

# *Selling Your Soul*

By Y. Y. Jacobson

The mortgage owner to a house hunter: "Yes, the kitchen is a bit small, but with a mortgage like this you won't do much cooking anyway."

## **Fields and Homes**

This week's Torah portion discusses the laws concerning sale of land in Israel (1).

After the Jewish people entered the land of Israel in 1273 BCE (2488 since creation), Joshua, the Jewish leader, assigned a plot of land to every tribe and family, as recorded in the book of Joshua. If a Jew fell upon hard times and was compelled to sell his ancestral field, the Torah -- the Jewish constitution -- gave him the right to redeem it two years after the purchase date. The seller would return the money to the buyer and receive his field in return. If he did not redeem it, the field would return to him automatically with the arrival of the Jubilee year.

What was the Jubilee year? After the Jewish people completed the settling of the land of Israel 14 years after entering it, they began counting their years in cycles of fifty (2). Every 50th year was observed as a Jubilee year during which ancestral plots of land that had been sold during the previous 49 years, reverted to their original owner. Almost no sale or gift in Israel was legal for longer than 49 years.

This was the law concerning the sale of a field. What happened if a poor Jew was forced to sell an ancestral home located within a walled city in Israel? Here the law changed dramatically. This home, the Torah states, could be redeemed only until the first anniversary of the sale. Thereafter, it remained the property of the buyer in perpetuity, and did not return to the seller with the arrival of the Jubilee year.

How about if a Jew sold an ancestral home located in an un-walled city? Here the law constitutes the "best of both worlds" of the two former cases. The home could be redeemed immediately after the sale, just like a home in a walled city. And even if it was not redeemed during the first year of the sale, it could still be redeemed afterwards, till the arrival of the Jubilee year when it returned to its original owner, just like the law regarding the field.

## **Income vs. Dignity**

What is the logic behind the three different laws concerning the sale of 1) fields, 2) homes in walled cities, and 3) homes in un-walled cities?

One of the great biblical commentators, the 13th century Spanish sage, Rabbi Moses ben Nachman, known as Nachmanides (3), explains the rationale in a rather moving way (4).

Selling your personal home due to impoverishment affects not your income (a home does not produce regular profits), but your dignity. Selling your field due to poverty, on the other hand, might affect your income (a field produces regular profits) but not your personal honor. To preserve the dignity of an impoverished individual who was forced to give up his home, the

Torah allows him to redeem it immediately after the sale, throughout the entire first year, as soon as he comes up with the money. After the year is up, however, he certainly relocated to another home; now the buyer is entitled to hold on to his purchase as long as he wishes. It cannot be redeemed any longer.

Concerning a field however, which affects a person's income rather than his dignity, short-term redemption was unnecessary. The Torah's only concern was that the field be returned to its original owner upon the arrival of the Jubilee year, in order not to deprive a person and his family of their natural source of income.

Homes in open cities, says Nachmanides, were often used for farmers and guardians of fields. Thus, they were treated like the fields themselves and needed to be restored to their owner by the Jubilee year. Yet since their sale (just as the sale of full-fledged homes in walled cities) was embarrassing for the seller, they too could be redeemed immediately after the sale, even before the passing of two years (5).

## **The Psychological Dimension**

All of these laws applied only when the entire Jewish nation was living in Israel, each tribe dwelling on the land designated to it (6). When the first Jewish tribes were exiled from their homeland, some 2600 years ago, the Jubilee year laws and plot-sale laws were no longer applicable. Yet each mitzvah and law in the Torah consists of a psychological and spiritual dimension, as well as a physical and real-life dimension (7). It is this dimension that is still relevant today.

What is the philosophical meaning behind these laws?

## **Selling your Career, Home and Soul**

Fields, homes located in un-walled cities, and homes located in walled cities, symbolize three aspects of our daily lives:

Fields represent a person's career and his or her day-to-day interactions and purchases in the outside world, in the "field."

Homes, situated in unwalled cities, represent a person's internal home and family life, which are not exposed for all to observe.

Homes located in walled cities, surrounded by an additional wall of protection, are symbolic of the most vulnerable and intimate space of a person's life, usually guarded by an additional fortress of privacy. This represents a person's inner relationship with G-d, his or her moments of prayer and meditation.

Here, the Torah gives us a blueprint of what transpires when we "sell" and dispose of our careers, homes, and selves.

## **Goodbye integrity**

When you sell your field, i.e. when you allow your career and your daily external encounters to become tarnished by dishonesty and selfishness -- you can get away without noticing your moral degeneration for a full two years. Only after two years of moral and spiritual decay will you begin to sense the void in your life. The depravity caused by the "selling" of your integrity will begin to haunt you. Then, when you have become aware and frustrated, you can liberate your field and your life. Even if you don't, time and life's experiences are likely to do the job. In the 50th year, you will get back your field. But why wait so long?

## Goodbye love

Then comes the far more serious situation where you "sell" your home, i.e. you lose touch with your loved ones, your wife, your children and your closest friends. In your smugness you enter into your private bubble and you alienate the people closest to you.

In this case, you will sense the emptiness immediately. Your life will just become miserably shallow and artificial. Since the pain will be felt immediately, you are indeed capable of liberating your home right after the "sale." Here again, even if you don't possess the courage to change, time and life's journey usually will change you. But why wait? Who knows what can transpire till then? Will you still have the chance to repair broken relationships?

## Goodbye G-d

Then comes the third and most serious condition -- when you "sell" your most intimate space, when you become alienated from your deepest sense of self, from your inner relationship with G-d. In such an event, you can sense the extraordinary void immediately and thus liberate your soul right away. But if you wait for more than a year, you will likely lose the chance to ever liberate your inner identity again.

When you allow the external pressures or enjoyments of life to rob you of your core self, when you no longer dedicate twenty minutes a day to speak your heart out to your Creator, when you have no time for the essence of it all, you will soon lose touch with the notion that you ever had any innocence to lose. You may no longer know that there was anything to liberate.

It is painful to lose things ("fields") in life. It is far more painful to lose people ("homes") in life. But the worst pain of all is when we lose our connection with the quintessence of life and reality, with G-d. We simply can't afford to lose our souls. None of us can afford to sacrifice our few intimate moments of prayer and communion with G-d because of other responsibilities or pleasures. For without this relationship, we might one day look in the mirror and observe a living body encasing a dead soul.

1) Leviticus 25: 29-31. Parsha Behar

2) See Rambam Hilchos Shmitah Veyovel 10:2.

3) Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, known as the Ramban, was the leader of Spanish Jewry in the turbulent 13th century. His great Torah scholarship, heroic personal life, and incisive analysis of Jewish history and destiny remain a beacon of light through the centuries. The Ramban was born in Girona, Catalonia, Spain in 1194, and was the crown of that country's golden age of Jewish scholarship. Toward the end of his life, he moved to Jerusalem, where he passed away around 1272.

4) Ramban to Leviticus 25:29.

5) This last point is not stated explicitly in Nachmanides, but seems to be implied by the context of his interpretation. The reason a field cannot be redeemed until two years of the sale have passed, is explained by Gur Aryeh to Leviticus 25:15 and 25:31. His point is this: Redemption of property cannot take place until the sale has been fully completed. A home is purchased with the

intention of living therein. Even if the buyer lives there for a single day, the purpose of the sale was accomplished and the seller can now redeem the home. A field, on the other hand, is purchased with the intention of harvesting produce to consume or to sell. Until two years have passed the sale is not complete and redemption cannot take place (Cf. Gur Aryeh *ibid.* for his reason why a home in a walled city cannot be redeemed after a year of the sale).

6) See Rambam *ibid.* 10:8.

7) See Rambam end of Hilchos Mikvoes.