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## Upcoming Events:

**May 30-June 20 Rabbi Dr. Yaakov Elman at the JCC in NYC on "Modern Orthodoxy—the Fourth Century Version"**  
7:00-8:15 pm

**May 30-June 13 Dr. Lawrence Schiffman at the JCC in NYC on "A Brief History of Heresy"**  
8:30-9:45 pm

**June 18 Edah mini-conference at the JCC**

## The Jubilee Year

### and The Exodus

By Rabbi Saul J. Berman

The opening passage in Parshat Behar is focused on two institutions; Shmita, the sabbatical year, and Yovel, the jubilee year. While it is true that both find their primary expression in relationship to the land, what is their relationship to each other?

In chapter 25 verse 10, the Torah seems to combine two disparate elements of the jubilee year in a single verse: "You shall hallow the fiftieth year: (1) you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land, unto all the inhabitants thereof," and (2) "each person shall return unto his possessions, and each person shall return unto his family." Those are two divergent and totally different elements of the institution of the jubilee year. One element relates to the liberation of slaves. To "declare liberty" means that all the Jewish slaves must go free within the jubilee year no matter how long he had previously been a slave. Even for a Jewish slave who had completed his seven years of service and then decided that he did not want to go free, for whom the Torah had allowed the continuation of his enslavement, when the jubilee year comes he must go free.

A second separate legal element is that in the jubilee year all agricultural land which had been part of the original distribution of the land to the Jewish people, is returned to the family of the person to whom the land was originally distributed. This element of the law was a critical assurance that impoverishment would not be generationally continued. By contrast, we see around us a different reality, in which any family that has been on welfare is likely to have it's grandchildren on welfare.

Why does the Torah combine the law of the freeing of slaves, and the return of land to its original family, in a single verse? What is the nature of the tie between these two elements?

The Talmud in Rosh Hashanah insists that the T'kiah, the blowing of the shofar, which declares the jubilee year, can only take place if the two elements above, the liberation of the slaves and the return of the land, are effectuated. If the people were to refuse to free the slaves, or if the people were to refuse to return the land, the sanctity of the jubilee year could not be declared. Why?

Actually, Shmita and Yovel are modeled on two separate historical experiences.

The sabbatical year is the culmination of one aspect of the experience of Shabbat, the affirmation of creation. The sabbatical year relates in its essence to the experience of God as creator of the universe. Therefore during that year, the Torah insists on suspension of human productivity, limitation on human consumption, and the restriction of human power over property. The sabbatical year is that moment in time when every Jew is called upon to recognize, that all human productivity is simply an echo of divine productivity, all human consumption no more than a gift of God, and all human power nothing more than God's empowerment of us to do his will to achieve his purposes in the world because, he is the creator of the world.

By contrast the jubilee year is not an echo of creation. The jubilee year is the periodic, national reenactment of the exodus. What does God say he is going to do when he informed Moshe that he will take the Jewish people out of Egypt? God says in chapter 6 verse 4 "I will now fulfill the covenant that I made with Abraham to give to them the land of Canaan." That is another part of the covenant, separate from the promise in verse 5, "to release them from their enslavement."

When that promise of release is completed, says God, then there will be another step necessary before my promise to Abraham will be completed. It continues in verse 8 "I will bring them to the land and I will implant them in the land which they will then inherit." Thereby, says God, I will have fulfilled my dual promise to Abraham, to free the people and to cause them to inherit the land.

The jubilee year is the culmination of all the years of celebration of exodus. The jubilee year is that moment in which we reenact not just the liberation of the people but the liberation plus the fulfillment of Gods additional promise of the distribution of the land to the people.

The jubilee year is not simply an extension of the sabbatical year; it is a totally different institution. The Sabbatical year is the introduction. The jubilee year is the culmination.

As in our weekly Shabbat creation and redemption are intermingled, one leading to the other; likewise Shmita and Yovel are parallel institutions which build on each other. Shmita builds on the recognition of God as creator. In the fullness of the awareness of God as creator, movement may take place to God as the liberator. God as liberator requires the reenactment both of individual liberation and of the total economic transformation of the society through the redistribution of the land.

*Rabbi Saul J. Berman is the Director of Edah.*

# Jew-ish or Jewish?

## Let's not Confuse the Two.

By Rabbi Eliyahu Stern

"Keeping up with the Steins," the new movie set to hit theaters shortly, is one of those cultural events that remind you just how different contemporary Judaism is from your grandparents' Judaism. The story revolves around a family preparing for the Bar Mitzvah of their son. A Bar Mitzvah in a wealthy and Jewish Los Angeles suburb is something that involves booking rock stars, luxury boat cruises, and million-dollar-a-night arenas.

The movie takes its inspiration from a recent spattering of some very high profile bar/bat mitzvah parties. For the last couple of years, we have increasingly read about and perhaps even attended these so-called religious coming of age events where the only thing religious about them is the amount of food conspicuously consumed.

Judaism is not prudish in its embrace of materiality. There is no mitzvah in being an ascetic. While the rabbis tell us "he who is wealthy is he who is satisfied with what he has," Protestant moderation is not seen as an ultimate value. I don't think that the Jewish tradition is opposed to nice Hanukkah gifts, being hospitable, and, yes, even dressed-up parties with good food and entertainment. But there is something about the image of the rapper 50 Cent and half-clad women on a yacht with 700 of your closest friends "dancing" around a 13-year-old that just...how do I say this.... doesn't sound Jewish.

The Stein's and the rest of the characters in this movie are easy targets for anyone who has a shred of moral and ethical decency. Do we really think one should be blowing millions of dollars on lavish affairs while children starve in African deserts? Do we really want gun-slinging rappers dancing the horah with our children at the Playboy mansion? Of course, not.

Along those lines, there have been those such as the Haredi community that have attempted to curb its appetites by demanding that people restrain themselves by limiting their spending on weddings and bar-mitzvah celebrations. In itself, not a bad idea.

So what does this movie have to teach us? And what does it tell us about who and what we as Jews have become?

What's new here are not Jews outdoing other Jews. Rather, it's that Americans want to be like Jews. The movie is not for Jews but about the image of Jews and about Americans wanting to mimic Jews. Judaism has become an icon of a religious and ethnic minority moving into the mainstream and into wealth. "Keeping up with the Stein's" is the economic and social equivalent to Madonna's and every other pop star's interest in "Kabbalah" and the black super model Naomi Campbell's belief that "anti-Semitism is anti me." It is cool to identify with Judaism.

Yuri Slezkine, the academic historian from Berkeley, in his much-acclaimed work, *The Jewish Century*, suggests that "The modern age is the Jewish age, and the 20th century, in particular, is the Jewish century." According to Slezkine, in the twentieth century the world adopted patterns of behavior and modes of thinking traditionally associated with Jews such as social mobility, capitalistic instincts, and intellectual achievement.

The Jewish century paved the way for what he terms "Tevye's children" to grow up and become "Steins" –a successful "Jew-ish" family that America as a whole can identify with or at the very least wishes to identify with. Instead of being Jews, the Steins, like so many other Americans, want to be Jew-ish.

How come and why have Jews like the Stein's merely become Jew-ish is a question whose answer is actually simpler than what any demographer or social scientist will admit. Crudely put, being Jew-ish is more "fun" than being a Jew. As the bar mitzvah boy's father Adam Fiedler (played by Jeremy Piven) says "it's not about what happens in Temple it's about what happens at the party." Jews are not interested in Judaism.

The movie resonates because people are all too aware of the real-life prototypes for its characters and situations. The paradigm for American wealth is no longer an old stuffy, reserved Protestant man. It's the latte-sipping, iPod-buying, Hummer-driving, sweat suit-wearing, hedge-fund-managing Jew-ish type. What is Jewish here are certain cultural and economic attributes that Slezkine and others have shown are traditionally associated with Jews.

However, the fact that Jews now compete with other Jews for wealth and social status is more chance than anything else. They do so not because of any inner ethnic ties but because this is who moved up the corporate, social, and intellectual ladder with them.

American Jews have gotten to the point where it's the most un-coincidental coincidence that many of their well-to-do neighbors are also Jews. While such characteristics may have held Jewry together in the twentieth-century, I doubt it will provide the glue to hold it together in the twenty-first.

The tragic part about this movie is not that America has become Jew-ish –as the saying goes "keyn yirbu" (let them increase); but that Jews have forgotten their Judaism. Being economically and socially mobile, putting a premium on education and even providing a loving home for children might make Jews the best Americans, but it will not help ensure a future for Judaism. Jewish sentimentality and ethnicity will never take the place of Jewish content. No matter how much everyone loves a party, in the long term what matters most is what happens in the synagogue.

*Rabbi Eliyahu Stern is scholar-in-residence at Manhattan's Park East Synagogue and writes for beliefnet.com.*