

TIMELESS TORAH

Behar-Bechukotai - Majesty & Meaning: The Eternal Gift of the Land of Israel

The Covenant of Shemittah

The parshiyot of Behar and Bechukotai conclude Sefer Vayikra's outline of our religious service by defining our relationship with Eretz Yisrael. From its very placement at the end of this section of the Torah, as well as from the repeated emphasis on its significance through these parshiyot, it is clear that our relationship with the Land of Israel is fundamental to our existence as a Jewish people. Indeed, as Rav Soloveitchik once expressed it, true love of Eretz Yisrael represents love of the Jewish people and devotion to Eretz Yisrael as the land of our forefathers. Eretz Yisrael is the place where the Jewish people need to be to practice not only the land-related mitzvot but everything involved in living and breathing as a Jew.

Most prevalent among the references to Eretz Yisrael in this week's parshiyot is the mitzvah of shemittah, the mitzvah to leave the land fallow every seven years. Some commentators understand this mitzvah as based on practical agriculture. For land to remain fertile, it cannot be worked on incessantly; it is necessary to allow it to rest so that it can rejuvenate and regain its natural nutrients. Many other commentators, however, disagree strongly with this premise, citing the severe punishment of exile mentioned in the *Tochachah* (Admonition) for failing to observe the shemittah. If this is the consequence of not keeping shemittah, this mitzvah must be far more significant than sensible farming. In fact, according to the Ramban, the mitzvah of shemittah is so fundamental that it forms a part of the covenant between the Jewish people and Hashem.

Analysing the passages of Parshat Mishpatim and Parshat Ki Tisa, the Ramban shows how the mitzvot mentioned at the end of Mishpatim, including a brief sketch of the mitzvah of shemittah, were the basis of the first *brit*, or covenant, that was made at Har Sinai. After the sin of the Golden Calf, this covenant was somewhat rescinded, and a second covenant was formed, with the same mitzvot repeated and expanded on at length. The mitzvah of building the Mishkan was added to this second covenant, together with the halachot of the korbanot, and after that digression, Parshat Behar is actually a return to the narrative of Parshat Ki Tisa. With this, the Ramban explains the opening verse of the parshah that cryptically links shemittah with Har Sinai. This mitzvah is indeed, argues the Ramban, a continuation of the covenant that was begun at Har Sinai.

The Land and Our Faith

Having understood that there is a deep-seated connection between shemittah and the covenant between us and Hashem, we must examine the rationale behind this key mitzvah. The *Kli Yakar* (Prague, d. 1619) discusses this at length, citing various opinions from the early commentators. His conclusion, based on several proofs from the verses themselves, is that the purpose of this mitzvah is to entrench in the hearts and minds of the Jewish people a sense of faith and trust in Hashem. The mitzvah of shemittah achieves this by removing the Jewish people's main source of livelihood from the natural order of things. For six consecutive years, we are to till the fields and tend to the crops, until in the sixth year, which ought to have the weakest yield,



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we can expect to find a bumper crop that will take us through to the eighth year.

The natural sentiments of a person who works hard for a living is that they provide independently for themselves, and it is this misguided attitude that the mitzvah of shemittah so magnificently negates. As much as we are expected to make efforts to support ourselves, we must always remember that we are unable to do so without Hashem. This is why there is a mitzvah every seventh year to lay down our ploughshares and shovels and internalise that whatever we have achieved over the past six years has been enabled only by Hashem.

And Eretz Yisrael is sensitive to this. Later in the parshah, we are warned that failure to keep shemittah will lead to the land itself rejecting the Jewish people and demanding its shemittah years as the people are exiled and the land remains fallow. This is the holiness that identifies our relationship with Eretz Yisrael. Our relationship with Eretz Yisrael is not determined by the strength of political arguments; it is defined by deep faith and trust in Hashem.

Personal Effort

Parshat Behar contains an additional facet to the mitzvah of shemittah that is not mentioned any other time this mitzvah is brought in the Torah. This is the mitzvah of yovel, which occurs at the end of every seven shemittah cycles and during which the land would lie fallow for a second consecutive year, Jewish slaves would be set free and ancestral lands would return to their original owners.

The critical difference between the shemittah and yovel, points out Rav Tzvi Hirsh Ferber (London, d. 1966), is that shemittah takes effect every seventh year regardless of whether the Beit Din announces it. Yovel, on the other hand, requires human input; the fiftieth year will not be yovel as long as the Beit Din has not formally declared it to be so.

This is a remarkable observation that complements the ideas that we have been discussing. The shemittah cycle is a holy system that is fixed in a way in which the lessons of trust in Hashem will be taught without us working towards it. But within that system, the yovel year requires us to inject our own sense of renewal and to make an effort to gain the faith in Hashem that is so vital for our Jewish perspectives.

This is the majesty of the eternal gift of the Land of Israel. In the confusing world we live in, Eretz Yisrael provides an anchor of faith in Hashem and teaches us to remain cognizant of His omnipotence.

Next Week: Bamidbar - Living With Purpose: The Power of a Number