

LEAP OF FAITH

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The theme of Shmitah - the sabbatical year - forms a great part of the substance of the parsha itself. The difficulty inherent in the observance of the mitzva of Shmita is apparent to all. The Torah itself addresses the issue by saying that one should not be deterred from Shmita observance by the obvious impracticality of the mitzva. Thus, Shmita, unlike many other mitzvot, becomes a test of belief and faith. The Torah, which otherwise adamantly dictates a practical approach to life, here demands a leap of faith and an abandonment of the everyday practicalities of living.

I have felt that the mitzva of Shmita is the Jewish community's communal equivalent of the akeidah of Yitzchak by Avraham which was ordained on a personal level. The akeidah also was the height of impracticality. It flew in the face of all of the moral teachings and behavior of Avraham until that moment. The akeidah was not only impractical but suicidal - it was the murder of any Jewish future. Thus, it became the supreme test of faith in the lives of Avraham and Yitzchak and remains the symbol of Jewish belief and sacrifice until today.

This correlation between the akeidah and Shmitah can help us understand why it is the mitzva of Shmita, over and above any other mitzva, that was chosen to represent the divinity of Torah from Sinai. For to all of us today, Sinai is a matter of faith. It is a belief that our ancestors were not liars, that their transmission of the Torah and its values was correct in form and in interpretation, and that the standards of behavior outlined in the Torah are of an eternal nature. For many in the Jewish world, that is a tall order of belief to demand. The modern world is long on narcissistic pleasure and short on faith and sacrifice. But without faith, without a feeling of the spiritual and supernatural, life is a very scary place and experience.

In the long run of Jewish history Shmita has rarely been observed. The non-observance of Shmita was cited by the Talmud as one of the contributing factors for the destruction of the first Temple. There is opinion that the biblical Shmita was never observed during the time of the Second Commonwealth either. Today, the rabbinic obligation of Shmita is observed in Israel in various forms. Nevertheless, the issue of how to observe Shmita remains a divisive one within the Jewish world. But Shmita reminds us of the necessity of faith and belief. That message of Shmita is timeless and reminds us of our obligations and destiny.

Shabat Shalom.

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