.

**54.** The last recourse is the jubilee, when all other efforts have failed.
26 You shall not make idols for yourselves, or set up for yourselves carved images or pillars, or place figured stones in your land to worship upon, for I the Lord am your God. You shall keep My sabbaths and venerate My sanctuary, Mine, the Lord's.

POSTSCRIPT (26:1–2)

2. Instead of worshipping improperly, Israelites should attend God’s legitimate sanctuary.

CHAPTER 26

1–2. Why this denunciation of idolatry at this point? And why are Shabbat and the sanctuary mentioned as contrasts to idol worship? It is suggested that these verses raise the question: Is the visible world all there is? Or is that which is real but invisible ultimately the greatest reality? Hoffman considers these two verses, which seem to be an arbitrary postscript, as a deliberate echoing of the Decalogue, serving to introduce the theme of loyalty to the Covenant, which will be the subject of the book’s concluding chapters.

* For the haftarah for this portion, see p. 758.
B’HUKKOTAI

If you follow My laws and faithfully observe My commandments, I will grant your rains in their season, so that the earth shall yield its produce and the trees of the field their fruit. Your threshing shall overtake the vintage, and your vintage shall overtake the sowing; you shall eat your fill of bread and dwell securely in your land.

The Pursuit of Holiness (continued)

EPILOGUE TO THE HOLINESS CODE (26:3–46)

THE BLESSING (vv. 3–13)

5. Your threshing shall overtake the vintage

There will be so much grain to thresh that the threshing will continue into late summer when the vines are picked.

This parashah centers on a brief but eloquent promise of blessings for those who follow God’s ways and a lengthy and chilling series of curses for those who reject God’s ways. The curses are known as the Tokhehah [Reproach]. Several commentators, notably Ibn Ezra, insist that although more verses are dedicated to the Tokhehah, the blessings promised in the opening section outweigh it in quality. The curses are spelled out at length in the hope that they will put fear into the hearts of those who cannot be persuaded to do what is right by any other means. In many synagogues, it is customary to read the Tokhehah in an undertone, perhaps because its vision of disaster is so frightening—or perhaps in keeping with Leviticus’s commitment to the reality of words; to say something aloud is halfway to making it happen.

3. If you follow My laws

Some commentators have understood this as “the Laws that I Myself follow” [Lev. R. 35:3]. The verb translated “follow” literally means “walk, go,” prompting the comment that humans “walk” in God’s ways but angels “stand” in the presence of God. Human beings, unlike angels, have the ability to grow and change after doing something wrong. Jewish law is known as halakhah and is sometimes understood as “the way to go.” For Hoffman, these blessings emphasize the idea that God is not only a God of liberation and hope but also a God of peace and prosperity. Once settled in the Land, Israel will have no need to turn to pagan fertility gods to ensure an abundant harvest.

4. rains in their season

The plain meaning here refers to the rainy season in Israel. Rashi, however, following the Midrash [Lev. R. 35:10], takes it to mean that God will make it rain only at times convenient for the people, e.g., on Friday nights when most people are at home and no one is traveling.

What is the modern reader to make of these threats and promises, aware of the fact that righteous people are not always rewarded and that wicked people are not invariably punished? We can see them as a vision of what the world will be like when it truly becomes God’s kingdom. Or we can see them as a collective assurance: When most members of a community follow God’s ways, the community as a whole will prosper even if some innocent individuals suffer illness or injustice. Alternatively, we can understand these verses as addressed to a still immature Israelite nation, not mature enough to do good for its own sake, capable of responding only to promises of reward and threats of punishment. Although these passages may be the word of God, they need not be God’s last word on the subject.

5. When will the people be able to live securely? When there is enough food for every-
6 I will grant peace in the land, and you shall lie down untroubled by anyone; I will give the land respite from vicious beasts, and no sword shall cross your land. 7 You shall give chase to your enemies, and they shall fall before you by the sword. 8 Five of you shall give chase to a hundred, and a hundred of you shall give chase to ten thousand; your enemies shall fall before you by the sword.

9 I will look with favor upon you, and make you fertile and multiply you; and I will maintain My covenant with you. 10 You shall eat old grain long stored, and you shall have to clear out the old to make room for the new.

11 I will establish My abode in your midst, and I will not spurn you. 12 I will be ever present in your midst: I will be your God, and you shall be My people. 13 The Lord am your God who brought you out from the land of the Egyptians to be their slaves no more, who broke the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect.

14 But if you do not obey Me and do not ob-

9. When God turns toward His people, they are blessed with victory and prosperity; but when God turns away from them or turns against them, the result is disaster.

11. abode Hebrew: mishkan, which often refers to the tabernacle, here has the more general sense of “residence.”

12. I will be your God, and you shall be My people This statement, which here presents the terms of adoption, defines the covenantal relationship between God and Israel.

13. who broke the bars of your yoke The bars of the yoke were tied to the neck of a work animal by means of thongs. Persons who are subjugated, upon whom a yoke is placed, are bent over. After the bars of the yoke are broken, they can stand straight.

one, so that no one is driven to crime or violence for lack of food. Ultimately, then, the question of whether our society will be blessed with peace or cursed with violence depends on how we share our resources.

6. vicious beasts According to one homiletic interpretation, the reference is to humans acting viciously. Thus “peace in the land” would mean internal peace, between neighbors, and between factions.

9. Maimonides, recognizing that people who follow God’s ways are not always rewarded with peace and prosperity, compares this passage to a teacher who bribes children to do their lessons with gifts of nuts and candy. He adds, “This is deplorable but unavoidable because of people’s limited insight. A good person should not ask ‘If I perform these commandments, what reward will I get?’” [Mishnah Commentary, Intro. to Sanh. 10].

11. My abode in your midst Israel’s greatest blessing will be the sense that they are living in the presence of God.

14–45. The Sages called this section the Tokhehah [Reproach]. Based on the phrase “sevenfold for your sins” (v. 18), the Sifra sees
serve all these commandments, 15 if you reject My laws and spurn My rules, so that you do not observe all My commandments and you break My covenant, 16 I in turn will do this to you: I will wreak misery upon you—consumption and fever, which cause the eyes to pine and the body to languish; you shall sow your seed to no purpose, for your enemies shall eat it. 17 I will set My face against you: you shall be routed by your enemies, and your foes shall dominate you. You shall flee though none pursues.

18 And if, for all that, you do not obey Me, I will go on to discipline you sevenfold for your sins, 19 and I will break your proud glory. I will make your skies like iron and your earth like copper, 20 so that your strength shall be spent to no purpose. Your land shall not yield its produce, nor shall the trees of the land yield their fruit.

21 And if you remain hostile toward Me and refuse to obey Me, I will go on smiting you sevenfold.

THE EXCRECATION (vv. 14–45)

The execration, the curse brought on by disobedience, often employs the terms and idioms of the blessing to state the reverse, a literary technique that heightens the opposition of obedience and disobedience.

15. It is the people Israel who create the unfavorable situation, not God, who promised not to reject His people as long as they remain obedient.

16. which cause the eyes to pine Literally, “exhaust the eyes,” so that the eyes can no longer see. They will have been worn out by anxiety and despair.

17. I will set My face against you This is the reverse of verse 9 of the blessing.

18. discipline you sevenfold The notion of sevenfold is proverbial in biblical literature.

19. I will break your proud glory The land, which was the pride of the people, will be destroyed.

21–41. hostile Hebrew: keri, a word found nowhere else in the Bible, characterizing the Israelites’ attitude of disobedience. It has prompted several interpretations. Hoffman takes it to mean “at cross purposes,” doing the opposite of what God commands, in the way that adolescents will often do the opposite of what they are told, to proclaim their autonomy. Rashi and Ibn Ezra relate it to the word...
enfold for your sins. 22 I will loose wild beasts against you, and they shall bereave you of your children and wipe out your cattle. They shall decimate you, and your roads shall be deserted.

23 And if these things fail to discipline you for Me, and you remain hostile to Me, 24 I too will remain hostile to you: I in turn will smite you sevenfold for your sins. 25 I will bring a sword against you to wreak vengeance for the covenant; and if you withdraw into your cities, I will send pestilence among you, and you shall be delivered into enemy hands. 26 When I break your staff of bread, ten women shall bake your bread in a single oven; they shall dole out your bread by weight, and though you eat, you shall not be satisfied.

27 But if, despite this, you disobey Me and remain hostile to Me, 28 I will act against you in wrathful hostility; I, for My part, will discipline you sevenfold for your sins. 29 You shall eat the flesh of your sons and the flesh of your daughters. 30 I will destroy your cult places and cut down your incense stands, and I will heap your carcasses upon your lifeless fetishes.

I will spurn you. 31 I will lay your cities in ruin and make your sanctuaries desolate, and I will not savor your pleasing odors. 32 I will make the skies like iron. The rains will cease and the artesian springs of the earth will become dry.

22. I will loose wild beasts against you This is the reverse of verse 6 of the blessing.
25. It will not help you to seek refuge in cities, because pestilence will spread quickly through the crowded towns under siege.

I will make your skies like iron The rains will cease and the artesian springs of the earth will become dry.

30. The Israelite warriors and citizenry will be slain at the very altars where they worshiped foreign gods.

31. I will not savor your pleasing odors God will refuse to accept the sacrificial offerings of those who have angered Him by violating His commandments.

32. I will make the land desolate The He-
land desolate, so that your enemies who settle in it shall be appalled by it. 33 And you will scatter among the nations, and I will unsheathe the sword against you. Your land shall become a desolation and your cities a ruin.

34 Then shall the land make up for its sabbath years throughout the time that it is desolate and you are in the land of your enemies; then shall the land rest and make up for its sabbath years.

35 Throughout the time that it is desolate, it shall observe the rest that it did not observe in your sabbath years while you were dwelling upon it.

36 As for those of you who survive, I will cast a faintness into their hearts in the land of their enemies. The sound of a driven leaf shall put them to flight. Fleeing as though from the sword, they shall fall though none pursues. With no one pursuing, they shall stumble over one another as before the sword. You shall not be able to stand your ground before your enemies, but shall perish among the nations; and the land of your enemies shall consume you.

37 Those of you who survive shall be heart sick over their iniquity in the land of your enemies;

bake is emphatic: “I, Myself, will make the land desolate.”

your enemies ... shall be appalled They will interpret the desolation as punishment for a horrid offense the Israelites committed against their God.

36. The sound of a driven leaf A leaf “blown away” (niddaf) by the wind. The slightest sound will alarm the people, so great is their fear.

38. The exiled community, swallowed up by the land of exile, will become extinct.

39. heart sick The people will experience deep remorse.

ward for upholding the Covenant, the loss of the Land will be the ultimate punishment for neglecting the Covenant. As living in the presence of God as a distinctive people was the reward for following in God’s ways, so exile and living far from God’s sanctuary, becoming a number of unconnected individuals instead of a special people, will be the worst punishment imaginable.

Some medieval commentators, fastening on the principle that “even God’s curses contain within them the possibility of being turned into a blessing,” would interpret Israel’s being scattered among the nations as a good thing. When enemies attacked and destroyed one Jewish community, others would still flourish. Some universally minded 19th-century thinkers saw the Diaspora as part of God’s plan to have the people Israel bring its message to all humanity by being scattered to so many different countries.

Rashi took this verse as an implicit promise that, once the Land has been laid waste, it would not return to life for any of its gentle occupiers. It would wait for the Jewish people to return and reclaim it. Only then would it yield its blessings.

36. faintness into their hearts Not only will the Israelites be defeated in battle, they will not care enough about their people’s fate even to put up a fight on its behalf. They will have given up even before the battle is joined.
more, they shall be heartsick over the iniquities of their fathers; 40 and they shall confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers, in that they trespassed against Me, yea, were hostile to Me. 41 When I, in turn, have been hostile to them and have removed them into the land of their enemies, then at last shall their obdurate heart humble itself, and they shall atone for their iniquity. 42 Then will I remember My covenant with Jacob; I will remember also My covenant with Isaac, and also My covenant with Abraham; and I will remember the land.

43 For the land shall be forsaken of them, making up for its sabbath years by being desolate of them, while they atone for their iniquity; for the abundant reason that they rejected My rules and spurned My laws. 44 Yet, even then, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them or spurn them so as to destroy them, annulling My covenant with them: for I the Lord am their God. 45 I will remember in their favor the covenant with the ancients, whom I freed from the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations to be their God: I, the Lord.

46 These are the laws, rules, and instructions

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40. Although God proclaims the divine readiness to accept penitents and meet them more than halfway, the first turning must come from the errant people. God does not impose repentance (t'shuvah) on an unwilling people.
that the Lord established, through Moses on Mount Sinai, between Himself and the Israelite people.

27 The Lord spoke to Moses, saying:

2 Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: When anyone explicitly vows to the Lord the equivalent for a human being, 3 the following scale shall apply: If it is a male from twenty to sixty years of age, the equivalent is fifty shekels of silver by the sanctuary weight; 4 if it is a female, the equivalent is thirty shekels. 5 If the age is from five years to twenty years, the equivalent is twenty shekels for a male and ten shekels for a female. 6 If the age is from one month to five years, the equivalent for a male is five shekels of silver, and the equivalent for a female is three

FUNDING THE SANCTUARY (27:1–34)

Maintaining the sanctuary was costly. It was necessary to provide the materials used in public sacrifice and to support the clergy. The goal of the system of funding prescribed in this chapter was to secure silver for the sanctuary and its related needs. What was donated could be redeemed; it was the redemption payment, the silver, that was sought for the sanctuary in most cases.

VOTARY PLEDGES OF SILVER (vv. 1–8)
The custom of promising one’s value in silver to the sanctuary goes back to the actual dedication of oneself, or one’s child, to Temple service. Pledging the equivalent of one’s life, according to a scale established by the priesthood, served two ends: the spirit of the ancient tradition was satisfied and, in practical terms, the sanctuary received necessary funds.

3. On the shekel, see Comment to Gen. 23:9: its silver content is specified in verse 25.

The age factor reflects productive ability. At the age of one month, a child was considered viable and likely to survive the perils of infant mortality.

4. Gender differentiation may be linked to productivity, it being presumed that a male could earn more than a female. Note that women could participate freely in the votive system.

CHAPTER 27

Why is this chapter on pledging to the sanctuary appended to the end of Leviticus? Hoffman sees it as continuing the theme of raising ordinary objects to the status of holiness, a major theme of the entire book. One commentator sees this connection: Even after all the calamities predicted in Lev. 26 have befallen the Jewish people, they will still be dedicated to God and to God’s sanctuary. Jews will strive for a life of holiness, not because it brings them rewards and comfort but because it brings them into the presence of God.

3. How do we measure the value of a person? The world at large values rich people more than poor people, economically productive people more than less productive, fertile women more than childless women, clever and attractive people more than others. In God’s temple, however, people are evaluated “by the sanctuary weight” (b’shekel ha-kodesh). God views our worth differently than the world does.
shells of silver. 7 If the age is sixty years or over, the equivalent is fifteen shekels in the case of a male and ten shekels for a female. 8 But if one cannot afford the equivalent, he shall be presented before the priest, and the priest shall assess him; the priest shall assess him according to what the vower can afford.

9 If [the vow concerns] any animal that may be brought as an offering to the Lord, any such that may be given to the Lord shall be holy. 10 One may not exchange or substitute another for it, either good for bad, or bad for good; if one does substitute one animal for another, the thing vowed and its substitute shall both be holy. 11 If [the vow concerns] any impure animal that may not be brought as an offering to the Lord, the animal shall be presented before the priest, 12 and the priest shall assess it. Whether high or low, whatever assessment is set by the priest shall stand; 13 and if he wishes to redeem it, he must add one-fifth to its assessment.

14 If anyone consecrates his house to the Lord,
the priest shall assess it. Whether high or low, as the priest assesses it, so it shall stand; and if he who has consecrated his house wishes to redeem it, he must add one-fifth to the sum at which it was assessed, and it shall be his.

16. If anyone consecrates to the Lord any land that he holds, its assessment shall be in accordance with its seed requirement: fifty shekels of silver to a homer of barley seed. If he consecrates his land as of the jubilee year, its assessment stands. But if he consecrates his land after the jubilee, the priest shall compute the price according to the years that are left until the jubilee year, and its assessment shall be so reduced; and if he who consecrated the land wishes to redeem it, he must add one-fifth to the sum at which it was assessed, and it shall pass to him. But if he does not redeem the land, and the land is sold to another, it shall no longer be redeemable: when it is released in the jubilee, the land shall be holy to the Lord, as land proscribed; it becomes the priest’s holding.

21. If he consecrates to the Lord land that he purchased, which is not land of his holding, the priest shall compute for him the proportionate assessment up to the jubilee year, and he shall pay the assessment as of that day, a shameful tax upon his acquisition.

16. any land that he holds This chapter differentiates between land belonging to an original owner and acquired land that had been transferred to someone other than the original owner.

seed requirement The method of delineating plots of arable land by reference to the quantity of seed required in their planting was common to many ancient Near Eastern societies.

homer A dry measure of Egyptian origin, approximately 6 bushels (220 L).

17. At the jubilee, tenured land reverted to its original owners, as mandated in 25:10,13ff. All transfers of such property were, in fact, not final sales, but long-term leases that expired at the next jubilee.

20. The priesthood sold the land when it became apparent that its donor had no intention of redeeming it. Once this occurred, the donor forever lost the right of redemption.

21. If the donor fails to redeem the land before the next jubilee, the initial consecration is considered permanently binding, and the land remains the property of the sanctuary forever.

22. This reflects the provisions of 25:25ff. If a man is compelled to sell any part of his tenured land, it reverts to him at the next jubilee, even if he has been unable to redeem it in the interim. Anyone who purchased such land from him, therefore, was not a full owner. If he subsequently consecrated such acquired land, he had to be prepared to remit its value in silver to the sanctuary at the time of its consecration, plus the surcharge of 20 percent. Otherwise, his consecration could not be accepted because the field could not be collateral for his donation.
24. The consecration of the land by one who had purchased it from its original owner does not affect the primary rights of the original owner.

FIRSTLING (v. 26–27)
The firstborn males of humans and beasts are consecrated to God at the moment of birth. One may not consecrate them to the sanctuary, for one may consecrate only what one owns.

26. This refers to pure animals, suitable for sacrifice.

27. The firstlings of impure animals, unsuitable for sacrifice, may be redeemed on the usual basis. If they are not redeemed, the sanctuary may sell them for silver. No time limit is stipulated.

PROSCRIBED PROPERTY (v. 28–29)
28. Owns ... man A non-Israelite slave, considered to be the owner’s property.

29. Proscribed thing Hebrew: heirem; the related verb means “to set apart, denote, restrict.” In the Bible, it seems always to have a negative or prohibitive connotation; it describes what is to be avoided, destroyed, or forbidden. To designate something as heirem may mean either that it is to be destroyed completely or that it is reserved for purposes associated with the sanctuary.

29. This law reflects, in part, the provisions of Exod. 22:19, which ordain that anyone who worships another god shall be condemned to death, proscribed (see Exod. 20:3).

TITHES (v. 30–33)
This section speaks of two kinds of tithes: 1/10 of the yield of the land and 1/10 of the flocks and herds.

30. Israelites are required to set aside a tithe from the produce of the fields and to bring it each year to the central Temple. There, they are to consume it “in the presence of the Lord” as a sacred meal. Those distant from the Temple were to convert the ritual produce into silver and to use that silver to purchase offerings when they arrived at the Temple, with which they would then celebrate in God’s presence. This was in addition to the tithe given locally to the Levites.
33. The actual 10th animal is to be counted as the tithing, whatever its condition. It can be neither substituted nor redeemed.

POSTSCRIPT (v. 34)
Likewise, the opening verse of chapter 25 reads:

34. on Mount Sinai Not all the laws, however, were literally given to Moses at Sinai! The opening verse of Leviticus describes the laws that follow as having been given at the Tent of Meeting. Sinai is not a geographic location. It is a symbol of Israel’s awareness of having stood in the presence of God and having come to understand what God requires of them. Whenever a person hears the commanding voice of God and commits himself or herself to live by that voice, that person can be considered to be standing at Sinai. “The greatest single event in the history of God’s revelation took place at Sinai, but was not limited to it. God’s communication continued in the teaching of the Prophets and the biblical Sages, and in the activity of the Rabbis of the Talmud. It remains alive in the Codes and Responsa to the present day” [Emet Ve-Emunah].
HAFTARAH FOR B’HUKKOTAI

JEREMIAH 16:19–17:14

(When B’har and B’huukkotai are combined, recite this haftarah.)

This haftarah comprises a series of sayings by the prophet, spoken in Judea sometime in the late 7th to the early 6th century B.C.E. They include personal prayers of proclamation and petition, divine indictments and instructions, and impersonal maxims of a general and national character. The reality of divine punishment for false worship and for immorality and the overwhelming importance of proper trust in God constitute the general themes that bind the verses together. Sin occurs in the open and in the hiddenness of the human heart. Both are observed by God, and the offenders are brought to justice. One must, therefore, hope in the “Hope of Israel,” the only source and font of life. Jeremiah exemplifies true piety by his own personal assertions of theological trust and dependence.

This passage establishes a contrast between the faithfulness of the prophet and the sins of his contemporaries. Jeremiah’s trust is dramatized by his extraordinary prayers of reliance on God as his refuge and redeemer (16:19, 17:14). The sinners’ folly, by contrast, lies in their flagrant disregard of the divine way. They serve “no-gods,” hoping for fertility and success, not realizing that they rely on objects “futile and worthless” (vv. 19–20). They act with deception and stealth, hoping to increase unjust gain, not realizing that God who probes the heart undoes injustice and deceit. Thus will their projects be perverted: The verdant trees worshiped in their alien rites will be transformed into dry bushes of the wilderness. Abandoning the “Hope of Israel” (17:13), they reject the true source of living waters. Indeed, their blatant apostasy is marked on their cult objects, even as their rejection of true piety is written on the earth. There is no escape: God knows the inner heart and the outward acts of all.

Trust in God, unlike trust in idols, bestows on its bearers the blessings of heaven. In the language of natural growth and sustenance, the faithful are promised deep roots in flowing waters, bearing fruit despite external circumstances (17:7–8). This trust enables devoted individuals to overcome the destructive forces of the natural world. They withstand oppression by being rooted in divine reality. Accordingly, Jeremiah’s teaching is a counsel to choose the “the Fount of living waters” (v. 13) for the sake of such inner power. Hence God’s blessing is not external to this decision but at its very root. The wholly natural attitude that worships the forces of nature and the semblances of self-reliance is thus proclaimed a sham, a deceptive blindness to the divine source of life. Only through trust in God may this folly be transcended and one’s life transformed.

RELATION OF THE HAFTARAH TO THE PARASHAH

The parashah concludes the Book of Leviticus with a series of blessings and curses that may befall an individual, depending on obedience or disobedience to God and His covenant (Lev. 26:3, 14–15). These rewards and punishments are set forth in detail, and correspond to the central image of the haftarah: blessings for those who trust in God and curses for those who spurn His ways (Jer. 17:5–8). Read independently, Jeremiah’s exhortation of trust marks a spiritual or theological disposition and does not speak explicitly about covenantal observance as such. Nevertheless, in the wider context of the haftarah, which condemns false religious practice (17:1–4), Jeremiah’s words on trust serve as an exhortation to covenantal commitments. This is emphasized when the haftarah is read in conjunction with the parashah. Through this pairing, the prophet’s teaching serves to reinforce the concerns of Mo-
16 "O LORD, my strength and my stronghold,
My refuge in a day of trouble,
To You nations shall come
From the ends of the earth and say:
Our fathers inherited utter delusions,
Things that are futile and worthless.
Can a man make gods for himself?
No-gods are they!
Assuredly, I will teach them,
Once and for all I will teach them
My power and My might.
And they shall learn that My name is LORD.

The guilt of Judah is inscribed
With a stylus of iron,
Engraved with an adamant point
On the tablet of their hearts,
And on the horns of their altars,

Jeremiah 16:19. The underlying metaphor here is based on the fortresses that served as a fortified place of refuge (cf. Isa. 17:9). This accounts for the use of the term מְנַעִית (My refuge), presumably derived from the verb מָנוּס, "to run." It thus evokes a sense of sanctuary, insofar as just this verb is used in connection with the right of an accidental manslayer to flee to the protective custody of a city of refuge (Num. 35:6; Deut. 4:42).

20. No-gods are they The opprobrium “no-god” has polemical force (Deut. 32:17,21), and was often used rhetorically to signal Israel’s rejection of the covenant with God (Deut. 32:21; Hos. 1:9).

21. I will teach them Or “inform them” ( WIFI-im). A critique of the nations for idolatry is unusual in pre-exilic sources; Jeremiah is the first to enunciate this view (cf. Jer. 10:11, 50:35–39). By contrast, the Torah never condemns the nations for pagan worship but only for such perversions as child sacrifice (Deut. 12:29–31). Indeed, Deut. 4:19 even presents the worship of the sun, the moon, and the stars as the divine portion for all nations except Israel. However, the nations are always arraigned for immorality (cf. Amos 1).

Jeremiah 17:1. The guilt of Judah . . . on the horns of their altars Hebrew: battat Yhuda. Normally, the purging blood of the purification offering (battat) was put on the horns of the altar.
While their children remember
Their altars and sacred posts,
By verdant trees,
Upon lofty hills.

Because of the sin of your shrines
Throughout your borders,
I will make your rampart a heap in the field,
And all your treasures a spoil.

You will forfeit, by your own act,
The inheritance I have given you;
I will make you a slave to your enemies
In a land you have never known.

For you have kindled the flame of My wrath
Which shall burn for all time.

Thus said the Lord:
Cursed is he who trusts in man,
Who makes mere flesh his strength,
And turns his thoughts from the Lord.

He shall be like a bush in the desert,
Which does not sense the coming of good:
It is set in the scorched places of the wilderness,
In a barren land without inhabitant.

Blessed is he who trusts in the Lord,
Whose trust is the Lord alone.

He shall be like a tree planted by waters,
Sending forth its roots by a stream:
It does not sense the coming of heat,
Its leaves are ever fresh;
It has no care in a year of drought,
It does not cease to yield fruit.

This was done to purify the shrine (Lev. 8:15; cf. M Shev. 1:4–7). It was also performed in cases of accidental sin by the individual (Lev. 4:25,30). Jeremiah thus mocks Israel’s practices by punning. It is their guilt, he implies, that is on their altars and not the blood of the expunging sacrifice.

8. like a tree planted by waters  Jeremiah’s image of the regenerative bounty of one who trusts God echoes Ps. 1:3, where the beneficiary is the student of Torah. Jeremiah extends the metaphor with the words that the tree’s “leaves are ever fresh (ra-anan).” This provides a powerful counterpoint to the critique of the sinners who worship “by verdant (ra-anan) trees” (17:2).
9 Most devious is the heart;  
It is perverse—who can fathom it?  
10 The LORD probe the heart,  
Search the mind—  
To repay every man according to his ways,  
With the proper fruit of his deeds.

11 Like a partridge hatching what she did  
not lay,  
So is one who amasses wealth by unjust  
means;  
In the middle of his life it will leave him,  
And in the end he will be proved a fool.

12 O Throne of Glory exalted from of old,  
Our Sacred Shrine!  
13 O Hope of Israel! O LORD!  
All who forsake You shall be put to shame,  
Those in the land who turn from You  
Shall be doomed men,  
For they have forsaken the LORD,  
The Fount of living waters.

14 Heal me, O LORD, and let me be healed;  
Save me, and let me be saved;  
For You are my glory.

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10. fruit of his deeds  A play on words linking verses 9–10 to the imagery of verses 5–8.

12. O Throne of Glory  In modern times, the phrase has also been understood as an oath sworn “[By thee] the Throne” that “Israel’s hope is the LORD.”

13. O Hope of Israel! O LORD!  Jeremiah’s cry of pathos. God is not only the focus of trust but the source of hope and “Font of living waters (m’kor mayyim hayyim).” Calling God “Hope” (Mikveh) condenses both theological ideas, insofar as this noun is a pun on the pool for ritual immersion (mikveh). Thus it also conveys the notion of divine purification. Akiva taught this idea powerfully, interpreting the phrase as “The LORD is the mikveh (ritual pool) of Israel,” adding: “Just as the mikveh purifies the impure, so the Holy One purifies Israel” (M Yoma 8:9).

14. Heal me, O LORD  The haftarah closes with this request. In context, it initiates a separate prayer of the prophet that concludes, after the haftarah, with a wish for the destruction of his enemies (Jer. 17:18). The Sages thus truncated this prayer for the haftarah, leaving only this line. The result is a powerful appeal for divine aid that balances the opening line (16:19). Subsequent Jewish tradition incorporated this prayer into the 8th blessing of the weekday Amidah. In an adaptation appropriate for communal worship, the compilers changed the singular personal pronoun (“me,” in “Heal me” and “Save me”) to the collective plural (“us,” in “Heal us” and “Save us”).

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Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary  
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