

דבר אחר | A Different Perspective

How Many Harvests

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| Northern red oak tree: 200–400 years | Eastern diamondback rattlesnake: 22.8 years |
| Eastern box turtle: 138 years | Northern slimy salamander: 20.1 years |
| African elephant: 65 years | North American cicada: 17 years |
| Horse: 57 years | Cockroach: 1 year |
| Great white shark: 50 years | Span from planting to harvesting, winter wheat: 7–8 months |
| Trumpeter swam: 32.5 years | Roundworm: 2 months |
| Domestic dog: 24 years | |
| House sparrow: 23 years | |

—Data drawn largely from *AnAge: The Animal Ageing and Longevity Database*

In its radical reframing of our right to claim ownership of anything and anyone, Parashat Behar sets our mortality against God's eternity, and our contingent lease to the Land against God's permanent deed: "The Land must not be sold beyond reclaim, for the Land is Mine; you are but strangers resident with me" (Lev. 25:23).

I write these comments in New York, a city driven by the value of real estate, and so I read with special interest the Torah's establishment of crop years as the determiner of price when selling land: "The more [crop] years [before the jubilee], 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**" (Lev. 25:15–16). The Torah teaches that there is no inherent value to land. Its value is a function of its productive potential. Our opportunity to cultivate land and enjoy its fruit is limited by our situation in life and, ultimately, by our own mortality.

Because it is tied to the jubilee year, the biblical buyer's question *How many harvests to a plot of land?* is not only an economic query, but also an ethical and theological one. It is framed by our temporary claims relative to God's eternal one. Each of us is called to consider the years of harvest available to us. We must define the **harvests** of our lives broadly, to include our professional and economic productivity but also our ethical, familial, social, intellectual, and spiritual "produce." These are a function of our mortality, yes, but also of our attention to the scope of what we claim for ourselves and what we refrain from claiming.

To provide some perspective on how many **harvest years** each of us has available, I offer, above, the maximum known longevity of various species. May each of us plant, till, and reap well in the time we have available.

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פרשת בהר תשע"ו



Facing Our Past and Looking Toward the Future

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Recently, the US Treasury Department announced that Harriet Tubman will replace Andrew Jackson, seventh president of the United States, on the \$20 bill. Tubman was born as a slave around 1820, ran away in 1849, and returned south repeatedly to usher more than 300 slaves to freedom via the Underground Railroad. Her selection for the \$20 bill is exciting news, because Tubman will be the first African American and the first woman to appear on federal paper currency. Women and civil rights leaders will be added to the \$5 and \$10 bills in the coming years, as well. While these changes are long overdue, the question is whether this change is merely symbolic or a further step toward acknowledging our nation's ugly history of slavery.

Putting Tubman's picture on our federal currency is a symbol that has been interpreted in several ways. Some say it commodifies Tubman once again. Others say this is the best retribution—allowing her to reclaim the money that once bought and sold her and many other enslaved individuals. These interpretations come out of a contemporary context where money still buys freedom—the freedom to live in a safe neighborhood, eat healthy food, attend good schools, and access powerful jobs. Unfortunately, we cannot separate money from freedom. Tubman herself spent money to free others from slavery. And yet, abolitionism was the movement that showed us that people should not be commodities.

In the face of a vocal #blacklivesmatter movement on campus, universities around the country are making changes, too. Yale, Harvard, Georgetown, the University of Virginia, the College of William and Mary, and Clemson University, for example, are wrestling with their slaveholder legacies. Some are considering renaming colleges or buildings. Many are incorporating their troubled history into their curriculum. Georgetown is taking on the difficult task of tracking down

descendants of the slaves it sold in the 19th century. Through these actions, universities acknowledge their funding of the slave trade and their use of enslaved individuals to build campus structures. They understand that in order to deal with the persistent racism of today, they must come face to face with a troubled past.

But is acknowledgement enough? Can we change the symbols—names of buildings, faces on bills—and expect real change to follow?

Parashat Behar understands this intricate and unfortunate connection. In this short parashah, we hear instructions for the *shemittah*, the sabbatical year, a year of complete rest for the land every 7 years, and the *yovel*, the jubilee year, which is marked every 50 years. In addition to not sowing or reaping the land during these years, field owners must leave food for everyone to eat. Furthermore, during the jubilee year, families reclaim the land they had to sell out of economic necessity, and indentured servants are free to return to their families.

These regulations have multiple purposes: (1) They remind human beings that the land does not belong to them, but rather to God. (2) They prevent the creation of a society that has two polarized classes—the rich and the poor—by giving the poor their property back and releasing them from servitude. (3) They show the wealthy what it might be like to live like a poor person, unsure when their next meal will arrive.

The laws of the jubilee intend to reset society: the poor become rich and the enslaved are set free. Scholars disagree over whether the *yovel* was ever actually implemented, but let's think of it for a moment. What if we could press the reset button every 50 years? What if every half century, our class divisions were neutralized?

For starters, we wouldn't have had more than 200 years of slavery in the United States. And people wouldn't enter old age with crippling debt from health care or student loans. But we have to wonder whether the legacy of classism and racism could ever be erased.

Think about impoverished Israelites living in debt for two decades, selling their land and everything else they owned. For the 20 years in debt, those Israelites live on the margins of society, begging for help from others, vulnerable, stigmatized, and subject to judgment. The day of the jubilee arrives and, *voilà!*

they become powerful landowners once again. Does the stigma stay with them? Probably. Are they able to escape the periphery and move into the center so easily? Unlikely. Even if one's material situation changes, one's social status does not change overnight.

Putting Harriet Tubman on the \$20 bill and renaming campus buildings is one approach to dealing with this country's history of slavery and legacy of racism. Tubman is no longer being bought and sold with money, but she is now, at least figuratively, one of the powerful landowners as she is honored with her face on the currency. Putting her on the \$20 bill is a type of jubilee, a type of reset. But these things cannot reset the endemic racism and poverty still felt in many parts of this country.

Parashat Behar seems to understand this inherent tension: our reading deals both with the *yovel* and with instructions about holding non-Israelites as slaves. Fellow Israelites, we learn, should not be treated as slaves, for they are *God's* servants (Lev. 25:42); but Israelites may hold men and women from the surrounding nations as slaves. The parashah goes so far as to say:

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: 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. (Lev. 25:45–46).

Thus, along with a utopian vision of *yovel*, we see permission given to hold other human beings as our property.

This parashah teaches us that, unfortunately, we cannot erase the ugly parts of our history by removing names from buildings or replacing pictures on bills. We cannot erase centuries of injustice and inequality overnight. Instead, we must live in tension with that history as we strive for a more just future.

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