

Nature in the Parasha

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Parashat Mishpatim

The Sabbatical Year & Blessings of Redemption

Planting in the Sixth Year and Relinquishing Ownership in the Seventh

Parashat Mishpatim is filled with laws as the name of the *parasha* means ‘laws’ – particularly interpersonal laws, which make perfect sense to human logic. Sandwiched in between the law not to oppress the convert and the mitzvah of keeping Shabbat, Hashem instructs us to keep the Sabbatical year (*Shemita*) and let the land rest: “Six years you shall sow your land, and gather in its yield; but in the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow. Let the needy among your people eat of it; and what they leave let the beast of the field eat. You shall do the same with your vineyards and your olive groves” (*Shemot* 23:10). I find it interesting that the Torah introduces the mitzvah of *Shemita* for the very first time, by prompting us to plant during the six preceding years. It is only when we do the work of planting and benefit from the harvest during the regular years that we are able to gain the full impact of the sabbatical year. We can only give something up to G-d if it used to be ours. If we don’t ever work the land, how can we fulfill, “You shall let it rest and lie fallow?” It seems from this English expression “lie fallow” that we must have nothing growing during the *Shemita* year. Only after seeing this English translation do I understand one of my visitor’s puzzlement when she saw me busy planting the winter crop before Rosh Hashana. She exclaimed, “But I thought that we are supposed to give the land a rest, so why are you planting now right before the *Shemita* year?” I explained to her that the Sabbatical year parallels Shabbat, and just as we are busy getting everything ready in the last hours before Shabbat, so may we get our garden ready and plant during the sixth year in preparation for *Shemita*. Actually, the Hebrew word נטשה/*netashta* doesn’t exactly mean “to lie fallow,” rather it means “to let go and leave [the land alone].” It is a verb describing an action, actually a lack of action on our part, rather than describing the condition of the land itself. So our verse in this week’s *parasha* “six years you shall sow your land...” I get confirmation that my sowing Swiss chard, arugula, fennel, and chicory at the end of September last year to provide for the *Shemita* year, was surely in accordance with Hashem’s directive. Only when I have something growing in my garden, can I let go of ownership during the Sabbatical year.

The *Shemita* Banana Blessing

It is also possible to understand the statement, “Six years you shall sow your land, and gather in its yield...” as a blessing rather than a commandment. When we keep *Shemita* in accordance with Hashem’s will, then the earth will give its energy during the remaining six years, unlike some fields, which need to lie fallow every second year, in order to produce. In the merit of keeping the *Shemita* year, the field will be blessed during the six previous years, so you can “gather in its yield” (*Torah Temima*). I read an amazing story about a miracle during last *Shemita* year, (2007-2008), about a completely secular banana farmer. For whatever reason, he decided to keep *Shemita* and approached the *Keren HaShvi’it* for assistance. They complied to register him in their program as long



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as he would also take upon himself to personally keep Shabbat throughout the *Shmitah* year. He agreed, whereupon *Keren HaShvi'it* undertook to cover his farming expenses. All his produce would then become the property of *Otzar Beit Din* and distributed according to Halacha. That year Israel suffered significant cold and frost spells, which is very damaging for bananas. The farmer, who hadn't yet seen the damage of his orchard, began to receive calls from his neighbor farmers, complaining bitterly that their entire banana crop had been destroyed by the frost. When the farmer drove up to inspect his orchard near Tiberias, he was overwhelmed by the damage as he passed from one orchard to another. Not a single banana from his neighbors' orchard had survived. They had all turned brown and become rock-solid hard. He could only imagine how bad his trees must have gotten. When he finally arrived at his own orchard, he was awestruck! ALL of his bananas were yellow and green. Although his orchard bordered those of his neighbors, not a single tree of his was struck by the frost. As he rushed from one section of his orchard to another, he realized that more than the farmer keeps the *Shmitah*, the *Shmitah* keeps the farmer! Since then more and more farmers have begun to keep *Shemitah* – and look at what blessed rainy year we have this *Shemitah* year!

Sharing on Equal Grounds

In addition to bringing blessings to the Land, by keeping *Shemitah*, we learn to give up our field and produce to others once every seven years. This instills within us as a nation a broader concern for the needs of our fellow human beings (*Sefer HaChinuch*). When one of my students asked to pick from my greens, I was happy for the opportunity to keep the mitzvah of *Shmitah* and responded, “of course you really don't even have to ask, it is also yours!” It may not always be so easy to let go of ownership, when you have worked hard, invested much money in soil, watering system, workers and seeds. Yet, this mitzvah of *Shemitah* ingrain within us the proper character traits of sharing on equal grounds, regardless of whether the other deserves it or not. This, expression of unconditional love, is so different from the Western values I was raised with, where the poor beggar is held responsible for his own poverty. Relinquishing ownership during the *Shemitah* year in order to share with everyone brings us closer to feel the unconditional love of, “what is mine is yours” (*Pirkei Avot* 5:10). I hope that when the summer fruit begin to ripen, many more neighbors and students are going to take their pick. This will give me a break from harvesting, dehydrating, juicing, jam making etc. Another purpose of *Shemitah* is exactly for our nation collectively to take a breather from the physical work of farming, and focus on higher, more spiritual pursuits. During this holy year, we are expected to concentrate more on our spiritual mission in life, and a little less on the material endeavors. We focus more on why we are needed, rather than what we need, more on faith in G-d, less on faith in our own talents and dodges.

Letting Go Letting G-d: The *Shemitah* Struggle

At the moment my garden looks quite depressing. Old half-dry seedpods hang with their heads, and weeds are popping up all over the place. Although you are allowed to do whatever work necessary to prevent plants from dying, many of my plants have sadly wilted away, when I stopped paying daily attention to the garden. I find it a great challenge to keep the mitzvah of letting go and letting G-d decide the fate of the plants that are already in the ground. At times, I just can't help myself from picking a few weeds. It's almost an automatic reflex, like the challenge of not picking off dead skin on

Shabbat. I know I'm allowed to pick weeds to feed the chickens, but you are really not supposed to pick them with the roots. As a religious Jewess, I obviously stay far away from doing serious gardening work during *Shemittah*. However, all the little borderline, hard-to-keep, gray areas test our *Yirat Shamayim* (fear of G-d). This applies equally to keeping the mitzvah of Shabbat. As much as we need faith to take off a full day a week from work and trust that Hashem will provide our needs, it is so much harder for the farmer to take off an entire year. We need a lot of *Yirat Shamayim*, as well as *emunah* to properly keep *Shemittah*. *Sefer HaChinuch* teaches that through allowing the land to rest during the seventh year and not cultivating it; we exhibit full faith and trust in G-d to provide for our needs (Mitzvah 84). Although during the last few *Shemittah* years it was really difficult to get *Shemittah* veggies, things are actually so much better this time. The Bat Ayin mini-mart has a great selection of *Otzer Beit Din* vegetables, and so does the big Rami Levi supermarket close by. It seems that *Shemittah* awareness is greatly growing in Israel.

Why Redemption in the Merit of *Shemittah*?

Hashem is giving us the Land of Israel in order that we guard its sanctity by keeping the laws of the land, especially *Shemittah*. That is our price for the privilege of living here. This can be compared to renting an apartment. If we don't pay the rent then we get kicked out of the apartment. The laws of *Shemittah* teach us that we do not own the land, we are only 'renting.' However, realizing that the land truly belongs to G-d, by keeping *Shemittah*, gives us the merit to possess the land of Israel. This explains why, "The Mashiach will arrive the year following *Shemittah*" (*Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin* 97a). When we show our perfect faith in Hashem by keeping the laws of *Shemittah*, then we are worthy of redeeming the land. It is, therefore, not surprising that every year following the *Shemittah* year has been consequential in our possession of the Land of Israel. Throughout the history of the State of Israel, we have either experienced great setbacks for our lack of keeping the laws of the land faithfully, or been rewarded greatly for the strengthened connection with Hashem and holiness we achieved during the *Shemittah* year. Most of the change in the borders of the state of Israel took place the year following *Shemittah* year. For example, it was *Shemittah* year in 1966, and the following year, during the Six Day War, we recaptured Yerushalayim and Gush Etzion. The next *Shemittah* year was in 1973. This year was followed by the devastating Yom Kippur war. Following the *Shemittah* year in 1980, we relinquished Sinai to Egypt. After two cycles of *Shemittah* in in 1995 the Oslo agreement brought bouts of terrorism in its wake. With Hashem's help we can expect good news this fall following our current *Shemittah* year. May Hashem send his Mashiach in the merit of the righteous people keeping the laws of the land!