Parashat B’har powerfully describes two important mitzvot: giving the land a Sabbatical every seventh year, and declaring a Yovel (“Jubilee”) every fifty years. Each of these commandments calls upon us to engage in what we might call “Shabbat practice”: to stop engaging in creation and productivity by cultivating the middah of bitachon (נודע), “learning to trust in God” or, as many may prefer, “trust in a force greater than ourselves.”

The Sabbatical and Jubilee years invite us to set down the tools by which we “work the land,” to relinquish what others may owe us, and surrender our inclination to control. To the extent that we can learn to “trust the process” or “go with the flow” of life, we may learn that the current carries us where we need to go. In practicing bitachon, we learn (in the terminology of twelve-step programs) to “let go and let God.”

The first of B’har’s Shabbatical-based mitzvot is the “Sabbatical year of rest for the land” (described elsewhere in Torah as the Sh’mitah):

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 Eternal. Six years you may sow your field, and six years

you may prune your vineyard and gather in the yield. But the seventh year the land shall have a sabbath of complete rest a sabbath of the Eternal: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard (Leviticus 25:2–4).

The second Shabbat-based mitzvah is the Yovel or “Jubilee” year, which takes place in the fiftieth year, the year after seven Sabbatical cycles. In the Jubilee year, slaves must be emancipated, and Israelites who have had to sell their ancestral homestead as a result of financial hardship are entitled to return home.

You shall hallow the fiftieth year. You shall proclaim release throughout the land for all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee to you: each of you shall return to your holding and each of you shall return each to your family (Leviticus 25:10).

Unlike most mitzvot, which can be performed in the moment, the Sh’mitah and Yovel mitzvot are enacted over a period of a full year. In a midrash on Psalm 103:20 (“Bless the Eternal, O the Eternal’s angels, mighty creatures who do God’s bidding, ever obedient to the Eternal’s bidding”), Rabbi Yitzchak Nascha comments:

This refers to those who observe Sh’mitah. It is customary for a person to perform a mitzvah for a day, a week, or a month. Does one usually observe a mitzvah for an entire year? Yet the farmer lets the field lie fallow for a year, the vineyard for a year, and remains silent. Is there greater strength of character than this?

Leviticus 25:23 clearly expresses the rationale for the Jubilee: “The land must not be sold beyond reclaim, for the land is Mine; you are but strangers resident with Me.”
Nachmanides views this verse as exhorting Israelites “to practice the Jubilee year and not feel bad about it—for the land is Mine and I do not want you selling it outright as you do with other things. That is the Sifra’s [midrash]’s point in saying: ‘You are but strangers resident with Me’—do not imagine that you are the point of it all.”

We are not the point of it all. For the medieval Spanish Jewish philosopher Bachya ibn Pakuda, B’hur teaches that each of us must be “ready to move on and relocate, and not feel settled and secure,” noting that “the soul is also a stranger in this world; all people are like strangers here, as the verse says: ‘because you are strangers and temporary residents with Me.’”

The mitzvot of the Sabbatical and Jubilee years therefore teach us to notice our natural human inclination toward attachment and to strive, over and over, to surrender that predilection. In a sermon entitled “To Hold with Open Arms,” Rabbi Milton Steinberg captured this paradox after he recovered from a near-fatal heart attack. Steinberg stressed the need to live fully and joyfully with the awareness of our impermanence, learning to “clasp the world, but with relaxed hands; to embrace it, but with open arms.” Practicing bitachon means, as Steinberg taught, to care for ourselves, others, and our world, without succumbing to the illusion that we “possess” anything.

We can understand our inclination to “cling” or “grasp” for control as symptomatic of anxiety induced by our sense of separation and disconnection from self, others, and God. We can notice the impulse to attach but allow that urge to pass through us, instead of expressing itself in futile attempts to seize control. By opening our mind, heart, and hands, we may settle into an awareness of the underlying interconnectedness of all.

Honestly facing our ultimate surrender can open our eyes to a deeper truth, as my friend and Mussar teacher Miki Young, z”l, expressed in a blog post while struggling with what proved to be terminal illness:

I think that there’s a comfort to mortality. I think some day, when the timing is right, I will simply fall back into a large white parachute, letting go of worry, letting go of fear and just relaxing into the silkiness. Until that time, I find it comforting to think that the reason for my mortality is to drive my living. We are all here for such a short time that it is important to discern what we really want our lives to be about.

We can practice bitachon by remembering that “large white parachute” and experiencing it as an ever-present source of comfort and support. We must pause and notice, without judging, our propensity to grasp for control. Then, at the n’kudat b’chirah ( düב לעבר), the “choice point” or “awareness point,” we must remember the truth that “we are not the point.” It is more than enough for us to understand that we are always gerim v’toshavim ( גורמים ותושבים —“strangers and temporary residents”) with God, just passing through.

We can be ready, at any moment, to emulate our ancestors Abraham and Sarah by “going forth,” uprooting and relocating ourselves to the next moment, the next place. We access our innate capacity for bitachon by opening our minds, bodies, and spirits, hold-
ing all that is precious with open hands, treading lightly on this world, treasuring and releasing each breath, each moment.

Bitachon is a particularly challenging middah, especially for those of us whose trust has been undermined by small and large personal traumas and challenges, natural disasters, or unspeakable tragedies. There seems to be ample reason to mistrust the ever-changing flow of life, since it often leads us onto rocky shores. But practicing bitachon does not require passive reliance on that flow; Rabbinic tradition calls upon us not to trust in supernatural intervention, but rather to exert our own efforts to make manifest the divinity latent in the world. Practicing bitachon involves active, intentional engagement with an underlying, often unnoticed and supportive process that we perceive, trust, and reveal through our words and actions.

**Questions to Ask**

What is your basic level of trust in yourself? In others? In God? In life in general?

What, if anything, reminds you of your capacity to trust in that which you cannot see, feel, touch, taste, or hear?

At times in your life when things have seemed bleak, have you been able to perceive within or beneath the bleakness a spark of light and hope?

Do you have a sense of trusting the “unfolding process of life”?

**Practices for the Middah of Bitachon**

Notice the presence of bitachon in your mind and body: When we attend to the process of breathing, we notice how we automatically trust that the next breath will arise, even when we are not making a conscious effort to breathe. When we bring awareness to the sensations of sitting in a chair or feeling the ground beneath us as we walk, we notice how we habitually trust in underlying supportive structures even in our less conscious moments. When we manifest confidence even while experiencing insecurity and anxiety, we manifest and build trust in ourselves. When we delegate a task to others, we notice our capacity to trust in someone or something beyond ourselves. When we get out of bed each morning, we notice how we trust the life process itself.

Befriend worry: “If worry comes to your heart,” teaches the Mussar master Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Satanov in his *Cheshbon HaNefesh*, “take it as a warning from God who loves you.” Rather than an impediment to practicing bitachon, worry can be an effective reminder of our capacity for feeling held and supported. When you notice anxiety or worry arising, greet and welcome it by placing a hand on your heart, taking a breath, and experiencing what it feels like to accept love from yourself and the universe.

Meet fear with bitachon: We are called to balance healthy fear with bitachon, which enables us to step outside our
comfort zone, not knowing the outcome in advance. Practice *bitachon* by noticing a recurrent situation that provokes anxiety in you. See if you can discern if that fear is exaggerated and whether fostering a sense of trust in yourself or another person may ease the constriction.

Cultivate *bitachon* in others: Investigate moments when you feel alone, unsupported, or helpless in meeting a challenge. Identify potential sources of assistance, and ask for help. Delegate a task that feels like more than you can or should handle right now. Trust others, and trust yourself to ask for help.

**Other Middot to Consider**

The process of intentionally “letting go” of control by engaging in *bitachon*, trust, implicates several other related *middot*:

- **Savlanut** (עברית, “patience, forbearance”), our innate capacity to “bear the burden” of waiting. How would savlanut come up for bonded servants awaiting the Yovel?
- **G’vurah** (עברית, “strength”), engaging our inner strength to maintain our boundary by restraining our impulse to “retake the wheel” and exert control. Imagine the g’vurah required of farmers observing the *Sh’mitah*.

**NOTES**

1. The Sabbatical year is referred to by the term *Sh’mitah* (“release”) in the Book of Deuteronomy: “Every seventh year you shall practice remission [sh’mitah] of debts. This shall be the nature of the remission: all creditors shall remit the due that they claim from their fellow [Israelites]; they shall not dun their fellow [Israelites] or kin, for the remission proclaimed is of the Eternal” (Deuteronomy 15:1–2).

2. Yalkut T’hilim 860.


4. Ibid., 419.
