

Gratitude from the Torah

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Parashat Behar

How Does Shemita Facilitate Gratitude for Renewing Our Relationship With G-d?

Shemita: The Synthesis Between the Systems of Private and Shared Ownership

The Sabbatical year (*Shmita*) is truly a gift! I experienced this, especially during the last Shemita in 2021-2022 or 5782. For the first time in the several Shemita Cycles, I had been living on the Land, I felt I could let go of my ownership of our entire plot with its orchard of grapevines and apple, pear, plum, cherry, pomegranate, fig trees and more. It was such a freeing feeling not to feel responsible or worry about picking all the fruits before they would go bad. I took a much-needed break from removing worms and making jams, fruit pies, dehydrated pears, and apricot leather. I was no longer in charge of sharing and distributing crops, I just announced “Hefker!” - ‘free for all to help themselves’ and whatever may be wasted, so be it. Let the animals of the field, the birds, stray rabbits, turtles, hedgehogs, and even the ants enjoy! At the very least the fruit remnants would return to the earth and nourish it. The Shmita year - when the land belongs to no one and everyone - is a perfect synthesis between the free enterprise of the Western world and the trend of utopic Marxism, that I was swept away by in my teenage years. Whereas we idealistic teens didn’t have any criticism to spare against the capitalistic private ownership and the exploitation of the poor, it later became all too clear to most of us that the innate self-interest of human nature doesn’t allow a system where everyone shares everything to function permanently. The Torah system of integrating and replacing private ownership with communal ownership every seven years seems to me the perfect sustainable, socialistic system. During Shemita when the produce belongs to everyone, production, distribution, and exchange are owned and regulated by the general community, and we get plenty of Otzar Beit Din fruits and vegetables sold for picking prices. Since no charge is made for the fruit, but only for the labor, Otzar Beis Din products cost much less than regular retail prices making the crop available to the poor. Furthermore, one year of shared ownership has repercussions for the following six years reminding us that ultimately everything belongs to Hashem, and even when we do enjoy private ownership, we don’t forget the poor, but happily let them have their pick. After a well-deserved break from getting dirt under my fingernails, during Shemita year, as soon as Rosh Hashana was behind us, I was eager to restore my garden and plant the winter crop. Then a new gift surprised me! All the swiss chard and beet leaves that I didn’t even plant but just began to water came up in such eager abundance that I literally could feed an army. For every B’erot retreat the students would pick the tender baby leaves for a humongous, wholesome salad, for all to share.

Receiving the Continual Gift of the Land by Letting Go of the Land

Parashat Behar opens with the mitzvah of Shemita (the Sabbatical Year). Just as the Shabbat of the week is a day of rest, the Shemita year is a year of rest. The Sefat Emet explains the purpose of the Shemita year based on its root sh-b-t:

סַפֵּר וִיקְרָא פֶּרֶקְךָ כֹּה פְּסוּקֵי בַּדְבָר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם כִּי תָבֹאוּ אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי נֹתֵן לָכֶם וְשַׁבְּתָהּ הָאָרֶץ שַׁבָּת לַיהוָה:

“Speak to the children of Israel and you shall say to them: When you come to the land that I am giving you, the land shall rest a Shabbat to Hashem” (*Vayikra* 25:2).

Hashem gives us the Land of Israel to inform us that the land belongs to Hashem. Hashem gave the land to Avraham forever and kept giving it to him. This is the mitzvah of Shemita, that Hashem

keeps giving us the land anew. Every Shemita the gift of the land renews itself. As it states, “And let G-d give you [from the dew of the heavens and the fat of the land]” (*Bereishit* 27:28). [the “and” is interpreted to mean:] let G-d give you and give you once again. Therefore, “When you come to the land that I am giving you...” (*Vayikra* 25:2), the word נָתַן/noten – ‘give’ is in the present tense. The Children of Israel are ready to receive this gift, as it states, “The land shall not be sold permanently, for the land belongs to Me, for you are strangers and [temporary] residents with Me” (*Vayikra* 25:23). This is the praise of the Children of Israel being aware that we are temporary residents. We understand that the land belongs to Hashem, and we attach ourselves perpetually to His gifting power. This is the meaning of the repeated “to give” the land:

ספר נחמיה פרק ט פסוק ח וּמָצַאתָ אֶת לְבָבוֹ נֶאֱמָן לְפָנֶיךָ וְכָרוֹת עִמּוֹ הַבְּרִית לְתֵת אֶת אֶרֶץ הַכְּנַעֲנִי הַחַתִּי הָאֲמֹרִי וְהַפְּרָזִי וְהַיְבוּסִי וְהַגְּרָגְשִׁי לְתֵת לְזָרְעוֹ וְתִקַּם אֶת דְּבָרֶיךָ כִּי צִדִּיק אָתָּה:

“You found his heart faithful before You, and You made the covenant with him **to give** the land of the Canaanites...**to give** to his seed, and You kept Your words, for You are righteous” (*Nechemiya* 9:8). That the land should be given to the Children of Israel repeatedly. Every Shemita “the land will return to Hashem” (*Sefat Emet, Parashat Behar, Year 5648*).

The root of both the words Shabbat and Shemita is ‘rest’ or ‘let go’ and ‘return.’ Thus, when we let go of our ownership of the Land, Hashem returns it to us multifold through His perpetual gifting power.

Acknowledging Hashem’s Ownership of the Land Makes it Ours

I’m blown away by this concept of continuously relinquishing ownership to be able to receive Hashem’s perpetual gift. What an epiphany to realize that the more we let go of control and ownership the more it becomes ours. This reminds me of the well-known Talmudic statement, Rabbi Levi raised a contradiction: It is written: “The earth and all it contains is Hashem’s (*Tehillim* 24:1), and it is written elsewhere: “The heavens are Hashem’s but the earth He has given over to humanity (*Tehillim* 115:16). The former verse refers to the situation before a blessing is recited (*Babylonian Talmud, Berachot* 35a). Whenever we recite a blessing before eating, we recognize Hashem’s ownership. For example, when we praise Hashem for the apple we want to eat, we recognize that He is the King and the Creator of the fruits of the tree. This verbal acknowledgment that everything belongs to G-d imbues us with ownership of whatever we plan to enjoy, conversely, if we fail to recognize Hashem’s ownership, then, as Rabbi Chanina bar Pappa said: Anyone who derives benefit from this world without a blessing, is considered as if he stole from G-d (*Babylonian Talmud, Berachot* 35b). Just as Hashem relinquishes His ownership when we recognize it, I often experience similarly that my desire to give is enhanced when the recipient is undemanding and acknowledges that it is my choice whether to give her what she wants or not. In contrast, I have lately had many uncomfortable encounters with people claiming ownership of what they think they deserve without recognizing that it is up to the giver to decide whether to give or not to give. Who wants to give to someone who comes across with claims of their rights, without even being willing to hear another perspective?

Shabbat and Shemita – The Source of Renewed Blessing

According to the *Sefat Emet*, Shabbat is not only about rest but also about ‘returning,’ another meaning for the same Hebrew root ש-ב-ת. Similarly, during the Shabbat of the Land (Shemita) the land returns to G-d while we rest from working it. The purpose of this return is so that the land will be given to us anew when the Shemita year concludes. Ohr Hachayim explains how every Shabbat

imbues Creation with new life. Just as this is true for the *Shabbat* of Creation [the weekly Shabbat], so it is true for Shemita. All the blessings are dependent on Shemita. Only the Children of Israel are prepared to receive this influence. Likewise, it states about Shemita וְהִיְתָה שִׁבְתַּת הָאָרֶץ לָכֶם לְאֹכְלָהּ [“the produce of] the Shabbat of the land shall be yours to eat” (*Vayikra* 25:6). This hints that all main influences are through שְׁבִיטָה/*shevitah* – ‘resting’ or ‘returning.’ Resting from work establishes the world (Sefat Emet, *Parashat Behar*, Year 5648). When we discern the land as a G-d-given-gift we learn not only to appreciate the land but also to open ourselves to attach to the gifting power and be blessed again and again. The more we learn to regard the land as a gift the more it will become a constantly renewed gift. If we perceive every sunrise, every blade of grass, and every breath that we take, as a gift, then they become gifts that we receive every minute and every second of the day. It isn’t easy to maintain this attitude of appreciation. It is much easier to take everything for granted. Stepping back and doing without helps us gain gratitude. By abstaining from work every seventh year, or every seventh day, we may feel deprived of something central to our lives. But it is exactly by taking it away from ourselves, that we appreciate what we had, and we are therefore able to receive the gift again. The dynamic relationship of movement back and forth, in immersing ourselves in our work and in our withdrawing from our work, in our giving and receiving keeps the relationship alive and vibrant and prevents it from becoming stale (Based on Rabbi Dov Linzer, *A Dynamic Faith of Gratitude*).

Gratitude Focus for the Week of *Parashat Behar* – Some Tips for How to Learn to Appreciate through Abstinence

When was the last time you set aside ten minutes to reflect on how grateful you are, for the things you have today that you only used to dream about? For most of us, the answer is “never.” It’s a simple but powerful exercise to break you out of taking everything for granted. All you do is:

- **Set Aside Ten Minutes to Do This Exercise with Something in Your Own Life That Has Meaning to You** – Sit down and think deliberately about what you have now that you take for granted. This is particularly effective when you practice it concerning an area of your life that you’re contemplating upgrading.
- **Practice Deliberate Deprivation** – Have you ever cut something out of your life temporarily? Maybe you went on a fast, cut out sugar, stopped drinking coffee, or cut computer time. You likely noticed that once you had that item again, whatever it was, you appreciated it a million times more than before. It’s easy to take our daily routines for granted. Shake up your routine and you’ll increase your appreciation.
- **Go on a Camping Trip** – is a perfect reset. If you’re feeling like you’re taking things for granted, there’s nothing like spending a week or so in a tent to make you fond of indoor plumbing, electricity, and air conditioning. When we get home, everything that was ordinary when we left feels more special. Our beds are more comfortable, we appreciate our roof (and how it keeps out rain!), and our kitchen as well.
- **Take a Smartphone Break** – If you think you need a new smartphone, put it away for a week or two. Afterward, you’ll have a new sense of appreciation for your old phone.
- **Embark on a “No Spend Month”** – If you are spending too much on things you don’t need? Take a month of the extras and spend only on your basic bills and food. Nothing else.

- **Cut off Sugar from Your diet for Two Weeks** – Eating too much sugar, salt, or processed foods desensitizes our sense of taste. Try cutting them out for a while to reset your taste buds.
- **Tune Into Blessings that Occurred to You Reflecting the Sefirot Connection of Each Day** – Your Sefirot Soul Accounting can be finetuned by relating to the sefirah of the week with its combination of the sefirah of the day. For example, on the day of Chesed of Netzach, tune into good deeds of extending yourself through tenacity that you accomplished. Another example may be to count your victories, even small ones, such as overcoming an urge to binge, during the week of Netzach associated with tenacity and victory.
- **Count Your “Not-Yet-Perfect” Blessings** – Acknowledge the baby steps you take on your journey toward tikun and self-improvement. It is the process rather than the project that matters or the effort rather than the end result that counts in Hashem’s eyes. If you began to speak lashon hara (evil speech) but caught yourself and instead of speaking 100 words only spoke 20 that too is a partial victory for which to be grateful. Keep recognizing and acknowledging your efforts towards becoming a better person more aligned with Hashem’s will.