



# Yovel Sampler



This year marks the fiftieth year since 1967 and the Six-Day War, which gave Israel control of all of Jerusalem and of the West Bank and Gaza. Through the Yovel Project, Jewish communities are exploring the Jewish concept of *yovel*—the biblical cycle of fifty years meant to shape our relationship to the land and people around us—as a way to get unstuck, and perhaps to bring about a new and better reality for both Israelis and Palestinians. This project does not aim to offer an ancient prescription for contemporary political challenges. Rather, we ask, in dialogue with the vast textual richness of the rabbinic tradition, how entering *yovel*-consciousness might shape our understanding of our contemporary moment.

The full Yovel sourcebook offers eight multi-page text studies, focusing on seven themes of Yovel plus Jerusalem. This sampler offers the original biblical text that commands *yovel* plus one or two texts from each of the eight sections. After studying the sampler, we invite you to dive into the full text study on whichever topic(s) most intrigue you, or to use this mile-high view to consider how the themes touch and shape each other.

## Leviticus 25:8-24

(ח) וספרת לך שבע שבתות שנים שבע פעמים והי  
לך ומי שבע שבתות השנים תשע וארבעים שנה :

<sup>8</sup> You shall count off seven weeks of years — seven times seven years — so that the period of seven weeks of years gives you a total of forty-nine years.

(ט) והעברת שופר תרועה בחדש השביעי בעשור לחדש ביום  
הכפרים תעבירו שופר בכל ארצכם :

<sup>9</sup> Then you shall sound the **horn** loud; in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month — the Day of Atonement — you shall have the horn sounded throughout your land

(י) וקדשתם את שנת החמשים שנה וקראתם דרוז בארץ  
לכל ישיביה יובל הוא תהיה לכם ושבתם איש אל אחותו  
ואיש אל משפחתו תשבו : (יא) יובל הוא שנת החמשים שנה  
תהיה לכם לא תזרעו ולא תקצרו ולא תספיקה ולא תבצרו את  
נזריה : (יב) כי יובל הוא קדש תהיה לכם מן השדה תאכלו  
את תבואתה :

<sup>10</sup> and you shall **hallow** the fiftieth year. You 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. <sup>11</sup> That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you: you shall not sow, neither shall you reap the aftergrowth or harvest the untrimmed vines, <sup>12</sup> for it is a jubilee. It shall be holy to you: you may only eat the growth direct from the field.

(יג) בשנת היובל הזאת תשבו איש אל אחותו :

<sup>13</sup> In this year of jubilee, each of you shall **return** to his holding.

(יד) וכי תמכרו ממכר לעמיתך או קנה מיד עמיתך אל תונו  
איש את אחיו : (טו) במספר שנים אחר היובל תקנה מאת  
עמיתך במספר שני תבואת ימכר לך : (טז) לפי רב השנים  
תרבה מקנתו ולפי מעט השנים תמעט מקנתו כי מספר  
תבואת הוא מכר לך : (יז) ולא תונו איש את עמיתו ונראת  
מאלהיד כי אני ה' אלהיכם :

<sup>14</sup> When you sell property to your neighbor, or buy any from your neighbor, you shall not wrong one another. <sup>15</sup> In buying from your neighbor, you shall deduct only for the number of years since the jubilee; and in selling to you, he shall charge you only for the remaining crop years: <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> Do not wrong one another, but fear your God; for I the LORD am your God.

(יח) ועשיתם את חקתי ואת משפטי תשמרו ועשיתם אתם  
וישבתם על הארץ לטוב : (יט) ונתנה הארץ פריה ואכלתם  
לשבע וישבתם לטוב עליה : (כ) וכי תאמרו מה נאכל בשנה  
השביעית הן לא נזרע ולא נאסף את תבואתנו : (כא) וצויתי  
את ברכתי לכם בשנה הששית ועשית את התבואה לשלש  
השנים : (כב) וזרעתם את השנה השמינית ואכלתם מן  
התבואה וישן עד השנה התשיעית עד בוא תבואתה תאכלו  
ישן :

<sup>18</sup> You shall observe My laws and faithfully keep My rules, that you may live upon the land in security; <sup>19</sup> the land shall yield its fruit and you shall eat your fill, and you shall live upon it in **security**. <sup>20</sup> And should you ask, “What are we to eat in the seventh year, if we may neither sow nor gather in our crops?” <sup>21</sup> I will ordain My blessing for you in the sixth year, so that it shall yield a crop sufficient for three years. <sup>22</sup> 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.

(כג) והארץ לא תמכר לצמתת כי לי הארץ כי גרים ותושבים  
אתם עמדי : (כד) ובכל ארץ ארצותכם גאלה תתנו לארץ :

<sup>23</sup> But the land must not be sold beyond reclaim, for **the land is Mine**; you are but strangers resident with Me. <sup>24</sup> Throughout the land that you hold, you must provide for the redemption of the land.

## 1. Counting 50 Years: *Kli Yakar* on Leviticus 25:8

לכך נאמר וספרת לך וגו', אם תספור לך לטובתך ולהנאתך כדי להוציא  
כל ימך בדברים רוחנים אז והיו לך ימי שבע שבתות השנים רצה  
לומר יהיו לך לבדך ולא לזרים אתך. אבל אם תכלה בהבל מיך לאסוף  
ולכנוס אז לא לך יהיה הזרע, כי תעזוב לאחרים חיל וחומה אשר בנית  
ואשר נטעת,

So it says *you shall count* [literally, count for yourself] – if you count for yourself, for your own good and to benefit from it, so that your days are focused on spiritual matters, then you will have the days of *seven weeks of years* – that is, they will be fully yours, and not for another. But if you waste your days uselessly, hoarding and collecting things, then you will not be able to enjoy the fruits of your labors, the things that you have built and that you have planted.

כי על הרוב אין האדם יכול להחזיק בשלו כי אם מספר שנים אלו אבל  
שנת החמשים משנת עשרים שהוא שנת השבעים מיום הוולדו

For the most part, human beings can hold onto what is theirs for only a number of years – until the fiftieth year from the twentieth year, that is, seventy years after being born.

» Rabbi Shlomo says that the process of counting should have an impact not only on the end of our lives, but also on the value of our years along the way. How do you relate to his seemingly paradoxical explanation of how to benefit from our lives—to hold on by letting go, rather amassing things? And what does it mean for something to be fully ours, to have it, to hold onto it?

Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim ben Aaron Luntschitz (Prague, 1550-1619), often referred to by the title of his most famous work, the *Kli Yakar*, served as Chief Rabbi of Prague. The *Kli Yakar* is a homiletical commentary on the Torah.

## 2. Shofar: Babylonian Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 33b

שיעור תרועה כשלוש יבבות.  
אמר אביי: בהא ודאי פליגי, דכתיב + במדבר כט+ יום תרועה יהיה  
לכם, ומתרגמינן: יום יבא יהא לכוּן.  
וכתיב באימיה דסיסרא + שופטים ה+ בעד החלוּן נשקפה ותיבב אמ  
סיסרא. מר סבר: גנוחי גנח, ומר סבר: ילולי יליל.

The length of the *t'ruah* is equal to the length of three yevavot [sobs or wails].

Abaye said: Here there is really a difference of opinion – It is written [Numbers 29] “It shall be a day of *t'ruah* for you,” and we translate [in Aramaic], “it shall be a day of *yevava* [wailing] for you.”

It is written of the mother of Sisera [Judges 5], “Through the window she looked forth and wailed [*va-teyabev*].” One authority thought that this means drawing a long sigh [*ganah*], and the other that it means uttering short piercing cries [*yalil*].

- » In the Book of Judges, Sisera is a general in the Canaanite army killed by Yael, a Kenite woman who serves him milk to make him sleep and puts a tent peg through his head. Sisera's death and defeat in battle bring about forty years of peace in the land of Israel. This text is striking in its demand that we hear the grief even of our enemy. What are some of the ways the lesson of this midrash might guide us in thinking about Israelis and Palestinians, Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories?

**The Talmud** is a compilation of law, narrative, folk wisdom, and more. It consists of the *Mishnah*, probably compiled around 200 CE, and the *Gemara*, compiled around 500 CE or later.

The Talmud is divided into 63 tractates, each mostly focused on one subject (but often including much material on other subjects as well).

When we refer to “The Talmud,” we usually mean the Talmud Bavli (Babylonian Talmud), codified in Babylonia. There is also a second Talmud, known as Talmud Yerushalmi (Palestinian Talmud), codified in the Land of Israel somewhat earlier. The latter is less complete and has been less central to the development of law.

## 3. Make the Year Holy: Abravanel on Leviticus 25

ולפי שבמתן תורה צוה יתברך שיתקדשו כמו שאמר וקדשתם היום  
ומחר לכך אמר ביובל וקדשתם את שנת החמשים שנה קדש היא קדש  
תהיה לכם.

Just as at the giving of the Torah the Blessed One commanded that they sanctify themselves, as it says “Make yourselves holy today and tomorrow,” so too it says of *yovel*, “You shall sanctify the fiftieth year” – the year is holy; “it shall be holy to you” – the holiness will be yours.

- » What does it mean to “make yourselves holy” in preparation for a sacred experience? Abravanel seems to be reading the idea that the yovel “shall be holy to you” not just descriptively but prescriptively, as in the case of preparing for the giving of the Torah. What do you imagine might have been an appropriate way to personally take on and prepare for the holiness of the yovel year in ancient times?

**Rabbi Isaac Abravanel (Portugal 1437-1508)** was a biblical commentator and philosopher, who often addressed the everyday concerns of his Jewish community, living under persecution.

## 4. Proclaim *D'ror* (Liberation): Rabbi Ya'akov Yehoshua Falk, *P'nei Yehoshua*

וקראתם דרוּר בארץ לכל ישיבה  
לכל עבדיה לא נאמר אלא לכל יושביה, כי מדינה שאין בה חירות,  
ואפילו רק למקצת תושבים, כל התושבים הם משועבדים. מרגישים  
את החירות רק כשאין בכלל עבדות במדינה. העבדות נגע היא, שנגועים  
בה העבד והאדון גם יחד. ומעין זה אמרו חז"ל: כל הקונה עבד עברי  
כקונה אדון לעצמו (קדושין כ). ולכן וקראתם דרוּר לכל ישיבה, שעל-  
ידי שחרור העבדים כל תושבי המדינה יהיו בני חורין.

“You shall proclaim release (*dror*) throughout the land for all its inhabitants.” It does not say “for all its slaves”, but “for all its inhabitants”, for in a state where there is no freedom, even for a minority of its inhabitants, all its inhabitants are enslaved. We experience freedom only when there is no slavery at all in a state. Slavery is an affliction that damages slave and master as one. This comes from a saying of the sages: “Anyone who buys an Israelite slave has essentially bought a master for him/herself” [Talmud, *Kiddushin* 20]. Therefore it says “proclaim release for all its inhabitants”--by freeing the slaves, all the inhabitants of a state become free.

- » According to the *P'nei Yehoshua*, how does slavery affect all of the inhabitants of a place? How does release affect them all?
- » How would you apply this principle in our own time? How do we (as a society or as individuals) withhold freedom, and from whom? How does that affect not only those living with restricted freedoms, but also those whose freedoms are not officially restricted?

**Rabbi Ya'akov Yehoshua Falk (Germany, 1680-1756)** was a Talmud scholar. *P'nei Yehoshua* is a book of commentary on the Talmud.

## 5. Return: *Meshech Hochmah* on Leviticus 25:10

ושבתם איש אל אחוזתו ואיש אל משפחתו תשובו. פשטא דקרא דמורה לנו התועלות, כאשר ישובו איש אל אחוזתו, הרי הפיזור בין חיי המשפחה בא ממסבות הזמן אשר מרחק אחים - זה פונה לצפון וזה לדרום לבקש טרפו ומזונו. אמנם אם ישובו איש אל אחוזתו, ישובו בתי האבות לדור במקום הורישום אבותם, ויתלקטו אנשי המשפחה אשר מכרו אחוזותיהם ונתרחקו זה מזה.

“Each of you shall return to your holding and each of you shall return to your family.” The simple meaning of the verse teaches us the value of each person returning to their holding. With the passage of time and the scattering of families, there comes to be distance between siblings – this one turns north and that one south to seek their fortunes. But if each person returns to their holding, they will return to the house of their parents to dwell in the place they inherit from the parents, and the people of the family, who have sold their holdings and become distant from one another, will gather together.

- » What value do you imagine Rabbi Meir Simcha sees in bringing families back together? What does this part of the verse—“each of you shall return to your family”—capture that is different from returning to a particular family plot of land?

The *Meshech Hochmah* is a commentary on the Torah by Rabbi Meir Simcha Kalonymus of Dvinsk (Lithuania and Poland, 1843–1926), a prominent rabbinic leader in his time. It combines Jewish thought and law with commentary on the text.

## 6. *Betach*: Feeling Secure: *Chazon Ish*, Chapter 2

ואכן מדת הבטחון קנין הלב, ומטבע הבוטח באמת בהצנע לכת ולא ישמע מפיו כי הוא מן הבוטחים, וגם בלבו הוא נאנח על חסרון בטחונו ומיעוט שלימותו בזה, ורק למעשה תלזה עמו בטחון ועצמה בו ית', לא יחס אם רעהו פותח חנות, ישתדל עוד לעזור לרעהו, לתקנו בעצה טובה, לעשות עבורו, ולשקוד על תקנתו, וכמה מן הקדושה מוסיף בעולם לראות איש עושה חסד עם המתעתד להתחרות עמו, ומוסיף תהלה ליראיו ית', אשריו ואשרי דורו.

The quality of security is an acquisition of the heart, and the truly secure person by nature acts modestly. You would not hear such a person touting their own security, but rather even in their own heart they would be sighing about their lack of security and their imperfection in that quality. Only through their actions do you know their security and courage in the Blessed One. A shop owner would not be upset if another person opened a store, but would try hard to help them, to give them good advice, to do for them, and to watch over their work. It adds so much holiness to the world to see a person acting kindly towards a person who might compete with them, and adds praise to those who have awe for the Blessed One – that person and their generation are happy.

- » According to the *Chazon Ish*, how is true security measured?
- » Do you see the ideal envisioned by the *Chazon Ish* play out in the real world? How or how not?
- » How might the *Chazon Ish*'s ideal, if implemented, affect the feelings of Israelis and Palestinians toward one another?

The *Chazon Ish* is the major work of Rabbi Avrohom Yeshaya Karelitz (Belarus and Israel, 1878–1953), who became a leader of the Haredi community in Israel around the time of the founding of the state. The *Hazon Ish* is a commentary on parts of the *Shulchan Arukh*, a primary code of Jewish law.

## 7. The Land is God's: *Sifra Behar* 3:8

כי לי הארץ אל תרע עינך בה כי גרים ותושבים אתם, אל תעשו עצמיכם עיקר, וכן הוא אומר כי גרים אנחנו לפניך ותושבים ככל אבותינו, וכן דוד אומר כי גר אנכי עמך תושב ככל אבותיי, אתם עמדי, דיו לעבד שיהיה כרבו כשתבוא שלי הרי היא שלכם.

“For the land is Mine”: Do not take it badly [that I forbid you to sell the land in perpetuity], for “you are but strangers and residents with me”. Do not make yourselves foremost. As it is written [I Chronicles 29:15], “For we are strangers with You and residents, as all of our fathers.” And thus [King] David said [Psalm 39:13], “For I am a stranger with You, a sojourner, like all of my fathers.” “With me”: It suffices for a servant to emulate their master. When you are Mine, it [the land] will be yours.

- » What does it mean for the land to be ours if we belong to God? Do we belong to God? How or how not? What would it look like in practice for us to imagine God saying, “You are Mine?”

*Sifra* is a collection of *midrash* on the book of Leviticus, probably compiled around the third century. It is considered a work of legal (rather than narrative) *midrash* because it expands on and explains the laws of the book of Leviticus.



## 8. Jerusalem

While this series focuses primarily on yovel, our project would not be complete without engaging with Jerusalem itself. During the Six-Day War, the State of Israel captured Jerusalem's Old City – an area of about one square mile – and the villages surrounding it. Israeli leaders have since expanded Jerusalem's municipal boundaries to 70 square miles. The joy of the Jewish people at regaining access to the Western Wall and other sacred sites is paired with the struggles and complexities of governing a multicultural city considered holy by Muslims and Christians as well as by Jews; and of having sovereignty over Palestinians in East Jerusalem, most of whom are not citizens of Israel or any other country.

### a. Stones (Shirley Kaufman, 1996)

When you live in Jerusalem you begin  
to feel the weight of stones.  
You begin to know the word  
was made stone, not flesh.

They dwell among us. They crawl  
up the hillsides and lie down  
on each other to build a wall.  
They don't care about prayers,  
the small slips of paper  
we feed them between the cracks.

They stamp at the earth  
until the air runs out  
and nothing can grow.

They stare at the sun without blinking  
and when they've had enough,  
make holes in the sky  
so the rain will run down their faces.

They sprawl all over the town  
with their pitted bodies. They want  
to be water, but nobody  
strikes them anymore.

Sometimes at night I hear them  
licking the wind to drive it crazy.  
There's a huge rock lying on my chest  
and I can't get up.



Shirley Kaufman (1923-2016) was born to parents who had immigrated to the United States from Poland. She grew up in Seattle, graduated from UCLA in 1944, and moved to Israel in 1973. Her poetry explores themes of family and conflict, often with Biblical themes.

» What does Kaufman see or not see about the different facets of Jerusalem's reality? How do you think her identities—as a child of Polish immigrants, as an American, as an olah (one who immigrates to Israel), as a woman—shape her perspective?



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### b. Naming Jerusalem: Genesis Rabbah 56:10

אברהם קרא אותו יראה שנאמר (בראשית כב) ויקרא אברהם שם  
המקום ההוא ה' יראה, שם קרא אותו שלם שנאמר (בראשית יד)  
ומלכי צדק מלך שלם

אמר הקב"ה אם קורא אני אותו יראה כשם שקרא אותו אברהם,  
שם אדם צדיק מתרעם, ואם קורא אני אותו שלם אברהם אדם צדיק  
מתרעם, אלא הריני קורא אותו ירושלים כמו שקראו שניהם יראה שלם  
ירושלים

Avraham called it [Jerusalem] *Yireh* (he will see), as it says [Genesis 22:14] and *Abraham called that place Adonai Yireh*. Shem called it *Shalem* (whole), as it says [Genesis 14:18] and *Melchizedek, the king of Shalem...*

The Holy Blessed One said, "If I call it *Yireh*, like the name that Avraham called it, Shem, a righteous person, will be angered. And if I call it *Shalem*, Avraham, a righteous person, will be angered. Therefore I will call it *Yerushalem*, in accordance with both of their names, *Yireh Shalem – Yeru-shalem*."

- » What meaning does each of these two names – Yireh and Shalem – carry? Which speaks more to you? How would you interpret or explain the combination of the two words?
- » Do you think the modern city of Jerusalem reflects these names? Why or why not?

*Genesis Rabbah* is a collection of *midrashim*—rabbinic expansions on the biblical text. It consists of stories and interpretive material on the book of Genesis and was probably compiled in the Land of Israel in the fifth century.