

## What Rockefeller Plaza Can't Teach Us About Shemittah

by Rabbi Eliyahu Kohen

*In New York City's Rockefeller Center in Manhattan, a private street called Rockefeller Plaza is situated between the RCA Building and the sunken skating rink. In order to preserve Rockefeller Center's right of ownership of the street, each year the street is closed to all traffic, even pedestrian, for one day - a Sunday in July is usually chosen as interfering least with tenants and visitors. It is believed by lawyers for Rockefeller Center that this formality is necessary to prevent the public from acquiring a permanent right of way in the street. ([Wikipedia](#)).*

### CONTENTS

#### Section I. The Four Mitzvot of the Shemittah Year

#### Section II. Shemittah in Jewish Thought

#### Section III. The Special Connection Between Shemittah and Har Sinai

#### Appendix. Guarding Cannabis Fields During the Shemittah Year

Before we explore the connection between Rockefeller Plaza and Shemittah, first we'll introduce the basic mitzvot of Shemittah and its context in Jewish thought.

#### Section I. The Four Mitzvot of the Shemittah Year

The mitzvot of Shemittah are a novel concept: an entire year where we relinquish ownership of the produce of our land – available free for anyone to take! Moreover, we are forbidden from cultivating, planting or commercially harvesting produce. The Hebrew word Shemittah, “release,” describes the four mitzvot that apply during the seventh year of the Shemittah cycle. The harvested produce of this seventh year, known as “yevul shevi’is” has a unique holiness, referred to as *Kedushas Shevi’is*.

There are four Torah mitzvot related to the year of Shemittah, three of which apply only to the Land of Israel:

- 1) We do not plant or cultivate fields nor do we commercially harvest and market produce grown in the land of Israel. (Vayikra 25:1-4)
- 2) We make the produce of our land *hefker*, ownerless, free for anyone to take. (Shemos 23:11 )
- 3) The produce of the land is imbued with holiness and must be utilized respectfully. (Vayikra 25:6; Talmud Bavli, Pesach 52b)
- 4) Outstanding loans are cancelled [*Shemittat Kesafim*] (Devarim 15:1-6). Unlike the three mitzvot above, *Shemittat Kesafim* applies worldwide. (Rambam, Hilchos Shemittah VeYovel, 9:2)

Related to the Shemittah year is the Yovel – The year after seven Shemittah cycles, the fiftieth year, is called the “Jubilee” (Yovel) year. Halachos #1-#3 of Shemittah (and some others) apply to it, as well. [1]

(To gain an understanding of the halachos of Shemittah, see *Derech Emunah*, Hilchos Shemittah V'Yovel by Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky, and *Gateway to Shemittah*, by Rabbi Dovid Merchant, Feldheim Publishers.)

#### Section II. Shemittah in Jewish Thought

Where does Shemittah fit in the context of Jewish thought and spirituality? The Morasha Syllabus [defines and illustrates](#) Jewish spirituality as the development and strengthening of an eternal relationship with G-d. The framework for Jewish spirituality is comprehensive; it is expressed through

mitzvot divided into three spheres: *bein adam LaMakom* – between man and G-d, *bein adam le'atzmo* – personal growth, and *bein adam l'echavero* – interpersonal relationships.

The dimension of *time* is a most precious resource. It is the medium through which we may infuse each moment with transcendent meaning. Moreover, time itself flows within a dynamic Jewish calendar containing cycles of Shabbat, festival days, and even weeks that are imbued with distinct types of holiness, offering powerful modes of spiritual expression. In addition to time, certain *places* (the Land of Israel), structures (synagogues), and even *objects* (Torah scroll, tefillin, and mezuzah) can be imbued with holiness and are a means for building a spiritual connection to G-d. (Morasha Shiur on [Spirituality IV](#)).

There are many mitzvot that integrate the holiness of the dimensions of ***time and place*** such as praying in a synagogue, *aliya leregel* – traveling to Jerusalem for the three festivals -- as well as the many daily mitzvot performed in the Beit HaMikdosh – Temple. However, there is only one mitzvah, Shemittah, that integrates the holiness of the dimensions of time and place over a ***prolonged period***. Every seventh year, for the entire year, the Land of Israel is imbued with an elevated holiness similar in concept to Shabbat. Just like every seventh day we rest from our creative efforts (melachah) due to the sanctity of the Shabbat, every seventh year we rest from working the land. Just as Shabbat teaches and reinforces the fact that G-d created the world and rested on the seventh day, so, too, Shemittah teaches and reinforces idea that we're not the real owners of our land; it belongs to G-d. Both mitzvot teach us that G-d is the creator of the world and sustains our existence. [2]

If the owners of Rockefeller Center are able to demonstrate to the world their legal ownership of Rockefeller Plaza for merely *one day* a year, why should the Torah command an *entire year* for the mitzvah of Shemittah to demonstrate G-d's "ownership" of the land of Israel?

Although the owners of Rockefeller Center display their possession of Rockefeller Plaza by a one-day summer Sunday closure, it does little if anything *to impact the consciousness or way of life* of the millions of people who use that street year round. In contrast, observance of the Shemittah year engenders a powerful impact on the entire Jewish people as we will see below. We will now explore reasons for the mitzvah of Shemittah as explained by selected Rishonim, Acharonim and contemporary thinkers. Furthermore, we will delve into how this mitzvah is meant to impact our thoughts and behavior. [3]

### **Part A. Improve Character Traits**

The ultimate purpose of life is to perfect our character traits.

#### **Vilna Gaon, Even Shleimah 2 – What is life for if not for character refinement?**

The prime purpose of man's life is to constantly strive to break his bad traits. Otherwise, what is life for?
---

If so, what specific character traits does Shemittah come to strengthen?

**Rambam, Moreh Nevuchim 3:39, Cited by Rav Kanievsky on Shemittah, ArtScroll Publishers, page. 22. – Have compassion on others.**

Rambam suggests that the Torah's commandments regarding Shemittah and Yovel serve to ingrain in the Jewish people the character traits of mercy and kindness toward other people. The laws of
---

Shemittah require us to leave the produce of our fields [ownerless] for all to take, and to release our loans, while the laws of Yovel teach us to free our slaves; all this trains us to have compassion for others.

**Akeidas Yitzchak, Cited by Nachshoni – *Studies in Weekly Parsha, Parashas Behar*. P.845. – Dedicate time to work on self-improvement.**

Akeidas Yitzchak teaches that Shemittah and Yovel are “windows to open blind eyes which are immersed in the sights of the (immediate) time.” They are meant to make man aware that the world was created by, and functions through, the desire of Hashem. Shemittah is also intended to take man out of his rote style of living, where he is totally involved in his work and subjected to drudgery. He must know that attaining perfection is his mission in life. Work is not an end in itself. The Torah therefore sets a time in which all the land (produce) a person possesses is declared ownerless, so that he should be content with earning just enough to sustain himself.

**Sefer HaChinuch (#84) cited by Cited by Rav Kanievsky on *Shemittah*, ArtScroll Publishers, pp. 178 – 181. – Develop and strengthen the trait of generosity.**

There is another benefit to be found in the matter of relinquishing ownership in the Shemittah year – it is a means to acquire the trait of yielding, i.e., a generous willingness to forego that which we see as our due. Performing this mitzvah is an exercise of this trait, for there is none so generous as one who gives without the anticipation of compensation. Consequently, one who generously yields the produce of Shemittah, as per this mitzvah, does so without anticipation of any worldly compensation...

There is yet another benefit found in a person who observes this mitzvah – the person will increase his trust in Hashem, blessed be He. For the trait of miserliness will never take hold of anyone who can find in his heart the capacity to give and relinquish to the world the entire year’s produce of his land and ancestral inheritance, a portion that he and his family are accustomed to keeping for themselves. Such a person will never lack trust in Hashem. On the contrary, he will willingly give of his possessions to others and trust in Hashem to provide his needs.

**Part B. Recognizing the Land of Israel Belongs to G-d**

The clearest consequence of Shemittah observance is recognizing G-d is the true owner of our resources.

**Rabbeinu Bachya, Cited by Nachshoni – *Studies in Weekly Parsha – Behar*, Page 845. – Shemittah reinforces our knowledge that G-d is the ultimate owner of everything in this world.**

Shemittah is meant to teach us that man should not convince himself that he is the master of his work. The general rule [that applies during Shemittah] is that one may not act in his field or vineyard in any way as the owner. Rather, all his produce should be ownerless (and available) to all; even the simplest Jew may take it. The Torah therefore commanded this mitzvah, so all types of control or ownership in this lower world should be annulled in regard to working the land. Man should consider that neither control nor ownership means anything, since everything belongs to the Master of All.

**Rabbi Dovid Zvi Hoffman, Cited by Nachshoni – *Studies in Weekly Parsha* – Behar, Page 846. – The Land of Israel is chosen by G-d and has special holiness.**

Shemittah demonstrates the kedushah of the Land of Israel, for it is under the direct supervision of Hashem. Chazal said in Sanhedrin 39: “G-d said to Israel, ‘Sow for six years and rest on the seventh so that you should know that the land is Mine.’” The purpose of Shemittah is not the same as Yovel. The latter comes to teach us we should not become conceited over our wealth, while the former comes to instill in us the *kedushah* of Eretz Yisroel.” It follows that the punishment for not keeping Shemittah is galus—exile—because when one violates the laws of Shemittah, he is desecrating Eretz Yisroel.

**Abarbanel** also brings the above idea and notes, among other reasons, that this is meant to inform us that Eretz Yisroel is the chosen land, just as man is chosen among all created things, and that it has its own Shabbos, just as the Jew has his Shabbos.

**Sfas Emes, Cited by Rav Kanievsky on *Shemittah*, ArtScroll Publishers, page 26. – Exile is a natural consequence of not respecting Shemittah.**

The primary purpose of the mitzvah of Shemittah is to ingrain in us the idea that the land belongs to Hashem; we live in the land and work it by Hashem’s grace. Stopping our work on the land for a full year solely because Hashem tells us to do so drives home this concept. For this reason, the Torah states (Vayikra 26:34) that if Shemittah is not observed, Hashem will send the Jewish people into exile and the land will “reclaim” the time it was supposed to have been left unworked. If the Jewish people do not observe Shemittah, they show that they consider the land to be their own and believe that their crops are the result of their own efforts. Therefore Hashem will have to demonstrate His ownership of the land in a different manner – by showing that it is in His hands to evict the Jewish people from it.

**Part C. Recognizing that G-d Created the Universe**

Shabbat teaches that G-d created the world in six days and rested on the seventh day. The Shemittah year reinforces this principle through an entire year of relinquishing ownership of our produce.

***Sefer HaChinuch* (#84), Cited by Rav Kanievsky on *Shemittah*, ArtScroll Publishers, pp. 178 – 181. – G-d created and sustains the world.**

Among the underlying purposes of the mitzvah is to instill in our hearts and draw a powerful image in our minds of the matter of Creation of the universe. [The observance of Shemittah serves as a testimony] that in six days Hashem made the heavens and the earth (Shemos 20:11). Regarding the seventh day on which He did not create anything, He instructed [Moshe] to use the term “resting” [in the Torah] with reference to Himself, as the verse states (ibid.) *and He rested on the seventh day*.

Deniers of Torah believe in an everlasting universe. By means of this idea, they [attempt] to destroy all of [the Torah’s] watchtowers and breach its ramparts. In order to remove, uproot, and expunge this notion, it becomes incumbent upon us to spend all our [cycles] of time – [both] daily and yearly -- [in a manner that causes us to reflect upon] this matter [of G-d’s creation of the world]. [Hence with regard to our years, we are able] to count six years [of work] and rest in the seventh. The matter [of creation] will thus remain a steadfast part of our consciousness. This parallels the manner in which we

spend the days of the week, with six devoted to work [and] one to rest. Therefore, G-d, blessed be He, commanded that we relinquish ownership of all [the produce] that the land brings forth in this year, aside from the command to rest from working the land during [Shemittah] (Mitzvah 112).

By fulfilling these mitzvot, man will remember that the land brings forth produce for him year after year is not bringing it forth by virtue of its own strength and constitution; for in truth there is a Master over it and over the man who is its owner. And when that Master so desires, He commands the landowner to relinquish ownership over the produce. Hence by relinquishing control of the land during Shemittah, we demonstrate our belief in G-d as the Creator and Master of the universe in two ways: (1) through counting the years, which indicates that at the time of Creation Hashem rested on the seventh day, and (2) through conducting ourselves in a manner that shows that we are not the masters of the land.

#### **Part D. Special Hashgacha Over the Land of Israel**

Shemittah observance allows us to recognize that not only did G-d create and continually sustain this world, He constantly supervises it, and especially the Land of Israel.

#### **Binah LeIttim, Cited by Rav Kanievsky on Shemittah, ArtScroll Publishers, page 29.**

“For six years you shall sow your field and for six years you shall prune your vineyard...but the seventh year shall be a complete rest for the land.” (Vayikra 25:3-4) Why doesn't the Torah simply state that we must let the land rest during the seventh year? Wouldn't we work it for the first six years even without the Torah telling us to do so?

It is common for farmers to rotate their crops, allowing some of their fields to lie fallow for one season every three or four years. One might think that Shemittah serves the same purpose – we leave our fields fallow to allow the land to rejuvenate, just as farmers throughout the world do. The Torah therefore states that we will work our land for six years. Although farmers throughout the world give their fields a break every three or four years, farmers in Eretz Yisroel can work for a full six years. Why? Because the soil of Eretz Yisroel is unlike that of the rest of the world; Eretz Yisroel is particularly blessed. “It is a Land that Hashem, your G-d, seeks out; the eyes of Hashem, your G-d, are always upon it” (Devarim 11:12). Therefore, you do not need to give the land a rest at all, as Hashem can bless the land to grow produce without pause. If so, why do we rest during the seventh year? The Torah continues: “The seventh year shall be a complete rest for the land, a Shabbat for Hashem (Vayikra 25:4). That is, we let the land rest solely because Hashem commanded us to do so.

#### **Part E. Sensitizing the Wealthy to the Poor**

During Shemittah, the playing field is leveled when the wealthy release ownership of their produce. They can better identify with the plight of the poor, even beyond the Shemittah year.

#### **Tzeror HaMor Parshas Behar, Cited by Rav Kanievsky on Shemittah, ArtScroll Publishers, Page 23.**

In the natural order of the world, there are both wealthy and poor people. Through the mitzvah of Shemittah, Hashem insures that for one period, all people will be equal to some degree, for during Shemittah, the fields are free and open for everyone alike. During the year of Shemittah, the wealthy

landowner feels some of the desperation that the poor feel every day, and comes to realize that his livelihood is not the result of his own efforts; he is completely dependent on Hashem. This experience sensitizes the wealthy person to the plight of the poor and changes his perspective toward those less fortunate than himself. In subsequent years, when the wealthy man once again enjoys the bounty of his fields, he will remember the years in which he worried about his livelihood. Bearing this in mind he will take responsibility for the poor of his community.

#### **Part F. A Time for Spiritual Renewal**

Individuals and the Jewish nation as a whole should use the Shemittah year as a time of spiritual rejuvenation.

#### **Rabbi Tzvi Hersh Weinreb, *The Spiritual Significance of Shemittah*, Jewish Action, Fall 2014.**

Rav Kook sees the Shemittah year as a time when the Divine light can shine in all its glory, when society as a whole can experience a spiritual rejuvenation. Rav Kook, who lived well into the twentieth century, sees Shemittah as an antidote to the ills of modern society. He contends that just as an individual needs Shabbat to remove himself from mundane pursuits once in seven days, so too does the nation require a set time once in seven years to renew itself spiritually. In fact, many farmers today use the Shemittah year for what it was originally intended—they return to the beit midrash. Rav Kook sees the Shemittah year as a time when the Divine light can shine in all its glory, when society as a whole can experience a spiritual rejuvenation. Indeed, shemittah and its lessons are no less germane today than they were 2,000 years ago.

Shemittah has many purposes, some of which are pragmatic, others that are profound. Perhaps the purpose of this mitzvah differs throughout different times in history, so that each generation requires Shemittah for reasons specific to that age. Shemittah helps the earth renew and nourish itself, and amends the unfair distribution of wealth. It cultivates a spirit of generosity and prevents an attitude of self-sufficiency and arrogance, both of which are antithetical to spirituality. It encourages trust in G-d and brings one closer to Him. Finally, it provides a counterbalance to the struggles and anxieties that pervade modern economic societies.

Shemittah is not just a set of arbitrary laws and demands. It provides an opportunity for the improvement of society and improvement of the self.

Shemittah is the catalyst for professors investing one year out of every seven as a time for personal growth and rejuvenation that became a formalized policy at many universities beginning in 1880 at Harvard.

#### **Gayle A. Brazeau, PhD and Jeanne Hawkins Van Tyle, *Sabbaticals: The Key to Sharpening our Professional Skills as Educators, Scientists, and Clinicians*, American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education, October 15, 2006.**

Sabbaticals have a long history and have been one of the defining elements of academic life... This concept of a break or leave every 7 years was the foundation for the development of sabbaticals in education, allowing for a time when a professor was not expected to teach, but rather have an opportunity for rejuvenation and restoration. Harvard University first developed a sabbatical program

in 1880. Since that time, there has been enormous growth in the availability of sabbatical programs as documented by a report in 1992 indicating approximately 75% of all private and public 2- and 4-year institutions offer some form of a sabbatical program.

Moreover, we see the idea of a sabbatical is expanding beyond academics throughout the professional workplace.

**Katherine Bindley, *The Sabbatical, a Power Move for the Burnout Era*, Wall Street Journal, January 7, 2022.**

Workers are putting in more hours than ever nearly two years into the pandemic. They are in many cases burned out and believe a prolonged break is the best respite. Surprisingly, some companies agree. Employees who take sabbaticals say they return to work energized and more productive. Managers who are worried about retaining top talent and how the Covid-19 era is wearing on employees' well-being find sabbaticals engender loyalty and greater creativity.

Late last year, Goldman Sachs Group Inc. started offering six-week unpaid sabbaticals to people who have been with the bank for at least 15 years, following an early 2021 move by Citigroup Inc. to give employees in North America with at least five years' service up to 12 weeks off at 25% of their base pay. A Citigroup spokeswoman said more than 200 employees have been approved to take sabbaticals as part of this program... An Adobe spokesman said that between July and September of 2021, close to 600 employees in the U.S. took sabbaticals.

It is not surprising, therefore, to see that there are organizations dedicated to researching and advocating for the therapeutic advantages of taking a Sabbatical.

**Dennis DiDonna and Matt Bloom, PhD, *The Sabbatical Project*, Research1.**

We found that sabbaticals can have profound implications for individuals' personal and work-related identities which, in turn, may have profound implications for their wellbeing at work, and in life. Sabbaticals are a "peak life experience" that provide an identity workspace for transitions, healing, discovery and growth. Our study provides a preliminary conceptual framework for understanding the process by which sabbaticals led to this outcome, and this framework may be useful for guiding future research on how individuals may benefit from such long-term separations from work.

### **Section III. The Special Connection Between Shemittah and Har Sinai**

The Torah specifically records that G-d taught the mitzvah of Shemittah at Har Sinai. We are all familiar with G-d teaching the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai. But why should the Torah also highlight Shemittah as being given at Har Sinai? This question is addressed by Toras Kohanim and cited by Rashi (Vayikra 25:1).

*What is the connection between Shemittah and Har Sinai? Just as both the general principles and the details of Shemittah were taught at Sinai so too both the general principles and the details of all the mitzvot were said at Sinai.*

Toras Kohanim answers that Shemittah is the archetypical mitzvah – just as Shemittah was taught replete with all its details, so, too, were all the other mitzvot. Moreover, there are additional ideas being expressed by this unique association as described below.

### **Part I. Shemittah Testifies to the Reality of Ma'amad Har Sinai**

No human being could have guaranteed the promise of bumper crops to sustain man through the Shemittah year. Hence, Shemittah underscores the Divine origin of the Torah at Mount Sinai.

#### **Rabbi Noson Weisz, *Orienting to the Right Express*, Aish.com**

...[O]ther commentators point out (see Ohr Hachaim) that Rashi does not really address or answer the real question. He explained the need to select one of the 613 Mitzvoth to inform us of the Sinaic origin of all Mitzvoth, but one is still left to wonder why *Shmita*, of all the commandments was chosen for this task. Are we to assume that its selection is mere coincidence?

We shall attempt to explore the special relationship between *Shmita* and Sinai...

It is common to point out that *Shmita* is an incredibly powerful Mitzvah; it has the power to prove that the Torah must have originated in heaven almost single-handedly. No human being living in an agricultural society - as pretty much everyone did in Biblical times - could ever have dreamed up the *Shmita* laws. To forego an entire harvest once every seven years, and two in a row once every fifty years, at a period in history when survival was marginal, did not only constitute economic suicide, but carried with it a serious threat of starvation as well.

The only way such a commandment could possibly be implemented in the real world is under the conditions the Torah itself describes:

*"If you will say, 'What will we eat in the seventh year? Behold! We will not sow and not gather in our crops!' I will ordain My blessing for you in the sixth year and it will yield a crop sufficient for a three year period. You will sow in the eighth year, but you will eat from the old crop; until the ninth year, until the arrival of its crop, you will eat the old."* (Leviticus 25:20-22)

Only someone who actually had G-d's ear could possibly guarantee this. No rabbinic sect interested in creating a new religion would have presumed to invent such a commandment. As it requires the quoted guarantee in order to make it possible to observe – and no one can guarantee such a guarantee other than G-d Himself - it follows that only G-d Himself could possibly have issued it. Thus, in a way, the connection between *Shmita* and Mount Sinai is readily apparent. The very existence of the commandment of *Shmita* testifies to the reality of the meeting at Sinai.

Why did the Torah choose *Shemittah* to teach a lesson as important and fundamental as the scope of Sinaitic revelation?

#### **Rabbi Yitchok Alderstein, *Why Shemittah?* Torah.org**

It is one of the most famous questions posed by Rashi in all of Chumash: What does *Shemittah* have to do with *Har Sinai*? The oft-repeated answer – that the Torah wished to underscore that the specific details and minutiae of each mitzvah are as sourced in Divine revelation as the general shape of the mitzvah – leaves a nagging question in its wake. Why did the Torah choose *Shemittah* to teach



a lesson as important and fundamental as the scope of Sinaitic revelation? Certainly we could think of any number of suitable mitzvos to which this lesson could have been linked...

The solution will come by way of unraveling a mystery associated with the first Mishnah in *Avos*, which describes Moshe as receiving the Torah from Sinai. Why Sinai? Isn't the real point of that Mishnah that Moshe received the entirety of Torah from HKB"Y? Can a mountain give the Torah?

We can suggest that Sinai does not mean the mountain *per se*, but what we colloquially call *ma'amad Har Sinai*, the experience of standing before Hashem, in the most overwhelming display of His Presence ever. That experience, like no other moment in human history, impressed clear *emunah* upon our souls. His reality became so clear and immediate that our souls fled our bodies. *Emunah* at that moment suffused our beings. We apprehended Him not only with mind and heart, but *emunah* in Him penetrated the appendages of our bodies. The sense of *ayn od milvado*, there is nothing besides Him, permeated every last nook and cranny of our bodies...

It means that Moshe was coming from a place of utter and complete *emunah*, and, as our teacher, drew a straight line for us from that moment to all the times we would spend studying Torah. When a Jew studies Torah – or performs any mitzvah, for that matter – he must hail back to that moment as much as possible, approaching his learning (as the Mishnah *Avos* 1:1 says) with fear and trembling, revisiting and drawing upon an *emunah* so deep that it seizes his body and causes it to tremble.

We might explain Rashi's "general" and "specific" along these lines. The "general" refers to the overarching sense of *emunah* that accompanies the entire mitzvah system. Every individual mitzvah – every "specific" instantiation of the mitzvah system – brings along a specific insight and deepening of *emunah*. The source of all of this is Sinai. We draw from it, and recreate in our own lives the clarity of *emunah* that was made available to us on that day.

One mitzvah in particular has special potency in reliving that *emunah*. Each *Shemittah* a Jew turns his back on the source of his livelihood and survival. With no apparent source of sustenance, he prevails upon himself to desist from the activity that ordinarily puts bread on his table. Living through *Shemittah* is living with an *emunah* that suffuses his body. It represents the epitome of *emunah*. (Arguably, Shabbos is a key component of living with *emunah*, representing as it does our conviction in Hashem as Creator. Shabbos, however, is about awareness of the facts of Creation. It pertains to *emunah* of the mind and heart.) *Shemittah* demands an *emunah* that occupies our bodies. The Torah hints at this in speaking of *Shabbos ha-aretz*, with *aretz* implying the lower, coarser, more earthy part of us. *Shemittah emunah*-teaching experience of Shabbos, applied to the *aretz* of our beings, or the penetration of *emunah* even to our unthinking and unfeeling bodies.

## Part II. Observing Shemittah Informs All Aspects of Life

We absorb the lessons of Shemittah and apply them to the next six years, so when we return to all our worldly pursuits, we will understand that it is G-d who gives us the strength and ability to accomplish our goals.

**Rabbi Avraham Edelstein, *Parshas Behar – Shemittah, Ner Le’Elef Chumash Series.***

The question is why Shemittah was chosen amongst all the mitzvot to teach us, “*Just as both the general principles and the details of Shemittah were said at Sinai so too both the general principles and the details of all mitzvot were said at Sinai.*”

Clearly, Shemittah was chosen because of its lesson in faith. We might rephrase the Sages as saying: What is the continuity of faith that is taught in the lesson of Shemittah which builds on the faith of Har Sinai? (Sfas Emes, Ohr Gedalyahu). Shemittah teaches us a faith that will inform all of the Torah and all of its commandments. We will absorb its lessons and apply them to the next six years, so that also when we plough and reap, and do business and consult, we will understand that it is G-d who gives us the strength to do all of this and it is He who determines the results. It is He who created and owns all things, including the very land we attempt to master.

It is easy for even those who believe in G-d, to imagine that somehow He has withdrawn from this or that arena. We talk of the laws of economics or sociology, of nature and nurture, of physics and chemistry as if somehow these laws are no longer subject to the guiding Hand of G-d. Does G-d really care whether I put on a light, or whether I made a business deal with just a slight embellishment of my sales pitch? To this G-d answers, “The leap of faith you will take during Shemittah will teach you that I am involved in every aspect the creation. I will feed you without your making any effort towards your own sustenance. I will be the plougher and the reaper.”

After keeping Shemittah, life will never be the same again. We will realize that, in all the other years, G-d sustains us at His Will and not because of any special business deals or professional achievements on our part. Having made the transition from the desert where our every need was taken care of, to the Land where we have to toil to plough and sow and reap, Shemittah will change our relationship to that and all other work. Our understanding of Who makes it happen will be different, our feeling of security hugely increased and our ability to share all of our possessions - that which really belongs to Him – significantly expanded.

**Part III. This World Leads to the World to Come**

The mitzvah of Shemittah sensitizes us to the transient nature of this world and brings us to the World to Come. This, too is the ultimate goal of all the mitzvot.

**Rabbi Ezra Cohen, *Ezras Kohanim, pp. 121-122.***

We need to understand why the Torah (Toras Kohanim) specifically chose to teach this principle through mitzvah Shemittah. The rationale for Shemittah is to make us remember that the land does not belong to us, but to G-d. Furthermore, allowing the land to rest reminds us that *Olam Hazeih* is temporary, and *Olam Haba* is the ultimate purpose of life. Withdrawing from working the land separates us from *Olam Hazeih*, similar to Shabbat which has a semblance to *Olam Haba*. Hence, not working the land is related to *Olam Haba*.

The pure words of the Ramchal in *Mesillas Yesharim* (Chapter One) are well known: “Man was created with the sole purpose of reveling in the Eternal and delighting in the splendor of the Divine Presence, this being the ultimate joy and the greatest of all pleasures in existence. The true place for this pleasure is the World to Come, which was created with this purpose in mind. However, the path that helps us reach our desired objective is this world...The means that lead man to this goal are the

mitzvot that G-d, blessed be His Name, commanded us to observe, and the place for doing the mitzvos is in this world alone.”

The words of the Ramchal teach us that the entire purpose of G-d’s mitzvot is to make us worthy of the World to Come. We fulfill mitzvot in this temporary world in order to reach the World to Come which is permanent and eternal. Shemittah teaches us this principle by reminding us that this world is temporary, and subservient to the World to Come.

**Ramban (Nachmanides), Torat Adam, Sha’ar HaGemul – The World to Come follows a progression of events and is ultimately an eternal existence.**

The reward of the souls and their existence in the World of the Souls is called Gan Eden by our rabbis ... After the World of the Souls will come the era of the Messiah, which is a part of this world. At the conclusion thereof, the Great Judgment and the Resurrection of the Dead will occur. This is the period of reward that includes both body and soul.

This is the World to Come, in which the body will become like the soul, and the soul will cleave to the knowledge of God, just as it adhered to it in the Gan Eden of the World of the Souls. At this point, however, it will be elevated to an even greater degree and everything will continue to exist forever and ever.

**Appendix. Guarding Cannabis Fields During the Shemittah Year**

As we learned in Section I, one is obligated to render one’s produce *hefker*, ownerless, free for anyone to take. What happens if your crop is medical marijuana, required by Israeli law to be under tight security, and marketed through highly regulated channels? How can such produce be considered ownerless, available for anyone to take?

**Teshuvah by Rav Kanievsky on Shemittah, ArtScroll Publishers, p. 62.**

**What to do with Cannabis Fields Grown for Medical Purposes?**

Rav Zilberstein presented a question to Rav Chaim. A handful of people in Eretz Yisroel were authorized by the government to grow cannabis for medical purposes. The process was highly regulated, and the premises were guarded by closed-circuit cameras, dogs, and security guards. One of these growers was a religious Jew who wanted to know what to do for Shemittah.

Rav Chaim answered that according to the Chazon Ish, items grown for medical purposes do not have Shemittah sanctity (See Beur Halachah, Hil. Shemittah VeYovel 5:10; Chazon Ish, Shevi’is 14:5).

Tifferes Yisroel and others maintain, however, that crops used for medicinal purposes do have Shemittah sanctity and must be left *hefker*. According to these opinions, can one fulfill his obligation to leave the cannabis plants *hefker* if they are guarded by heavy security?

Rav Chaim cited the Chazon Ish who ruled that the prohibition to guard Shemittah produce applies to the owner of the field; he may not guard his own fields, but it is not forbidden for another person to guard the field. In this case, then, since the cannabis is guarded by government-appointed security

guards, it would seem that no prohibition is being transgressed. In addition, although a person is obligated to declare his Shemittah crops ownerless, that is only to allow people to take the produce and treat it with Shemittah sanctity. Here though, if not for the guards, people would take the cannabis and use it as a recreational drug, which is certainly not in keeping with its Shemittah sanctity. Therefore it is permitted to post guards to prevent people from taking the crops.

Yet it still might be possible to declare the crops ownerless, with government permission, in front of ten *talmidei chochomim* who would be trusted not to use the crops in an inappropriate manner.

## Endnotes

[1] By Torah law, the mitzvah of Yovel only applies when the land of Israel is divided among the twelve *Shevatim* – Tribes – and inhabited by them in their respective portions. That has not been the case since approximately 600 BCE. Yovel is therefore not observed today, nor is the Yovel year included in the Shemittah cycle calculations. (See Rambam Hilchot Shemittah 10:5 Derech Emunah, *ibid.*) Although there is a disagreement whether Shemittah today is considered binding by Torah or rabbinic law, most opinions maintain Shemittah observance today is rabbinic. These opinions hold the Torah obligation of Shemittah would only apply when the Yovel is observed, and when the majority of Jews live in the Land of Israel with a functioning Sanhedrin (Jewish High Court). They also hold that the land of Israel lost its Kedusah-holiness with the destruction of the Second Temple. See Shottenstein Talmud Yerushalmi, Tractate Shevi'is, Volume I, Introduction, and *The Shemittah Guide*, Rabbi Yissachar Dov Krakowski, Gefen Publishing House, p. xxiii.

[2] Appreciation to Rabbi Michael Jablinowitz who helped sharpen this idea.

[3] I first heard about the Rockefeller Plaza annual closing from Rabbi Mordechai Becher in a shiur on Shabbat observance.