

Shemita: A Year of Perspective
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Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: When you enter the land that I assign to you, the land shall observe a sabbath of the LORD. Six years you may sow your field and six years you may prune your vineyard and gather in the yield. But in the seventh year the land shall have a sabbath of complete rest, a sabbath of the LORD: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard (Vayikra, 25:2-4).

Rabbi Aharon Rokeach (d. 1957) was the fourth Belzer Rebbe. He and his wife had five children and four sons. Tragically none survived the Shoah. The Rebbe himself did escape the Shoah. After a harrowing journey he settled in Israel where he remarried. He had no more biological children and he devoted his entire life to his chasidim and to the Jewish people. The Rebbe never spoke about anyone who was murdered in the Shoah. He maintained that anyone murdered by the Nazis was holy beyond our comprehension and therefore we could not even utter their name. The Rebbe lived a very spartan existence and said that after the Shoah we must devote all our energy to building Jewish institutions to keep our traditions alive. His life was entirely focused on the spiritual and the study of Torah.

One day the Rebbe turned to his gabbai and asked him to find the best gardener around and to hire him to make the Rebbe's garden the most beautiful garden in the entire land of Israel. The gabbai was shocked beyond words. Such a request from the Rebbe was highly unusual. The Rebbe never showed an interest in the material matters of the world and now from out of nowhere he was trying to make a beautiful garden. The gabbai wondered what this was about, but since the Rebbe insisted, he set out to complete his task. Sure enough, an amazing gardener was located and the Rebbe paid top dollar to engage the gardener's services. Before too long, the Rebbe's garden was beautiful and much admired. That year, as Rosh Hashanah drew near, the Rebbe asked his gabbai to tell the gardener that the eve of Rosh Hashanah would be the last day the gardener would work in the garden. The Rebbe said that instead he could pay the gardener to do other tasks in the coming year that do not relate to working the land. The coming year was the Shemitah year and the Rebbe's reasoning now became clear. The Rebbe had wanted to properly observe the mitzvah of Shemitah—of not working the land of Israel—and in order to fulfill that mitzvah the Rebbe wanted to own land that had been previously harvested which would now lie unworked.

On a basic level the Belzer Rebbe desired to fulfill the mitzvah of Shemitah. When he had lived in Poland, he had been unable to practice this mitzvah. Now that he lived in the Holy Land, he was able to do so. The Rebbe also wanted to teach his chasidim about the importance of this mitzvah and so he prominently displayed his love for the mitzvah.

What is the reason for the mitzvah of Shemitah?

Here is how Sefer Hachinuch answers this question:

It is from the roots of this commandment to affix in our hearts and make a strong impression in our minds [about] the matter of the world having been created. As (Exodus 20, 11) "in six days did God make the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day" - in which He did not create anything - He imposed rest on Himself. And in order to remove and uproot and eradicate from our thoughts the idea of the eternity [of the world] - which the deniers of the Torah believe in, through which they destroy all its principles and break through its walls - did the requirement come upon us to expend all our time, day by day and year by year, for this matter, by counting six years and resting on the seventh so that this matter will never depart from between our eyes for all time. And this is similar to the manner in which we count the days of the week [by dividing them] into six days of work and the seventh is a day of rest. Therefore, He, blessed be He, did command to render ownerless all that the land produces in this year - in addition to resting during it (i.e. during the year) - so that a person will remember that the land which produces fruits for him every year does not produce them by its [own] might and virtue. For there is a Master over it and over its master - and when He wishes, He commands him (i.e. the master of the land) to render them (i.e. the fruit) ownerless. And there is another benefit in this matter - to acquire the trait of letting go (i.e. of one's possessions), for there is no one more generous than he who gives without hope for recompense. And there is another benefit - the outcome of this is that a person will add to his trust in God, may He be blessed, since anyone who finds it in his heart to give and abandon to the world all of the produce of his lands and his ancestral inheritance for an entire year - and educates himself and his family through this for all of his days - will never have the trait of stinginess overcome him too much, nor will he have a deficient amount of trust (Sefer Hachinuch, 84).

To summarize, Sefer Hachinuch lists three reasons for the commandment of Shemitah:

One reason is to remind us all that Gd created the world in six days. For this reason, we have a Shabbat for the land in order to emphasize that the world is Gd's creation.

A second reason is to teach us the character trait of not being stingy. As we let go of our possessions by not working the land and leaving it for the poor, we will realize that what we think is our possession is not really ours. The more we let go, the more momentum we will create towards becoming more generous. This relates to becoming more generous both as individuals and as a society.

A third reason for Shemitah is that this will teach us to have faith in Hashem. By leaving the land empty and not focusing on our own livelihood for a year, we will learn to rely upon our Creator in every facet of our life.

This third reason is explicit in the Torah:

“And should you ask, “What are we to eat in the seventh year, if we may neither sow nor gather in our crops?” I will ordain My blessing for you in the sixth year, so that it shall yield a crop sufficient for three years. When you sow in the eighth year, you will still be eating old grain of that crop; you will be eating the old until the ninth year, until its crops come in” (25:20-21).

Many Jews have found great meaning in this third reason—i.e. in the understanding that the Shemithah year is meant to inculcate within us a stronger quality of faith in Hashem.

Although many religious Zionists rely upon solid halachik rulings to minimize the practical consequences of observing Shemithah nowadays, the chareidi community fully embraces Shemithah's strictures and inconveniences and often wear it as a badge of honor to demonstrate complete and total commitment to Hashem.

A story is told about the Shemithah year in 1959. Although the challenge looked particularly great that year, many in the chareidi community were deeply committed to the idea of not working the land in order to observe Shemithah. The chareidim created a fund to support farmers who were not working their crops during the Shemithah and thus were potentially facing huge losses of income. They created a fund to purchase produce from lands in which there would be no concerns of Shemithah violations. That year they were able to find all the produce they needed except for onions. Onions are a staple of a Mediterranean diet, but alas, no onions. Suddenly a strange thing happened. An entire ship filled with onions arrived in the port of Haifa. There was no crew or owner to be found—just onions. No one knew what to do. After the matter was investigated it was discovered that the onions had belonged to a ship from a country that Israel was at war with. The captain and crew had had to abandon the ship and the ship had drifted to the port. Miraculously an entire ship of onions arrived for a community in need of onions. For that community it reinforced the message that Hashem will provide for those who have faith (Vekarat Leshabbat Oneg, volume 1, 188).

As interesting as that story is, I draw a different message from the concept of a Shemithah year. In Temple times, the Shemithah year was the time for the farmer to stop working for a year and instead spend the year in pursuit of the spiritual. Most of us are no longer farmers, but we all need to set aside time to evaluate our lives. For me the Shemithah year is about taking a pause in our life to gain perspective and evaluate our core values and whether they match with the way we lead our lives.

This past year has been a year like no other. It has been a year where our routines have been altered. Hopefully, we took this as a sign for introspection and to gain perspective on our own lives.

It is too easy for all of us to lose perspective.

We read a terrible story in our daf yomi studies this week:

An incident occurred where there were two priests who were equal as they were running and ascending the ramp. One of them reached the four cubits before his colleague, who then, out of anger, took a knife and stabbed him in the heart. The Tosefta continues: Rabbi Tzadok then stood up on the steps of the Entrance Hall of the Sanctuary and said: Hear this, my brothers of the house of Israel. The verse states: "If one be found slain in the land... and it be not known who had smitten him; then your Elders and your judges shall come forth and they shall measure...and it shall be that the city which is nearest to the slain man...shall take a heifer" (Deuteronomy 21:1–3). And the Elders of that city took that heifer and broke its neck in a ritual of atonement. But what of us, in our situation? Upon whom is the obligation to bring the heifer whose neck is broken? Does the obligation fall on the city, Jerusalem, so that its Sages must bring the calf, or does the obligation fall upon the Temple courtyards, so that the priests must bring it? At that point the entire assembly of people burst into tears. The father of the boy, i.e., the young priest who was stabbed, came and found that he was still convulsing. He said: May my son's death be an atonement for you. But my son is still convulsing and has not yet died, and as such, the knife, which is in his body, has not become ritually impure through contact with a corpse. If you remove it promptly, it will still be pure for future use (Yoma, 23a).

What a horrific tale. A kohen murdering another kohen in pursuit of removing ash from the altar! How could such an event even take place! And then, perhaps even worse, when the father of the murdered kohen sees his son dying, his instinct is to try and save the knife as opposed to the dying son.

This tale represents a total loss of perspective. It shows us how easy it is to completely lose perspective on what is important in life. In no world should we ever consider the removing of ashes from the altar to be more important than a human life, but that's what happens when we lose perspective.

Shemita is a year to stop and regain perspective. It is a ritual designed to help us think about our lives—about what we are doing and where we want to be.

Looking back on our year of covid quarantining it was in some sense a Shemitah year. Hopefully, we have all taken the time to ponder, reflect, and grow so that we can live our lives to our fullest in service of Hashem.