

# The Year Of Jubilee

- Why does God divide up His time into cycles of seven?
- What benefits did Israel receive during God's bonus Year of Jubilee?
- How did God protect His people and His land, Israel?
- Why was the Year of Jubilee a time for rejoicing?
- What is the message God is conveying to His people through Jubilee?
- How can we have a perpetual Jubilee in our lives each day, just for the asking?

There are very few Christians or Jews who have not heard about "The Year of Jubilee." The word "jubilee" has become synonymous with something very good, something that is worth celebrating. In fact, modern dictionaries give as synonyms for jubilee: celebration, anniversary, season of rejoicing, festival. A 50th anniversary is called a Golden Jubilee.

Nevertheless, most people don't know exactly what the biblical "Year of Jubilee" is all about and what it means to you and me today. Part of the reason for a lack of understanding is that very little is mentioned in the Bible about the Year of Jubilee or its subsequent practice in the life of Israel. So, before we can determine if this biblical precept has any meaning for us today, let's look together at the great blessing God provided for His people and His land, Israel.



## God's Sabbatical - His Cycle of Sevens

The term, sabbatical, defined in the modern dictionary as "a year or half-year of absence for study, rest or travel, given every seven years to teachers in some colleges and universities" is an ancient concept that comes right out of the pages of the Bible.

God divides His time into cycles of seven days (one week) and seven years. From God's first rest on the seventh day of creation, to Jacob's working seven years for his wives, to Daniel's prophetic "weeks," we can see this theme of seven throughout the Bible. Every seven days is a Sabbath. The biblical holiday seven weeks and a day (50th day) after Passover is Shavuot or Pentecost. There are seven biblical feasts in the year (Lev. 23), and the seventh Hebrew month, Tishri, is a sacred month. Seven is the number of perfection and completion, a connotation derived from its use in Scripture.

*The Sabbath Day:* The seventh day of each week is the Sabbath which God set aside as a day of rest and communion with Him (Ex. 20:8-11). Actually, even before this precept was given in the Law of Moses, we read that back in the days of the Garden of Eden, "on the seventh day He [God] rested from all His work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it He rested from all the work of creating that He had done" (Gen. 2:2-3).

*The Sabbatical Year:* Next, we find God instituting the sabbatical year, which occurs every seventh year. More than just a year off for college professors, Leviticus 25:1-7 tells us that the seventh year was a special year for the people and land of Israel. Just as the people were to work six days and then rest on the Sabbath, so the land on which they lived was to be worked for six years (v. 3) and then allowed to rest on the seventh year.

In Hebrew, this sabbatical year is known as *shmitta*. During this year, there is no sowing of the fields, no pruning, reaping or harvesting. Any spontaneous yield of the land could be consumed for food by anyone (not just the landowner), but there was to be no organized harvest and no selling of the produce to others (vv. 6-7). Thus, the sabbatical year brought a cessation of all normal agricultural activity, and the landowner and the landless were on an equal footing in living off the land.

In the days of the Bible, as well as in Israel today, we see *shmitta* practiced by those who honor the Bible as the living Word of God. God promised that if they followed His decree on this matter, He would cause the land to yield a double portion in the sixth year to carry them over during the sabbatical year.

Let's think about this for a minute...God was literally shutting down all agricultural activity for an entire year. This meant Israel would have to live for that period without any visible means of support. They would have to put their lives completely in God's hands, trusting Him for all supplies.

Of course, this would require a lot of faith. Like us, I am sure the Israelites wondered, "What are we going to do for food this year? How will we feed our families and our children? What will the livestock eat? Am I supposed to just sit idly by and watch those around me go hungry?" Well, the answer lay in the fact that God did provide, and the people of Israel learned a very important lesson - God always provides for those who trust and obey Him.

During the *shmitta* year, there was another benefit which is not practiced today. This was the canceling of all debts and the freeing of slaves (Deut. 15:1-18). If a person fell into debt and was unable to complete loan payments within six years, their debts were to be released and forgiven during the seventh year. Certainly, the forgiveness of debt was not an excuse to default on one's loans, which is dishonorable. But if circumstances left you in difficulties that

you could not avoid, God gave you another chance.

Because the land lay fallow and there was no income, taxes were also exempted during this sabbatical year.

From both the Sabbath day and sabbatical year (*shmitta*) precept, we can see that God set aside one-seventh of all time, both in days and years, for rest and restoration for His people and His land.



*During both the Sabbatical and Jubilee years, this kind of agricultural activity was not permitted. There was no sowing of the fields, no pruning, reaping or harvesting. Everyone, landowner and poor beggar alike, was allowed to eat of the spontaneous increase of the fields.*

## The Year of Jubilee

Something special happened after Israel completed seven cycles of seven years (49 years). A special bonus year, the 50th year, was introduced by God - "The Year of Jubilee."

The Hebrew word translated jubilee is *yovel*, whose original meaning is "ram" or "ram's horn" and commemorates the shofar blown to announce the beginning of the Jubilee year. *Yovel* became associated with the Latin term, "jubilum" (from *jubilare* - to rejoice, to exalt) and so entered our Bible as jubilee. On all other years, the shofar is blown on the 1st of the Hebrew month of Tishri, Rosh HaShana - New Year's Day. But for the Jubilee year, the shofar was blown on the 10th of Tishri, which is Yom Kippur - The Day of Atonement (Lev. 25:9). We will see how significant this is, as we read on.

And what did the sounding of the shofar proclaim in this special year? The principal message of the Jubilee year is freedom and release, "*proclaiming liberty throughout the land*" (Lev. 25:10).

Josephus, a Jewish historian of the first century, stated that "Jubilee means freedom." The Hebrew word for liberty is *deror* which comes from a root word which means "to live" - not just exist, but to live a full and fulfilled life. To proclaim this "throughout the land" is only possible by canceling oppression and restoring the freedom and heritage of the people.

The three main purposes of the Jubilee year were: 1) the return of the land to its original owners, 2) rest for the land, and, 3) the freeing of all Hebrew slaves to return to their families and the family property. It was a

time set aside by God when justice would be restored. Those that had been depressed into poverty for any reason were commanded to return home to their family and repossess their inheritance. It was thus a year of new beginnings, an economic recovery for everyone in the land. Jubilee was a time in which God would set right what had gone wrong throughout the previous years.

There was also a spiritual significance to the Jubilee cancellation of debt and freeing of slaves at the sounding of the trumpet on the Day of Atonement. The Day of Atonement was the one day in the year when the High Priest entered the "Holy of Holies" to make the sacrificial atonement for the sins of the people. During the Year of Jubilee, those who had lost their physical liberty or property were to have them restored on the same day that God forgave the spiritual debts of His people and restored them to fellowship with Himself.

In the year of Jubilee, the sounding of the shofar must have been like sweet music in the ears of the hearers. What rejoicing must have taken place. At that moment when the high priest was making atonement and the shofar was sounded, every bondservant was set free. Every person who had lost property regained it. Families were reunited. Homes were restored. Yes, it was a time of liberty, freedom and deliverance - a celebration of celebrations!

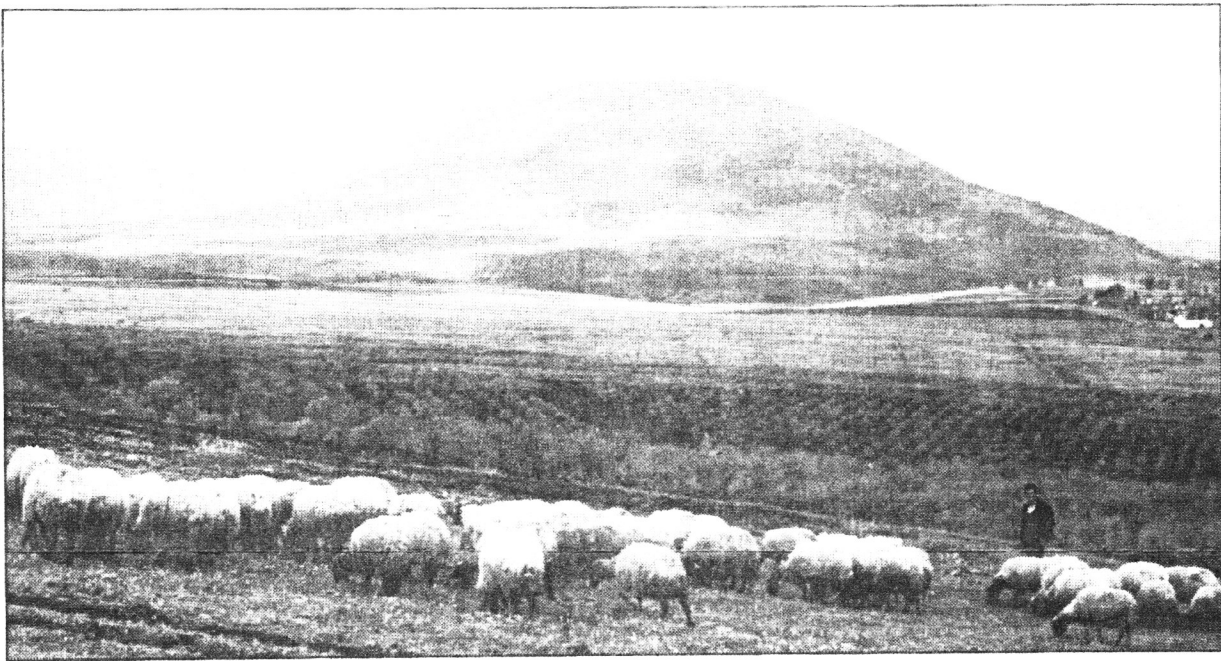
Jewish sources reflect that the Year of Jubilee was observed in the land of Israel during the First Temple period until exile from the land in 586 BC. Maimonides writes that though the Jubilee year was not observed during the Second Temple Period, they were nevertheless counted by the people so as to observe the sabbatical (*shmitta*) year.

That is also the situation today in Israel where the *shmitta* year is counted and observed, but not the Jubilee. This is because the date of the Year of Jubilee was lost since the Second Temple period, and there is much debate as to when it is. Meanwhile, this year is Israel's 50th anniversary since the founding of the modern state in 1948. While it is not a biblical Jubilee, it is certainly a chronological jubilee and a time of great celebration.

## "The Land Is Mine"

On every 50 year Jubilee, all property (except in walled cities) was returned to its original owners. The Land of Israel belongs to the Lord, and the Jubilee year was a reminder to everyone that He owned it. In Leviticus 25:23, God says, "*The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is Mine and you are but aliens and My tenants.*" God did not want anyone to amass a vast portion of land and think they were the masters of God's land. The law also adjusted the distribution of wealth in the various classes of the community, helping to equalize society as much as possible. The rich and the powerful in society tend to exploit the poor and the weak. So, the Year of Jubilee allowed the land allocated to each family to return to that family, no matter what their misfortune during the years prior to the Jubilee.

If the Jubilee provisions concerning land were respected, it was impossible to sell a piece of land permanently. The selling of land was not God's ideal. However, sometimes it was necessary. Since God expected that it would be returned in the Jubilee year, its price was to be calculated fairly for all con-



*Even the land rested under God's comprehensive justice system. During the year of Jubilee and on every seventh year, the land was not to be sown or reaped. God provided abundantly the year before these fallow years to supply His people through the rest period.*

cerned (Lev. 25:14-17). The valuation was based on the number of years since the last Jubilee year, and the number of harvests until the next Jubilee. What one was really selling was not the land, but the value of the number of crops until the next Jubilee. Thus, it was really a limited lease on the land paid in full, in advance. This way, when the land reverted to its original owner, it was a truly just deal for all parties.

## “Do Not Sow, And Do Not Reap”

During the Year of Jubilee, God told His people not to sow seed or reap, but let the land rest. As during the preceding sabbatical (*shmitta*) year, the land was to enjoy a second consecutive year of rest (Lev. 25:11-12). This was also a blessing of rest for one's animals.

Since the land would lie fallow for two years in a row, you might wonder how the people were to eat. God made a promise to the people that if they obeyed His law to the letter, He would provide a triple portion in the 48th year to carry them over the two years of fallow. He would also give them a life of safety, protecting them from war (Lev. 25:18-22).

This was not a time for planting or harvesting. God was making the provision. Instead, it was a time of rejoicing in the Lord. It was like having a year of Shabbats to bask in God's presence and blessing.

I am sure it was hard to trust God for two years in a row. Yet the Israelites would have remembered that there had been seven cycles of sabbatical years when God did provide. Now, Jubilee took a little more faith, and it was probably a bit frightening to believe that God would really come through. For those who trusted the Lord, the reward was sweet. But, they had to believe

God and act upon His Word to claim the blessings of Jubilee. There is a message in this for us - no matter what the circumstances look like in the natural, if we trust and obey the Lord and act upon His Word found in the Bible, He will provide for us and meet our needs.

Nevertheless, I am sure there were those who did not have the faith and trust for God's provision. They probably set about to sow and reap, and just do it themselves. Their harvests were probably diseased and bore little fruit and these farmers fell deeper into debt, having to borrow from their neighbors. Remember the Israelites who did not trust God to provide the manna each day? Just as God said, that which they hoarded, showing their lack of trust in God's ability to provide each new day, grew worms in the night.

When we trust in the Lord, He never fails us. We only have to trust and obey and He will deliver us and provide for us. He so much wanted His people to learn this lesson and receive the blessing of a righteous relationship with Him.

## “They Must Not Be Sold As Slaves”

Though slavery was permitted under the Mosaic Law with certain restrictions, even Gentile slaves were given some protection and rights not given to slaves elsewhere in the world. All slaves were given rest on the Sabbath (Ex. 20:10; Dt. 5:14), and God prohibited any mistreatment of slaves (Ex. 21:20-21; Dt. 23:15-16).

As God's servants, the Israelites were not to be enslaved to any other master. As with the land, God says of His covenant people, “*the Israelites belong to Me as servants*” (Lev. 25:55). Yet, many Israelites fell into debt - whether through mismanagement, disobedience, illness, laziness or some kind of disaster that prevented them from prospering. Since there were no provisions for bankruptcy, such a person would have no other recourse than to sell off his assets, his farm and ultimately sell his family and himself into slavery. How tragic for the family that found themselves in such circumstances. However, under biblical law, slavery for Israelites within Israel was not intended to be a permanent arrangement, although one could choose to remain in the household of his master.

Fortunately for the Hebrew slave, this arrangement was more humane than the 19th-century debtor's prisons. Hebrew slaves had broader rights than Gentile slaves. The power of a master over his Hebrew slave was much more restricted (Lev. 25:39-43). This is in keeping with the Hebrew slave's status as a servant of the Lord, first and foremost.

A Hebrew slave was to be treated as a hired worker rather than as a slave. Both he and his children who were born in the master's household were to be released in the Year of Jubilee. They were not to be sold as slaves to others. Hebrew slaves had the option of release during each sabbatical (*shmitta*) year, and received certain release during the Year of Jubilee. Gentile slaves were not accorded these rights, and thus were slaves for life and could even be willed as inherited property (Lev. 25:44-46).

Whether purchased by a fellow Israelite or a resident alien, a Hebrew slave could be redeemed by laws similar to the redemption of property, i.e., his redemption price was proportional, based on the number of years left until the

next Jubilee. Ideally, a relative would free him by paying off the debt which forced him into slavery in the first place, or if he prospered, he could pay for his own freedom.

If neither of these options were possible, then came the Year of Jubilee. When the shofar sounded that year, every debt was wiped out and all property and possessions reverted back to their original owners. This meant that the slave was freed, he received his land back and was reunited with his family. What a day to thank the Lord, for His mercies abound forever.

## He Is Our Jubilee

Hallelujah, the Year of Jubilee really was a time of rejoicing for God's release, freedom and liberty. It was God's purpose to give His people and His land, Israel, an opportunity to start over and have a second chance. How compassionate of God to do this. Many of us would certainly like to have a second chance to start over, even if it were only once every fifty years.

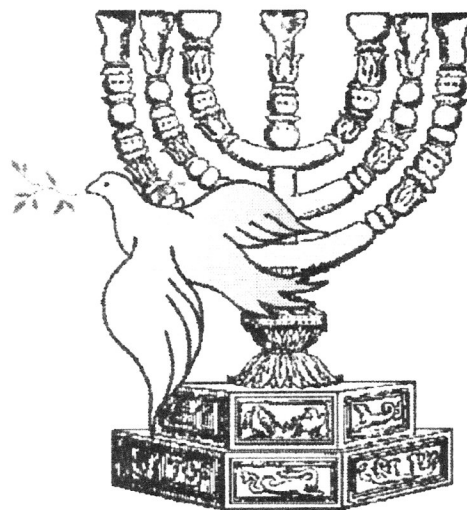
In spiritual terms, however, we don't have to wait for a Year of Jubilee to receive our release. We can have it today!

Because evil and sin plague each of our lives, we all need a second chance to right the wrongs of life - especially those we have perpetrated against God and others. Haven't you ever wished you could turn the clock back and relive parts of your life and do it differently, to do it God's way? Well, God is a God of second chances and has given us the provision for this. He redeems and releases us into a new life. The very moment we confess our inadequacy and express our need of Him, we are forgiven and, with His help, begin to see our past mistakes corrected. He is waiting for us to invite Him to come into our lives so He can give us the redemption and release we need, including the forgiveness we need in our heart towards others who have wronged us.

For us Christians, this redemption comes through Yeshua (Jesus) who came as the Messiah of Israel and shed His blood for our sins. Just as the Israelites received their Jubilee on the Day of Atonement when God forgave their sins and restored them to fellowship with Himself, we can receive our Jubilee of release from our shortcomings and sin by recognizing the atonement and forgiveness provided for us at the Cross. Just like the Israelite debtor whose debt was forgiven in the sabbatical year, God has made a way to pay the price for our spiritual debts that we cannot pay ourselves.

There is a connection between the message of Jubilee and the coming of the Messiah. Yeshua announced His Messiahship in Luke 4:14-22, when He opened the Torah scroll in the synagogue one Sabbath in Nazareth and read Isaiah 61:1-2, a well-understood messianic passage:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is on Me, because He has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and*



*There was a spiritual significance to the Jubilee cancellation of debt and the freeing of slaves when the trumpet was sounded on the Day of Atonement.*

*recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."* Yeshua then said, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

During Yeshua's ministry, He demonstrated the messianic attributes promised in this passage, which are the same characteristics of the Year of Jubilee, and more. He came to "*preach good news (the Gospel) to the poor — proclaim freedom for the prisoners - release to the oppressed (those who are downtrodden, bruised, crushed and broken down by calamity) - and the year of the Lord's favor.*"

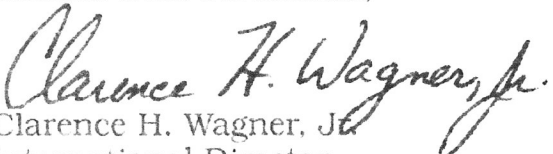
Yeshua understood this passage as referring to Himself, and He joined together the two concepts of the coming of Messiah and Jubilee. By proclaiming "the year of the Lord's favor," Yeshua was proclaiming the Jubilee - that is, the year which most pleases God because it is the year of release for all people. Yeshua understood that both had been fulfilled in His own coming.

Yeshua is our Jubilee. We don't have to wait 50 years to find our freedom, release, restoration, and redemption. The year of the Lord's favor is now, if we want to accept it. Through Messiah Yeshua, a perpetual Jubilee has been provided and this blessing can become a pattern of daily life and practice those who believe - not only receiving this Jubilee for ourselves, but by being a part of expressing God's Jubilee to others.

God has made the first move and provided the way. All we have to do is call upon Him through prayer, confess our sin and need of God's Jubilee (release) in our lives, and then accept His redemption and the benefits God releases in all areas of our life. We need to believe God and step out and claim it.

God's Jubilee can be ours - not in 50 years, but today!

Shalom from Jerusalem,

  
Clarence H. Wagner, Jr.  
International Director

P.S. This is Israel's chronological Jubilee, so let us pray for freedom and release, restoration and redemption for the people God calls, "My covenant people." and a land God calls, "My land." God has already blessed this land and people in many ways, as He is fulfilling His prophetic Word in our day. These are exciting times in which to live. While we are praying for ourselves, our family, our community and our nation, let us not forget to "*pray for the peace of Jerusalem,*" as well.

Many pastors, Bible teachers and even lay people have written and asked if they can use these notes for preaching and teaching. The answer is a resounding, YES! That is why I am sending out this Israel Teaching Letter. It is my hope that the information contained herein will be disseminated over and over again, whether through the spoken word or by photocopying and redistributing these teachings. "*For out of Zion shall go forth the law, the Word of the Lord from Jerusalem*" (Isa. 2:3).

THE MYSTERY

OF THE EIGHT

## OR NINE JUBILEES



"It is fundamentally certain that no one knows the date of the Messiah's arrival," the chief rabbi of the Western Wall, **Meir Getz**, told me. "God only showed us certain signs by which we can recognize when the Messiah is about to come. One of these is the return of the Jews to the Land of their forefathers, followed by a return to the faith of their fathers. If, however, the Jews do not turn to God, He will create situations that will give them no choice."

In this context, Jerusalem Torah scholar **Shabbtai Shiloh** believes that 1967 marked the end of Daniel's 2,300 "days," which began with the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD (Daniel 8:13-14). According to the annual **Accadian Cycle\*** in Babylon during Daniel's time, by 1967, the "night" had passed and the "morning" had begun (see verse 14).

We are now in the initial stage when the rays appear on the horizon, heralding the coming of the sun (the Messiah). Shiloh referred to the writings of two Jewish sages, **Yehuda ben Samuel** (known as **Yehuda the Hassid**) and the **Gaon of Vilna**.

Although these two men represented different streams of teaching, they agreed on matters concerning the coming of the Messiah. In his book *Sefer Hassidim*, Yehuda the Hassid

(1150-1217), the founder of Jewish mysticism in Germany, espoused the sanctification of both religious and everyday life. As a mystic, he saw no contradiction between the Bible and science. He made Biblical computations using *Gematria* (interpretation based on the numerical value of Hebrew letters), which he published in his work, *Sefer Gematriot*. He became so well known that even the **Bishop of Salzburg** and the **Duke of Regensburg** consulted him.

Yehuda interpreted the command to love God "with all your heart, soul and strength" (Deuteronomy 6:5) to include "the depths of the intellect." While he was a mystic, he was also a realist, which provided common ground with the anti-mystic, the Gaon of Vilna (1720-1797), a mathematician and the father of scientific Biblical research. The Gaon adopted some of Yehuda's ideas, including his calculation of **eight or nine jubilees** (50-year periods; see Leviticus 25:8-17), published after Yehuda was killed in the massacre of Jews that took place in 1348 and 1349.

The Gaon believed that the Ottoman conquest of Jerusalem was a significant historical milestone. According to his calculations, the eight or nine jubilees began with the Ottoman conquest in 1517. Jerusalem would be in the hands of the Ottomans for eight jubilees before being liberated from them. Afterward, Jerusalem would remain a "no-man's-land" for one more jubilee, coming into Jewish hands again at the

end of the ninth jubilee. This would begin the last days before the coming of the Messiah.

**Eight jubilees total 400 years: 1517 plus 400 is 1917. Amazingly, this was the year that Britain's General Allenby captured Jerusalem from the Ottomans. For the next 50 years, no one ruled the entire city, until the Israelis reunited it in 1967, exactly one jubilee later.**

Yehuda the Hassid formulated the theory of "eight or nine jubilees" around the year 1200, about 300 years before the Ottoman conquest, when the count of eight jubilees began. The Gaon of Vilna confirmed it about 200 years before the end of the ninth jubilee (1967). **So when the Israelis recaptured East Jerusalem in 1967, the last days before the coming of the Messiah began.**

## \* THE ACCADIAN YEARLY CYCLE

One Accadian year = 442 days  
(36.8 days per month).

70 AD to 1967 = 1,897 years

1,897 years x 442 Accadian days =  
**838,474 days, which divided by 2,300 years totals 364.55 days per year.**

Therefore, Daniel's calculation fits that of the Jewish sages featured in this article!

## RELATED LITERATURE

17 books and writings of Yehuda ben Samuel  
70 works of the Gaon of Vilna  
*Graetz Volume VI*  
*Dubnov Volume IV*  
*Encyclopedia Judaica Volume VII*  
*von Epstein, HaGoren, Volume IV*

— Ludwig Schneider —