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# Behar 5782 on the Shmita year

## D'var Torah for Parashat Behar

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Parashat Behar, our Torah reading for this week, introduces us to the Shmita year. Every seven years, Leviticus/Vayikra instructs us that the land must lie fallow—no agricultural or food production is permitted and there are a number of other restrictions put into place in addition. As it so happens, 5782 is a shmita year. For those of us living in the Diaspora, where shmita is not applicable d'oraita or on a Torah level, the question is often asked—what significance does the shmita year hold for me, for us?

The number seven is one of great significance in Jewish tradition. We are commanded to rest on the Shabbat and, here, the parallel between our need as human beings to rest and the need for the land to rest is striking and profoundly countercultural. Resting on Shabbat is mentioned multiple times in Torah and is compared to G-d's rest on the seventh day after six days of creation. Just as The Divine rests from creative labor, so, too, do we. In a capitalist system which correlates human worth with human productivity, the Torah offers us a blueprint for what an alternative system could look like, an egalitarian system of rest and rejuvenation. Recognizing that no human being, no animal, and no part of the land, upon which, our portion tells us later, we are strangers and sojourners with God, not owners outright can produce without ceasing, guidelines are put into place enabling us to shape a society in which the Shmita year is taken seriously. Yet, in the world as it is, the Shmita is an incredibly difficult mitzvah to observe. How might a commandment prohibiting food production, for instance, impact those most viscerally affected by rampant structural and social inequality? If a person cannot produce their own food, how are they supposed to sustain themselves and their families? And if they have not been able to store a year or two's worth of food because they are living month to month, where does that leave them? In many ways, preparing, saving and storing for the future are luxuries most in our own time still do not have access to. This societal restructuring reminds us that ultimately, we are but sojourners and that to be good stewards of land we must allow the land to be cared for rightly.

Shmita offers us all a paradigm for how we care for the land we live and work upon. This feels even more crucial as we are experiencing a global pandemic whose impact is felt differently for different communities. Many who have had the luxury of working from home and minimizing exposure have not had to get proximate to those who are going to work daily to keep the systems and structures we rely upon functioning, even as they increase their personal exposure and that of their families. Those who do not live with disability or chronic illness that puts them at greater risk for COVID and its complications tend not to consider the impact personal choice has on social fabric and the ability for all of us to live and thrive safely.

If we take seriously the Torah's mandate to allow the land to rest, just as human beings are required to rest, we must recognize that in order to put this into practice, we are required to radically rethink and reconstitute our social structure. In our pandemic era, there is yet hope that radical reawakening can—indeed—must occur, even as we yearn to return to normal, whatever normal means.

Shmita is a difficult mitzvah and that is the point. Human beings thrive on routine and predictability, which is why it feels like the status quo is so intrenched that change is out of reach. It is nearly impossible to imagine a scenario in our own time when those with much are willing to redistribute resources for the welfare of all. Yet, we return to this portion year after year as a reminder that the systems we have and the ways of being we've grown accustomed to are not sacrosanct. We can make change if we harness all of our will and ingenuity into doing so.

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