

## The Month of Tishrei:

# Life Lessons from the *Shemittah* (Sabbatical) Year

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha Siegelbaum

The New Year is upon us, and this year is a special year – the sabbatical *shemittah* year. Just as the last hour before Shabbat can get hectic cleaning the last dishes, finishing with the computer, and setting up the hotplate, so did the weeds, the old dry leaves, the bare hanging branches need to be uprooted or pruned. The *shemittah* clock was ticking, the remaining days and hours were winding down and there was no longer any time for procrastination. I was standing in the middle of my garden a few days before the New Year overwhelmed and helpless. Something was eating the leaves of the roses, most of the geranium leaves had wizened, nothing was growing in the flower bed and the herbs are hanging with their heads. Grass was growing all over except for where we wanted to have a nice grassy area which was sadly bare and yellowish. In another week it would be finished, meaning it would never finish, but there was nothing to do about it except for ‘letting go letting G-d.’ As great a test as it is for me to leave the dishes in the sink on Shabbat, how would I ever be able to leave the dead leaves, the aggressive weeds and the overgrown potted plants at my entry way? Don’t even mention how difficult it would be to hold myself back from straightening up the garden before we will be hosting important company such as my parents who have scheduled a visit during Chanukah.

## A Year of Spiritual Recharge

Those of you who live outside of Israel where the laws of *shemittah* do not apply may hardly notice it when the *shemittah* year kicks in. All you have to do is ensure that whatever produce you buy imported from Israel has a proper *shemittah* kosher certificate. Some of you may even avoid buying any produce from Israel during the *shemittah* year and the following year in order to avoid the problem altogether. For those of us who live in Israel it’s a whole other ball game. The challenges and lessons of *shemittah* affect our lives to such a degree especially if you are a farmer or even a bit of a farmer like I would call myself. During *shemittah* year the farmer puts down his hoe and pickax and takes a year off from physical work for spiritual recharge by immersing himself in Torah study. From this ancient tradition the Israeli government has adapted, what we call, the sabbatical year where every teacher and professor in the country gets the seventh year off from teaching and receives his regular salary while taking courses and enrolling in continuing education programs. So wherever you live in the world the *shemittah* year is a year for spiritual recharge. It’s a time to decrease the involvement in the physical material world and increase Torah learning and self-reflection.

## Who are in Charge Hashem or I?

Often when I go out to my garden to pray I have been distracted by some weeds that need to be pulled or a dead flower that needs to be cut off. Although it is challenging for me, I try to restrain myself without interrupting my *davening*. I received the insight that if I would only learn to be less compulsive about all the gardening work, and make my prayers to Hashem priority, then Hashem



would bless my garden and take care of the work I wouldn't get to. There is even a Talmud which supports this notion: "Rabbi Yonah said in the name of Rabbi Zera: If a man does his own business before he says his prayers, it is as if he had built a high place. He said to him: A high place, do you say? No, he replied; I only mean that it is forbidden. Rabbi Idi bar Abin said in the name of Rabbi Yitzchak bar Ashian: Whoever prays first before he goes about his own business, Hashem will do his business for him, as it says, righteousness [prayer] shall go before him and then He [Hashem] shall set his steps on his way" (*Tehillim* 85:14), (*Babylonian Talmud, Berachot* 14a). So during *shemittah* year it is all about strengthening our *emunah* that Hashem is in charge, and no matter how hard we work on anything in life, it is only Hashem's blessing that brings success. We learn this lesson most clearly when it comes to gardening, as so much in the garden is dependent on Hashem's blessing. I have literally bought and planted hundreds of flowers, which unfortunately have died, for no apparent reason. In spite of the fact that I have worked so diligently on watering composting and weeding around them. Perhaps I have been overdoing it. You know; when we try too hard, usually whatever we are trying to do doesn't work out. The reason is that Hashem is constantly showering us with blessing, yet we need to open up ourselves to receive them. When we try too hard we actually close the energy fields. Plants are sensitive to energies, they pick up on when we are tuned into *emunah* in Hashem's blessing and respond accordingly with renewed growth. So *shemittah* is about opening ourselves to Hashem's continuous blessings. It is the time of letting go of trying so hard and allowing Hashem to take over. This is why Hashem promises us a threefold blessing for the *shemittah* year: "I will command My blessing upon you in the sixth year, and it shall bring forth produce for three years. You shall sow the eighth year, and eat of the produce, the old; until the ninth year, you shall eat the old until her produce come in" (*Vayikra* 25:21-22).

### Letting Go of Ownership

The main lesson of *Shmittah* is that 'my' land does not really belong to me. During the six years of the *shemittah* cycle I'm just a steward working for Hashem taking care of His land. During the seventh year all the slaves and workers go free (*Shemot* 21:2). Hashem doesn't need me this year to take care of His land. These words are so easy to write but so difficult to internalize. I remember, since a little girl I would collect different things like stamps, napkins, beads and coins. I would periodically take out my collections from their shelves and boxes and inspect and count them to make sure none of them were missing. In this way I would exert my ownership upon my various items. Today, when I think about how fast life goes and how transient all our possessions are, it makes sense that *shemittah* comes to prepare us for the spiritual world which is beyond personal ownership. During *shemittah* year anyone can come into 'your' garden and help themselves, because it's not your garden at all it's everyone's garden. Even when we put in so much money and work, we need to learn to apply all this effort for everyone and not just for ourselves. Human nature is that most people care much more about their personal everything rather than what belongs to the public. *Shemittah* comes to teach us to go beyond human nature into the realm of holiness, where we can feel as if everything we own belong to everyone. The Midrash tells a story of a man who is cleaning out rocks and rubble from his field into the public pathway. A Rabbi passing by asked him: "Why are you removing these rocks from a place that is



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not yours and putting them in place that is yours?" The man didn't know what the Rabbis was talking about, until many years later. After having become impoverished, he lost all of his land. One day when he was walking on the public pathway, he stumbled over a big rock. When he recognized the rock as one of those he had cleared out of his field many years ago, the meaning of the question hit home. Now that he was a pauper, without his own land, the communal area was all he shared a part of. (Based on *Midrash Kohelet Rabbah*, 6:10).

This *shemittah* year I hope to up my level of *emunah* to reach at a place where I won't even need to be struggling to hold myself back from weeding or nipping off a dead flower. I aspire to become so completely detached to the extent that I can shrug my shoulder at dead undergrowth saying, "I'm not the one in charge here!"