

DEBAR TORAH *by* RABBI ROHDE

Indebtedness, Servitude, Redemption: Freedom in the Balance Sheet

One way to characterize the overall theme of our double-section Torah reading from Leviticus Chapter 25 through 29 is to describe it as tackling the topic of indebtedness and its consequences. This is obvious in the first Parasha, in Chapter 25, most of which deals with laws geared to prevent Israelites' permanent indebtedness to their fellow men. Indebtedness through poverty was understood to lead to enslavement. Hence there were many safeguards put in so that citizens could avoid or get out of debt. Getting out of debt, like getting out of slavery, was called "redemption."

Agricultural land could not be sold permanently, but rather only leased for fixed periods until the Jubilee, after which the land was "redeemed," automatically going back to the original owners. Even before the Jubilee, the original owners had the right to "redeem the land by paying back the value of the remaining years of the lease. If an Israelite ended up selling himself into slavery out of his indebtedness, the "slavery" had a fixed seven-year term limit, and the Israelite had rights to redeem himself by paying up the value of the remaining years. There was a one-year buy-back period established for urban homes. In addition, there was a prohibition of lending upon interest to the poor Israelite.

The one debt which was safeguarded was the debt to God, which had primacy over all other debts. For the Israelites' servitude to God was responsible for giving them the freedom from servitude to Egypt and from other nations, and would eventually redeem them from the debts which would lead to any future enslavements. (cf. Lev. 25:55). The prohibition of labor during the Seventh and Jubilee years has much to do with preserving and "paying-off" the indebtedness to God, which in turn gives back to Israel the freedom from slave-like incessant labor and serves as a guarantee of enough bounty to keep them from impoverishment. Taxes owed to God, such as first-born animals and tithes (27:27 & 30), are debts which must be maintained.

Indebtedness stemming from dedications of persons and property to Divine Service pose a problem which require a delicate balancing: On the one hand, the law wishes to provide some degree of debt relief and freedom from slave-like servitude; on the other, the primacy of Israelite indebtedness and servitude to God must be recognized and perpetuated. Hence some "valuations" can and must be paid and grant redemption once they are paid, although the valuation must be fixed carefully, often with a penalty imposed and added. Other dedications, relinquishments, and renunciations are unalterable.

Even the beginning of Behukotai, which describes the rewards for following the Torah and the great punishments which await Israel when they fail to keep God's law, may be thought of in the context of these debts. Faithfulness to following the Law, our primary debt to God, will bring plenty in its wake, which will keep Israel out of debt and servitude to others. Sin can be thought of as a failure to pay our primary debt to God, and it can be thought of as tipping the balance sheet. God can and will demand payback, which will lead to a loss of prosperity, and this can lead to cycles of further indebtedness to others. If restitution of what is owed to God is not made over the longer term, this will lead to God's relinquishment of Israel to the natural consequence of their debt: servitude to others. However, their suffering will eventually expiate and "pay off" the consequences of their sin, and between what they pay and what God pays or concedes the full price to redeem them shall be paid off.

I have often remarked upon Leviticus' closing with the laws of valuation, tithing, and redemption/exchange of dedicated items rather than ending with the more dramatic "blessing and curses" part: After all the fire and brimstone, it seems like such a prosaic ending. But as I wrote above, these laws require keeping the most delicate balance between offering relief and redemption to preserve freedom and maintaining payments of the most important debts which we owe. True freedom lies in the balance sheet.



CONGREGATION SHEARITH ISRAEL
The Spanish & Portuguese Synagogue

Shabbat Behar-Behukothai

May 8-9, 2026 | 22 Iyar, 5786

Consecration Anniversary: 70th Street (1897)

SCHEDULE

Hertz: Parasha: 531 | Haftarah: 551

Kaplan: Parasha: 630 | Haftarah: 1178

Candle Lighting | 7:41 pm

Evening Services | 7:00 pm | Main Sanctuary

Zemirot | 8:15 am | Main Sanctuary

Shahrit | 9:00 am | Main Sanctuary

At the conclusion of the last word of the parasha, the congregation says:

יְהוָה יְהוָה חַזַק וְיִשְׂרָאֵל יִשְׂרָאֵל לְבַבְכֶם כָּל הַיּוֹמִים לֵה'

Be Strong and let us be Strengthened - Be strong, and let your heart take courage,

All ye that hope for the LORD.

Tot Shabbat & Youth 5+ | 10:00 am | Fidanque Youth Room

Jr. Congregation | 10:30 am | Little Synagogue

Kiddush | following services | Levy Auditorium | *Sponsored by the Class 2026 of Hausner and Wornick Jewish Day Schools | Supporter: The Shapiro Family: Connie, Gail & Phil, and Elana, in memory of Bob Shapiro*

Shabbat Afternoon Class | 6:55 pm | Rabbi Soloveichik

Teen Shiur | 6:55 pm | Baruch-Lev Kelman

Evening Services | 7:40 pm

Habdala | 8:41 pm

Yom Yerushalyim begins on Thursday night.

Weekday Service Times

Mornings:

Sunday: 8:05 am | Monday-Friday: 7:05 am

Evenings:

Sunday-Thursday (Minha & Arbit): 6:30 pm

COMING UP

Final Spring Sisterhood Meeting & Flower Arrangement

THIS Tues, May 12 | *Workshop by Rose Edinger*

Hear what we are planning for the Fall & Winter 2026-2027 and how you can get involved.

PLUS - just in time for Shabuot:

A flower demonstration by our own Rose Edinger, a floral designer and floral instructor.

This event is free, but registration is required at shearithisrael.org.

Shearith Israel is a proud partner

UWS Pre-Yom Yerushalayim BBQ

THIS Thursday, May 14 | Jewish Center | 5:30 pm | Adults: \$36, Kids: \$18

Register at jewishcenter.org

Knitting & Needlework

Alternate Thursdays | Next session: May 21 | 2:30-4:00 pm

Knitters, Crocheters, and Needle Crafters: bring your own supplies and projects to work with like-minded crafters in the comfort of our homes. Please contact Vivienne (vivienneroumani@gmail.com) or Aura (aurabijou@yahoo.com) if interested.

Graduation Shabbat: Kiddush & Scroll of Honor

Shabbat, June 13 | Following Morning Services

Submit graduate info and/or sponsor kiddush at shearithisrael.org/graduation5786.

SHABUOT AT SHEARITH ISRAEL

Learn more at shearithisrael.org/shabuot5786

- Rabbi Soloveichik's Shabuot Late Night Lecture
- Young Professionals Shabuot Dinner
- CSI Youth's Shabuot Ice Cream Bash
- Girls' and Young Women's Book of Ruth Reading

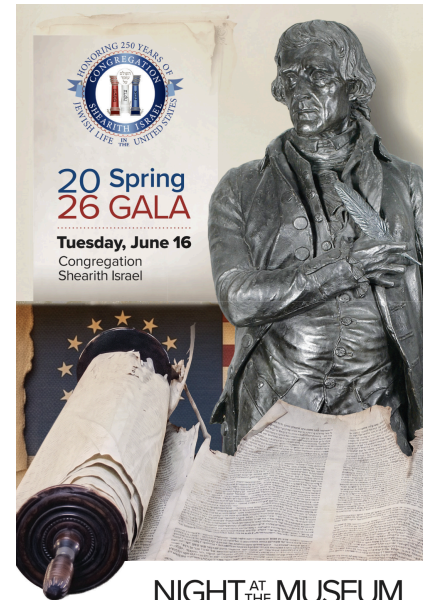
COMMUNITY ANNOUNCEMENTS

We welcome back members **Anne (Schulson) & Stephen Young** to our growing Shearith Israel family.

Mazal tob to **Leo Benton-Reich**, upon becoming a Bar Mitzvah at the Touro Synagogue in Newport this Shabbat. Congratulations as well to his parents, **Dr. Maya Benton & Daniel Reich**.

We welcome the 8th graders of the Gideon Hausner Jewish Day School from Palo Alto and Ronald Wornick Jewish Day School from Foster City who are visiting us this Shabbat morning. Instead of their planned Israel trip, they are "stuck" visiting NYC and Philadelphia.

Condolences to **Jonathan (& Michelle) Aufzien** on the passing of his mother, Norma Aufzien.



NIGHT AT THE MUSEUM

ANNOUNCING: 2026 Spring Gala: *Night at the Museum* Tuesday Evening, June 16

Start your evening with Rabbi Soloveichik **after closing hours** at The New York Historical's new Tang Wing for American Democracy, for an exclusive preview **before it opens to the public** of its forthcoming exhibit on the story of American liberty. Followed by a gala reception at Shearith Israel.

For details, tickets, and sponsorships, go to shearithisrael.org/gala2026.

COMING UP: SEMIQUINCENTENNIAL PROGRAMS

Jewish History Tour of Central Park

Presented by the Shearith Israel League | Sunday, May 17 | 5:00 pm

Register at shearithisrael.org.

Annual Chatham Square Memorial

Memorial Day, Monday, May 25 | 10:30 am | Chatham Square Cemetery

Special Guest Speaker: Joshua Obstfeld, FBI Counterintelligence

With remarks from: Mikhail G. Smits, Captain, US Army

Faith, Freedom, and the First Amendment:

A Symposium on Religious Liberty

Monday, June 8 | 11:00 am-12:30 pm | Touro Synagogue, Newport, RI

Emcee & Keynote Speaker: Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

Additional Confirmed Speakers: Rabbi Dr. Stuart Halpern & Dr. Tevi Troy

Registration & details at shearithisrael.org/faith-freedom-symposium.

KIDS KORNER

To win a raffle ticket at kiddush, find Dalya & Jake with the answer to this riddle:

*I shape the week from work to rest;
in fields I pause and give them rest.
Years I count till land's release—
Which number brings this sacred peace?*