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LET THE LAND REST: LESSONS FROM SHMITTAH

Shmittah, the Sabbatical Year, comprises a number of the 613 commandments (mitzvot) of the Torah.[1] Like the commandment to rest every seven days on Shabbat, Shmittah not only provides physical benefits but also enables humanity to develop spiritually and experience the unity of Creation. It also seems designed to shift how we relate the Earth.

With today's environmental challenges, these mitzvot may be more relevant and needed today than at any time in Jewish and world history.

While the laws of Shmittah for Jews living in Israel are quite numerous and complex, there are four main commandments:

- The first commandment is that the land should rest, as the Torah says, “and the land shall rest a Sabbath to God.” This occurs by people refraining from planting, pruning, plowing, harvesting or engaging in any other form of working the land.
- The second commandment of Shmittah is that all seventh-year produce is hefker—ownerless and free.
- The third commandment is for Jews to cancel outstanding debt obligations between each other.
- The fourth commandment is to sanctify all seventh-year produce by handling it respectfully, consuming it completely, and not doing any business with it.

Shmittah helps us realize that the Earth is not merely some resource to be used and abused. If we want to live on the land, it is our responsibility to let it rest. Shmittah can also help us reflect on the sanctity in our food, and help us connect with the Source of all things.

When we abstain from working the land during the Shmittah year and relinquish the ownership of its produce, we acknowledge that we do not own the land. This is a crucial insight for our modern world. It provides us with the opportunity to free ourselves from the constant pursuit of material goods and wealth — and the idolatrous illusion that they signify our value and the value of our existence.

The great commentator and philosopher Maimonides (Spain, 1135-1204) wrote that some of the laws of the Sabbatical Year “are meant to make the earth more fertile and stronger through letting it lie fallow.” The Torah warns us that if we fail to keep the mitzvah of Shmittah, “Then the land shall enjoy her Sabbaths”—when we are expelled from it and it lies barren.

The way that we treat the land today reflects that humanity has yet to learn the lessons of Shmittah. For example, the “slash and burn” method of clearing land for agriculture, employed globally by both small and large-scale cattle farmers, involves cutting the vegetation of a plot of land and allowing it to dry, at which

point it is burned. The cleared forestlands are then cultivated for a few seasons until yields decline on the fragile, nutrient-poor soil, used for cattle pasture until it is further degraded, and then abandoned. This method of agriculture is a significant driver of tropical deforestation. The Global Forest Resources Assessment 2005 of the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) reports that deforestation "continues at an alarmingly high rate - about 13 million hectares (or 32 million acres) per year." As the UN FAO notes, "Deforestation causes incalculable environmental damage, releasing billions of tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere and driving thousands of species of life to extinction each year.

When we benefit from this degradation of the land by consuming the meat, produce, or timber that comes from it, we are contributing to its long-term destruction as the world's greatest source of biodiversity and stabilizer of the global climate. While we are not directly transgressing the laws of Shmittah, we are demonstrating that we have not learned its lessons.

Shmittah teaches us about the needs of the land, our responsibilities to the earth and other people, and the holiness in the world. Today's society is in great need of this wisdom, not just to take care of the land itself but also to preserve it for the future of human beings. How can we bring this wisdom into our lives and into the world? Here are some ideas.

First, keep track of the Shmittah year so that you can be aware of the cycles of the land. Although you are likely not a farmer in Israel, contemplate the significance of a Sabbatical year occurring, and what that can mean to you personally.

Second, Shmittah is a cycle that includes both "working and farming" years and the "rest years." So, the values of Shmittah also can enrich our thinking every day, not just during the Shmittah year.

Considering the significant impacts that our society is having on the land today, there is much that we can do to rectify this with values that reflect a deeper and more meaningful relationship with the land. For example, we might consider eating more healthy, organic and local food, in order to connect ourselves to the land where we live.

Shmittah represents an ideal - a vision that can move us to treat the world around us, and its fruits, with the sanctity they deserve. May the Jewish people manifest the wisdom of Shmittah and share it with the world.

Source: Rabbi Noam Yehuda Sendor