



Parshat Behar: The Mitzva of Shemithah

By Noam Yehuda Sender

Before the sin of Adam and Chava (Eve), the Earth provided sustenance not through the plowing and plowing of people, but rather through prayer. In the Talmud (200 C.E.–~500 C.E.), the Sage Rav Assi expounds that the vegetation would not break through the Earth until Adam came along and prayed to G-d to have mercy on the Earth. The rains fell and the Earth sprouted.¹ The removal of the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil can be interpreted as a decision to derive pleasure from G-d’s Earth without paying attention to the consequences it would have. As a result, humankind’s working of the land was no longer within the context of safeguarding it. And thus, the Earth is cursed, sprouting thorns and thistles, only giving forth its fruit by the sweat of one’s brow. The commandment of *Shemithah* given by G-d in the portion of *Behar* enables a return to the ideal relationship between humankind and creation.

The laws and rulings relating to the *Shemithah* year are numerous and complex, but there are four general commandments in the Torah from which they are derived.²

1. The first commandment is that the land should rest, as it says “and the land shall rest a Shabbat to Hashem.”³ Though this commandment is directed at the land, it is humanity’s responsibility to return all of creation to proper relationship with G-d. Through our refraining from planting, pruning, plowing, harvesting or any other form of working the land, the land is allowed to rest and move towards achieving the union of Shabbat.
2. The second commandment is to declare all seventh-year produce *hefker*—ownerless and free for all to take and enjoy.
3. The third general commandment is to sanctify all seventh-year produce. We are prohibited to do any business whatsoever with the produce and obligated to ensure that it is consumed properly and equitably and does not go to waste.
4. The fourth commandment requires us to absolve all loans from one Jew to another.

The conscious and meticulous observance of these laws and their rabbinic application expands the awareness of humankind as to the true nature of reality. The mandated abstinence from attempting to physically and commercially control the land and the positive commandment to give up all sense of ownership of its produce, free us from the enslavement of the constant pursuit of material goods and wealth and the idolatrous illusion that they serve as a testament to our existence. Additionally, the Sabbatical year provides ample time to contemplate and understand that it is not through the strength or the might of our hand that the Earth brings forth its fruits. This not only instills a deeper sense of faith

¹ Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Chullin 60b

² *Sefer HaShemittah*, HaRav Yechiel Michel Tukachinski (Mossad HaRav Kook).

³ Vayikra 25:2

and trust in G-d, but it allows a shift in how we relate to the Earth. The Earth must be viewed as a precious gift that has been entrusted to us and therefore we must treat it in a caring and sustainable manner.

The inner teachings of the commandment of *Shemithah* are vital today as humankind flirts dangerously with destroying the beautiful world we have been given. One example is the deforestation of vast portions of the Earth's most vital ecosystems in order to support the growing demand for beef.⁴

The "slash and burn" method of clearing land for agriculture, employed globally by both small and large-scale cattle farmers, involves cutting the vegetation of a plot of land and allowing it to dry, at which point it is burned. The land is then cultivated for a few seasons, and eventually abandoned—left fallow for cattle pasture. Though this process may release nutrients which fertilize the soil, it is only sustainable on a small scale and on nutrient-rich soil. When applied on an industrial level to nutrient-poor soil, like the current situation in the Amazon Rainforest, the result is an ecological disaster⁵. As Richard Robbins puts it,

Hundreds of thousands of acres of tropical forests in Brazil, Guatemala, Costa Rica, and Honduras, to name just a few countries, have been leveled to create pasture for cattle. Since most of the forest is cleared by burning, the extension of cattle pasture also creates carbon dioxide, and, according to some environmentalists, contributes significantly to global warming.⁶

Such operations lead to erosion and remove all nutrients from the soil, leaving it desolate. The result is severe damage to the biodiversity of the rainforest, an increase in the release of carbon dioxide, and general biosphere instability.⁷

Instead of being elevated and sanctified, the Earth has become trampled and disgraced. The frightening ecological reality we are facing morally obligates us to rethink our relationship with the land and the consequences of our actions. Many of our actions may be deriving pleasure from G-d's Earth without paying attention to the drastic consequences they have.

Yet even with the damage humanity has caused, *Shemithah* teaches us that we must have faith that G-d is in control, waiting for us to return from our careless and selfish ways. We must also know that the fluttering of the wings of any change in our relationship with creation on the physical dimension will cause a tornado of movement in the spiritual worlds.

The mitzvah of *Shemithah* provides insight into one of the most puzzling episodes in the Torah. As the Children of Israel prepare themselves in the desert to enter the Land of Israel, the prophetess Miriam passes away and the miraculous source of water that had sustained the people goes dry. G-d commands Moshe (Moses) to carry out one more miraculous act to instill the true nature of the relationship with the land of Israel deep within the consciousness of the new generation. G-d tells Moshe to speak to the rock to bring forth water. On this verse, Rav Simcha Meir Cohen of Dvinsk (Eastern Europe, 1843-1926), in his book Meshech Chochmah, says G-d wanted the Children of Israel to experience the Divine Speech flowing through Moshe's mouth, drawing even inanimate objects towards His Will. The intention was for them to "see that which is heard"⁸ in a similar manner to the awesome

⁴ This is in addition to the inherent health issues with eating too much beef, and other practices of the meat industry which cause health and environmental problems.

⁵ Slash and burn techniques have also been historically used by indigenous tribes, including those in the Amazon forest, to create very small plots of ground for growing crops for a few years. Because of the small plots and small, scattered populations, the effect on the forest dynamics was much less (but still evident) than that done in today's more industrial cattle farming.

⁶Robbins, Richard *Global Problems and the Culture of Capitalism*, (Allyn and Bacon, 1999), p.220

⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deforestation#Impact_on_the_environment

⁸ Cohen, Rav Meir Simcha *Meshech Chochmah* (Even Yisrael) pg. 297 (Parshat Chukat).

revelation at Mount Sinai where “the entire people saw the Voices.”⁹ This incomprehensible act would significantly strengthen their faith in G-d’s Providence over all. As a manifestation of this new-found faith, they would also understand that this Holy Land which they were about to enter is not a land that is conquered, used and abused by the sticks wielded by humans. Rather, the Land of Israel is a celestial land which will pour forth its abundant blessing according to the divine prayer spilling from the lips of the Jewish people, a people who are sensitive and respectful to the needs and nature of all of G-d’s creation.

Moshe, possibly shaken by the death of his dear sister and frustrated with the complaints of the people, tragically strikes the rock. G-d rebukes Moshe and Aharon (Aaron) and says “because you did not have faith in Me to sanctify Me in the eyes of the Children of Israel, therefore you will not bring this congregation to the Land that I have given them.”¹⁰ Because they failed to express to the people the sanctity of a proper relationship with the Land based on pure faith in G-d and not human strength, they could not lead them in.

When the Torah introduces *Shemittah*, it says “G-d spoke to Moshe on Mount Sinai saying.”¹¹ The commentator Rashi (France, 1040-1105) asks “Why is Shemittah mentioned [specifically] by Mount Sinai? Were not all the mitzvot said at Sinai?” In truth, living a life of *Shemittah* consciousness is a constant reenactment of the receiving of the Torah at Sinai. G-d gave us the Torah so that we could sanctify and reveal the Truth of all of creation through the passionate and dedicated observance of the mitzvot. And so, when we come to proper relationship with the Earth and give it proper rest and respect through the mitzvot of the *Shemittah* year, the awesome splendor of its divinity is revealed. The sensitive eyes of the caring and enlightened individual will be opened up to the radiance of the Divine Speech flowing through all of creation, as it slowly but surely brings the world closer to its perfected state.

Suggested Actions:

- This year is a shemittah year in Israel. Learn the laws of produce coming from Israel and take care to observe them this year.
- Reduce one beef meal per week, and replace it with a vegetarian dish, kosher organic chicken (for one example, see http://aaronsgourmet.pagedepot.com/html/kosher_organic.html), or sustainable fish (See www.oceansalive.org)

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⁹ Shemot 20:25
¹⁰ Bamidbar 20:12
¹¹ Vayikra 25:1