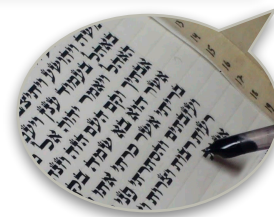




The Collective Conversation

Weekly Torah Essays from the
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community



Sefer Vayikra

Parshat Behar-Bechukotai

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A Fallow Land, not a Fallow Life

By Ben Niewood

This week we read *Behar-Bechukotai*, and with this reading we close *Sefer Vayikra*. *Vayikra* is filled with lists upon lists of *mitzvot*, and I don't think anyone could be blamed if they zoned out somewhere around *Metzora*. But, right at the end of the Sefer, in *Parshat Behar*, we're hit with two *mitzvot*, *Shmita* and *Yovel*, that scream for attention.

The Sefat Emet teaches that the commandment of Shmita is not just a practical measure for soil conservation, but rather a spiritual practice that allows the land to recharge and come back to life. Just as humans need rest to maintain their physical and mental health, so too does the land need rest to maintain its fertility and vitality.

Shmita occurs every 7th year in Israel, and in *Shmita* the land must lay fallow, meaning no farmer in Israel is allowed to plant or sell produce from their land. Instead, any produce that grows is given to the poor and, although it isn't mentioned in this *parsha*, all debts between Jews are also forgiven. *Yovel* is the year after every 7th *Shmita* cycle (every 50th year), and again no planting is allowed. Any land outside of a walled city in Israel is also returned to its original owners and all slaves are set free. The Torah explains that if we observe *Shmita* and *Yovel* the land will be enriched and our crops will be bountiful. Practically, this has a strong basis in agricultural practice, since letting land lay fallow actually helps rejuvenate soil nutrients and increases crop yields in subsequent years.

Shmita is first introduced in *Vayikra* 25:2:

דַּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם כִּי תִבְאוּ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי נֹתֵן לָכֶם וְשָׁבְתָה הָאָרֶץ שְׁבַת לַיהוָה

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.

This *pasuk* says something very interesting — that **the mitzvah of *Shmita* is actually observed by the Land of Israel, not by the Jewish people living in it.** The *Sefat Emet* in *Likutei Torah* interprets *Shmita* in this deeper sense, suggesting that the land itself is a living entity that requires rest and rejuvenation. He teaches that the commandment of *Shmita* is not just a practical measure for soil conservation, but rather a spiritual practice that allows the land to recharge and come back to life. Just as humans need rest to maintain their physical and mental health, so too does the land need rest to maintain its fertility and vitality. The *Sefat Emet* reminds us that the commandment of *Shmita* is not just an agricultural practice, but a way to connect with the divine energy that flows through all living things.

The *Sefat Emet* also says something very interesting in his commentary on *Behar*. He explains that just as when we observe *mitzvot* we are elevated above our normal state, the Land of Israel is also elevated when it observes the mitzvah of *Shmita* and *Yovel*. Israel, through *Shmita* and *Yovel*, is given a special spiritual significance.

This message is particularly relevant to us now since we recently celebrated *Yom Haatzmaut* and soon will be celebrating *Yom Yerushalayim*. Before the Jewish people returned to the land of Israel it was impossible for us to allow the land to observe *Shmita*. Now that we have returned, those living in Israel finally have the opportunity to give the land its spiritually mandated R&R and help elevate it to the special status the *Sefat Emet* describes.

Shmita and Yovel challenge us to reconceptualize how we think about wealth and property, and they remind us to care for those less fortunate and to use our resources in a way that aligns with Hashem's justice and compassion.

The commandments of *Shmita* and *Yovel* remind us that Israel, and really all land everywhere, is not just a personal commodity to be exploited, but rather a sacred trust allotted to us by God that we must care for and cultivate. Israel is a symbol of God's promise to the Jewish people, and we have a responsibility to use its resources in a way that honors that promise. *Shmita* and *Yovel* challenge us to reconceptualize how we think about wealth and property, and they remind us to care for those less fortunate and to use our resources in a way that aligns with *Hashem's* justice and compassion.

Just like the land is enriched both physically and spiritually when it lies fallow during its *Shabbat*, so too our lives are enriched by resting on our *Shabbat* every week. In the words of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, on the *Sabbath* we stop creating and realize that we are created. This *Shabbat*, when we rest and listen to *Parshat Behar*, we are given the opportunity to stop and think about how we can recharge spiritually and align our lives with the message of *Shmita*. Whether it's finding ways to reduce our carbon footprint, or giving our money and time to help those less fortunate, there is much we can do to observe our own version of modern *Shmita* both in and outside of Israel. In *Shmita* the land may lay fallow, but by learning from these ideals and putting them into practice we can ensure that our lives are anything but.

Ben and Aliza moved to Scarsdale from Brooklyn last June and now have two kids, Gwendolyn (2) and Leland (<1), and two dogs, Magellan and Frida. They have loved participating in all the *shul* programming since coming here and have especially been blown away by the amazing events and groups for kids. *Behar* was Ben's Bar Mitzvah *parsha*, but unfortunately his *dvar Torah* wasn't stored in the cloud so he had to write a new one.

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