



SHEMITAH AS A MODEL FOR HOW WE SPEND OUR TIME

For an agricultural society, the shemittah year presents an intriguing conundrum: what is one to do with so much free time? Shemittah-observing farmers face the challenge of how to utilize the time they usually dedicate to tilling their fields. Unsurprisingly, the Torah itself hints at a solution. Based on the repeated links between Shabbat and shemittah, the commentators (see Seforno, Va-yikra 25:2, *Ha'ameik Davar*, Shemot 34:21) infer that just as Shabbat is a day of rest dedicated to divine service, so too the shemittah year. Both demand of us an increased focus on spiritual matters and, in particular, the study of Torah. Indeed, Torah-study seems to be Chazal's programmatic answer to how we are to use the time the Torah forbids

us from work. Like Shabbat and shemittah, the prohibition of work on chol ha-moeid is also intended to facilitate widespread Torah-study (see Yerushalmi, *Moeid Katan* 2:3). Why is Torah-study the single answer to how to spend our discretionary time?

Put simply, the consistent recommendation for Torah-study may be to facilitate the fulfillment of the mitzvah of *talmud Torah*. Those working the fields may be hard-pressed to find ample time to study, and, as such, they are given a year off

to concentrate on the most paramount of mitzvot. While this explanation suffices, an analysis of the unique characteristics of Torah-study reveals a complimentary answer that guides how we use our free time even when we are not able to engage in Torah-study.

Talmud Torah constitutes a paradigm of three principles that characterize constructive use of free time. First, it engages our creativity. Torah-study forces us to think, to analyze, to organize, and to create, so much



Members of the YU Shemittah Trip learning about how Shemittah is observed in Israel

so that the Torah we learn becomes an intrinsic part of our identity (see *Avodah Zarah* 19a and R. Norman Lamm's "A Jewish Ethic of Leisure" in *Faith and Doubt*). Second, *talmud Torah* reflects human capacity for control, for *bekhirah* (see *Avot* 6:2). When we choose to learn, and thereby implement our highest of priorities, we also highlight that we are in control of the time we have and not controlled by the activities that fill

it. Third, Torah-study highlights our commitment to the implementation of our values, our ability to not only pinpoint and define our priorities but to put them into practice (see *Teshuvot Ha-Rosh* 15:10). Because *talmud Torah* exemplifies these three principles, it is the paradigmatic free-time activity. *Chazal's* programmatic answer to learn Torah with our free time encourages us to fulfill the mitzvah of *talmud Torah* whenever

possible, and also provides us with a roadmap of how to use our free time even when we are not studying.

From this perspective, the laws of *shemittah* enlighten and enrich not only the lives of farmers but the lives of all of Klal Yisrael. Whenever confronted with the challenge of how to best use our free time, we are to look to the model of the *shemittah* year.

SOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

Source#1: Seforno, Va-yikra 25:2

שתהיה כל השנה הבטלה מעבודת האדמה מוכנת לעבודתו כמו שכיון בשבת בראשית באמרו שבת לה' אלקיך.

So that during this whole year the farmer instead of "serving" the soil which requires cultivation, will turn his efforts to serving G-d directly instead. Just as the weekly Sabbath is a day set aside for intensive service of the Lord, so the shemittah year is to serve the same purpose.

Source #2: Yerushalmi, Moeid Katan 2:3

כלום אסרו לעשות מלאכה בחולו שלמועד אלא כדי שיהו אוכלין ושותין ויגיעין בתורה ואינן אוכלין ושותין ופחזין.

They only forbade to work on the intermediate days of the holiday so they should eat, and drink, and exert themselves in Torah; but they eat, and drink, and behave wantonly.

Source #3: R. Norman Lamm's "A Jewish Ethic of Leisure"

Nofesh is more than self-discovery; it is the use of leisure for self-transformation ... On Shabbat, we receive a neshamah yetereah, an "additional soul." This suggests an undeveloped facet of a personality, a spiritual dimension, of which we remain unaware in the normal course of events. On Shabbat (in the nofesh sense of a menuhah), we are given the time to enrich ourselves by developing or creating this spiritual dimension.

Source#4: Avot 6:2

והלחת מעשה אלקים המה והמכתב מכתב אלקים הוא חרות על הלחת, אל תקרא חרות אלא חרות, שאין לך בן חורין אלא מי שעוסק בתלמוד תורה.

"And the tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, graven upon the tablets" (Exodus 32:16). Read not charut ['graven'] but cherut ['freedom']. For there is no free man but one that occupies himself with the study of the Torah.

Source#5: Teshuvot Ha-Rosh 15:10

הילכך כל אדם שעושה תורתו קבע ומלאכתו עראי כגון שיש לו עתים קבועים ללמודו ואינו מבטלם כלל ושאר היום כשהוא פנוי שאינו צריך לחזור על מזונותיו הוא חוזר על הספר ולומד ואינו מטייל בשוקים וברחובות אלא כדי להשתכר פרנסתו ופרנסת אנשי ביתו ולא לאצור ולהרבות ממון לזה אני קורא ת"ח והמביישו משלם קנס המפורש בירושלמי.

Therefore, any person that makes Torah primary and work secondary, such as someone who has designated times for learning and doesn't ever cancel them, and the rest of the day takes every free moment, when not busy making a living, reading a sefer and learning [Torah], and only travels the streets and marketplaces to provide for the family, not to amass wealth, this is what I call a Torah scholar, and someone who embarrasses such an individual should pay the fine that is spelled out in the Talmud Yerushalmi.