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The Year of Release

15: 1-11

The year of release DIG: By this principle of releasing all debts, what attitude, behavior, and theology is Moses trying to teach Isra'el? How is each of these three related? Why should Isra'el be so generous? How did the Year of Release and the Year of Jubilee balance the economic scales of the nation? What Promises are given for a generous heart?

REFLECT: What attitudes and behaviors can (and will) you adopt from these verses? What promises in Scripture and role models in your community do you have for becoming more generous? What can you adopt from their example? What causes a "tight fist?" In what ways would you like to become more "open handed?" How will you begin this week?

At the end of every seven years, ADONAI required His covenantal people to grant a release, and cancel any loan they have made to a fellow Israelite.

It is one of the features of the Torah in **Deuteronomy**, although it may be seen elsewhere in the TaNaKh, that there is a deep concern for the welfare of the individual member of society, whether rich or **poor**. Elsewhere, in the ancient Near East, men were treated in terms of their status in the community rather than individuals. Members of the aristocracy, priests, landowners, rulers, and military leaders always had the advantage. A study of the so-called Code of Hammurabi will reveal that the slave and the underprivileged counted for less before the law. In **Isra'el**, however, **the poor** and the needy were the special concern of **ADONAI** and the covenant community was expected to ensure the welfare of every member of the family. Since **Isra'el** herself had once been enslaved in Egypt and had known the sorrow of oppression and the joy of redemption, she was bound to guarantee the freedom and welfare of individuals.³⁴⁶

*Dear Wise and Wonderful **Father**, Praise **You** for being such a merciful and loving father. Praise **You** for paying for our sin's sacrifice by **Yeshua** dying for us as our punishment. **God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (Second Corinthians 5:21). Your love is so fantastic! Not only did***

You pay the costly price of pain and shame for us; but for all who have a reverent fear of You so that they choose to love and follow You, You also forgave their sins so completely that you release them and put them far away! For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His mercy for those who fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us (Psalms 103:11-12). You are a wonderful example of what you want your children to do in order to release the debt that others owe us. As you have forgiven us, so we will release the sin by being forgiving when others wrong us and repent. If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. Even if he sins against you seven times a day, and seven times returns to you, saying, 'I repent,' you shall forgive him" (Luke 17:3b-4). We love You and delight in pleasing You. In Yeshua's holy name and power of His resurrection.



The mitzvah stated (15:1): The reference is to the sabbatical year which ended each **seven-year** period within the **jubilee** cycle (**Leviticus 25:8-17**). In the Book of the Covenant, **the year** is referred to as one in which **the land** was to **lie fallow so that the poor among your people may eat (Exodus 23:11b)**. The root of the verb **lie fallow** (Hebrew: *smt*) is also the root of the noun **release** (Hebrew: *shmita*). **The mitzvah** is expounded in more detail in **Leviticus 25:1-7**, where it is called a **Shabbat rest for the land**. In **Deuteronomy** alone is the sabbatical year designated as a time when **debts** are to be canceled. Clearly the peasant could not pay debts from the produce of his land if it was **fallow**. Therefore: **at the end of every seven years, you are to grant a release (15:1).**³⁴⁷ The **Deuteronomy mitzvah** thus expands the scope of the **fallow year** from **release of the land** from the burden of plowing, to the **release** of human beings from the burden of **debt**.

The Year of Release and **the Year of Jubilee** were part of **God's** wise plan to balance the economic scales in **the nation** so that the rich could not exploit **the poor** or **the poor** take

advantage of the rich. However, **ADONAI** knew that there would always be **poor** people in the Land (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ, to see link click Kb - Jesus Anointed at Bethany**) because **Isra'el** would not consistently obey these **mitzvot**. The nation of **Isra'el** would have been the most prosperous nation on earth if **she** had followed the mitzvot given to **her**, but **she** rejected **His** will and adopted the ways of the goyim around **her**.

The mitzvah explained (15:2): This is how you are to cancel debts: every creditor is to release what he has loaned to his neighbor. He must not force his neighbor or his brother to repay, for ADONAI's debt cancellation has been proclaimed (15:2). The repeated description of **the needy** person as **his neighbor** and **brother** draws on the covenant solidarity that made all **Israelites neighbors** and on the kinship solidarity that made **them** all like **brothers**.³⁴⁸ **They** were to release the loan totally at that point, regardless of the personal loss to themselves (**Exodus 23:10-11; Leviticus 25:2-4**). No **Israelite** owed anything to another **Israelite**.³⁴⁹

The personal implications of the mitzvot (15:3-11): Isra'el is called upon to always deal with the poor with generosity. **A foreigner you may force, but your hand is to release whatever your brother owes you (15:3).** It was legal to require payment of debts from **foreigners** during **the Year of Release**, for **they** were not included in the family circle of **Isra'el**. **The mitzvah** was designed to relieve poverty in **Isra'el** and regulate relations between members of the covenant community. There can be no doubt that the early Messianic community found in **Deuteronomy** a blueprint for their attempt to eliminate poverty in their midst, and **Luke** links the growth of the covenant community as firmly to that social and economic effort as to the evangelistic preaching of the apostles (**Acts 2:42-47 and 4:32-35**).³⁵⁰

However, there should be no poor among you, for ADONAI will surely bless you in the Land and ADONAI your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess. If only you would carefully listen to the voice of ADONAI your God, being careful to do all these mitzvot that I am commanding you today! For ADONAI your God will bless you as He promised you. So, you will lend to many nations, but not borrow; you will rule over many nations, but they will not rule over you (15:4-6). Complete obedience to **YHVH** and **His mitzvot** would result in divine blessing. That would mean, among other things, that there would be no **poor in the Land**, but also that **Isra'el**, as a nation, would never be in debt to other nations, but would rather lend to them. Nor would she ever be subdued by the goyim, but would rule over them.³⁵¹

While **the mitzvah** required that **debtors** should be released from **their** obligations every **seventh year**, **love** demanded nothing less than a continual attitude of generosity and mercy towards **the poor**. **If there is a poor man among you - any of your brothers within any of your gates in your land that ADONAI your God is giving you - you are not to harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother (15:7). We see a metaphorical use of body language in the chapter as a whole, but especially in this section. Three terms are used.**

The hand: Cancel (Hebrew: *shemittah*, meaning *release the hand*, in other words, *to renounce one's claim to, or power over the pledge, and thus, the debtor*). Similarly, in **verses 7, 8 and 11, opening or shutting the hand** speaks of the power that the creditor wields over the debtor. So, the text addresses those who have economic power. The social response to poverty is put squarely in **the hands** of those who *have hands*, in other words, the power to do something effective about it. It is not left up to the self-effort of **the poor** alone.

The heart: As the seat of the mind and will, **the heart** governs the intentions and direction of economic action. The warning is against a cruel will. **The heart** can be **hard** as in **verse 7**, filled with a **wicked thought** as in **verse 9**, or **grudging**, literally *evil* in **verse 10**. Deuteronomy is well aware of the self-interest of those who wield economic power and dictate economic policy, and realizes that justice for the poor requires a whole different mindset translated into personal and political will power. It is a perception that has lost nothing of its sharpness and truth with the passing centuries.

The eye: How one looks at another reveals the attitude inside. Wrong attitudes are bound up with wrong action, just as a wrong mind and will are. Thus, to show that **your eye is evil** as in **verse 9**, or to **consider it a hardship** in **15:18** are both translations of Hebrew "eye" metaphors.³⁵² The usage here, and later rabbinic use of the "eye," make it clear that **Yeshua** was referring to the **good** or **bad eye** when **He** said: **The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good**, that is, *if you are generous*, **your whole body will be full of light**. In Judaism, "having a good eye," or *'ayin tovah*, means *being generous*, and "having a bad eye," or *'ayin ra'ah*, means *being stingy*. **But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness (Matthew 6:22-23).** **The eye** that **is bad** flows out of **the heart** that is selfishly indulgent. The person who is materialistic and greedy is spiritually blind. The principle is simple and sobering: the way we look at and use our **money** is a sure barometer of our spiritual condition.

Rather, you must surely open your hand to him and you must surely lend him enough for his need - whatever he is lacking (15:8). One who is kind to the poor lends to ADONAI, and ADONAI will reward him for his good deed (Proverbs 19:17). There is a Jewish saying, "The rich often give less than they can afford, and the poor more than they should, for the same reason - to conceal who they are. The rich don't want to let people know how rich he is, and the poor don't want to let people know how poor he is! As **the seventh year** approached men of wealth would hesitate to make loans which would not be reimbursed. To lend a poor man something in the sixth year was practically making it a gift. But it was precisely a gift of this kind that was being asked of **Isra'el**.

The letter of **the mitzvot** kills, but the spirit of **the mitzvot** gives life. The absence of compassion would lead people to a hardened **heart**, and a mitzvah that was designed to protect the poor would become a reason for oppressing them.³⁵³ Therefore, **the Word of God** says: **Watch yourself, so there is no wicked thought in your heart saying, "The seventh year, the year of cancelling debts, is near," and your eye is evil against your poor brother and you give him nothing. Then he may call out to ADONAI against you, and it will be a sin upon you. You must surely give to him without a grudging heart - because of this [sacrifice], ADONAI your God will bless you in all your work and in every undertaking of your hand (15:9-10).**

These verses anticipate the Sermon on the Mount because they penetrate behind the outward act to the motives and intents of the heart (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Dm - You Have Heard That Is Was Said: Love Your Neighbor**). Obedience towards **God** inevitably results in generosity towards others. **But if someone has material possessions and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him (First John 3:17)?** A mean and unwilling spirit that produces a cry of anguish from a **poor** person sinful in the sight of **Ha'Shem** and earns divine condemnation.

The failure of **Isra'el** to follow **these mitzvot** has cost **her** dearly. **She** did not observe **the Year of Release** every **seventh year**, or **the Year of Jubilee** every **fiftieth year**, and for this failure **she** paid a great price (**Leviticus 26:32-45**). **Her** seventy years of captivity in Babylon (see the commentary on **Jeremiah Gu - Seventy Years of Imperial Babylonian Rule**) gave their land the Sabbath rest that it missed during those years of disobedience. **The Chronicler** tells us: **In fulfillment of the word of ADONAI by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the Land had paid back her Shabbat rests - for as long as it lay desolate - the Shabbat rest was kept till 70 years were complete (Second Chronicles**

36:21).³⁵⁴

Therefore, I am commanding you, saying: You must surely open your hand to your brother - to your needy and poor in your Land (15:11). The Year of Release was a test of faith, but it was also a test of love. Suppose a poor **Jew** needed a loan and **the Year of Release** was a year away. If the loaner looked at the loan strictly as a business proposition, he would turn it down, but that's the very attitude **the LORD** wanted to correct. It wasn't a business proposition; it was a ministry to **a brother**. If **the rich Israelite** closed **his heart** and **his hand** to a needy **brother**, **he** would not only hurt **his brother**, but also grieve **YHVH**, who had given **him** all **his** wealth to begin with. Therefore, **he** was to open **his heart** and **his hand** to help **his brother**, and **ADONAI** would see to it that **he** was compensated for **his** generosity (**Proverbs 14:21 and 31, 19:17, 21:13, 28:27; Ephesians 4:28; First Timothy 6:17-19; First John 3:14-18**).³⁵⁵