

Parshat Behar 5776

The Sedra opens with a detailed explanation of the laws of Shemita (the sabbatical year which occurs every seven years for the Land of Israel when it is to lie fallow, when its produce is available to anyone who requires it for themselves). The Jewish people are not allowed to cultivate it for an entire year- meaning there is no crop in the 8th year.

Shemita as Basis of Faith The Torah emphasizes that the laws of Shemita were revealed to Moshe at Har Sinai. Rashi quotes the Sifra, to the effect that the laws of Shemita are an example for all the laws of the Torah. Therefore, just as the laws of Shemita were given in all its details at Har Sinai, so too, all the rules and details of the other commandments were also given there.

Why was Shemita singled out for this purpose? Rabbi Berel Wein says that Shemita, unlike many other Mitzvot, is a test of faith. The Torah, which otherwise dictates a practical approach to life, demands a leap of faith and an abandonment of the everyday practicalities, by keeping the Mitzva of Shemita. It is, says Rabbi Wein *“the Jewish community’s communal equivalent of the Akeidah of Yitzchak by Avraham which was ordained on a personal level”*. The Akeidah was contrary to all the moral teachings and behavior of Avraham and was not only impractical but arguably suicidal! Thus, it became the supreme test of faith in the lives of Avraham and Yitzchak and remains the symbol of Jewish belief and sacrifice.

For us today, the events of Har Sinai are a matter of faith as we have no direct tangible proof of it. We believe that our ancestors were not liars, that their transmission of the Torah (both written and oral) were correct, and that the standards of behavior outlined in the Torah are of an eternal nature. Therefore, citing Shemita, (which is a faith based Mitzvah) as having been revealed to Moshe at Har Sinai, illustrates to us today that believing the Torah was given at Har Sinai is a matter of faith

Shemita ‘s Kinship to Shabbos Rabbi Berel Wein says *“There are always side benefits from obeying the commandments of the Torah but these are never the reason or the basis for the commandment itself. The underlying lesson of the sabbatical year (Shemitta) is its obvious kinship to the weekly Sabbath. Just as every seven days brings with it a holy day of rest, so too does a holy sabbatical year bring with it a rest for the earth itself.*

And, to continue this obvious comparison between these two Sabbaths, just as the weekly Sabbath is meant to remind us of G-d’s creation of the universe so too does the seven year Sabbath testify to G-d’s omnipotence and presence in all of our human affairs”.

Thereafter, after seven complete Shemita cycles (49 years), in the fiftieth year, there is the Yovel year when lands (inside Israel) return to their original owners, and Jewish servants are freed. The Sefer HaChinuch says that this is to ensure we recall, at least once every fifty years, that land and freedom are gifts from G-d, and ownership of everything belongs to whom G-d wills it.

What Is the connection between Shemita and the law of “Ona-ah” prohibiting cheating? In the middle of the laws of Shemita, the Torah teaches the following Halacha: *“When you sell an item to your fellow man, or buy from the hand of your fellow man, one man should not cheat his brother”* [Vayikra 25:14].

Why does the Torah insert the Halacha of “Ona-ah” (prohibiting cheating) in the middle of the laws pertaining to Shemita. The laws of “Ona-ah” apply primarily to moveable property. The laws of Ona-ah are not fully applicable regarding real estate.

Rabbi Avraham Aharon Yudelvitz , The Beis Av ,(1850-1930) says that the fundamental concept that underlies the keeping of Shemita laws is the belief that one’s livelihood comes from G-d (For the avoidance of doubt, a person, one must exert the appropriate amount of effort, i.e. work!). If a person actually believes one’s livelihood comes from G-d, why would he proceed to cheat his fellow man? The cheat clearly thinks he makes his livelihood without divine assistance. That is why the prohibition of “Ona-ah” is located in the middle of the laws of Shemita.

Conclusion During most of our recent history, Shemita has rarely been observed. The non-observance of Shemita was cited by the Talmud as one of the contributing factors for the destruction of the first Beis HaMikdosh. Some commentators maintain that the biblical Shemita was never observed during the time of the Second Beis HaMikdosh either. Today, the rabbinic obligation of Shemita is observed in Israel in various forms. Nevertheless, the issue of how to observe Shemita unfortunately remains a divisive one. Yet the Mitzvah of Shemita reminds us of the necessity of faith and belief; that message is timeless and can be agreed by all.