

# EVER THINK OF FARMING?

*by Rabbi Aron Tendler*

Shemitah (the Sabbatical year) occurred every seven years. The fields lay fallow, the six-year-term Jewish slaves were released and sent back to their families and all the fruits and grains in the orchards and fields were made available to any that needed.

Every 50 years, Yovel (Jubilee) was celebrated. In addition to all the laws of Shemitah, most ancestral lands were returned to their original families, and long-term Jewish slaves were freed to return home.

Every seven years, and every fifty years, the nation would undergo a reorganization and redistribution of wealth and property. Every Shemitah and every Yovel elevated the downtrodden and the destitute to the status of the wealthy and the landed. Produce was shared equally, and all Jews needed to be subservient to G-d, and only G-d - not man.

The laws of Terumah, Maaser, Lekech, Payah, Shikcha, Bikurim, and Ulah (laws dealing with priestly gifts and the rights of the poor) were reserved for the non-Shemitah and Yovel years. During those periods, the wealthy and the landed were responsible to support the Kohain, Levi, and the needy. G-d, as all the commentaries explain, gave us more than our allotted portions so that we could do all His wishes for providing for those who did not have their own. Just as we have a partnership with the tribe of Levi to support them because they do our work in the Bais Hamikdash (Temple), so too, we are partners with the poor in safe-keeping their money and providing for their needs. This understanding should challenge the prevalent attitude that the poor, and I have to assume that it was equally true when we were giving Terumah and Maaser to the Kohain and Levi, are somehow beholden to us for what we give them. In fact, the opposite is true. We are actually in their employ, no different than a business partner is responsible and dependent on his partner and the banker is responsible and dependent on his customers. With the Kohain and the Levi we are partners; with the poor we are bankers.

It is interesting to note that the portions designated for the Kohain and the Levi are called presents due to the Kehunah - priesthood. The intention is to emphasize that what the Kohain and the Levi receive, as their portion is a "present" from G-d just as all that we have is a gift from G-d. It has nothing to do with our actual work and effort. Our yearly income is set each Rosh Hashanah for the entire year. We work only as a consequence to the sin of Adam and Chava in Gan Eden. However, the degree of our success has nothing to do with our actual effort. Before the sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge we were completely dependent upon G-d's providence. The only difference

after the sin is the degree of our awareness of our dependency. Before the sin, while living in Gan Eden, it was overtly obvious that our existence was totally dependent upon G-d. After the sin, as we live outside of Gan Eden, our total dependency upon G-d is simply less obvious. The fact that we have to "work for a living" provides us with the illusion of independence. Therefore, G-d built into His system ongoing reminders that we are, in truth, totally dependent upon Him for all that we have, regardless of our chosen occupation. Terumah, Maaser, Shemitah, Yovel etc. along with saying Brochos - (blessings) and daily Tefilah (prayer), are some of those reminders. Just as the Kohain, the Levi, and the poor depend upon us for their livelihood, regardless of what they do, so too are we dependent upon G-d for our livelihood, regardless of what we do.

Considering the history of our people, it is interesting to note the changes in our chosen professions. Starting with Gan Eden, humankind was commanded to "work and safe-keep" the garden. After being expelled from Gan Eden, the consequence of "by the sweat of your brow..." suggests that man was to continue farming the land. Kayin (Cain) and Hevel (Able) are clearly identified by their choice of professions. Kayin was the farmer, and Hevel was the shepherd. After killing Hevel, Kayin was no longer allowed to farm the land; so, he turned his skills in the direction of city dwelling and its attendant industries. After the Mabul (Great Flood), Noach continued to farm, (planting the vineyard) and ten generations later, city dwelling had been perfected by Nimrod (Tower of Babel) while Avraham became a shepherd. Yitzchak added farming to his choice of occupations, while Yakov returned to the sheep herding of his grandfather. Yakov's twelve sons introduced themselves to Pharaoh as herdsmen, and the Egyptians forced the construction industry upon us. Upon entering Eretz Yisroel most of us became farmers, and it has been the long years of exile and persecution which has turned us into bankers and merchants.

An analysis of our national work resume seems to favor farming over any other enterprise. Farming is the most logical choice for personal and communal survival. Farming provides an ever self-renewing source of fuel, food, shelter, and clothing. Farming, and its attendant jobs, engages far more people as an industry than any other activity. Shepherding, on the other hand, is an important industry that is ultimately dispensable. It isn't necessary for food or nutrition, and it has a limited and replaceable application for clothing and shelter. If not for the important role that animals play in medical research and therapy, I would suggest that all forms of animal consumption are potentially unnecessary. Therefore, farming seems far more fundamental to human survival and development than shepherding. Why then did Hevel, Avraham, Yakov, the twelve Shevatim (Tribes), Moshe, and Dovid all choose to be shepherds? Why did Yitzchak, on the other hand choose to be a farmer?

Following Adam and Chava's expulsion from Gan Eden, humankind was forced to work. The work that we do is intended to challenge our sense of personal effort and benefit. Who is really responsible for our accomplishments? Us, G-d, or both of us? As explained earlier, it's only G-d who should receive the credit for our successes. However, being that we are involved in the effort, we tend to take partial or total credit for our achievements.

Farming is an industry that pits man against nature, man against G-d. From morning to night, 365 days of the year, the farmer physically nurtures and protects his investment of time, sweat, and money. Bone tired, the farmer falls into bed at the end of a long hard day, only to arise before dawn the next morning to again do battle with the forces of nature. His success is sweetened by the extensive effort of his commitment, and his sense of personal pride is certainly justified.

The shepherd, on the other hand, is a caretaker: leisurely tending to his flocks, protecting them from predators, leading them to still waters and green pastures. Their birthing is a miracle of nature, and their individual growth and development a mystery. Any personal sense of accomplishment on the part of the shepherd is misguided ego and arrogance. Therefore, our great leaders and Tzadikim (Righteous individuals) chose to be shepherds rather than farmers so that their free time at work could be maximized and their personal involvement in the work's outcome minimized. While attending to their flocks they could freely explore and contemplate G-d's covert but manifest presence, and fully appreciate the degree of their own dependency on Him. However, the farmer who struggles to care for his crops and is able to nevertheless recognize and acknowledge G-d's total control and benevolence, is far greater than the shepherd who justifiably wanted to avoid the test to his faith.

Yitzchak who never left the boundaries of Eretz Yisroel and who represents the Jewish people after the time of Mashiach, was a farmer. For him, every seed planted and every stalk that grew was a miraculous revelation of G-d's overt control. That is why his yield was 100 times that of every other farmer. His success had nothing to do with his own efforts.

When the Bnai Yisroel occupied the land it was supposed to be forever. It was supposed to be the flagship economy of G-d's world. It was supposed to be the natural but miraculous revelation of a country maintained by G-d's direct supervision, "...from the beginning of the year to the end of the year." It was supposed to be a land of lush vineyards and verdant hills, flowing with milk and honey. It was to be a land whose every flower and stone testified to G-d's mastery and love. That is why we were supposed to be farmers. That is why we were given the laws of Shemitah and Yovel. In the same way that our workweek is restricted to six days, regardless of the specific industry, so too are we restricted on the seventh and fiftieth year. Economic logic suggests that the farming industry could not sustain an entire year of idleness, and certainly not two consecutive years. However, G-d promised that the natural yield of the land would far exceed normal output expectations. Just as Yitzchak planted and harvested 100 times the norm, so too would there be enough to support the entire nation.

Of course, we would have to follow Yoseph's example and properly administer the excess yield. However, just as Yoseph emphasized for his brothers that his sale into slavery and his meteoric rise from rags to riches, and his reorganization and administration of the Egyptian economy were clearly G-d's doing, so too would each seven-year and fifty year cycle reveal G-d's providence and protection.

In the end, no one, not the rich, the poor, the Kohain or the Layvie should ever have disputed G-d's total dominion over the land, the economy, and the people. In the end, exile would have been avoided and we would all be farmers in Israel.

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