

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

(Mishlei 3:17)

Behar-Bechukotai, May 2015

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

**Behar-Bechukotai – Lessons from Shemittah**

This week, those outside Israel read Parshat Behar-Bechukotai.<sup>1</sup> The Parsha begins with the laws and details of Shemittah. This is very topical because we are currently right in the middle of a Shemittah year.

For the people living in Israel, the laws of Shemittah have a very practical impact on a daily basis. It affects what produce we can buy, how we can buy it, how we can dispose of any leftovers and what work we are allowed to do in our gardens. However for the people that are not living in Israel it may be easy to forget that it is a Shemittah year. How can we make Shemittah relevant to those living outside of Israel? In his book on the laws of Shemittah, Rav Yosef-Tzvi Rimon emphasises the values that we can learn from Shemittah. These values are relevant no matter where we live. Rav Rimon suggests that we use the opportunity of Shemittah to focus on these values and try to apply them to our lives. Let's focus on some of the values that we can learn from Shemittah.

**Taking a break to refocus our priorities**

Produce that has kedushat sheviit (holiness of the seventh year) does not belong to the owner of the land. It is hefker – free for anyone to take.<sup>2</sup> Many fields around Israel have large signs confirming that the owners observe Shemittah and that the produce is thus free for anyone to take. Homeowners with fruit trees also often put up a sign declaring the fruit to be hefker. Everyone has equal rights to take the fruit.

We might presume that Hashem gave us the mitzvah of Shemittah because this is the ideal way to live and He wants us to live our lives this way all the time. However, He only commands us to observe these laws every 7 years. The usual laws of private property apply for the other 6 years when we are free to engage in commerce with the produce of our fields. One value that we can learn from Shemittah is the importance of taking a break from our usual activities to refocus our priorities. We take a year off from working the land to remember that there is a higher purpose. We should then take that awareness back with us when we re-enter the world of agriculture and commerce after the Shemittah year has finished.

This same value and pattern is also represented in the structure of our week and our year. Each week we cease our usual mundane routine in order to celebrate Shabbat and remember that there is a higher purpose. Once each year, on Yom Kippur, we cease our mortal pursuits and instead we act like angels. Just like angels we wear white, we refrain from eating and we spend the day totally engaged in spirituality. Of course we are not really angels, we are humans, but one day a year we stop acting like humans and we are injected with a spiritual boost that revives us for the new year.

<sup>1</sup> Those in Israel read only Parshat Bechukotai.

<sup>2</sup> There is a machloket as to whether the produce is automatically hefker (ownerless) or if the owner has an obligation to declare it hefker. In practice, we do not pick fruits from someone's property without asking permission. Many people put up signs in their fields or gardens confirming that the produce is hefker.

Without these regularly enforced rest periods we may become carried away with our jobs and our commitments and forget that there is more to life. The Shemittah year helps us to refocus and prioritise. It reminds us of the importance of taking regular breaks from our routine to remember the big picture.

### **Superiority complex**

This idea was heard from Rav Aharon Lichtenstein zt"l. Rav Lichtenstein was Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Har Etzion. One of the leaders of Modern Orthodoxy and the son-in-law of Rav Soloveitchik, he passed away only a few weeks ago. Thus it is appropriate to share one of his teachings.

There are many mitzvot related to helping the poor. As well as the obligation to give at least 10% of our earnings to tzedaka, owners of fields are required to leave a number of gifts to the poor. For example: Peah (the portion of the crop left standing for the poor); Leket (ears of grain that fell from the shearer's hand); Shich'chah (forgotten sheaves); and Ma'aser Ani (a tithe for the poor in certain years of the agricultural cycle). All of these gifts have a giver and a recipient. The giver has been blessed with wealth and the privilege of being able to support others that are less fortunate. The recipient is relying on the giver's generosity. The giver may feel slightly superior to the recipient. This can engender a superiority complex.

Every 7 years the Shemittah year reminds the givers that they do not really own the land or their wealth. It all belongs to Hashem. Hashem has decided who will be blessed with wealth and who will not. During the Shemittah year Hashem 'takes away' some of our wealth. The concept of private property ceases to apply in the usual way and everyone has equal rights to take the fruits of the land. This fosters humility (anava) and minimises the risk of a superiority complex amongst the wealthy.

For those of us who are fortunate enough to be givers of tzedaka, we can use the Shemittah year as a reminder to examine ourselves closely to ensure that we avoid any trace of arrogance or a false sense of superiority.

### **Cutting back on work**

What does a farmer do during Shemittah? For 6 years he diligently worked the land and sold his produce. During Shemittah he is forbidden from working the land. Farmers may find themselves with a lot of free time! They may take advantage of this forced holiday to spend time doing other things such as time with their family, doing a chesed or community project or learning Torah. Many of us may work harder than required and we don't receive the benefit of a forced holiday every 7 years. However we can still apply this lesson from Shemittah and spend a bit less time at work and a bit more time with our family and learning Torah.

Let's try something this week:

1. The Shemittah year can encourage us to reflect on our priorities and contemplate our life's direction.
2. We can use the equalising notion of the land belonging to everyone equally to remind ourselves that everything we give to others comes from Hashem and to try to avoid any trace of a superiority complex.
3. We can imitate the benefit that farmers receive from an enforced break to increase our family time, our chesed activities and our Torah learning.

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 parashah that usually relates 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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