



5780 Divrei Torah on Jerusalem by Rabbi Yosef Bronstein Parashat Vaera / פרשת וארא

The Freedom of Yerushalayim

In the beginning of the parsha, God declares to Moshe that He will redeem the Jewish people:¹ “And also, I heard the moans of the children of Israel, whom the Egyptians are holding in bondage (*ma’avidim otam*), and I remembered My covenant.” On a simple level, this refers to the Jewish people’s moaning from the horrible, backbreaking load of the work that they did for the Egyptians.

However, the Avnei Eizel (cited in Ma’ayanah Shel Torah) offers a deeper explanation. He suggests that the words “*ma’avidim otam*” refers not to the physical bondage of the Jewish people’s bodies but rather to the fact that “*otam*” (them), or their essential personhood were in bondage. As he puts it “The Egyptians were enslaving “*otam*” – [the Jewish people’s] soul and spirit.” It was to this form of existential and spiritual slavery that God responded by actualizing His promise to the forefathers.

This understanding of the verse is reminiscent of a celebrated passage from Rav Kook in his essay “On Freedom.”² There, he argues that the essential definition of a free man and a slave is not the legalistic question of being owned by another person, but rather a mindset and perspective on life. One can be a legally free-person but still be in bondage to the culture around them and the opinions of others and therefore not be free to follow one’s inner essence/soul. Alternatively, a person can be legally a slave but still spiritually and existentially free in the sense that their own self-worth is not bound up in the opinions of others but rather in the inner spiritual/moral compass of their own soul.

¹ Shemot 6:5. Translation from Chabad.org.

² Available in *Ma’amarei HaRe’iyah*.



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Elsewhere,³ Rav Kook argued that this form of spiritual/existential freedom to follow one's own soul is the essence of the mitzvah of Yoveil. Every fifty years the slaves go free and the fields of the Land of Israel return to their original ancestral owners. The Torah describes this process with the words "proclaim liberty throughout the Land." In other words, the fact that everyone goes back to their proper place – be it the slave to his family or a poor person to his fields – is symbolic of the inner freedom that we are to experience, with each person following the voice of their inner soul and finding their correct place without feeling bound to the oppressive gaze of others.

With this explanation in mind, it becomes clear why the onset of the Yoveil year is intertwined with the city of Yerushalayim. Yoveil is created through the Sanhedrin's counting of the years from one to fifty after which they verbally sanctify the year.⁴ This occurs in Yerushalayim. Similarly, the slaves go free on Yom Kippur of the Yoveil year when the Sanhedrin blows the shofar in Yerushalayim.⁵

Yoveil focuses on the quality of freedom. As defined by Rav Kook, this refers to the capacity of each person to access their own soul and follow its unique path to reveal its unique manifestation of divinity in this world. All Jewish souls are intricately bound with the city of Yerushalayim and it is through our connection to that city that our souls can be revealed and shine in this world. Therefore, the true liberty of Yoveil can only be initiated and experienced through a deep connection to Yerushalayim.

³ *Ein Ayah* to Shabbat 106b.

⁴ Rambam, hilchos Shemita VeYoveil 10:1.

⁵ *Ibid*, 10:14.