

Reflections from the YU Shemitta B'Aretz Trip to Israel

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

WHAT SHEMITTAH CAN AND MUST TEACH US

Shemittat karka, the Biblical commandment to leave fields in Israel fallow every seven years, is a most unusual mitzvah and a tremendous test of faith for Jewish farmers.

The *Midrash Rabbah* (Vayikra 1:1) declares, in the name of R. Yitzchak, that the phrase in Tehillim 103:20 “Powerful ones who fulfill His word” refers to none other than those faithfully keeping the dictates of shemittah. It explains:

גבירי כח עשי דברו, בַּמָּה הַכְּתוּב מְדַבֵּר, אָמַר רַבִּי יִצְחָק בְּשׁוֹמְרֵי שְׁבִיעִית הַכְּתוּב מְדַבֵּר, בְּנֶהֱגָ שְׁבַע עוֹלָם אָדָם עוֹשֶׂה מִצְוָה לְיוֹם אַחַד, לְשֶׁבֶת אַחַת, לְחֹדֶשׁ אַחַד, שְׁמָא לְשָׂאָר יָמוֹת הַשָּׁנָה, וְדִין חֲמֵי חֲקָלֶיהָ בְּיָרֵה כְּרַמֶּיהָ בְּיָרֵה וְיִהְיֶה אֲרָנוֹנָא וְשִׁתִּיק, יֵשׁ לָהּ גְבוּר גְּדוֹל מְזָה.
“Powerful ones who fulfill His word, etc.”

— about what is the verse speaking? Rabbi Yitzchak said, “The verse is speaking about those that observe the sabbatical year. It is customary in the world that a man will fulfill a commandment for a day, for a Shabbat, for a month, but for the rest of the days of the year? And this one watches his field empty, watches his vineyard empty and he gives his purse and is silent — is there one more powerful than this one?”

Typically, a person fulfills a commandment for a day, perhaps a week, or even a month. But need a person stay focused on a mitzvah for the entirety of a year? Yet these farmers emerge from their homes each day to find their fields fallow, their vineyards bare. Their taxes and expenses? They are still there. But, for a year, there is no income. Despite this, they remain

silent and resolute in their faith. Is there any greater courage and moral fortitude than this?

I had the opportunity in January to travel with an elite group of students and rabbim from Yeshiva to meet with everyday people keeping shemittah 5782. The purpose of the whirlwind trip was primarily to understand the *otzar beit din* system for distributing shemittah fruit (see Rabbi Dr. Ari Bergmann’s article in this issue). Along our journeys we met many courageous land and business owners, forgoing a year of income in 2022 because of a concept that was introduced into the world at Mount Sinai more than three millennia ago. This, despite the fact that shemittah restrictions are, according to most authorities, a rabbinic dictum at this

stage in history. What made those encounters even more remarkable was the fact that many of the farmers were, ostensibly, otherwise secular Israelis. Somehow, their connection to God and the Land of Israel inspired them to sacrifice for the fulfillment of this most difficult commandment.

What Lies Behind This Unique Statute?

Shemittah is referred to in the Torah as a Shabbat. Just as we work for six weekdays and then rest on Shabbat Bereishit, we work for six years in the fields and then take off an entire year. It seems that the messages of Shabbat are designed to punctuate our lives in different ways. Whatever we must remember through the keeping of Shabbat requires both frequent reminders as well as intense periods of contemplation. We can never get more than six days away from the “correction” or “reorientation” provided by Shabbat. At the same time, at least some of its messages require more than 24 hours to truly assimilate. Thus, a Jew is given two ways to make the messages of Shabbat part of his or her life: a weekly reminder and an intense sabbatical year.¹

Work is, of course, not completely forbidden during the shemittah year. One can argue that it would simply be impossible for the nation to desist from all 39 Biblical categories of work for an entire week — never mind an entire year. The difficulty of shutting down one’s business should not be minimized; however, it pales in comparison to a requirement to actually keep Shabbat for 12 (or 13 this leap year) months.

Perhaps, however, shemittah, while

sharing similarities to Shabbat, comes to highlight values that go beyond the weekly Shabbat. In particular, the Torah tells us that shemittah serves as three shabbatot: a “*Shabbat LaShem* — Shabbat for God” (Vayikra 25:2,3), a “*Shabbat La’aretz* — Shabbat for the Land” (Vayikra 25:5) and a “*Shabbat ... lachem* — Shabbat for the People — to Eat” (ibid). Each of these phrases give us insight to different, but interconnected takeaways from the mitzvah of shemittah.

Simply put, the shemittah year emphasizes three profound messages:

1. God is Creator and the Provider of our continued sustenance.

This message, consonant with the message of the weekly Shabbat, is magnified during the shemittah year. While Jewish history is replete with stories of Jews who needed to sacrifice their livelihoods for Shabbat observance, for most, Shabbat serves as a needed break rather than a threat to their financial security. We can run many businesses for six days a week. The loss of a year of income, on the other hand, is cause for significant angst. Dependence on God comes to the forefront in the Sabbatical year.

This idea is particularly poignant in shemittah as God restricts the use of our real estate. Land ownership, and with that ownership, the ability to use our properties as we see fit, is simply more “real” or meaningful than possession of movable objects or even cash. The Sabbatical year forces us to acknowledge that everything belongs to God.

At the same time, the inability to eat the fruit in one’s own field as one sees fit sends a very direct message to those with orchards. On our trip to Israel, we came to understand that

fruit trees continue to yield produce in the shemittah year (and the year that follows) despite the fact that little is done to foster their growth. Trees are laden with fruit that must be harvested — even during shemittah — to save the trees from collapsing under the weight of their yield. The fruit, which cannot be sold in a normal manner, inevitably rots. [This is another reason why the *otzar beit din* system, which allows for the distribution of produce to those who can eat it with the necessary care, is to be encouraged]. Maharal (*Netiv HaTorah* 17) notes the farmer’s challenge of watching so much “go to waste,” especially at a time when he lacks proper income. The landowner is left with no choice but to remember that all belongs to God. The land, the fruit, simply don’t belong to men and humans are not consulted as to what shall ultimately become of their supposed property.

2. The Land of Israel is more than a means for our physical well-being. Respecting and sanctifying that land is a value unto itself.

Shemittah is one of many *mitzvot hateluyot baaretz* — dependent on the Land of Israel and only applicable on its holy soil. Most other such commandments, however, focus on the fruit of the land less than the land itself. Produce of the sabbatical year is holy and, while it should be consumed, it must be treated in a special manner. But the essence of shemittah is a “hands-off” approach to the soil, which emphasizes not just God’s ownership, but a necessary reverence for Eretz Yisrael.

Even for Rambam (*Moreh Nevuchim* 3:39), who maintains that the sabbatical year is intended to rejuvenate the land, preparing it for future harvests, the commandment

is limited to Israel. There is no other country given such care, regardless of who may live there. Even if the Torah is doing *us* a favor by teaching us how to maintain our field for maximum yield, we are taught this lesson specifically in Eretz Yisrael.

R. Yosef Zvi Rimon, in his masterwork on the Laws of Shemittah, cites R. Shlomo Goren and others to this effect. We are reminded through mitzvot shemittah that Eretz Yisrael is, for the Jewish People and beyond, unlike any other place on Earth. It is our land, a holy gift from the Creator, and every effort must be exerted to care for it. We, like Adam and Chava in Gan Eden, are charged “*le’ovdah uleshomrah*,” to work the land while guarding it from harm.

3. We must repeatedly invest in ourselves and our brethren, spiritually and materially, to allow our people to function at peak capacity.

Once every seven years, the Jewish people, especially in an agricultural society, assume the role of the Tribe of Levi, relieved of land ownership and free for spiritual pursuits. Of course, like the weekly Shabbat, refraining from work doesn’t necessarily lead to study and meditation. The sabbatical year seems to reach its climax with *hakhel* on the Sukkot that follows. *Hakhel* is a massive Torah-study convention led by the king in Jerusalem, which lays the groundwork for religious revival in Israel.

Rav Kook (introduction to *Shabbat*

Ha’aretz) expressed that shemittah functions for the nation and Shabbat functions for the individual. Shabbat allows for a personal reorientation after a hard week of work and material distractions. It allows the individual to reconnect to his or her soul. The nation, too, has a soul. And the soul of the nation requires not a day, but a year to be freed from the petty disagreements and distractions that keep it from flourishing and advancing the nation toward its destiny. A year without the usual business dealings, when rich and poor are equalized, when the people have time to step back and refocus their national goals, is the necessary cure for a collective mission gone awry.

For the needy, shemittah provides a second chance. A year where dignity is restored, and sustenance can be picked off every tree. And the shemittah year concludes with the cancellation of debts, offering a lifeline to those who have fallen on hard times.

The laws of shemittah play but a minor role for those living in the Diaspora. They should remind us of the spiritual benefits that we forgo by choosing to remain in exile. However, the values underlying the sabbatical year are timeless and ubiquitous. Just as study of the Temple sacrifices allows us to reap some of the benefits of a mitzvah that seems distant, a closer look at shemittah can reinforce central Torah concepts that must guide us wherever we find ourselves.

Endnote

1. R. Yehuda HaLevi, in *Sefer Hakuzari* (3:5), extends this further, suggesting that thrice daily tefillah serves as “mini- shabbatot” during each day. These breaks, times throughout our day, allow us to connect back to our ideas and values every few hours. Tefillah services, much shorter than a Shabbat day, ensure that the Jew is never distant from at least a brief reality check in the morning, afternoon and evening.



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