



Shmita

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Question:

What exactly is the shmita (sabbatical) year? -- Meir

Answer:

Every seven years, the Torah commands us to cease working the land and also to erase any outstanding debts. This mitzvah (Torah commandment) appears in the Torah in three different places – each in a different context: Exodus 23:10-11, Leviticus 25:1-7, and Deuteronomy 15:1-7.

From our perspective, there are several reasons behind shmita:

First, this mitzvah resembles Shabbat – albeit with an agricultural twist. Simply put, shmita forces us to recognize that there's more to life than just the physical world. By refraining from agricultural work and, instead, devoting our time to Torah study, we can spend every seventh year developing the spiritual world as well.

Second, shmita involves social justice. In the past, landowners were, by definition, rich; more land signified greater wealth.

Yet during the sabbatical year, the landowner must repudiate ownership of his fruit. In other words, anyone may enter the landowner's field and partake of the fruit. Thus, the landowner and the village pauper enter the field as equals, and each are only permitted to pick exactly the amount they need to eat.

A similar idea lies behind "shemitat kesafim" (ie, shmita's monetary dimension). Since the rich must forgive all the poor's debts, an impoverished man can more easily get back on his own two feet after the shmita year has concluded.

Furthermore, by observing the laws of shmita, we are - in effect - declaring that we recognize that all the property which we have acquired doesn't truly belong to us. Rather, everything that we have come from the Holy One, Blessed Be He.

Therefore, we obey God's command and repudiate ownership of our fruit, refrain from working our fields, and cancel our debts.

Finally, shmita serves as evidence of our faith in God's promises. Even though the land remains fallow for an entire year, we trust that we'll have sufficient produce. As the Torah states:

“And if you should say, ‘What will we eat in the seventh year? Surely, we will not sow, and we will not gather our crop!’ I will command My blessing for you in the sixth year, and it will yield a crop for three

years. And 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)

Broadly speaking, these are shmita’s basic underlying principles. Needless to say, they must be fleshed out with the mitzvah’s numerous details and finer points.

You can read more about shmita’s conceptual and philosophical underpinnings in one of the many books on the subject.

Examples include:

- “Shabbat HaAretz” by Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaCohen Kook
- “Likra’at Shmita Mamlachtit BiMedinat Yisrael” by Rabbi Ze’ev Veitman
- “Katif Sheviit”, the Torah and Land Institute
- “Shmita BaHalachah U’VaAgadah” by Rabbi Yechiel Michel Shtern
- “HaShmita ViHaMa’asrot L’Or HaMekorot” by Rabbi Tzvi Shinover
- “Shmita: A Study Guide” by Rabbi Menachem Borenstein

In addition to the above works, please consult one of the following books for information pertaining to the relevant laws:

- Maimonides’ “Mishneh Torah” – Book of Seeds, Laws of Shmita and the Jubilee
- “Aruch HaShulchan HeAtid” by Rabbi Yechiel Michel Epstein
- “B’O’halah Shel Torah” (Volume III) by Rabbi Yaakov Ariel

Many other works contain pertinent information as well.

May we merit observing shmita correctly and properly.

(Rabbi Yaron Ben-David)

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