The Jubilee year, which occurred every fifty years, was the year in which liberty was proclaimed throughout the land of Israel. The relevant laws appear in Chapter 25 of Leviticus, one of the five books of Moses (the Torah), a work comprising the history, ritual and social legislation of the Jewish people. It is traditionally dated some fourteen hundred years before the Christian era ("BCE"), about three thousand four hundred years ago, and some five hundred years after the era of the Jewish Patriarchs and Matriarchs, the founding ancestors of the Jewish people. The Torah appears at the beginning of the Hebrew Bible, described by some Christians as the "Old Testament".

The Social Welfare Principles

The laws of the Jubilee and the Sabbatical Year reflect two Jewish concerns. Firstly, there is the central importance of personal freedom, constantly asserted throughout the Torah: "Remember that you were slaves in the land of Egypt!" This reminder appears in relation to a number of the laws, and it is the source of the continuing obligation for the whole community to "redeem the captive".

Then there is the necessity of alleviating poverty, with the Torah reminding us that the "the poor are always with us", and prescribing specified obligations for the alleviation of poverty, described in Hebrew as "righteousness" rather than charity.

The overriding principle is that everyone should be "open-handed" and generous to those in need. In addition, there are particular laws, such as the obligation to give a "tithe", one tenth of one's produce, as a tax which was applied for the benefit of the "widow and the orphan". There is also the obligation not to harvest the corners of the field or to scour the vineyard, and to open the fields and vineyards to the poor as "gleaners", and there were also the laws of the Jubilee and the Sabbatical year.

From ancient times, the result was a welfare system in which the entitlements of those in need are protected by Divine law and are not merely dependent on the goodwill of a giver, a system of law rather than charity, which gives dignity and security to the recipient.

The Temple was also maintained by the donation of the half-shekel, a silver coin minted in Tyre, and often purchased in the Temple courtyard. In Roman times, however, the serious burden on the population was the oppressive imperial taxation, ruthlessly enforced by rapacious Roman tax-farmers, who purchased the collection rights from the authorities.

The Biblical Law of the Jubilee

The Jubilee comes at the end of seven Sabbatical years, that is, after the expiration of every 49 years. The laws of the Jubilee therefore take into account the laws of the Sabbatical year, which are set out in Deuteronomy 15.

There are four basic themes:

1. Every 50 years, at Yom Kippur (The "Day of Atonement") in the Jubilee year, a ram's horn ("yovel") was sounded throughout the land of Israel. Any agricultural land which had been sold was then automatically restored to the family of its original owners. This right was in addition to the right to recover the land at any time by redeeming it for payment.
2. Those who had fallen into poverty and sold themselves as servants were released on the Jubilee and were able to return to any land which had been restored to them.

3. In every Sabbatical and Jubilee year the land is to lie fallow.

4. All debts are cancelled in every Sabbatical year.

The right of a servant to be released on the Jubilee was in addition to the right to be fully discharged after seven years of service as well as the servant's right to be redeemed at any time. The result was a term of seven years, shortened if the Jubilee was proclaimed during that period. Deuteronomy 15 also prescribes humane conditions of service.

The law reflected a socio-economic system in ancient Israel in which the freehold of rural land was held in perpetuity by smallholders and their families. It was a system in which landholders who fell on hard times could not sell or mortgage their property, but could only sell the right to operate their farms for limited periods, and subject to the vendor's right of redemption at any time.

The idea of a permanent ancestral title to the family property thus prevented the acquisition of large landholdings or the emergence of a landed aristocracy, and the society described in Leviticus avoided the social and political upheavals which arise when property owners become landless labourers. The law also envisaged that those in financial distress might sell their labour for a lump sum and for fixed terms, and subject to legal protection.

There is an interesting contrast in Leviticus 25 between the precise calculation of the discounts to be allowed in the price of land or labour to allow for the Jubilee, on the one hand, and the open-handedness expected in making advances to the poor. Those advances were to be without interest, and without taking into any consideration the cancellation of debts due in the next Sabbatical year.

The law of the Jubilee applied only to rural land. Leviticus 25:29 provides that property in a walled city could be sold permanently, subject to a right of redemption by the vendor within one year after sale.

The First Book of Kings provides an example of the principle that the ruler is subject to the law, and in particular to the law protecting ancestral property. The story of Naboth's vineyard appears at 1 Kings 21, and we are told that Ahab, king of the northern kingdom of Israel (869-850 BCE) makes an apparently reasonable request:

“Let me have your vineyard to use for a vegetable garden, since it is close to my palace. In exchange I will give you a better vineyard or, if you prefer, I will pay you whatever it is worth.”

In response Naboth (“Navot” in Hebrew) claims his legal rights:

“The LORD forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my ancestors.”

Queen Jezebel then arranges for the murder of Naboth, and the Prophet Elijah delivers a curse on the descendants of Ahab.

The desolate remains of the palace of Ahab still stand in the fields of a kibbutz in the Valley of Jezreel.

The Book of Ruth tells the story of the penniless Moabite widow who became the grandmother of King David. Set in about 1100 BCE, the book illustrates how the laws for the maintenance of those in poverty, and specifically for the protection of the widow, worked in practice. Ruth appears as a gleaner in the field, she is taken under the protection of her deceased husband's kinsman, and she eventually marries him, and brings her late husband's family property in Israel into the marriage.
When the law of the Jubilee and the Sabbatical Year applied

The Talmud is an encyclopaedic collection of Biblical commentary and legal discussions and rulings by leading Rabbinical thinkers, compiled between the third and the seventh centuries CE, and there is a ruling in the Talmud that the law of the Jubilee can only be put into effect when a majority of the Jewish people are settled in the land of Israel. It was therefore decided that the calculation of the Jubilee periods commenced 14 years after Joshua led the Jews into the land, since it was by this date that the allocation of land to tribes and families was deemed to have been completed.

It followed that when the people came under foreign rule or were dispersed, then the law of the Jubilee could no longer be applied. However there is no record of any ruling that the Jubilee ceased or was suspended by reason of any particular historical event. Certainly after Pompey the Great invaded in 66 BCE and the usual Roman practices of expropriation and extortion in the colonies came into effect, any proclamation of a Jubilee would have been a meaningless exercise.

On the other hand there is firm evidence that the law concerning urban property in Leviticus 25:29 and the law relating to cancellation of debts in the Sabbatical year, were both still considered binding at the beginning of the first century CE. The Talmud records that Hillel the Elder, the chief judge of the Sanhedrin until 10 CE, introduced complex reforms into the administration of both laws.

The Legacy of the Jubilee and the Sabbatical Year

The modern Dispersion of the Jewish people traditionally dates from 70 CE with the destruction of the second Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans.

The Jewish revolts which preceded and followed that destruction were crushed with ferocity, and so many were enslaved by their Roman conquerors that prices for slaves in the slave markets of the empire were depressed for several years. Much of the population was dispersed around the world, and to the extent that the connection of families to their ancestral landholdings had survived to that point, it was now irrevocably broken.

The moment of freedom proclaimed by the sounding of the ram's horn throughout the land of Israel was no longer a practical possibility, and the guaranteed right under Biblical law, to return to one’s own property as a free person, was permanently lost.

However the underlying principles of the ancient law remained a part of the Jewish culture.

Agricultural Land

In modern Israel most agricultural land is leased from semi-government authorities, to various types of co-operative enterprise. These include the kibbutzim, founded on the principle “from each according to capacity, and to each according to need”, as modified in the light of experience, and particularly to accommodate new manufacturing enterprises. There are also moshavim, co-operatives of small landholders, who join together in marketing and purchasing, and in providing a variety of services to their members. (The suffix -im denotes a Hebrew plural.)

Also, of course, much of the land in modern Israel is Arab-owned and occupied, and large areas, including the site of the Knesset, Israel’s parliament, are owned by various Christian Churches.
Indeed the social pattern of the self-employed smallholder protected by the Jubilee is reflected in reality by the widespread appearance of the Jewish family business as an economic model. At the same time many of the larger enterprises in Israel were created and operated by the Trade Union movement, both as a means of mobilising capital and to avoid exploitation.

Some of the laws continue to apply in practice. In observant neighbourhoods in Israel, for example, there are notices in the shops certifying that local produce has been correctly tithed, and that the land has been appropriately rested in the sabbatical year.

The most important legacy of the Biblical system is that all Jewish communities assume the duty of setting up social welfare systems. In New South Wales, for example, there is a Jewish Communal Fund, which collects what is in effect a voluntary tax from the whole community to help finance institutions such as JewishCare, the Jewish old age home, a hospital and the Jewish schools. Funerals are also conducted by non-profit institutions, which charge more to prosperous families in order to provide the same services for the poor without charge.

It is interesting that before the British government introduced national welfare laws in 1911, which became the precursor of the modern welfare state in the English speaking world, it commissioned a study of the welfare system of the London Jewish community as part of its enquiries.

APPENDIX
Extracts from some of the relevant texts:

**Leviticus 25**

8 ‘‘Count off seven Sabbath years—seven times seven years—so that the seven Sabbath years amount to a period of forty-nine years. 9 Then have the trumpet sounded everywhere on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the Day of Atonement sound the trumpet throughout your land. 10 Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each of you is to return to your family property and to your own clan.

23 ‘‘The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers. 24 Throughout the land that you hold as a possession, you must provide for the redemption of the land. 35 ‘‘If any of your fellow Israelites become poor and are unable to support themselves among you, help them as you would a foreigner and stranger, so they can continue to live among you. 36 Do not take interest or any profit from them, but fear your God, so that they may continue to live among you. 37 You must not lend them money at interest or sell them food at a profit. 38 I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan and to be your God.

39 ‘‘If any of your fellow Israelites become poor and sell themselves to you, do not make them work as slaves. 40 They are to be treated as hired workers or temporary residents among you; they are to work for you until the Year of Jubilee. 41 Then they and their children are to be released, and they will go back to their own clans and to the property of their ancestors. 42 Because the Israelites are my servants, whom I brought out of Egypt, they must not be sold as slaves. 43 Do not rule over them ruthlessly, but fear your God...

54 ‘‘Even if someone is not redeemed in any of these ways, they and their children are to be released in the Year of Jubilee, 55 for the Israelites belong to me as servants. They are my servants, whom I brought out of Egypt. I am the LORD your God.

**Deuteronomy 15**

7 If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tight-fisted toward them. 8 Rather, be open-handed and
freely lend them whatever they need. 9 Be careful not to harbor this wicked thought: “The seventh year, the year for cancelling debts, is near,” so that you do not show ill will toward the needy among your fellow Israelites and give them nothing. They may then appeal to the LORD against you, and you will be found guilty of sin.

12 If any of your people—Hebrew men or women—sell themselves to you and serve you six years, in the seventh year you must let them go free. 13 And when you release them, do not send them away empty-handed. 14 Supply them liberally from your flock, your threshing floor and your winepress. Give to them as the LORD your God has blessed you. 15 Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you. That is why I give you this command today...

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