

The Land of Israel in the Parsha & Our Lives

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha

Parashat Behar/Bechukotai

How does Keeping the Sabbatical and Jubilee Years Bring About Redemption?

Why is it a Great Challenge to become a Guest in "Your Own" Garden?

Keeping the Sabbatical year in Israel can be challenging, especially for farmers, and even for very small-scale gardeners like myself. Being a workaholic, I find it difficult to let go of improving my surroundings. It's not simple to abstain from working the land and truly let go, letting G-d take over. Rather than noticing which plants are unhappy, which one needs compost, or more water or light, the Sabbatical year – *Shemitta* – is about completely releasing ownership and appreciating what is.

It took me several seven-year cycles to finally reach a place where I could feel like a guest in "my own" garden. Truly internalizing that I don't own it – that I am merely an eternal renter with a contract from the true Landlord, who reclaims His ownership every seven years – was not immediate. I still remember my first *Shemitta* year in Bat Ayin and how uncomfortable I felt when, from my kitchen window, I saw a neighbor casually trampling into my garden and helping himself to the ripest cherry tomatoes – the very ones I had planned to harvest the next day in honor of Shabbat.

It was a great challenge to silence my inner voice: "These are my tomatoes! I worked so hard to prepare the soil, plant the seeds, raise the stakes, and ensure they had enough water. How could he have the nerve... without even asking permission?!" While I was able to intellectually accept that the laws of *Shemitta* grant equal access to all produce growing in the Land of Israel, that inner voice still kept whispering in the back of my mind each *Shemitta* year – until my fourth *Shemitta* cycle in Bat Ayin.

Finally, during the most recent *Shemitta*, I learned to let go and truly relax. After living on the land for over 30 years, I was finally able to completely silence the voice of ownership, even letting go of concern for the fallen fruits that, if left too long, would become infested. No longer did I feel compelled to pick up every single fruit, rinse, inspect, mash, and add to preserves of every kind. For the first time, instead of noticing all the things that needed improvement in my garden, I could simply delight in its beauty.

How Does the Shemitta Year Parallel a Husband-and-Wife Relationship?

Living in Eretz Yisrael grants us a relationship with the land that mirrors the depth and sanctity of marriage. Just as a husband and wife must count seven days of separation following a woman's cycle, so too do we release physical interaction with the Land every seven years. Just as *Shemitta* teaches us to relinquish our sense of ownership over the land, the laws of *taharat hamishpacha* (family purity) train a husband to let go of any illusion of ownership over his wife.

The *Shemitta* year ingrains within us the truth that we never fully possess the Land – we are only its caretakers. Likewise, the marital cycle of withdrawal and reunion emphasizes that a woman is not an object of possession, and that marriage is a partnership of mutual respect. Our relationship with the Holy Land is similar: it requires reverence, space, and time off for recharging. Stepping back for a time allows for renewal and reconnection. Coming together again breaks the feeling of entitlement and opens the door for deeper love.

The same is true in marriage. Stepping away from physical contact can break stale patterns, the pause offers fresh possibilities for growing together, and opens the heart to rediscovery – new pathways into each other's souls. Keeping the hands-off laws of the *Shemitta* year, approaching the Land with humility, reverence, and gratitude, empowers us to reach new levels in the Land. As the Talmud teaches: "In the year following the conclusion of the Sabbatical Year, the son of David will come" (*Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 97a*). It is through letting go that we prepare the ground – and ourselves – for redemption.

Why is Exile the Consequence of Neglecting Shemitta Observance?

Since keeping the Shemitta year prepares us for redemption, it makes sense that neglecting fulfilling the mitzvot of Shemitta causes exile, as it states, “Because of the sin of neglecting the Sabbatical and Jubilee years, exile comes to the world...” (*Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 33a*). This Talmudic statement is based on the following verses in *Parashat B’Chukotai*:

ספר ויקרא פרק כו פסוק לד אִז תִּרְצָה הָאָרֶץ אֶת שְׁבֻתֶיהָ כָּל יְמֵי הַשְּׁמָה וְאַתֶּם בְּאֶרֶץ אֹיְבֵיכֶם אִז תִּשְׁבֹּת הָאָרֶץ וְהִרְצָתָ אֶת שְׁבֻתֶיהָ: (לה) כָּל יְמֵי הַשְּׁמָה תִּשְׁבֹּת אֶת אֲשֶׁר לֹא שְׁבַתְתָּ בְּשְׁבֻתֵיכֶם בְּשְׁבֻתֶיכֶם עָלֶיהָ:

“Then, the land will be appeased regarding its sabbaticals. During all the days that it remains desolate while you are in the land of your enemies, the Land will rest and thus appease its sabbaticals. It will rest during all the days that it remains desolate, whatever it had not rested on your sabbaticals, when you lived upon it (*Vayikra 26:34-35*).

Rashi explains that the seventy-year Babylonian exile was a measure-for-measure punishment – one year of exile for each Sabbatical year (*Shemitta* or *Yovel*) that the Israelites failed to observe. Over 436 years during which the people consistently sinned and neglected Shemitta, there should have been seventy sacred years of rest for the land. Because these years were disregarded, Hashem exiled the people to allow the land to “rest” in their absence. As it states: “Until the land was appeased for its Shabbatot... until the completion of seventy years” (*II Divrei Hayamim 36:21*).

The Torah teaches us to keep Shemitta to absorb the Infinite Light within Eretz Yisrael. The holiness of the land is reserved for those willing to meet the conditions to access this Infinite Light. Only by following this practice do we deserve to live in the Holy Land. This explains why the consequence of neglecting to observe Shemitta results in the severe punishment of exile from the Holy Land.

The *Netivot Shalom* deepens this understanding: The Shemitta year imbues the Land with holiness. When the laws of Shemitta are not upheld, the *נֶשְׁמָה*/*neshama* – ‘soul’ of the Land departs. And with the departure of its soul, exile from the Holy Land inevitably follows (*Netivot Shalom, Vayikra*, p. 106).

Why Does Resting Bring About Restoration?

Shemitta applies only in Eretz Yisrael, revealing the land’s elevated spiritual stature and the unique sanctity of its fruits. The produce of the Holy Land contains a distinctive energy and holiness, as reflected in the blessings we recite over the seven species native to it. Rebbe Nachman teaches that ascending to the highest levels of spirituality is not linear – it often involves being pushed back. Yet if we accept these setbacks with simcha (joy), we expand our capacity to receive greater Divine light (*Likutey Moharan 24*). His student, Rav Nachman of Tcherin, explains that this process is foundational: learning how to face pauses and delays with joy becomes essential for progress in all areas of life (*Yekara d’Shabbat* on LM 24).

This idea is mirrored in many physical disciplines, where the rest between exertions is what brings about the deepest restoration. One of our meditative movement teachers used to say, “Let the pause do its good work.” In moments of stillness, we shift shape – we let go of who we were to become something new. In the process of meditative movement, the pause is essential to transformation – the shedding of the old habit of being. Likewise, after six years of working the land and drawing the spiritual dimension from within the Holy Land and its fruit, Shemitta invites us to stop. Only by letting go-by pausing completely can we truly internalize the light of the Land.

In today’s fast-paced world, where we are constantly rushing and overextended, the mitzvah of Shemitta offers a powerful spiritual remedy. Taking a break isn’t easy; we fear losing ground. But relentless movement without renewal can lead to burnout. Shemitta teaches us how to pause before we collapse – how to breathe and become whole again. This seventh-year rest is not only agricultural – it is a Divine prescription for

spiritual and emotional healing.

(Inspired by Rabbi Meir Elkabas, *The Restraint of Shemittah*)

The Return to Our Source During the Jubilee Year

Parashat Behar introduces the mitzvah of the Jubilee year – a spiritual milestone that challenges us even more than the Sabbatical year. After observing seven full Shemitta cycles, the Torah calls upon us to sanctify an additional year – the fiftieth – and to refrain from working the land for a second consecutive year:

ספר ויקרא פרק כה פסוק ח וְסָפַרְתָּ לְךָ שִׁבְעַת שָׁנִים שִׁבְעַת שָׁנִים שִׁבְעַת פְּעָמִים וְהָיוּ לְךָ יָמֵי שִׁבְעַת שָׁבָתֹת הַשָּׁנִים תִּשַׁע וָאַרְבָּעִים (ט) וְהָעִבְרִית שׁוֹפָר תְּרוּעָה בַּחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי בַּעֲשׂוֹר לַחֹדֶשׁ בַּיּוֹם הַכִּפָּרִים תַּעֲבִירוּ שׁוֹפָר בְּכָל אֲרָצְכֶם: (י) וְקִדַּשְׁתֶּם אֶת שָׁנַת הַחֲמִשִּׁים שָׁנָה וְקִרְאתֶם דְּרוֹר בְּאֶרֶץ לְכָל יוֹשְׁבֶיהָ יוֹבֵל הוּא תְהִיָּה לָכֶם וְשָׁבָתֶם אִישׁ אֶל אֲחֻזָּתוֹ וְאִישׁ אֶל מִשְׁפַּחְתּוֹ תֵּשְׁבוּ: (יא) יוֹבֵל הוּא שָׁנַת הַחֲמִשִּׁים שָׁנָה תְהִיָּה לָכֶם לֹא תִזְרְעוּ וְלֹא תִקְצְרוּ אֶת סְפִיחֶיהָ וְלֹא תִבְצְרוּ אֶת נִזְרֶיהָ:

“Then you shall count for yourself seven sabbatical years, seven times. The days of these seven sabbatical years shall amount to forty-nine years for you. You shall proclaim with shofar blasts... on the Day of Atonement... You shall sanctify the fiftieth year and proclaim freedom throughout the land for all its inhabitants. It shall be a Jubilee for you, and you shall return, each man to his property, and each man to his family. The fiftieth year shall be a Jubilee for you; you shall not sow, nor reap its aftergrowth, nor pick its grapes [for yourself] ... (*Vayikra* 25:8-1).

In this sacred year, we not only observe the agricultural release of Shemitta – refraining from planting and allowing the produce of the fields to be available to all – but we also witness a full societal reset. Land holdings return to their original families. All Hebrew slaves go free. The Yovel year represents a collective return to the roots of our truest self, reconnecting with what is most essential in our lives.

This is why the Torah emphasizes that Yovel is proclaimed specifically on Yom Kippur. As the Maharal explains, Yovel and Yom Kippur are intrinsically linked. Both are about return – whether of land, people, or soul. Just as the Jubilee returns land to its ancestral owner and releases the slave to freedom, Yom Kippur returns the sinner to innocence, restoring us to our original state of purity and perfection (Maharal, *Gur Aryeh*, *Vayikra* 25:9).

This return is not only personal but cosmic. The fiftieth year alludes to the Fiftieth Gate – the level of transcendent Divine light that lies beyond the bounds of human logic and limitation. To let the land lie fallow for two full years – Shemitta followed by Yovel – is the ultimate act of emunah. It demands that we fully surrender all ownership and rely entirely on Hashem. Yet in that very restraint lies the seed of ultimate restoration. The more fully we let go, the more space we create for something infinitely greater to return.

May we merit to reach this sacred return – to come back to our highest selves, and be restored to our rightful portion in the Holy Land, aligned with the essence of our souls.