

# NOT LIKE THE REST OF THEM

*by Rabbi Pinchas Winston*

This week's parsha begins with the mitzvah of Shmittah, the commandment to let the land lie fallow once every seven years. Aside from the agricultural value of doing so, the mitzvah of Shmittah reminds us of to whom the land actually belongs. It is good for humility, and best of all, for maintaining a sense of appreciation for Divine sustenance.

Every fifty years, after seven Shmittah cycles of seven years, the Jewish people observe the Yovel year. At such a time, both the forty-ninth and fiftieth year are to be considered holy, and we are to abstain from working the land, free our slaves, and let the purchased properties revert back to their original tribal owners. Just like Shavuot comes on the fiftieth day of the Omer, and represents a departure from the natural world into the supernatural realm, so too does the Yovel year signal an opportunity to rise above nature.

Today, without the Temple, the mitzvah of Shmittah and Yovel cannot be observed the same way (see the book, *The Easy Guide to Shmittah Foods*, by Rabbi Yehudah Landy). Many farmers though do in fact observe the Shmittah year, and have reported miraculous bumper crops in the sixth year, as promised by the Torah. To supplement the incomes of such brave farmers, additional funds have been established to ease the financial stress of keeping Shmittah even in these times.

As Rashi points out (VaYikrah 25:18), the mitzvah of Shmittah is one that is very much connected to our hold on Eretz Yisroel. As Rashi points out, the first exile into Bavel, which last seventy years atoned for the seventy Shmittah cycles (490 years) that went unobserved just prior to the destruction of the First Temple.

In fact, so serious is the mitzvah of Shmittah that even the transgressing of avuk-Sh'viis (Sh'viis means "seventh" and refers to the Shmittah of the seventh year) leads to horrible results. This is learned out from the juxtaposition of the sections in this week's parsha of Shmittah with the mitzvah to help a fellow Jew who has become financially broke.

The Talmud says:

Come and see how difficult the "Dust of Sh'viis" is: A man who deals in produce of the Shmittah year which eventually have to sell his chattel ... and then his property ... then his house ... eventually his daughter as a handmaid ... then he will have to borrow with interest ... and then he will be forced to sell himself ... and to someone who worships idols, which will cause him to do the same. (Kiddushin

20a)

It is mind-boggling that one mitzvah could lead to such self-destruction! In essence, the Talmud is saying that, for not observing the Shmittah year and by dealing in the produce of the Seventh Year, a man will eventually turn to idol worship. Does this make sense? Yes, if you consider that the "root" of idol worship is what Shmittah tries to "unearth," and it has to do with the number seven.

The number seven represents the physical world. God made creation in seven days, and seven represents the world created in those seven days. The number eight, associated with Chanukah and Bris Milah, like the number fifty, represents the transition from the natural, physical world to the unnatural, spiritual world. That would make Shmittah, and Shabbos for that matter, a threshold into a higher reality, the reality of the eighth year, or even the eighth day.

In other words, Sunday is not merely the first day of the next week; it is the eighth day of the previous week! The cycle may start all over again after Shabbos, as it has for thousands of years now, but on a higher level. There are two ways to count days: by the week, and by the day itself. With respect to the former, each week may merely appear like a repeated cycle; however, the days climb in number toward a higher goal, the next one higher than the previous one. This is reflected in the counting of the omer taking place now, during which we count seven weeks, and forty-nine days.

According to Jewish belief, there is only one God who runs both worlds; it's just that in the supernatural world His "hand" is revealed, whereas in the natural world, His "hand" is hidden behind the "veil" of nature, or better yet, with a "glove." Idol worship disregards this concept, and imbues the physical world with powers it does not have, as if there are separate gods that govern the natural world.

Shmittah year, like Shabbos, comes to keep us on track, and when necessary, knock us back on track. Working six days of the week in the veiled natural world, one's eyes cease to look heavenward because the concerns of daily life keep them pinned downward. Once a week, we step out of that world into a higher one, and again we can raise our eyes to God. The same is true of the six years of working the land, and the seventh, Shmittah Year.

To overlook Shabbos, and the Shmittah year, is to leave one's eyes pointing downward (spiritually speaking, of course). As time goes on, and as life continues quite naturally, one can get the impression that, whether or not they believe in God, they can make their living, and in fact, do quite well, without a direct relationship with God.

Such a viewpoint is sadly mistaken, for, the point of Shabbos and Shmittah is not to make life difficult for the Jew, or to even test our faith in God's promises, though this happens as a matter-of-fact. The point of any "shabbos" is to keep us "in touch" with God. Shabbos and Shmittah is God's way of not only giving us life in This World, but life in The World-to-Come as well, a time that will be "completely Shabbos."

By making us dependent upon the hand of God, we have no alternative but to pray to Him, to ask Him for our needs, and more importantly, to thank Him for the good we have received. Mitzvos become our way of remaining connected and satisfied. This is the "ticket" into the World-to-Come.

Thus, to not observe the Shmittah is to lose touch with God. But it is the nature of man to believe in something, without which he cannot find reason to get out of bed in the morning. And if that belief will not be in the true, eternal God, then it's going to have to be in something more transient, and **that** is idol worship.

Thus, we can appreciate why disregarding the Shmittah year even indirectly can be the cause of so much self-destruction. Like many changes, it doesn't happen fast, or over night. But when it's all said and done, history reveals just how easy it is to be lenient with the "less important" aspects, and how such leniencies can lead to the worse atrocities. However, if we follow the Torah's prescription for maintained spiritual awareness, even in our generation that lacks a Temple, then we can rise to the secure world that exists above the level of the natural.

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This week's parsha also addresses the issue of lending money to a fellow Jew with the expectation of receiving interest in return with the principle amount. And, although there is a halacha "loopholes" through which one can pass to make his money "work" for him, the basic mitzvah is to make it as easy for a fellow Jew to financially stand up on his own two feet and stay there. Interest hurts and its "bites," which is why it is also called "neshech," which means "bite."

Imagine walking into a bank today and asking for a loan-interest free! What would be the reaction of the bank manager? "What are you, **nuts** or something?"

It is as natural today to make money on money as it is to receive a day's salary for a day's work. And why not? What's wrong with earning interest? You earned the money, so why shouldn't it benefit you. After all, while the borrower is using it to help himself, you can't do anything with it. So, at least let the two of you benefit from your dollars, the borrower from the money, and you from the interest.

However, parnassa-earning a living-is one of the things that G-d keeps **direct** control over. There are people who work hard, and earn little. There are people who work little, and earn a lot (one multi-millionaire told how he came into New York for the day, invested in some stock, and made another million dollars that day!). And sometimes, you might find people who get paid exactly for what they work. Obviously other factors are at work when G-d decides who gets how much for what. The bottom line is, earning a living is a miracle, and a tremendous gift.

By restricting our control over our money (even if you take advantage of the loopholes), the message of the Shmittah year is sustained on a daily basis. We're being told,

"The money you have, even though you worked for it, still belongs to **me**. You are more like a teller

than the depositor. I have placed **my** money in **your** possession for you to manage it for **me**. Use it sensitively. Use it responsibly. Use it for mitzvos. This way, once you prove yourself trustworthy, I know I can keep up the partnership-in This World, and The World-to-Come."

Have a great Shabbos,

Pinchas Winston

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