



MISHNAS CHAYIM

משנת חיים

MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

פרשת בהר תשס"ח • Parshas Behar 5768

ALL ABOUT SHEMITTAH

“For six years you shall sow your field...and on the seventh, there shall be a *Shabbos* for the land; do not sow your field, and do not prune your vineyard,” (*Vayikra* 25:3,4). The *Rishonim* and *Achronim* present various rationales to explain the underlying ideas behind this *mitzvah* of allowing the land to lie fallow. Some of the reasons are quite eye-opening.

THE RAMBAM'S VIEW

The Rambam (*Moreh Nevuchim* sec. 3, ch. 39) suggests that a primary function of the *Shemittah* directive is to benefit the land. Through constant usage, the land would lose its potency, and produce a leaner crop. Allowing the land to ‘rest’ for a year enables it to recoup its strength and increase its productivity. (This is actually common agrarian practice).

Based on a Mishnah in *Avos* (5:9), the Abarbanel (*Nachlas Avos, ibid.*) takes issue with the Rambam's approach. The Mishnah in *Avos*, which delineates the different punishments that come on account of various *aveiros*, states:

גְלוּת בְּאֶהָ לְעוֹלָם עַל עוֹבְדֵי עֲבוֹדַת זָרָה, וְעַל גְלוּי עֲרִיּוֹת, וְעַל שְׁפִיכוֹת דָּמִים, וְעַל הַשְּׂמֹטָה הָאֲרָצִי.

“Exile from the Land is occasioned by idolatry, immorality, murder, or working the land during the *Shemittah* year.”

Apparently, the violation of the laws of *Shemittah* is quite a heinous crime—as evidenced by its associates in this Mishnah, as well as by the harsh punishment! If the main thrust behind the instruction to halt labor on the land is to increase

future fruit production, why would the Torah attach such severity to the observance of *Shemittah*? Were the people to opt to forgo this measure, they'd be harming themselves agriculturally, but that should be their problem! Why should they get slapped with exile merely because of a lousy business decision?

ABARBANEL'S REJOINER

The Abarbanel himself, as well as numerous *Rishonim* such as the *Sefer Hachinuch* (*Mitzvah* 84), perceives the intent of *Shemittah* in a much different light. According to the Abarbanel, the underlying idea behind *Shemittah* dovetails that of *Shabbos*. *Shemittah* follows the same format: six periods of work, followed by a seventh period of rest. This formula is patterned after the six days in which the Creator fashioned the world, followed by the seventh day on which He ‘rested’. When the Jewish people adhere to these observances, they are recalling and bearing witness to this fundamental principle.

The *Sefer Habatim* (*mitzvah* 130) demonstrates just how prevalent this pattern—and the testimony it renders—is in *mitzvah* observance:

Days: The seventh day is observed as *Shabbos*.

Weeks: Seven weeks are counted preceding the festival of *matan* Torah.

Months: The seventh month of the Jewish year is *Tishrei*, the majority of which is sanctified by *Yomim Tovim* of a most awesome nature.

Years: *Shemittah* is the seventh year.

Sabbatical cycles: Seven are counted and observed, culminating in the observance of

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Yovel after the completion of the seven cycles of seven.

In fact, we find that the history and existence of the entire world is based on this structure as it relates to millennia, which brings us to the next opinion:

THE RABBEINU BECHAYE'S APPROACH

The **Rabbeinu Bechaye** (*Vayikra 25:2*), citing the 'Kabbalistic approach', perceives *Shemittah* as a microcosm of the plan of world history. The Gemara in Rosh Hashanah (*31a*) states that the duration of the world will be 6,000 years. During the seventh millennium, the world will lay desolate, devoid of mankind. (The righteous will assume some type of angelic existence during this interim period, at which time the world will be reconstituted and readied for eternal living, as Ramchal explains in *Ma'amar Ha'ikrim*). The cessation of agriculture and abandonment of the land during *Shemittah* is a reminder and affirmation of this state of affairs.

In a similar vein, R' Yonasan Eibshitz (*Tumim sec. 67*) views *Shemittah* as a reflection of the utopian existence of the Messianic era. Relieved of the burdens of labor, the conditions of *Shemittah* resemble those of the eternal day of blissful rest.

THE CHIDA'S OPINION

The **Chida** (*Nachal Kedumim, Parshas Behar, 1*) approaches *Shemitta* in a most original way. The Gemara (*Berachos 35b*) describes how Rava would order his students to absent themselves from the *beis medrash* during the months of *Nissan* and *Tishrei*. Rava was not trying to cause *bitul* Torah, *chas v'shalom*; on the contrary, his intent was for them to tend to the timely harvest. With their sustenance taken care of during these months, the students would be free to devote

themselves to Torah learning for the remainder of the year.

After following this ideal program for six years, a sum total of twelve months of *limud haTorah* (two months per year) would have been lost. To make up for the lost learning, the Torah imposed a year-long 'vacation' from agricultural labor. In other words, according to the Chida, Eretz Yisrael during the *Shemittah* year would look like one giant *Kollel*.

Of course, the above presentation is far from exhaustive. On the contrary, it is hardly a drop in the limitless ocean of Divine Wisdom which is contained in the *mitzvah* of *Shemittah*. As with the rest of Torah, it is only on that 'eternal day of rest' to which R' Yonasan Eibshitz alluded, that we may come to understand it with some degree of totality.

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