

Behar

The Sabbatical Year: From the Practical to the Mystical

The Torah portion of *Behar* deals exclusively with the *Shemittah* (Sabbatical year), which falls every seven years, and the *Yovel* (the Jubilee year), which takes place every fifty years. The concept of Shemittah and the elucidation of its laws were considered so important that Shemittah is the only commandment to have an entire weekly Torah portion devoted to it. While the Sabbatical year had fallen into disuse from both a conceptual and practical perspective over the last two thousand since the destruction of the Temple and the subsequent exile, in the last century renewed Jewish settlement of the Land of Israel has made it necessary to again observe and contemplate the practical and deeper implications of the seventh year.

The single most important idea to grasp about Shemittah is that practically, spiritually, and even mystically, it is the cornerstone of Torah society. Like all the other mitzvot the Sabbatical year is ultimately meant to manifest and fulfill Judaism's spiritual values, underscoring the fact that in Judaism religious practice and belief are not divorced from daily life. Loving and honoring God goes hand in hand with loving one's fellow man, and in fact the two are dependant on one another.

The primary spiritual message that the Sabbatical year teaches is that all human striving and achievement must be in tune with the Divine cycle and plan for humankind. Just as we are commanded to work for six days and rest on the seventh day, likewise we are commanded to work the land for six years and on the seventh allow ourselves and the land to rest. While God wants us to play the role of being His partners in creation, we must realize that we are junior partners. On the one hand, each individual, and humanity as a whole, must strive both on the physical and spiritual planes towards fulfilling the human destiny of being created "in the image of God," but, on the other hand, we must avoid our natural tendency to think that "my power and the might of my hand has gotten me all this wealth" (Deuteronomy 8:17). By resting on the Shabbat and the Shemittah year, we concretize the message that God is directing and perpetuating the world and only by His good graces do we have the ability to accomplish anything.

On a socioeconomic level the implications of Shemittah do not end with the land owners allowing their fields to lie fallow for the entire Sabbatical year. In addition, biblical law mandated that all loans were remitted and whatever grew in the fields was deemed ownerless, so that anyone could benefit from these crops. The natural moral impulse of helping the poorer classes in society was further stressed by the command to declare every fiftieth year a Jubilee year following the end of every seventh Sabbatical cycle (forty-nine years). Jewish indentured servants were set free, and properties, fields, and houses reverted back to their original owners.

Torah society grants individuals the freedom to develop to their fullest capabilities, while simultaneously guarding against excesses that lead those most successful from forgetting God's role in their success and from gathering all the power, wealth, and property into their own hands to the detriment of the many. Within the context of enumerating the tithes for the cohen and the levi; the gleanings and corners of the fields left for the poor, the widow, and the orphan; and the general commandment to

be concerned with the fate of one's neighbor – “And if your brother grows poor, and his means fail with you, then you shall relieve him, though he be a stranger or sojourner with you” (Leviticus 25:35) – the Torah also commands the land owner to remember that “the Shabbat produce of the land shall be food for you, and your servant, and your maid and your hired servant and for the stranger that sojourns with you” (Leviticus 25:6). Furthermore, the Shemittah and Yovel years become the opportunity to free one's indentured servant, remit loans, return properties to their original owners, and share the produce of the fields with others less fortunate. All these measures were designed to ensure a certain socioeconomic equality was maintained and the nation remained united by a common purpose.

Of course, for a whole nation to undergo such an economic upheaval every seven years is no simple matter. A wholesale remittance of debts and freeing of indentured servants would certainly shake up society. Furthermore, it is one thing to refrain from working one day a week and quite another to refrain from plowing, sowing, and reaping one's crops for an entire year, especially in an agrarian society as Israel was in ancient times. (Imagine if the Israeli high-tech industry were to shut down for just a year!) Despite God's promise to His people that if they kept and sanctified the Sabbatical year He would guarantee their safety and ensure that there would be a bumper crop in the sixth year that would be enough for three years, on the whole, the entire nation never fully kept the Sabbatical laws. For this transgression the Jews unfortunately paid the price prophesied in the next portion:

And I will scatter you among the nations ... Then shall the land enjoy her Shabbats, as long as it is desolate and you are in your enemies land, then shall the land rest and enjoy her Shabbats. As long as it lies desolate it shall rest, because it did not rest in your Shabbats when you dwelt upon it. (Leviticus 26:33-34)

This prophecy came to fruition following the destruction of the First Temple, when the Jews were exiled to Babylonia. According to Jeremiah, they spent seventy years in exile as a penalty for the seventy Shemittah years they had not fully observed. Only after the land received its rest did the Jews come back to rebuild the Second Temple.

As we have discussed, Divine time flows in a series of cycles. When we understand these, we can enter Divine time. From the creation of the world in six days and the culminating Shabbat when “God rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had done,” (Genesis 2:2) the number seven has symbolized the cycle of time and the orderly purpose of creation. Indeed, Shabbat not only provides humanity with a period of rest, but also a crucial perspective on how to balance between the physical and spiritual aspects of creation.

This cycle of seven is, of course, also reflected in the Shemittah and Jubilee year cycles, and in the dynamic of exile and redemption underlying nature, our private lives, the course of Israel's history, and even the Divine plan for the human race. Consequently, the number seven is reflected within Judaism on the private and public planes and in a wide range of universal and particular natural and historical phenomena.

In the world of nature, science has revealed that most cells in the body completely rejuvenate themselves every seven years. Jewish lifecycle events, combining the public and the private, are replete with the number seven. A baby boy is circumcised on the eighth day to ensure that he has already experienced one Shabbat. At a wedding the bride encircles the groom seven times under the *chuppah* (the wedding

canopy), and seven special blessings are recited. During the next seven days, at every festive meal the bride and groom attend, these blessings are recited during Grace After Meals. Moving from joy to sadness, following the death of one of seven immediate family members, the initial mourning period is seven days.

On an exclusively communal or national level, the menorah in the Holy Temple had seven branches, one central branch representing Shabbat, and three branches on each side representing the six days of creation and the work week. The holiday of Pesach is celebrated for seven days, as is Sukkot. On Simchat Torah we dance in circles with the Torah seven times. Every Shabbat, the weekly Torah reading is divided into seven sections and the Shabbat Amidah consists of seven blessings. Furthermore, when the Jewish people left Egypt, seven complete weeks had to elapse before they were ready to receive the Torah on the fiftieth day. Indeed, every year we recall this period by counting the days and the weeks between Pesach and Shavuot. Likewise, we count seven Sabbatical cycles before reaching the fiftieth, the Jubilee, year.

The number seventy (ten times seven) also plays a significant role in the Jewish tradition. Seventy souls accompanied Jacob when he went down to Egypt, and these correspond to seventy archetypal nations descended from Noah and their seventy archetypal languages. During Sukkot, the cohanim sacrificed seventy oxen in the Temple in Jerusalem on behalf of these seventy nations as a symbol of the Jewish people's desire to live in peace with the entire world. In the desert Moses appointed seventy elders to assist him in judging and advising the people. The Sanhedrin (High Court of Law or Supreme Court) in the Land of Israel also had seventy sitting justices and a *nasi* (the chief justice) who presided over them.

What might be considered the most significant manifestation of the number seven and what is clearly the mystical message alluded to by the Sabbatical year cycle is the following tradition: the very existence of the world is predicated on a cycle comprised of seven thousand years. For six thousand years mankind will work at developing its full potential but in the seventh millennium, a radically new era will begin and the great and never ending Shabbat will arrive.

Thus, it is no coincidence that as we approach the year 6,000 (the current year is 5771 in the Jewish calendar), the Jewish people are returning to Israel. All the prophets prophesied that after a long and horrifying exile, the ingathering of the Jewish people would occur at the End of Days. The Land of Israel would be replanted and flourish, Jerusalem would be rebuilt, and the final wars guaranteeing Jewish sovereignty would be fought. The process would culminate with the coming of Mashiach, the rebuilding of the Temple, and the establishment of world peace and harmony. This utopian vision is the hope Judaism holds out to the world and is in a sense the Shabbat of world history.

Just as the six days of the work week are followed by rest and the spiritual bliss of Shabbat and six years of agricultural labor are followed by the Sabbatical year, human and world history follow the same pattern as six thousand years of mundane toil will culminate in a Sabbatical millennium. The profound meaning this correspondence holds is even deeper than it first appears because the seventh millennium is also, according to tradition, a "return to the Garden of Eden." The notion of a "paradise lost" and the quest to return humanity to its former exalted station is fundamentally connected to the role the Shemittah year plays in trying to rectify the consequences of humankind's first sin.

When Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge they thought they would become, as the snake promised, "like God to know good and evil" (Genesis 3:4).

What they did not realize was that their action would effect the very nature of human development. While Adam and Eve did attain one type of knowledge, they sacrificed another one: a pure unconscious intuition that resulted from their being in harmony with God and nature. As a result of their eating from the Tree of Knowledge, no longer would the lofty spiritual plane they took for granted in the Garden of Eden be a given, now human beings would have to struggle long and hard to attain it. From a Kabbalistic perspective, this was not simply a punishment, but a natural consequence of their actions, and, in a sense, a fortuitous one at that. Just as a parent must allow a young child the opportunity to learn to walk, even though it means a few nasty spills, likewise, God had to send Adam and Eve out of the Garden in order to allow them to fulfill their destiny of being created “in the image of God” through their own hard work.

Humanity’s exile from the Garden of Eden set the pattern for all future individual and national exiles. Furthermore, Adam’s curse affected all his descendants: “Cursed is the ground for your sake; in sorrow you shall eat of it all the days of your life ... by the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground: for dust you are and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3:17-18). Instead of living in harmony with nature Adam now found that he would have to work hard to make his living, constantly combating nature to coerce the “accursed” earth to produce for him.

The episode of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden represents humanity’s archetypal predicament. The passions, emotions, and intentions of each of the protagonists, as well as the forces of cause and effect portrayed in the story, serve as a paradigm that repeats itself in all our lives, especially in the deeper messages conveyed by the Sabbatical year. Indeed, the Sabbatical year is meant to heal both humanity and the earth of the damage caused by the primordial sin. Furthermore, it teaches us how this sin can be rectified so that we can “return to the Garden.” During both the time spent in the Garden of Eden and the Sabbatical year, we live off the abundance of the land without engaging in agriculture. During the Sabbatical year, we once again exchange working by the “sweat of our brow” for living in tune with nature and the bounty it provides. Since the Land of Israel rests during the Shemittah year, the “soul” of the land is partially healed from the “curse” it received for Adam’s sin. Of course, the Sabbatical year is slightly different from the time we spent in Eden, for we need to prepare for the seventh year by working hard in the sixth year to raise and store enough crops to last for three years. However, this level of faith is, in and of itself, an essential aspect of living in unison with nature and God, and also rectifies the lack of faith evidenced by Adam and Eve’s sin.

As a commandment that is only fulfilled in the Land of Israel, Shemittah also stresses a message inherent in the Garden of Eden story. Just as in the Garden of Eden humanity did not own or possess the Garden, the Shemittah year reminds us that the Holy Land of Israel really belongs to God. We are neither accursed slaves to the Land nor its fortunate masters, but instead temporary dwellers aware of the privilege of living in the Holy Land. Therefore, the Torah proclaims: “The Land shall not be sold forever; for the land is Mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with Me (Leviticus 25:23). Indeed, the Land of Israel on spiritual and mystical levels fundamentally corresponds to the Garden of Eden.

Tying together both the practical socioeconomic message and the mystical significance of the Sabbatical year is the fact that during the Shemittah year, everything the Land produces is decreed ownerless; thus ensuring that once every seven years, even the wealthy land owners are reminded that the earth belongs to God and the nation of Israel, not to them. After working for six years to build up one’s

lands and estates, it is no easy task to admit that they are on loan from the true Owner. Such a courageous act bridges the social and economic divide in society and returns the Jews to a utopian Eden-like state, where God is the true owner of the Land and everyone shares in its bounty. Furthermore, the threat of expulsion from the Land for failure to observe the Shemittah reminds the Jew of the initial expulsion from the Garden of Eden, thus motivating strict compliance with the laws so rectification can be achieved.

Despite the great rectification the Sabbatical year is designed to accomplish the prophetic vision that one day humanity will rise above petty jealousy, greed, and hatred, and join hands to transform this world into a paradise has been historically very difficult to achieve. The very notion of the seven year cycle can be read in the following way: six represents the spiritual and physical work to be done, and seven represents the Divine Providence necessary to ensure this lofty goal is reached. Without God's constant assistance, that which He promised through the prophets would certainly remain beyond our grasp. Perhaps no mitzvah requires such a leap of faith and for this reason the Jewish nation has still failed to fully observe it, yet the very act of learning about the seventh year is valuable, for it reminds us of what a just and caring society should look like. With the return of the Jewish people to their homeland, these laws can again be practiced as of old and the ancient dream of building a just society is within our grasp.

More than any other mitzvah the Sabbatical year serves as a bridge between the more individually-focused weekly Shabbat and the global macro-cycle of human development, represented by the seven thousand year cycle. Shemittah teaches the fine balance between free choice and individual initiative, on the one hand, and God's Providence on the other. The shofar of freedom blown in the Jubilee year is a sound all humanity needs to hear and experience. For Israel to be true to its calling we must hold on to the vision of a righteous and enlightened future. This vision may be the greatest contribution we have made to humanity. May learning about the Sabbatical year and its profound lessons, along with the revival of observing its laws in the Jewish homeland create a bridge between Israel and the Holy Land, between Israel and the nations, and ultimately between humanity and God. (This insight is discussed in *Seeds and Sparks*, pp. 60-66.)

Seven Cycles of Seven

As we have discussed in the previous section, the most fundamental of all cycles are those based on the number seven. Whether counting days, weeks, months, years, series of years, or millenia the cycle of seven appears again and again in the Jewish tradition. In fact, there are seven such time periods.

The first cycle is comprised of the six days of creation that culminated in Shabbat, the seventh day of rest. This weekly cycle underlies all of reality and orders time itself for the observant Jew. The second cycle is manifest in the counting of seven times seven weeks during the period between Pesach and Shavuot. The very act of taking the time to count every day for seven weeks out loud makes the counter supremely aware of the importance of this cycle. The third cycle is manifest in the cycle of the three Pilgrimage Festivals – Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot – which take place over a seven month period. These three holidays create their own cycle, which has practical

ramifications in the application of Jewish law in a number of fields including oaths and the obligation to return lost objects.

The fourth cycle is manifest in the counting of years, the Sabbatical years discussed in the previous section. This cycle forms the basis for the larger fifth cycle, where seven times seven years culminate in the fiftieth – the Jubilee – year. The sixth cycle counts thousands of years, dividing the world's existence into seven thousand years: six thousand pre-Messianic years followed by the Messianic era, the seventh millennium, referred to as a time that is “all Shabbat.”

The seventh and last of the cycles of time based on seven is referred to as “fifty thousand Jubilees,” a term denoting the infinite level of consciousness that will be reached after the Messianic era is reached, the resurrection of the dead takes place, and the World to Come is fully revealed. The phrase “fifty thousand Jubilee years” symbolizes an eternal realm of ongoing revelation and spiritual advancement and ascent. (See Rabbi Yitzchak Ginsburgh, *The Hebrew Letters*, p. 220.)

All seven cycles of seven place our lives in a certain context. It is obviously easier to relate to the cycles based on days, weeks, or months than to those based on years and millennia, but in reality all of them form concentric circles surrounding and guiding our consciousness. The more we meditate on these cycles of time, the more we are capable of orienting our lives according to the Divine cycles of time that God set in motion at the time of creation.