

DARCHAI NOAM**Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם -**

(Mishlei 3:17)

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Behar – Lessons from Shmittah and Yovel

This week's Parsha of Behar, teaches us about the Shmittah year and the Yovel (Jubilee) year.

Every seventh year is a Shmittah year. Israel is now gearing up for the next Shmittah year which starts in approximately 5 months, on Rosh Hashana 2014. During the Shmittah year, it is forbidden to farm Jewish-owned land in Israel. Whatever produce does grow is available for anyone to take. Also, all loans between Jewish creditors and debtors are cancelled and Jewish slaves go free.

Every 50th year is a Yovel year. The same prohibitions on farming apply as in a Shmittah year. In addition, in ancient Israel everyone would return to their original ancestral property. In most cases, it was not possible to sell property permanently because the land would automatically revert to its original owner in the Yovel year. Transfers of land would, in effect, be leases with the price calculated based on the number of years left until the next Yovel year.

The Yovel year is not able to be observed these days because certain halachic criteria are not fulfilled. However the agricultural prohibitions of the Shmittah year still apply.

What lessons can we learn from the Shmittah year and the Yovel year that are relevant for us today?

Lesson 1 – The land doesn't belong to us

Real estate has always been an important measure of one's wealth and status. Owning 'bricks and mortar' provides us with a sense of security. But the Shmittah and Yovel year teach us that the land does not really belong to us. It is under Hashem's control. He determines when we can farm the land and He does not allow us to sell the land permanently. This reminds us that all of the land belongs to Hashem and He gives us permission to use it.

The land shall not be sold permanently, because the land belongs to Me, because you are strangers and temporary residents with Me. (Vayikra 25:23)

Hashem permits us to use our possessions for our own personal enjoyment, but we also need to use our possessions for the performance of mitzvot and we need to give the appropriate amount of tzedaka. We must always remember where our wealth comes from and acknowledge this with gratitude. There is a real danger of forgetting this. The laws of Shmittah and Yovel help us to remember.

Lesson 2 – Emuna - Hashem is in charge of our parnassah (livelihood)

Farmers regularly leave parts of their fields to lie fallow so that they retain their fertility. They usually have a rotating system to ensure that each field has a turn to rest but they can still produce a crop each year. However, the idea of leaving the entire farm fallow for a whole year does not make commercial sense. And the idea of leaving every farm in the country fallow for a whole year is ludicrous! When a Yovel year follows a Shmittah year the whole country would lie fallow for two consecutive years!! Naturally, Bnei Yisrael would be concerned about their food supply during these years. The Torah provides an answer.

Hashem promises that there will be a bumper crop in the 6th year and there will be enough food:

And if you should say, "What will we eat in the seventh year? We will not sow, and we will not gather in our produce!" I will command My blessing for you in the sixth year, and it will yield produce for three years. (Vayikra 25:20)

Even though the farmers have to work the fields, the amount of produce that actually grows is in Hashem's hands. The Torah doesn't command the farmers to work extra hard in the 6th year. They just need to plant a regular crop and have emunah (faith) that Hashem will take care of the rest.

This is a very important message. Many of us work hard to make a living and we often assume that the livelihood we earn is a direct result of our hard work. We presume that the harder we work, the more we will earn. However this is not the case. Even though the punishment for Adam's sin is that we must toil for our sustenance, Hashem controls the amount that we earn. Putting in extra hours in the office will not change that. Most people spend far too much time at work at the expense of time with their family and spiritual pursuits. If we spend a little bit less time at work and a little bit more extra time with our families and working on our spiritual selves, our income will not suffer. That's a guarantee from Hashem.

There is a psychological principle called cognitive dissonance. This means, for example, that if we are feeling a bit sad, we can force ourselves to smile. This can actually make us start to feel happier. The same principle can work here. If we cut back our focus on livelihood and increase our focus on spiritual pursuits, this will hopefully cause our levels of emunah to increase.

Lesson 3 – Time to focus on spiritual growth

In Biblical times, Bnei Yisrael lived in an agricultural society and many people were involved in working the land. Every seven years they had a forced holiday for the entire year and they were unable to work. So what would they do? The Shmittah year and the Yovel year were a time to work on spiritual pursuits. Bnei Yisrael would flock to the shules and study halls to learn Torah and pray. Many people take a year off after school to learn in a Yeshiva or seminary. Imagine taking a year off from work every 7 years to do the same! These special years were a regular reminder to Bnei Yisrael to realign their priorities. Instead of viewing the Shmittah year as burdensome or a worry we can view them as a gift – a chance to learn and grow and not worry about sustaining ourselves but leaving it to Hashem. These lessons hopefully flow into the following 6 years and remind people to devote more effort to spiritual pursuits and not quite so much effort to physical pursuits.

Nowadays, many people no longer work in agriculture. But the lessons still apply. We can plan that this coming Shmittah year be focused on spiritual pursuits. Perhaps we can plan to take on an extra shiur or try to keep an extra mitzva. The lessons of the Shmittah year and the peace of mind from greater emunah can then flow over into the following 6 years.

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to be more grateful for the possessions that we have been blessed with and make sure that we are using them in the way that Hashem wants us to use them. For example, are we giving enough tzedaka?
2. Remember that Hashem is in charge of how much parnassah we earn. To reflect this mindset we can try to cut back slightly on the effort we put into our jobs. This includes actual time spent at work and also how much of our mental energy is spent thinking about work.
3. Recall Bnei Yisrael's shift in focus every Shemittah year – instead of being focused on parnassah they were focused on learning. Doesn't that sound tempting? We can have a taste of that by focusing more on our spiritual pursuits and less on our physical pursuits.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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About Darchai Noam

The passuk in Mishlei (3:17) describes the Torah as follows: "Its ways are ways of pleasantness (Darchai Noam) and all its paths are peace". The Torah is our guidebook for life. It is packed full of good advice as to how we should live our lives.

The aim of the Darchai Noam weekly email is to examine an idea from the weekly parsha relating to good middot (character traits). It will focus particularly on treating each other with respect and how to interact with each other in a more peaceful and pleasant manner. It will also suggest some practical tips for implementing these ideas in our daily lives.

By learning together each week, and making an effort to regularly put the ideas into practice, with Hashem's help we can all gradually improve our character traits and our observance of 'v'ahavta l'reiacha kamocho' – loving one's fellow as oneself.

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