

The *Shemittah* year is about to end. R' Mordechai Eliyahu z"l (1929-2010; *Sephardic* Chief Rabbi of Israel) writes: "I have long wondered why the commentators devote more effort to discovering the reasons for the *Mitzvah* of *Shemittah* than those of other *Mitzvot*." He explains:

The *Gemara* (*Sanhedrin* 39a) says: Why is there *Shemittah*? *Hashem* said to *Yisrael*, "Plant for six years and rest for one, so that you will know that the land is Mine." *Rashi* explains that when a person finds his sustenance even while he observes the *Shemittah*, he is forced to learn the lesson that the land is *Hashem's* and that a person's "strength" neither adds to nor detracts from the outcome of man's work. Says R' Eliyahu: Since it appears that one of the very purposes of *Shemittah* is that we derive lessons from observing it, it certainly makes sense that commentators devote their energies to expanding upon those lessons. (Approbation to *Ta'ama d'Shviata*)

R' Avraham Yitzchak Kook z"l (1865-1935; *Ashkenazic* Chief Rabbi of *Eretz Yisrael*) offers this lesson of *Shemittah*: Man has many innate spiritual qualities that are too subtle to show in the relatively rough-and-tumble workaday world. Fortunately, he notes, *Hashem* gave man one day a week to unwind, one day when, freed from the rat race, his spirituality can come to the fore. That day is *Shabbat*.

What *Shabbat* is to the individual, continues R' Kook, the *Shemittah* is to the nation. For six years, man toils to build his business, to cultivate his land, and to work his staff. In such an environment, there is little room left in a person's thoughts for the rest of his nation, particularly the down-trodden and helpless. Then comes the *Shemittah*--loans are forgiven, slaves are freed, and the gates of the orchards and fields, which before had been so jealously guarded, are thrown wide open for whomever comes. Stripped of competition and subjugation, both the nation and the land can show their true spirituality. (*Shabbat Ha'aretz*, Introduction)

A Final Thought About *Shemittah*

During the year now ending, we discussed some of the laws and concepts of *Shemittah*, including some of the leniencies built into those laws--for example, the concept of *Prozbul* discussed last week. Many of the leniencies in the laws of *Shemittah* are possible only because the observance of *Shemittah* is "only" a rabbinic *Mitzvah* in our times, when the majority of Jews do not live in *Eretz Yisrael*.

Why, wonders R' Shaul Yisraeli z"l (1909-1995; *Rosh Yeshiva* of *Yeshivat Mercaz Harav*), did the Sages bother? Why did they instruct us to observe *Shemittah* on a rabbinic level and then devise ways to circumvent that rabbinic law's requirements? For example, why did the Sages prohibit farming during *Shemittah* in our times and then permit leniencies such as the *Otzar Bet Din* or the sale of the Land to be used to farm (the "*Hetter Mechirah*," which some authorities recognize)? By the same token, why did Hillel the Elder devise the *Prozbul* to allow lenders to collect their loans after the *Shemittah*? True, Hillel was responding to the fact that people were not making loans. But, instead of allowing us to use what appear to be loopholes to circumvent the rabbinic *Mitzvah* of forgiving loans, why didn't the Sages simply abolish the rabbinic *Mitzvah* of forgiving loans altogether (since the *Mitzvah* does not apply today on a Torah level, as we have explained)?

Another question: Even if selling the Land or using a *Prozbul* is *Halachically* permitted, R' Yisraeli wonders, is it the "right" thing to do?

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“See -- I have placed before you today the life and the good, and the death and the evil. . . I have placed life and death before you, blessing and curse; and you shall choose life, so that you will live, you and your offspring.” (30:15, 19)

Our Sages explain that G-d is telling us, “This – life – is the good portion. Choose it!”

If G-d has made the choice so clear, asks R’ Yehuda Ashlag z”l (1886-1954), do we really have a choice? He explains:

We are often too harried to make good choices. When our Sages say that G-d directs us toward the correct choice, they meant that, from time-to-time, G-d gives us a break from the “rat race” and allows us the peace of mind to see clearly what is right. However, it remains up to us to use that opportunity to make good choices. (*Hakdamah L’Talmud Eser Sefirot*)

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R’ Yisraeli offers two answers: First, *Kabbalists* teach that a person who does an action which the Torah prohibits sullies his soul. The Torah prohibits a Jew from working his land during the *Shemittah* year. Working one’s land during the *Shemittah* is, to put it simply, a bad thing. Even if the prohibition does not apply technically because the laws of *Shemittah* are not applicable today, the fact remains that it is the *Shemittah* year and the Jewish farmer is doing an act--working his land--which is prohibited.

In contrast, the Torah did not prohibit working a gentile’s land during the *Shemittah* [according to some authorities]. Thus, if a Jew sells his land for the year--not as a legal fiction, but sincerely--he is permitted to work that land during *Shemittah*. The sale is not merely a “leniency”; it actually creates a spiritual reality. Similarly, the *Otzar Bet Din* and the *Prozbol* allow a person to observe the law in some form rather than saying that it simply does not apply.

Second, an important rule in *Halachic* decision-making is to preserve the Torah-law to the extent possible. Rather than saying that a set of laws--for example, *Shemittah*--will have no application at all if we cannot observe them on a Torah-level, it is preferable to enact a rabbinic law that preserves a memory of the *Mitzvah*. That way, both during the era when we do not perform the *Mitzvah*, and later, when it is time to begin performing the *Mitzvah* again, we will remember that the *Mitzvah* exists.

Our Sages teach: “One must always ask himself, ‘When will my deeds reach those of my forefathers?’” This includes the obligation to yearn to perform the *Mitzvot* that our ancestors observed but which we cannot observe. *Shemittah* in its fullest form is such a *Mitzvah* [may we soon merit to perform it fully]. (*Ma’amar Shemittah B’mahalach Ha’dorot*)

“You are standing today, all of you, before Hashem, your Elokim -- the heads of your tribes, your elders, and your officers -- all the men of Yisrael; your small children, your women, and your convert who is in the midst of your camp, from the hewer of your wood to the drawer of your water.” (29:9-10)

R’ Nosson Sternhartz z”l (1780-1845; foremost student of R’ Nachman of Breslov z”l) writes: Before Moshe Rabbeinu died, he gave the Torah anew to all Jews on all levels. In every generation, every Jew, whoever he is, whatever level he is on, can succeed by placing himself under the Torah’s protection.

(*Likkutei Halachot: Shilu’ach Ha’ken* 4:13)

“For this commandment that I command you today -- it is not hidden from you and it is not distant.” (30:11)

R’ Chanoch Henach ben Avraham z”l (“R’ Chanoch Darshan”; Poland and Central Europe; died 1663) writes: The straightforward meaning of this verse is that *Teshuvah*, which was mentioned in the preceding verses, is not beyond a person’s reach.

He continues: We read in *Parashat Yitro* (*Shmot* 19:5), “And now, if you listen well to Me. . .” *Rashi* z”l comments: “Every beginning is difficult, but if you take upon yourselves now the observance of My commandments, they will be pleasing to you from now on.” This, too, teaches that *Teshuvah* and good deeds are not beyond a person’s reach. If one only takes the initiative, the process will be pleasant.

R’ Chanoch notes several related teachings of our Sages: We read in *Shir Ha’shirim* (5:2), “Open up to Me, My sister.” The *Midrash* comments on these words: “If you open an opening for Me [*Hashem*] like the point of a needle, I will open an opening for you wide enough for wagons to pass through.” This, writes R’ Chanoch, also is meant to teach how easy *Teshuvah* is. In addition, it alludes to the *Gemara’s* statement (*Sukkah* 52a) that a person cannot defeat the *Yetzer Ha’ra* without Divine assistance. Therefore, all that is expected from us is to begin the process (“open an opening like the point of a needle”) and *Hashem* will do the rest (“open an opening wide enough for wagons to pass through”).

In light of the above, R’ Chanoch continues, we can understand another statement on the same page of the Tractate *Sukkah*. The *Gemara* states that, in the future, the *Yetzer Ha’ra* will be slaughtered in front of the righteous and the wicked. To the wicked, the *Yetzer Ha’ra* will appear as small and flimsy as a hair, and they will be despondent that they did not put in the small amount of effort needed to defeat it. To the righteous, however, the *Yetzer Ha’ra* will appear as a tall mountain and, says the *Gemara*, they will cry and wonder, “How were we able to conquer such a thing?” [Until here from the *Gemara*]

Why will the righteous cry? R’ Chanoch explains that the righteous will realize that the *Yetzer Ha’ra* was too big for them to conquer on their own, and it was *Hashem* who helped them do so. Accordingly, the righteous will think that they will not be rewarded for their efforts, and they will cry. The reality, however, is that *Hashem* is so kind that He rewards us as if we conquered the *Yetzer Ha’ra* on our own.

(*Reishit Bikkurim*)