

Date: 20 Elul 5786 (September 2, 2026)

Torah Portion: Vayelech

Topic: The Longer View

The Angel of Death's critique of human shortsightedness highlights the importance of remembering our mortality and the transitory nature of our existence. The Zohar (Vol. III, 126a) laments that people often become so comfortable in this world that they begin to imagine they will remain here indefinitely. Although everyone knows that life is temporary, we easily live as though our present circumstances, possessions, and plans were permanent.

Because this tendency is deeply rooted in human nature, the Creator surrounded man with continual reminders of his vulnerability. Despite his intelligence and accomplishments, man is physically weak and dependent. He is subject to illness, hunger, exhaustion, injury, and an unavoidable need for sleep. These limitations continually remind him that he is not sovereign over his own existence. Hunger reminds him that he is dependent; weariness that his strength is limited; illness that his body is fragile; and sleep that even the strongest person must regularly surrender control.

So significant are these reminders that when YHWH condemned mankind in the generation of Noach, He declared, **"My Spirit shall not strive with man forever, in his going astray he is flesh"** (Gen. 6:3). Rashi explains that if man could rebel against Elohim even though he was merely flesh—weak, mortal, and subject to decay—how much more rebellious might he have become had he been made of fire or some stronger substance. Human frailty should therefore lead to humility. The tragedy is that man can experience his weakness every day and still imagine himself independent.

For Yisrael, YHWH provided additional reminders through the mitzvot of **Shemittah and Yovel**. Every seventh year, agricultural work ceased and debts were released according to the Torah's command. After seven cycles of seven years came Yovel, when ancestral property returned according to its appointed inheritance and Israelite servants were released. These commandments challenged the illusion of permanent ownership.

A person might work a field for decades and naturally begin to think, *This belongs to me*. Yet Shemittah required him to step away from his labor, while Yovel reminded him that even his ownership existed within boundaries established by YHWH. The Torah explains the principle plainly: **"The land shall not be sold permanently, for the land is Mine, for you are sojourners and settlers with Me"** (Vayikra 25:23).

This does not mean that ownership is meaningless. Rather, Torah teaches that human ownership is ultimately **stewardship**. Our land, possessions, wealth, strength, opportunities, and even our days are entrusted to us for a time. Therefore, the proper question is not merely, *What may I do with what belongs to me?* but, *What does YHWH desire me to do with what He has entrusted to me?*

There was even a mitzvah to count the years toward Yovel. Thus, its lesson was not to be remembered only once every fifty years. The counting itself continually reminded Yisrael that present circumstances would not last forever. Fields would return, servants would be released, and economic arrangements that appeared permanent would eventually come to an end.

In this sense, Yovel and the remembrance of mortality teach the same lesson: **both remind us that there will eventually be a release**. Yovel tells the landowner, *Your possession is temporary*. Mortality tells every human being, *Your possession of this life is temporary*. Both confront the illusion that what we presently hold will always remain in our hands.

This lesson is beautifully illustrated by a story told about R' Chaim of Volozhin. Two members of his community became locked in a bitter dispute over a plot of land. Each insisted that the property belonged to him. After hearing their competing claims and angry accusations, R' Chaim announced that he needed to see the disputed land before issuing his ruling. The judges and litigants accompanied him to the field. When they arrived, R' Chaim unexpectedly bent down and placed his ear near the ground. Astonished, the men asked what he was doing. He explained that he had already heard what each litigant had to say, so now he wanted to hear what the **land itself** had to say. "What did it say?" they asked.

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R' Chaim replied, **“The land says, ‘This one claims that I belong to him, and the other claims that I belong to him. But they are both mistaken. One day they will both die and return to the earth. Ultimately, they do not belong to me—I belong to neither of them; rather, they will both belong to me.’”**

The humor contains a profound Mussar lesson. Human beings can become consumed with determining who owns the earth while forgetting that eventually the earth receives every one of its owners. One generation possesses a field, another inherits it, and another purchases it, but none possesses it forever.

This is also the lesson behind the Angel of Death’s criticism. There is nothing wrong with planning for tomorrow. Torah itself teaches responsibility, preparation, planting, building, and providing for future generations. The danger begins when **planning becomes presumption**—when we speak of tomorrow as though it were already ours.

Remembering mortality is therefore not intended to make us gloomy. It is intended to make us wise. If our days are limited, today becomes more valuable. If our possessions are temporary, how we use them becomes more important than how tightly we hold them. And if everything ultimately belongs to YHWH, then possession becomes a responsibility rather than merely a privilege.

The Angel of Death, Shemittah, Yovel, and the earth beneath R' Chaim’s feet all teach the same truth: **we are temporary occupants in a world that belongs permanently to YHWH**. We may build, plant, acquire, save, and plan for tomorrow, but we must remember Who owns the field and Who gives tomorrow.

Thus the Torah declares, **“The land is Mine, for you are sojourners and settlers with Me.”** The question is not whether we will eventually surrender what has been entrusted to us—we will. The greater question is **what we will have done with it before it must be returned**.