


Contemporary Observance of Shmittah in the State of Israel

 A public storm has raged in the wake of an attempt to force, on to part of the public, a solution of purchasing produce from non-Jews. This public debate has caused us to forget the main concepts of the mitzvah of Shmittah, as derived from the Torah.

Let us remind ourselves of the important message behind the mitzvah of Shmittah and what is the best way to properly observe Shmittah.

The Rishonim have explained the reason behind the mitzvah in accordance with the Scriptural verses that deal with the Torah mitzvah of keeping Shmittah. The Rishonim have defined the following aims in keeping Shmittah:

- A) Letting the land lie fallow, as the Torah states, "A Sabbath of Sabbaths shall be for the land (VaYikra 25:4)."
- B) A person's ceasing from agricultural work, as the Torah states, "You shall not sow your field; you shall not harvest your vineyard (Ibid.)."
- C) Concern for the lower class. During Shmittah, the lower class will be able to obtain sustenance for free. In addition, all debts that they may have incurred will be canceled, as the Torah states, "And the poor of your nation shall eat (Shemot 23)."

The mitzvah of Shmitta specifically demands from an owner of property and land to have faith in the Ribono Shel Olam and to believe that everything is His and everything comes from Him.

Let us elaborate on the significance of each of Shmittah's aims:

- A) By letting the land lie fallow, we emphasize Eretz Yisrael's holiness. This sanctity expresses itself in the Sabbatical year dedicated to Eretz HaKodesh, the holy Land. A parallel concept is the weekly Shabbat, which commemorates Hashem's ceasing from creating. "The Shabbat of Creation" emphasizes the sanctity of time, whereas "the Shabbat of the Land" emphasizes the holiness of Eretz Yisrael.
- B) Man's cessation from agricultural work demonstrates that one should be concerned with his or her spiritual needs. In order to get a spiritual tune-up, one needs to take a break from the rat race of making a living, which inevitably causes heartache. With this in mind, one appreciates the need to take a year off after six years of work and to dedicate the Shmitta year towards attaining spiritual development - whether by increasing one's time spent learning Torah or strengthening one's connection with spiritual leaders, the prophets, and those who understand the Torah's wellspring of knowledge. The land's sanctity will then become connected with the Jewish People's holiness.




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C) Concern with those on the lower rungs of the socio-economic ladder is an integral part of Shmittah's mitzvot. It is clearly impossible to enjoy eating Eretz Yisrael's sanctified produce when other portions of society suffer from lack of food and live under hardship. It is incumbent upon the property owner to remember that everything belongs to the Creator. When one integrates this, he follows in Hashem's Path. This is the expression of "Hashem is Good to all; His mercies are on all His works (Tehillim 145:9)."

Our attempts to properly observe Shmittah should be accompanied by the above objectives.

Let us preface our statements prior to evaluating various contemporary solutions available in the market. According to the vast majority of the Rishonim's viewpoints, today's obligation to observe Shmittah is rabbinic. This does not mean, G-d forbid, that one should be lenient by degrading this important mitzvah. The opposite is true! The obligation to be careful in certain areas of halacha is often more pronounced in rabbinic law. Indeed, one must scrupulously observe rabbinic edicts.

There is a Divine assurance of "Then I will command My blessing upon you in the sixth year, and it shall bring forth produce for the three years. And ye shall sow the eighth year, and eat of the produce, the old crops; until the ninth year, until her produce come in, you shall eat the old crops (VaYikra 25:21-22)."

However, one must remember that Hashem's guarantee only exists when a Torah obligation to keep Shmittah concurrently exists. When there is no Torah obligation, it is not possible to demand that the farmer should have faith in something that is not assured.

The only ideal (Mehadrin) solution today is to establish a Shmittah fund on a large-scale. This will allow all of Eretz Yisrael's farmers to abandon their fields and to take a Sabbatical year. During that year, he will dedicate his time to spiritual elevation and to strengthening his performance of Hashem's mitzvot. We look forward to the Shmittah year, so that other sectors of the populace will also take the year off.

One cannot describe the special ambiance that will exist in Eretz Yisrael - Eretz HaKodesh - if a large segment of the public will use that year to delve into spiritual matters and aspire to live a life of sanctity and spiritual purity. (Next week we will continue checking the other solutions which all are "Bediavad").



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