

**The Excellence that Comes from Pursuing Perfection:
What I Learned About the Jubilee Year from Vince Lombardi**

Rabbi Michael S. Siegel

Behar Behukotai

May 15, 2020

Growing up in Cleveland in the 60s, football was the civil religion. No matter what part of the city you lived in, your politics, religion, race, or socioeconomic standing, the one thing that everyone could agree on was their love of the Cleveland Browns. I can still remember the excitement of a Sunday as game time neared when we would at last be able to turn on the television to watch our beloved Browns. But there was one Sunday that I dreaded, and that was when the Green Bay Packers came to town. Coached by arguably the greatest Football Coach of all time, this was a team to be feared.

Vince Lombardi never had a losing season as a head coach in the NFL. His winning percentage strained the imagination: 72.8% and 90% in the postseason. Lombardi, the short, stocky son of Italian immigrants, was the American success story. Beyond all of the x's and o's, and the intricacies of football, it was Lombardi's ability to motivate his players that set him apart. His gift for inspiring his players to greatness was as important as any game strategy. His motivational sayings are well known today:

- *Winners never quit and quitters never win*
- *Winning is not everything; it is the only thing*
- *Winning is a habit and unfortunately, so is losing*
- *It's not whether you get knocked down, it is whether you get back up*

You get the idea.

But I never thought of Vince Lombardi as anything more than a great football coach until this morning. Today, I present to you the RAVAG, Rabbi Vince Lombardi, commentator of Torah. In all seriousness, a quotation of Lombardi's that I came across this week actually helped to clarify something about this morning's Torah reading that I never quite understood. Here is the quotation: *Perfection is not attainable, but if we chase perfection, we can catch excellence.*

Permit me to apply the teaching of the RAVAG to our text.

Approaching the end of the book of Leviticus, the Torah presents a vision of a truly holy society whose boldness has never been equaled. Every 50 years, the people are to sound the Shofar as the Yovel, the Jubilee, begins. Now, we know that on the 7th Day we rest, and that in the 7th year the Israelites were commanded to treat the land to a rest by letting it lie fallow. But now after the perfect 7, 7 squared, the 49th year, we are commanded to reach even higher and take unprecedented actions to recreate our society with what can only be explained as a Divinely ordained reset:

- All debts would be forgiven
- All land from family holdings that were sold because of debt would be returned to the original owner
- All Israelite slaves would be freed

And that is just the beginning. What the Torah presents to us this Shabbat is the greatest vision that the world has ever known of a truly equitable society. Where no person, no family, would ever be sentenced to an endless cycle of poverty. Where slaves had the knowledge that the day would arrive when their servitude would come to an end; where those who had been disenfranchised and robbed of the dignity of working their land would now have it returned to them. All of this is based upon the idea that *the Earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof*, to quote the Psalmist: God is the ultimate owner of the land upon which all of us subsist. If that is true, then God can also decree how the land and its resources are used in the land of Israel. The Yovel also tests the notion of whether we actually see other fellow Israelites as brothers and sisters. The Jubilee year is truly breathtaking in scope and vision.

Now, would you be surprised to know that there is absolutely no evidence that the Yovel was ever observed in the way that the Torah described? There was never a 50th year where debts were forgiven, land returned or slaves freed! In fact, this notion of forgiving debts became so onerous that the wealthy stopped giving the poor loans as the 50th year approached. This reality wreaked such havoc that no less of a teacher and leader than Hillel created an innovation called the Prozbul, a legal fiction, if you will, where loans made before the 50th year would need to be repaid after the 50th year. In making this bold decision, Hillel demonstrated his

belief that the Yovel, which was designed to bring brothers together, was having the opposite effect. He saw no alternative other than letting his people starve. So, not only was the Jubilee year never fully observed, but one of the greatest and most respected Rabbis in Jewish history had to find a way to ensure that it not be put into effect!

Which leads to me to the question that has bothered me about the Jubilee Year for a long time:

Why should we read about it every year? Why remind ourselves of an ideal society that never was and quite likely never will be fulfilled?

Enter the RAVAG, Rabbi Lombardi, to the rescue.

Listen to his words again: *Perfection is not attainable, but if we chase perfection, we can catch excellence.* In other words, whether or not we actually fulfill the dream of the Yovel in its entirety is not really the point. Rather, it is the vision that inspires us to pursue aspects of the Jubilee that will ultimately lead us to excellence, inspire us to take the steps to build a truly great, if not perfect, society. This, then, is the reason that we read about it every year. The Yovel serves as a summons to dream of what a truly just society can look like. It inspires us to take the steps needed to fulfill a part of the whole. The power of the Yovel can be seen in how Jews have maintained their communities over the years, wherever the winds of the Diaspora took them. Wherever we went, Jews took care of their poor, from Morocco to Lithuania. But on these shores as well. Think of how many Jews were helped through the Hebrew Free Loan Society. Perhaps your relatives were recipients of that largess. Think of the work of the Federation, to create a safety net for members of our community; the important efforts of the Jewish Vocational Service; the sustenance that is made available by the Ark. It is that spirit that drives the work of our congregation to ensure that anyone who wants to be part of this community is welcomed, no matter their financial condition. This is why we offer the support, financial or otherwise, to those in need. This is the excellence that comes when we pursue the perfection of the Yovel. The sense of obligation to others comes from these passages in our Torah reading. It is that vision that has yet to be achieved that calls Jews respond to the call for Zedakah. This is what it means to be a Jewish community, both in the time of Moses and today.

Today, our country is faced with the greatest medical crisis since the Pandemic of 1918 and the greatest financial challenge since the Great Depression. How our nation faces this crisis will determine the dream that is America. Let me note that our founding fathers were also inspired by these passages from the book of Leviticus, by the vision of the Jubilee. As they planned this new nation, Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, and Ben Franklin were all inspired by a society that saw its citizens as brothers, the idea of giving everyone an equal opportunity to succeed. This is why they quoted from the inauguration of the Yovel when they inscribed the liberty bell: *Proclaim Liberty throughout the land and to the inhabitants thereof.*

What is becoming of that dream today, and what will happen when the pandemic lifts? Let us be aware of what awaits a society that stops dreaming, that puts the Yovel away because it is too impractical to become part of our reality.

In the face of the economic uncertainty of Covid 19 our nation's self-understanding, our vision of ourselves will need to be reconsidered, and the elements needed to rebuild are in the words of our Torah reading this morning, the vision of the Yovel.

We, as a nation must find ways to release:

- Those enslaved by debt
- Those who will soon find themselves homeless
- Those who will find themselves without hope of getting a job

In the months and years ahead, what will be tested is not simply American ingenuity, or our willingness to work hard. We will also be tested as to our understanding of American citizenship, and what brotherhood means in America today and tomorrow. We will also have to think hard about the meaning of freedom. Not only my personal freedoms but my responsibilities to others. American liberty comes with a sense of obligation to the whole.

I believe that the Jewish community can model that type of responsibility for others, the obligation to share your blessings, and to see our fellow Americans, whatever their station, as brother or sister. While we cannot create the Yovel as envisioned in the Torah, we can exemplify its spirit in our day, in our Jewish institutions, in our synagogues.

Thanks to the RAVAL, Vince Lombardi, I not only appreciate the need to read of the Yovel each year, but the special importance its vision of a just society offers us today. Let us take the inspiring words of a great American Football Coach, Vince Lombardi, and dream of how to apply them in our day: *Perfection is not attainable, but if we chase perfection, we can catch excellence.* So that we will yet proclaim, in words and in action, liberty for all in these United States of America. Amen.