

THE SABBATICAL YEAR: GOD RULES OVER US

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The opening commandment in this week's parsha deals with shemitta - the sabbatical year for the Land of Israel when the ground was to be allowed to lie fallow and the farmer abstained from his regular routine of work. The traditional commentators to the Torah emphasized that even though the ground and farmer would benefit in the long run from the year's inactivity this was not the reason for the commandment.

There are always side benefits from obeying the commandments of the Torah but these are never the reason or the basis for the commandment itself. The underlying lesson of the sabbatical year is its obvious kinship to the weekly Sabbath. Just as every seven days brings with it a holy day of rest, so too does a holy sabbatical year bring with it a rest for the earth itself.

And, to continue this obvious comparison between these two Sabbaths, just as the weekly Sabbath is meant to remind us of God's creation of the universe so too does the seven year Sabbath testify to God's omnipotence and presence in all of our human affairs.

The foundation and basis of all of Jewish faith and belief in its Torah is the necessity of human acknowledgment of God's role in our lives and in His ability to instruct us how to live. Since the weekly Sabbath sometimes is taken for granted for it becomes such an accustomed and regular part of our existence, the seven year Sabbath comes to jolt us out of our complacency and to have us recognize clearly, once again God's rule over us.

Shemitta has always been a difficult test of faith for the Jewish people. Even in Temple times it appears that the commandment was never fully fulfilled. There are many reasons for this apparent laxity in observance, the most obvious one being the seeming impracticality of its observance.

The Torah promised prosperity because of shemitta observance but the people feared the practicality of observing this commandment properly. In our time the shemitta remains a contentious topic with various halachic solutions being advanced and implanted, all in effect circumventing the true basic observance of the commandment itself.

Apparently the commandment was meant for a more perfectly faithful society than the one we have ever been successful in achieving. Nevertheless, the challenge posed by the shemitta remains

omnipresent in Jewish life. As long as there is not a proper balance between human effort and ultimate faith in the Almighty we remain a somewhat dysfunctional society.

The shemitta reminds us of our dependence upon God and on factors that are not within our human power to control. It forces us to renew our weekly sabbatical testimony as to the creation and guidance of our world and its events. Even if we are unable to fulfill the shemitta commandment fully as of yet, the idea behind it demands our discipline and understanding. The weekly Sabbath is the basic day of Jewish observance. The seven year Sabbath reinforces this basis of all Torah observance.

Shabat shalom.

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