

Rabbi Beth H Klafter  
Erev Rosh HaShana 5778  
September 20, 2017

### Fifth to Fiftieth: The Lessons of the Jubilee

I have always been drawn to the number FIVE. It probably started when I was a child, the youngest of three. There were five of us - sitting at the kitchen table. Five of us on a car-ride -- mom and dad in the front seat; I was always squished between my older sister and brother. There was just something that felt complete about five.

In elementary school, I loved the '5 times table.' Every number ended in a five or a zero - how easy could that be?

As an adult now, in our family, there are five kids, all in their 20's. That's a lot of kids, I know. Imagine those years when they were five kids in their teens (that was fun).

William Carlos Williams wrote a one sentence poem in 1921. Here is the beginning of it:

*Among the rain  
and lights  
I saw the **figure 5**  
in gold  
on a red  
firetruck  
through the dark city.*

20<sup>th</sup> century artist, Charles Demuth, inspired by these words, painted a piece called ""Figure 5 in Gold"" in 1928 which depicts the numeral 5, a copy of which hangs in our home.

And there was the 1970 film, ""Five Easy Pieces,"" of course.

The rabbi in me is also drawn to the number five – there are five books of the Torah. The Torah itself is compared to five things: water, wine, honey, milk and oil (Midrash Rabbah Deut 7:3). Five is a number of protection, as symbolized by the 5-fingered hand of the hamsa.

I do confess sometimes the number five isn't a warm reminder of my childhood; sometimes it isn't the number of sacred books of the Torah. Sometimes five is the daunting number of sermons delivered each high holiday season.

Why all this talk about five, as we begin the Hebrew year of **5778**? Am I three years late?

Though this is my 30<sup>th</sup> year as a rabbi, five - kept coming to my mind and then I realized that this is the fifth high holiday season that I have the privilege of serving as Senior Rabbi of TBD.

I can sum up the previous four high holiday seasons with this card –noting sermon topics and word counts. Yes, one of the important lessons this rabbi learned early on – word count might be just as significant as holiday sermon topics.

Milestones give us an opportunity to pause, to review, to transport ourselves back over the years. We note anniversaries and birthdays in many ways: with cake and presents and cards. At TBD we bless couples on their ‘milestone’ wedding anniversaries in the spring. Several years ago we marked the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the congregation. This year we will be celebrating Cantor Halpern’s 30th Anniversary here at TBD, and Dr. DeSesa’s 30th year as well.

The rabbis of the Talmud reckoned lives by 5’s and 10’s. In a section called, Pirke Avot, we are taught about the milestones in one’s life:

- at 5 years of age one is ready to study Torah, according to the rabbis.
- at 10, the legal work of the Mishnah;
- at 20, one should have a livelihood;
- at 30, power;
- at 40, understanding.
- And at the age of 50,  
one has enough intelligence and experience to give counsel to others.

Fifty gates of understanding were created in the world we are taught (Talmud RH 21b).

Fifty is the number of days between Passover and Shavuot. During these same fifty days our ancestors journeyed from Egypt to the revelation of Torah at Mount Sinai, from slavery to freedom. Fifty, then, is an important number in our tradition.

It turns out – that if you turn the pages – or rather the parchment – of that Torah scroll back some 5000 years, we discover another kind of milestone of 50. We are commanded to observe the Jubilee Year, every 50 years.

50 years - a Jubilee – the *YOVEL* in Hebrew, a biblical “Golden Anniversary.”

2017 marks 50 years since the 1967 Six-Day War in Israel; tomorrow I will share a few words about that anniversary. And next week I will speak about another 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

Tonight I turn to the meaning of the *Yovel* itself. Though the biblical *Yovel* is not currently observed its messages and lessons speak to me this season – perhaps another reason I was drawn to the number five.

The laws about the *Yovel*, are found in the 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of Leviticus:

*“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. Then you (singular) shall sound the shofar loud in the seventh month on the tenth day of the month- the Day of Atonement – you (plural) shall sound the shofar throughout your land and you shall*

*hallow the fiftieth year. You shall proclaim liberty throughout the land for all its inhabitants. It shall be a Jubilee (YOVEL) for you: each of you shall return to your holding and each of you shall return to your family."*

Some of the words may sound familiar, "*You shall proclaim liberty throughout the land for all its inhabitants.*" Inscribed on the Liberty Bell, these words are embedded into our nation's history and our nation's soul. What does this liberty actually look like? The Torah tells us that the 50<sup>th</sup> year of liberation, "*each of you shall return to your holding and each of you shall return to your family*" (Leviticus 25).

This means that if a clan had lost their land during the previous 49 years, the land would be returned to them in the 50<sup>th</sup>. It means that servants were free to leave their master's home no matter how long their service had already been. It's hard to even envision what that would look like: to liberate the land from possession and the people from servitude.

Safe to say that these specific biblical mandates presumably have no meaning in our lives today. We are not forfeiting this land on Hauppauge Road to return it to its previous owners; and we do not claim other human beings as our property.

However we still need to hear and to heed these words today: to proclaim liberty in our new year. And not just to declare it – but to take action to ensure liberty and rights across this United States of America.

The biblical author chose words carefully: *U'karatem D'ROR ba'aretz*: you shall proclaim "*d'ror*" in the land. There are several words for 'freedom' in the Hebrew language. The more common is "*chofesh*" meaning freedom in the most literal way.

But the verse says *d'ror* meaning release, liberation. Not just freedom. 12<sup>th</sup> century, R. Bedersi notes that *d'ror* is not just the removal of enslavement; it is a total salvation from servitude and from the authority of the master; when granted this type of release, he adds, one can truly live without fear.

The injunction is not just to free the slaves; the command applies to all.

How many live in fear today?

- Afraid to speak the truth
- Worried about using the bathroom of their choice
- Concerned about becoming ill without healthcare
- Scared to walk outside in the only neighborhood they have ever known

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai taught: People were on a ship. One of them took a drill and started drilling beneath his seat. The others said to him, "What are you doing?" He replied, "What do you care? I am not drilling under your seat, am I?" They said to him, "But still the water will rise and flood us all" (Vayikrah Rabbah 4.6). We are truly on this ship of life together.

The lessons of the *Yovel* in the public sphere are clear. On the High Holy Days we celebrate in community but our worship is also intensely personal.

The grammar of Leviticus speaks to this balance as well: the Hebrew command to observe the *Yovel* first addresses 'you' in the singular and then 'you' in the plural. From this we learn that this process of emancipation is both communal and personal.

This year especially, 2017, we are occupied with the liberation of the *Yovel* for others (as I believe we should be). For the new year of 5778. I also yearn for a different kind of *Yovel* of as well – a liberation and release of ourselves, for ourselves, from ourselves.

Throughout our Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur worship, we hear the words and melody; we sing along with the Cantor and quartet: *Zochrenu l'chaim..kot-vey-nu b'sefer ha-chaim.* We pray: "Remember us unto life.....inscribe us in the Book of Life." "Our days our scrolls, write in them what you wish to remember," Rabbi Ibn Pakuda cautions us. The imagery of God's Book of Life is powerful; it records each day, each minute in the lives of all people.

While God's Book of Life may hover above us at this season especially, our own Books hang around inside us all the time. We cling tenaciously to our own books..

There is a story told about 18<sup>th</sup> century Reb Zussysa, who was sitting and studying Talmud. His students looked over his shoulder and saw him studying a certain page. The next day, they saw their teacher studying the identical page. The following week they saw him on the same page still. This disturbed them greatly. 'Maybe our teacher is not as wise as we thought,' they wondered, 'why does he need to study the same portion for so many days?' Finally they questioned him, 'How come you are on the same page as yesterday, the same page as last week?' Reb Zussya replied, 'It feels so good here, why should I go elsewhere?'

We, too, tend to read certain pages of our own books again and again. It feels good here: it's familiar and seems uncomplicated. But what about when the familiar becomes complicated? When we get stuck on a page. Trapped in our own stories? This year the lessons of the *Yovel* give us the opportunity to read our own books – Consciously and attentively, critically and honestly, freeing ourselves from the narratives that may weigh us down like armor.

We tend to see ourselves in a certain way –

- I'm the 'class clown' and I don't get good grades.
- No matter what I do, I am the unlucky one.
- We all know someone who plays the role of the victim in relationships; they act as though they are never at fault; they take no responsibility for conflicts in their lives.
- I can't (fill in the blank) because I never do that.
- Or I have to (fill in the blank) because I am the only one around here who can

When I was the child in the back seat of the car or at the dinner table, I was usually the happy one, the easy one, the accommodating one. I was the rule-follower. It felt good to be on that page. Good and familiar. Until a day that I wasn't happy about something or wasn't agreeable about going somewhere. Or the day I broke a rule because that is what kids do sometimes. I realize now that I was seeking to turn to another page. I had a role that I couldn't always play – and didn't want to. Even a good page becomes onerous when we are stuck on it.

In a book called The Mind of the Mnemonist, Russian psychologist, Alexandr Luria, describes the life of a man who had an extraordinary memory. Show him a page of several hundred random numbers; he can remember them instantly. Read an entire opera libretto to him in Italian, and he instantly remembers the whole thing. Years later, he still remembered the numbers and the opera. At first this may sound like a fantastic skill.

- Imagine never losing your keys or eyeglasses.
- Never forgetting to mail a letter or return a phone call.
- Never needing to write down a shopping list.

Luria explained that this man actually led a disturbed and reclusive life. His mind was cluttered up with things he wished he could forget. This man and this book reminds us that, as vital as it is to remember, sometimes it is just as important to forget.

These holy days, and the liberation of the *Yovel*, the Jubilee, give us permission to let go of memories that hold us back from growing, that keep us stuck in our narratives. Rashi, the great medieval commentator, describes the sounding of the shofar, announcing the Jubilee, as a 'warning' for the Israelites from mindlessly continuing their behavior. Too often we may say to ourselves and our loved ones, "That's just the way I am."

Scientists have proven that our brains do not have to remain fixed in any one pattern of thought, no matter how old we are and how familiar it is. (See Bukovich and Bennet, McLean Hospital) These holy days tell us that spiritually we can change, as well. We don't have to remain locked in old behaviors, stuck on the old page.

The shofar is our 'wake-up' call.

"You shall proclaim d'ror, release, throughout the land for ALL of you," the Leviticus verse commands. "ALL of you" – means every inhabitant of the land. "ALL of you" – also means with every part of your being.

On this eve of Rosh HaShana, as we welcome the year 5778, may we celebrate the journeys of our lives and of our people be they for five years or thirty or fifty or 5000.

May the soul of our world, and the world of our souls know the blessing of d'ror true liberation, in the new year.

AMEN