Eight Themes of Yovel

The 50th anniversary of the Six Day War means different things to different people. The Yovel Project uses the biblical concept of the Jubilee Year (yovel) to frame a broad conversation, hoping to transcend particular policies and positions to get at underlying values, fears, and aspirations. This study page, meant as a springboard for conversation, gives a glimpse of the eight themes that emerge from Yovel, with a snippet of Jewish text on each. Page numbers refer to the full Yovel sourcebook, which is available online. As you discuss, consider these overarching questions:

What inspiration might you draw from each of these themes as you respond to this fiftieth year? Might any of them shift your existing thinking?

### 50 YEARS
For the most part, human beings can hold onto what is theirs for only a number of years – until the fiftieth year from the twentieth year, that is, seventy years after being born.

*(Kli Yakar on Lev. 25:8, p. 16)*

### SACRED YEAR
“You shall sanctify the fiftieth year”— the year is holy; “it shall be holy to you”— the holiness will be yours.

*(Abravanel on Lev. 25, p. 41)*

### SHOFAR
“Sound the horn loud”— for the joy of freeing the slaves and returning of fields to their owners.

*(Sforno on Leviticus 25:9, p. 24)*

### D’ROR/LIBERATION
It does not say “for all its slaves”, but “for all its inhabitants”, for in a state where there is no freedom, even for a minority of its inhabitants, all its inhabitants are enslaved.

*(P’nei Yehoshua, p. 50)*

### BETACH/SECURITY
This will awaken in the wealthy person’s heart feelings of compassion for the poor every single day – joining in their sorrow and their struggle and understanding their despair. And because of this – “I will ordain My blessing.”

*(Avraham Saba, Tzror Hamor, p. 83)*

### JERUSALEM
When you live in Jerusalem you begin to feel the weight of stones.

… They dwell among us. They crawl up the hillsides and lie down on each other to build a wall.

… They want to be water, but nobody strikes them anymore.

*(Shirley Kaufman, p. 104)*

### “FOR THE LAND IS MINE”
Do not take it badly [that I forbid you to sell the land in perpetuity], for “you are but strangers and residents with me”. Do not make yourselves foremost.

*(Sifra Behar 3:8, p. 87)*

### RETURNING
…”Proclaim release throughout the land to all its inhabitants”— that is, that everyone will be free to live wherever they would like. And it says there, “it is yovel”, that every person will be led [yuval, from the same Hebrew root] to their holding and to their family, and their legs will lead them (yoviluhu) from afar to live… and it will be this way for all of you, that you will come and return, each person to their holding and each person to their family.

*(Ramban on Lev. 25:10, p. 62)*
Our Teachers

- **Kli Yakar** is the Torah commentary of Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim ben Aaron Luntschitz (Poland and Hungary, 1550–1619).
- Rabbi Isaac ben Judah **Abravanel** (also spelled Abarbanel) was a Portuguese statesman and Bible commentator (1437–1508).
- Rabbi Ovadia ben Jacob **Sforno** was an Italian rabbi and physician (1475–1550).
- **P'nei Yehoshua** is a commentary on the Talmud written by Rabbi Yaakov Yehoshua Falk (Germany, 1680–1756).
- **Ramban**, also called Nachmanides, was a rabbi, mystic, and physician (Catalonia and Israel, 1194–1270).
- The **Sifra** is a collection of legal midrash on the book of Leviticus, probably compiled around the 3rd century.
- Shirley Kaufman was a Jewish poet born in the US in 1923 to parents who had immigrated from Poland. She made aliyah in 1978 and lived in Israel until her death in 2016.
- **Avraham Saba** was a rabbi and kabbalist (Spain, Portugal, Morocco, 1440–1508).

What other teachers—be they people (living or dead), books, experiences, etc.—shape your personal understanding of Israel and of this 50th anniversary?

About the Biblical Yovel

Every seven years, the Torah commands a *shmita* (sabbatical) year, when agricultural work was forbidden and debts were forgiven. After seven cycles of seven, the 50th year was observed as a jubilee (*yovel*). On Yom Kippur, the shofar was blown to announce the year; on top of the standard *shmita* prohibitions, slaves were freed and all land was returned to its original owners. From a historical perspective, it is unlikely that the *yovel* was ever practiced, but that didn't stop successive generations of scholars and commentators from analyzing its laws.

The biblical Yovel does not touch on Jerusalem specifically, but given this particular 50th anniversary, it seemed impossible to delve into the sources without also examining what our tradition teaches about this sacred, complicated city.