

The Mystery of the Shemītah Revealed

It is well known that, for the nation of Israel, every seventh day was called “the Sabbath.” The Sabbath was unique among days. The Israelites were commanded to keep it separate and distinct from the other six days of the week. It was holy. It was the Lord’s Day. On the Sabbath all regular work and all worldly endeavors were to cease. The Sabbath was the day of rest, to be devoted solely to the Lord.

But what is not well known is that the Sabbath was not only a day but also a year. As every seventh day was the Sabbath day, so every seventh year was the Sabbath year.

The Sabbath year was likewise to be kept separate and distinct from the six years that preceded it. It was to be a holy year, a year specially devoted to the Lord. During the Sabbath year there was to be no working of the land. All sowing and reaping, all plowing and planting, all gathering and harvesting had to cease by the end of the sixth year.

During the Sabbath year it was not only for the people to rest, but also the land. The fields would lie fallow, the vineyards untended, and the groves unkept. The land itself would observe its own Sabbath to the Lord.

During the Sabbath year the people of Israel were to leave their fields, vineyards, and groves open for the poor. For the duration of the year the land belonged, in effect, to everyone. And whatever grew of its own accord was called *hefker*, meaning, “without an owner.” So during the Sabbath year the land, in effect, belonged to everyone and no one at the same time.

Just as striking as what happened to the land during the Sabbath year was what happened to the people on the last day

of that year:

“At the end of every seven years” refers to the last day of the Sabbath year. Elul was the last month of the Hebrew civil year, and the twenty-ninth day was the last day of Elul. So on Elul 29,

the very last day of the Sabbath year, a sweeping transformation took place in the nation’s financial realm. Everyone who owed a debt was released. And every creditor had to release the debt owed. So on Elul 29 all credit was erased and all debt was wiped away. The nation’s financial accounts were, in effect, wiped clean. It was Israel’s day of financial nullification and remission.

In the Hebrew reckoning of time, each day begins not with the morning but with the night. This goes back to Genesis 1, when the account of Creation records that there was first darkness, night, and then the day. So every Hebrew day begins with the night before the day. And since night begins with sunset, every Hebrew day begins at sunset. Therefore the moment that all debts had to be reckoned as wiped away was the sunset of Elul 29.

In English, the Elul 29 command ordains that every creditor shall “grant a release.” But the original Hebrew commands every creditor to make a “shemitah.” In those first two verses of Deuteronomy 15 the word shemitah appears no fewer than four times. At the end of the second verse it is written, “Because it is called the Lord’s release.” In Hebrew it is called the Lord’s “Shemitah.”

The word shemitah is most often translated as “the release” or “the remission.” The English word remission is defined as “the cancellation or reduction of a debt or penalty.” The Shemitah of ancient Israel refers not only to the releasing of the land but also to the nullification of debt and credit ordained by God and performed on a massive nationwide scale.

Shemithah became the name of the last day of the Sabbath year, Elul 29, the Day of Remission. But it also became the name of the Sabbath year in its entirety. The seventh year would become known as the Year of the Shemithah, or simply, the Shemithah. The Year of the Shemithah would begin with the releasing of the land and end with the Day of Remission, when the people would themselves be released.

So the word shemithah covers both the seventh year and the last day of that year. There's a reason for that. That last day of Elul 29 is the year's crescendo, its peak and culmination—the remission of the Year of Remission. In a sense, everything about the Shemithah year builds up to that final day, when everything is released, remitted, and wiped away in one day—or, more specifically—to the eve of that day, to the final sunset.

This excerpt from The Mystery of the Shemithah by Jonathan Cahn was provided with permission by Frontline/Charisma House.

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