

D'var Torah for Parshiot Behar/Bechukotai

By Samuel Shvartsman

The following is an edited version of Samuel Shvartsman's Bar Mitzvah D'var Torah! Mazal Tov!!

Today, I am going to speak about the Mitzvah of Shmita which is in the first of this week's parshiot, Behar. The Torah teaches that every 7th year in Israel, farming stops. There is no planting and harvesting. Everybody is allowed to eat what grows by itself. This means that the owner is allowed to bring into his house what he and his family need to eat, but must leave the rest outside for other people and animals.

The Torah says that when people will ask, "How will there be enough food to eat?", the answer is that Hashem will provide enough produce in the 6th year for the 6th, 7th and the beginning of the 8th until what is planted in the 8th year grows. The Torah calls this "enough food for 3 years" which means, 2 full years and part of the 3rd. Also, fruit trees will grow almost their regular amount even without the owner taking care of it.

Many people ask why we even need shemitah. The Rambam, in his philosophical work, Moreh Nevuchim, says that it is to allow the land to regenerate its nutrients. But Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim Luntschitz in his commentary Kli Yakar challenges that idea. The Torah says that if the Jews don't keep Shmita, they will be exiled from the land and replaced by their enemies and the land will make up its neglected Shmitot. How is exile a sensible penalty for not regenerating the land? A more natural consequence would be that the land would not produce a decent crop. And replacing the Jews with an enemy who will farm the land will certainly not make up for its missed shmitot if the purpose of those shmitot is to rest the land and allow it to regain its strength! Also, Klei Yakar points out, the Torah describes the 7th year as 'שבת לה', a "Shabbat for G-d". According to Ramban, it should be called שבת לארץ, a "Shabbat for the land".

Rabbi Isaac Arama in his commentary, Akeidat Yitzchack explains that we have shemitah to remind us that God is the creator and leader of the world, similar to the theme of the weekly Shabbat. Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim Luntschitz in his commentary Kli Yakar" thinks that this is an incorrect explanation because, the great mitzvah Shabbat already covers that and demonstrates that every week. If the weekly Shabbat does not make enough of an impact, how could a mitzvah that happens once in every seven years make a difference. This is Kli Yakar's challenge. Although I think that it could make a difference because it happens for an entire year. A mitzvah that continues for such a long time, could have an impact even if it occurs rarely.

Kli Yakar's favorite explanation is that we have shemitah to learn trust in God when He provides enough food despite our total inactivity. That miracle shows us that God is the power behind every year's crop and nature is just a word for how God usually does things. The miracle has 2 parts. First of all, the land doesn't produce less on the 6th year even though the land was farmed for 6 years in a row. The 2nd miracle, according to the Kli Yakar, is that the instead of the land growing more produce on the 6th year for the 6th, 7th and part of the 8th, the usual amount grows, but it is enough for all that time because people will be satisfied with less food. The Kli Yakar understands this from the words of the Torah. God says that when the people will ask, "What will we eat on the 7th year?", God tells Moshe to say to them:

וְצִוִּיתִי אֶת בְּרַכְתִּי בַּשָּׁנָה הַשְּׁשִׁית וְעָשָׂתָּ אֶת הַתְּבוּאָה לְשָׁלֹשׁ הַשָּׁנִים

"I will command my blessing on the 6th year and it will make the produce for three years."

Notice how it says THE produce, הַתְּבוּאָה. Rather than say that the land will make "produce for 3 years; that is, more produce than usual, It says that THE produce, the same amount of produce that the field makes every year, will be enough for more than 2 years. The people will be satisfied with less food. I find it pretty cool how we can learn so much from even a single letter if we read carefully.

The Kli Yakar realizes that his explanation must pass the "Natural Consequence Test". Will he be able to explain how exile from the land is a logical penalty for not keeping Shmita? He feels that he can, and he proposes some very interesting ideas!

The miracles of Shmita teach trust in God. But one needs a good amount of trust in the first place to have the strength to rely on God and not farm on the 7th year. Not being able to do that would mean that the Jewish people consider themselves responsible for the land's success and not God. Put another way, they consider themselves the masters of the land rather than God.

This is why, the Kli Yakar says, exile is a natural consequence of farming on Shmita. The land, he says, "feels humiliated" that the Jews consider themselves the masters of the land rather than God. The land would prefer being owned by the most wonderful owner possible, God. When the Jewish people first arrived and agreed that God was the master of the land, the land was still happy, until the Jewish people stopped observing Shmita and forgot that God was the master of the land and responsible for its success. Imagine how the land feels now. It feels offended that the Jews consider themselves its master. The land also wanted to be the instrument through which the Jews would see miracles and learn even more trust in God. The land feels very disappointed that it could not fill this role. So the punishment of exile, removing those offending Jews from the land they were offending and shortchanging, makes sense. The punishment fits the crime.

I'm sure that by now, some of you might be frowning and thinking, "Dirt has no feelings! The land can't mind anything! What does the Kli Yakar mean???"

Here is my teacher's theory. The entire world is like an exercise gym....for the soul, and personality. God, the coach, provides many exercises for us called Mitzvot and Nisyonot; specific workout rituals and other challenges. Certainly, our interactions with other people provide many of these challenges. But God also wants us to treat inanimate objects the same way, in order to practice positive Midot, or traits. There are many other examples of this in the Torah, like Moshe not turning the Nile to blood or making it swarm with frogs because the Nile floated his basket and saved his life. Sefer Hachinuch says that all the Mitzvot to treat animals well is really a training ground for treating people well. So... my teacher thinks that the factors in not keeping Shmita that trigger exile are the sins of showing disrespect to another and not allowing another the opportunity for great accomplishment.

Life is very exciting and enjoyable if we can see whatever happens to us as opportunities for growth rather than problems that mess everything up. Shmita occurs only once every 7 years, but with a positive attitude, every day can be great!