



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Behar – Bechukotai 5769

By Adina Gerver

May 16, 2009

In *Parshat Behar*, the Torah requires residents of the Land of Israel to desist from planting, harvesting, or pruning during *shmittah*, the sabbatical year.¹ The Torah itself anticipates the extreme hardship inherent in these laws and promises to mitigate it: “[S]hould you ask, ‘What are we to eat in the seventh year, if we may neither sow nor gather in our crops?’” God responds, “I will ordain My blessing for you in the sixth year, so that it shall yield a crop sufficient for three years.”²

In case the promise of agricultural abundance is not enough to promote compliance, *Parshat Bechukotai* contains a warning for what will happen if the Israelites disobey these laws:

“And you I will scatter among the nations....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...”³

It is a chilling image and a kind of poetic justice: either follow God’s laws of your own free will and let the land have its rest, or you will be exiled and the land will have its rest without your consent. *Shmittah* will take place either on your terms or on God’s.

We can see a similar poetic pairing of reward and punishment in our relationship with the earth today: if we care for it, it will provide abundant gifts. If we fail to be thoughtful stewards of the earth, we risk a future without resources. If we don’t let the earth rest, it will claim its own *shmittah* of sorts—climate change and natural disasters will prevent us from continuing to enjoy the earth’s bounty.

One might think that spending this year—the year after *shmittah*—in Israel, I got to witness how an agriculture-centered economy continued to succeed despite letting the land rest for a year. Yet, the Israeli agriculture industry relies on rabbinic loopholes that allow the land to continue to yield produce during *shmittah*.⁴ While these legal loopholes prevent breaking the letter of the law, they do not preserve the intention of *shmittah*. Instead, the land continues to be worked to its maximum without receiving its sabbatical.

Many of us today make similar compromises in our own relationships to the environment. We know that our equivalent of “a sabbath of the Lord”⁵ means curbing our rapacious consumerism; walking, biking or taking public transportation; reducing our carbon-costly airplane travel and import of out-of-season produce from around the

¹ Shmittah is described in Leviticus 25:2-7, Exodus 23:10-11, Deuteronomy 15:1-3 and Deuteronomy 31:10-13.

² Leviticus 25:20-21.

³ Leviticus 26:33-34.

⁴ For example, in the modern solution known as *heter mechirah*, literally “the permission of selling,” the land is temporarily sold to non-Jews for the *shmittah* year. Since the laws of *shmittah* only apply to land in Israel that is owned by Jews, the sale enables Jewish farmers to continue to work their land. For more information about rabbinic approaches to *shmittah*, see <http://www.adultjewishlearning.org/Shmitah.html#Winter2008>.

⁵ Leviticus 25:2.

world; and living simpler lives. Yet, these lifestyle changes are highly inconvenient, so we either find ways to justify our consumption or use “loopholes” such as carbon offsets to avoid having to make them.

The costs of not embracing the concept of *shmittah*, of voluntarily letting the land rest, often seem inconsequential to those of us who rarely kneel to uproot a carrot. We who strip the earth of its natural resources at the fastest rate, who have the most financial leeway to make cuts in our production and consumption, who are most divorced from the earth, are least affected by the costs of this negligence. Instead, the world's poor, those least responsible for dumping carbon into our atmosphere, are impacted by our actions. By 2015, an estimated 375 million people, most of them in poor countries, will be adversely affected by climate change annually through natural disasters.⁶

Climate change, of course, exposes everyone in the world to more floods, droughts and other natural disasters, but the impact that these catastrophes have on people is almost entirely determined by their vulnerability: the physical strength of their homes, the safety of their clean water supply, their proximity to rivers and oceans, and their food security. For this reason, poor people will bear the overwhelming brunt of increasing natural disasters due to climate change.⁷ Those who earn subsistence livings by farming or whose lives depend on how the river runs, need us to embrace the concept of *shmittah* because *they* suffer the consequences of *our* complacency.

The clear message of this week's double *parshah* is that if we ignore God's will that we care for the earth now,⁸ we risk losing everything in the future. In our case this will happen through climate change rather than biblical exile. The natural disasters that we see more frequently are the earth's way of taking by force the *shmittah*, or rest, that we are denying it. While the laws of *shmittah* may seem foreign to those of us living far from the land and outside the Land of Israel, the lessons it teaches—to safeguard and protect the land, lest our overuse of its resources force us into a situation where we no longer have the option of safeguarding and protecting it—ring terrifyingly true.



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⁶ “Oxfam background paper: The Right to Survive in a Changing Climate.” Oxfam UK, April 2009, p. 1. http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/policy/climate_change/downloads/right_to_survive_climate.pdf.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁸ Genesis 2:15: “The Lord God took the man and placed him in the garden of Eden, to till it and protect it.”

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The writers of the Dvar Tzedek are the recipients of the Lisa Goldberg Memorial Fellowship. As President of the Charles S. Revson Foundation and as a mother, wife, colleague and friend, Lisa Goldberg had a profound commitment to social justice and the Jewish community. She died tragically at the age of 54. Lisa was a good friend and generous supporter of AJWS, and we hope that, through these words of tzedek, we can contribute to her legacy.

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