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Channah *bas* Ya'akov *a"h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

***Shemittah* and *Yovel*: Schedule of the World's Existence**

PARSHAS BEHAR BECHUKOSAI 5777

As believing Jews, we know, of course, that there is a lot more to the world than just what meets the physical eye. As such, some of the basic tenets of our faith touch upon the notions of the arrival of the Messianic Era and the attainment of ultimate reward in Olam Haba (the World to Come). At the same time, our ability to know the particulars of such eventualities is extremely limited. In discussing the scope of our knowledge of Olam Haba's reward, the Gemara (*Berachos 34b*) applies the following verse: עֵין לֹא רָאָתָה אֱלֹקִים וּזְלָתָה יַעֲשֶׂה לְמַחְפָּה לּוֹ – “No eye aside from Yours has beheld what G-d shall do for those who rely on Him” (*Yeshayah 64:3*). Furthermore, there is a certain point beyond which we are not even authorized to contemplate, as the Mishnah in Chagigah (2:1) makes clear:

כָּל הַמְסַתֵּיפֵל בְּאַרְבָּעָה דְּבָרִים, רָאוּי לוֹ כְּאֵלוֹ לֹא בָּא לְעוֹלָם, מִה לְמַעְלָה, מִה לְמַטָּה, מִה לְפָנִים, וּמִה לְאַחֹר.

“For whoever ponders the following four items, it would have been preferable had he never entered the world: What is above, what is below, what is ‘within,’ and what is ‘behind.’” (The commentators understand this directive as placing limitations upon our sanction to contemplate such matters as the Afterlife.)

Nonetheless, Chazal have revealed certain aspects to us. In the grand scheme, of course, these constitute a miniscule fraction of the overall picture. With it all, however, the revelations are quite astounding and intriguing. And as we shall see, the institutions of *Shemittah* and *Yovel*, principal features of this week's *parshah*, play a most significant role in this regard.

The “6-7” Pattern

Focusing on the process of Creation, the Ramban (*Sha'ar Ha'gemul*) demonstrates how it actually reflects the entirety of the future existence of the world. כִּי שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים עָשָׂה ד' אֶת-הַשָּׁמַיִם – “For in six days did Hashem make the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day He ceased and rested” (*Shemos 31:17*). The Ramban explains that this arrangement parallels Hashem's overall plan for the course of the world, which likewise follows such a pattern: six units of activity, followed by one of total stoppage and rest. As Chazal state: שֵׁית אֲלֶפֶי שָׁנֵי הוּוּ עֲלֵמָּה וְחָד חָרוּב – “The world shall exist for 6,000 years and revert to destruction for another 1,000” (*Sanhedrin 97a*).

Now, it must be noted that this teaching of Chazal – while it may appear as a sobering prospect – is generally understood not as a reference to the total and final cessation of existence for all time, G-d forbid. As may be expected, there is intense discussion on the exact intent. The general consensus seems to be that it refers to some form of interim period, the result of which will be the renewal of Hashem's world to a much more exalted plateau and the commencement of the everlasting existence of spiritual bliss in Olam Haba. In reference to this 1,000-year period, for example, the Gemara itself states earlier (*Ibid. 92b*): אוֹתָן שָׁנִים שְׁעֵתֵי הַקְּדוּשָׁה בָּרוּךְ הוּא לְחַדֵּשׁ בָּהֶן אֶת עוֹלָמוֹ... צְדִיקִים מָה הֵן עוֹשִׂין, הַקְּדוּשָׁה בָּרוּךְ הוּא עוֹשֶׂה לָהֶם כְּנִפְתָּם – “In those years during which Hashem shall renew His world... what shall be with the righteous? Hashem shall provide them with wings like eagles, and they shall hover above the surface of the water” (*cf. Rashi, ibid.*).

Significance of “Fifty”

The Ramban notes further that Shemittah is patterned in a similar vein. Here again, the fields are worked for six years, followed by a one-year period of total cessation. This mitzvah, then, likewise reflects the schedule designated for the world of six (thousand) followed by one more (thousand) of total “rest.”

The question becomes, then, what Yovel represents. As delineated in the *parshah*, after seven cycles of seven Shemittahs, the following year – the fiftieth – is designated as the year of Yovel (“Jubilee”). This year likewise entails a cessation of work (and the freeing of bondsmen). If Shemittah, the seventh year, reflects the “*Chad Charuv*” – the 1,000-year period of desolation in the seventh millennium – to what does the fiftieth year of Yovel correspond?

In his *Sha’ar Ha’gemul*, the Ramban is quite cryptic on this score, referring merely to the “*Sod Ha’yovlos* – Secret of the Yovel.” However, the *Chazon Yo’el* (commentary to the *Sha’ar Ha’gemul*) points to the words of the Ramban in a number of other places where the matter is elucidated further (e.g., Ramban’s commentary to Shemos; Exposition to Koheles; et. al). And there, the Ramban provides a most remarkable explanation. A primary feature of Yovel, as mentioned, is the liberation of bondsmen. The Torah refers to their term of servitude in the following manner: “*Va’avado l’olam* – And he shall serve (his master) ‘forever’” (*Shemos 21:6*). Now, as stated, he does not actually serve his master for the entire duration of his life, but (at most) for a period of fifty years (attaining liberation during Yovel). The reason, explains the Ramban, that the Torah characterizes the fifty-year period in this fashion – “*l’olam*” – is because *it refers to the duration of the world’s existence*. In other words, the fiftieth year of Yovel corresponds to the 50,000 years during which the world will exist.

This assertion, it would seem, presents an obvious difficulty. How, indeed, could the Ramban imply that the world will only exist for 50,000 years; isn’t existence designated to endure forever? The Ramban himself concludes his *Sha’ar Ha’gemul* by stating: “Those who will be resurrected will endure forever and ever – from the days of the Resurrection of the Dead through to Olam Haba, which is a world of ceaseless existence...”! What, then, is this date of expiration of 50,000 years?

The *Chazon Yo’el* cites an explanation in the name of a contemporary sage. Of course, the Ramban does not mean, *chas v’Shalom*, that the world will “expire” at the end of this period of time. Rather, this date represents the time beyond which we are not authorized to contemplate. The Mishnah in Chagigah mentioned in the outset made reference to such limitations, discouraging the contemplation of, “What is above, what is below, what is ‘within,’ and what is ‘behind.’” The world shall surely endure forever, a sentiment echoed by Chazal and (as we have seen) mentioned explicitly by the Ramban himself. What lies beyond the 50,000-year mark is simply a matter beyond our comprehension and even sanction to fully ponder. We merely pray that Hashem include our portion with the righteous who will merit this eternal and limitless bliss.

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