

This week's parasha is Behar-Behukkotai, the final double portion in the book of Leviticus. Behar opens with the laws of Shmita, the sabbatical year every seven years, starting with Leviticus 25:1:

Hashem spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai: Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: When you enter the land that I assign to you, the land shall observe a sabbath of Hashem. Six years you may sow your field and six years you may prune your vineyard and gather in the yield. But in the seventh year the land shall have a sabbath of complete rest, a sabbath of Hashem: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your untrimmed vines; it shall be a year of complete rest for the land. But you may eat whatever the land during its sabbath will produce—you, your male and female servants, the hired and bound laborers who live with you, and your cattle and the beasts in your land may eat all its yield.

*Shmitta* – the seventh Sabbatical year, is actually mentioned several times in Torah, first in Exodus 23, which focuses on how *shmitta* is a time for the needy to have equal access to the produce of the land, and later in Deuteronomy 15, which describes *shmitta* as a time for the release of debts. In each, *shmitta* is clearly a radical departure from life as usual, particularly for those who are the most settled and fortunate, a recalibration of society.

The ideals of *shmitta* are lauded by Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, chief Rabbi of Palestine under the British mandate, 100 years ago, who wrote, “What the Sabbath achieves regarding the individual, the *shmitta* achieves with regard to the nation as a whole. ...It is a year of equality and rest, in which the soul reaches out towards divine justice, towards God who sustains the living creatures with loving kindness. There is no private property and no punctilious privilege but the peace of God reigns over all in which there is the breath of life.”

Of course, this is quite inspiring in theory, especially for those of us do not depend a particular plot of land to provide our sustenance year by year. In Torah study yesterday, however, one of our members who runs a vineyard pointed out that letting the vineyard go completely untended for a full year would in practice be disastrous – not just for profits but for the ecology of the vineyard and the productivity of the vines.

Evidently, our Biblical ancestors had a similar struggle, even though the penalties for violating *shmitta* were severe. Behukkotai, the second of our parshiyot, describes the rewards if we follow the laws, and the punishments if we fail to do so. The punishment writ large is plague, war and exile, described in particularly graphic horror – look up Leviticus 26: 14-32 if you want to see some gory details. As the description of the process of exile winds down, the verses 33-35 say,

“...Your land shall become a desolation and your cities a ruin. Then shall the land make up for its sabbath years throughout the time that it is desolate and you are in the land of your enemies; then shall the land rest and make up for its sabbath years. Throughout the time that it is desolate, it shall observe the rest that it did not observe in your sabbath years while you were dwelling upon it.”

This leads to the teaching in Pirke Avot 5, “Exile comes upon the world on account of idolatry, sexual immorality, murder, and the failure to observe the *shmitta*.”

And, in fact, many rabbis comment that the destruction of the first temple and the Babylonian exile were specifically punishment for the Israelites not observing *shmitta*. As Rashi puts it, “The seventy years of the Babylonian exile exactly corresponded to the seventy Sabbatical and Jubilee years that were due in those years when Israel was provoking the anger of the Omnipresent whilst still in their land, i. e. in 430 years.” – and he has some complicated math to prove it.

Rashi and all the other commentators assume that our ancient ancestors didn't just slack off after a few centuries, but that they *never followed the laws of shmitta* in the first place. Presumably this was for both the reason that came up in Torah study yesterday – how actually logistically difficult and even unsustainable it would be for small farmers and the food system – as well as for the ways that the debt-release and equal access to produce would have threatened existing power structures.

Why would we have a functionally impossible commandment that demands that we throw our lives into upheaval, and risk the land's productivity every 7 years? We know that there are ways of sustainably keeping land generative – and they do not depend on letting an entire country lie fallow every 7 years. Rav Kook wrote about the beauty of the vision, but he wasn't a farmer, dealing with the reality on the ground.

The answer may be found in Behukkotai's description of the land "reclaiming its rest." Again, it says, "then shall the land rest and make up for its sabbath years." Which suggests that the land itself has intrinsic rights. That shmitta is not just about *us* creating a sustainable, just, socialist, utopian - whatever – society. Because a full year of agricultural cessation complicates rather than aides that goal, at least if we think about sustainability only in terms of the land's productivity in relation to us.

So the goals of shmitta must not be all about *us*. Shmitta is not just about creating a better ordered society. *Shmitta* might in fact be about knocking ourselves down a peg, collectively, as the only and ultimate protagonists in the drama of the universe. From the Divine perspective, the land has equal rights to us, and what

the land wants in terms of rest is not necessarily the same things that we would do for its renewal or sustainability from a human perspective. According to Torah, the land wants wildness and wants us to remember how to be wild and out of control – in the sense of not controlling everything. Even if we are as industrious and productive as we can be – perhaps especially then – the land gets to assert those rights, even if it throws us into upheaval and exiles us.

Essentially, *shmitta* itself is a mini-exile, for what is having no land to till or own, and the requirement to glean food where one can if not a taste of exile?

Exile – the experience of being torn away from what is safe and familiar - that is part of the human condition. We must make room for it in small doses or be swept away by it. The more we can allow ourselves, in small doses to relinquish control of reality around us, in cycles of Shabbat and *shmitta*, the more resilient we are. And the more we try to control reality, the more we insist that we are the center of our own story, the less resilient we will be for upheaval.

So whether or not we will follow the laws of *shmitta* – and they only apply in the land of Israel, in any case – every year when Parashat Behar comes around, we would do well to remember that the world is not only for us, the land and is not only for us, Torah is not only for us, and even God – especially God - is not only for us. We are part of a wild story, and we are commanded to embrace the wildness.