

How Jubilee Year came into my life

We Jews read, study, or chant the weekly Torah Portion, or “Parsha,” on Shabbat (Friday evening and Saturday morning) to keep our sanity. The Torah is divided into 64 sequential Parashat, from creation to the death of Moses.

There is a Parsha for every week of the year, and 12 for special days. The Parsha for the week is listed on Jewish (lunar) calendars. The first Parsha is B’reishit, that is Genesis 1:1-6:8. The 64th is V’zot Hab’rachah,

or Deuteronomy 33:1-34:12. After the 64th Parsha is read, we celebrate the joyous holiday of Simchat Torah by unwrapping the entire Scroll and rewrapping it back to the beginning. Jews don’t see the Torah as a book



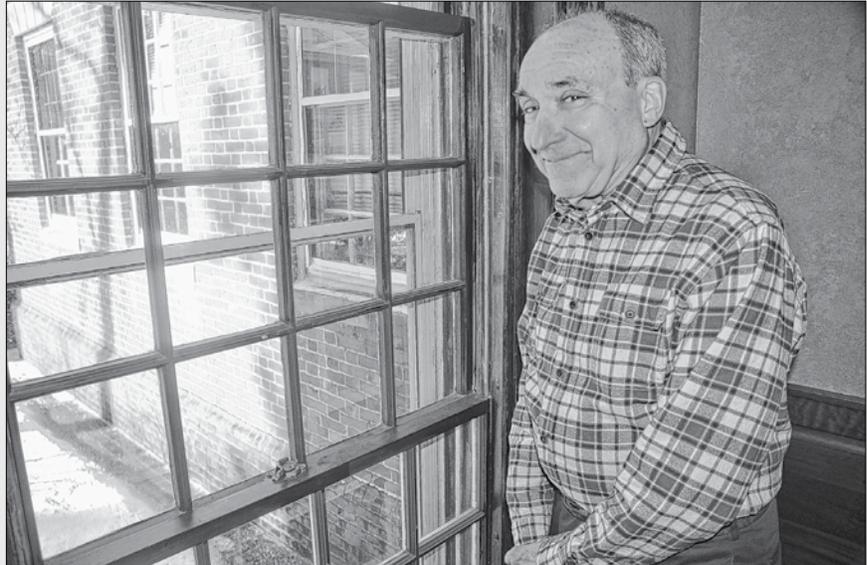
Mark Wisan

called “The Old Testament,” but as a scroll that we engage with every week of the year.

This story is about one Parsha, B’har, Leviticus 25:1-26:2, and the profound effect it has had on my life. B’har expands upon God’s commandment to keep the Sabbath Day by adding a Sabbath year every seventh year and a Jubilee year on the seventh Sabbath year. Just as a master must release his servants from work on the Sabbath Day, he must also release them from work on the Sabbath year; when he is also commanded not to cultivate his land. On the Jubilee year, all landed property that has been sold in the preceding 48 years must revert to its original owners and all Israelite slaves must be freed.

Back in 1959, it was customary only for a boy nearing his 13th birthday to be called to the Torah for the first time to assume his place as a responsible adult in the Jewish community. Now, girls as well as boys can earn this honor. It is a Bat Mitzvah for girls and a Bar Mitzvah for boys. It involves chanting in Hebrew part of the weekly Parsha and giving a speech describing what he or she learned from it.

My 13th birthday was on June 10, 1959. I was supposed to read my Torah portion on June 5, 1959. But, be-



Staff photo by Priscilla Morrill

Mark Wisan, of Peterborough, helps coordinate Monadnock Havurah, which offers Jewish religious events and activities for adults and children.

a year, each lasting a few days, and one seemed due around my birthday, my parents changed my Bar Mitzvah date to May 23, 1959.

I woke up the day before my Bar Mitzvah with familiar symptoms: perspiring, nausea and dizziness. The solid world spun wildly if I moved. Previously, I coped with the spells by not moving and not eating, and by resting. My parents were ready to postpone my Bar Mitzvah. But, I had worked so hard. I loved that the words from B’har were inscribed on the Liberty Bell: “Proclaim Liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof.” I loved that “release” is a better translation of “d’ror” than “liberty.”

With great difficulty I got dressed in a suit. My parents drove me to beautiful Central Synagogue on Lexington Avenue and 55th Street. Even though I could not balance, I could still speak. Friends, relatives and rabbis helped me to stand on the Bimah, gripping the lectern in front of the Ark, which held the Torah Scrolls. Cantor Friedrich Lechner, of blessed memory, told me I did well. But, when Rabbi David Seligson, of blessed memory, put his hands on my

help me not lose my balance — I felt a surge of holiness enter into my body. I was never again to have a dizzy spell. I felt release — d’ror.

Rabbi Seligson was a lieutenant colonel, chaplain in the U.S. Army Reserve. I did not object to participating in required Air Force ROTC in college. In 1966 after a seminar at the Pentagon, I concluded that the Vietnam War would be as bad for the United States as it would be for Vietnam. Three years later, I was able to achieve conscientious objector status because I objected to participating in a particular war.

Release, d’ror, is about freedom and liberty itself. What would happen if the world was given a Jubilee year; would it become stronger?

Mark Wisan lives in Peterborough. He grew up and spent most of his working life in Manhattan. He was one of the founders of the Peterborough Havurah, and is currently a coordinator for the Monadnock Havurah, a group that organizes, promotes and provides opportunities for participation in Jewish and Israel-related cultural, social, charitable, educational and religious events and