

הַדְגֵּבָה
יְסֻדֵּי

פרשת בהר Parshat Behar

Ashreinu | אשרינו

Enhancing your Study of the Weekly Torah Portion



Shemita Vaccine

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In 2007, Oliver James coined the term “affluenza” after his research indicated that the more value a nation put on the acquisition of money, possessions, or external appear-

ances, the greater the psychological distress that was measured in its people. He suggested that we can reduce the negative impact of affluenza when we learn to identify and pursue real needs instead of perceived wants. The mitzvah of shemita, described in Parshat Behar, offers a second way to combat affluenza. Perhaps if Oliver James understood that the mitzvah of shemita promotes moral sensitivity, social cohesion, and religious commitment, he too would suggest that it provides the perfect antidote to affluenza.

The first time shemita appears in the Torah is in

Sefer Shmot (23:10-11). There the Torah seems to focus on the socio-economic benefits of the shemita cycle. The Torah suggests that in order to promote sensitivity to the disadvantaged and fair treatment of the poor, there is one year out of every seven where everyone is considered equal and where money is not the determining factor in one's status. Whereas normally the poor may be dependent upon the rich and thus feel inadequate as a result, in the shemita year everyone is put on a level playing field. As a result, individuals are given the opportunity to see people for who they are and not for what they possess.

In contrast to this description in Sefer Shmot that focuses on the way in which shemita can help people in their interpersonal relationships, the description of shemita in our parsha in Sefer Vayikra focuses on how shemita can provide an opportunity to improve our relationship with Hashem. Parshat Behar describes that for six years people can sow their land, but the seventh year will be a Shabbaton to Hashem.

וּבִשְׁנָה הַשְּׁבִיעִית שְׁבֵת שְׁבֵתוֹן יִהְיֶה לָאָרֶץ שְׁבֵת לָהּ
שְׂדֵךְ לֹא תִזְרַע וְכֶרֶם לֹא תִזְמַר

Here, shemita is designated as a time to cultivate a relationship between man and Hashem. It enables us to recognize that Hashem is the ultimate provider who is behind our material success at all times. While we may become complacent and believe that we are responsible for our own material success, during the shemita year we come to recognize that, in truth, everything is provided to us by Hashem. The pasuk above also draws a comparison between Shabbat and shemita. Just as there are six days of the week where the focus is on the mundane but one day of the week where we are meant to have an intensified awareness that Hashem is our creator, so too, in the shemita cycle, for six years we are given an opportunity to pursue a capitalist existence but for one year out of the seven we are asked to put aside our relentless pursuit of wealth to focus on cultivating our relationship with Hashem.

The third time shemita is discussed in the Torah is in Sefer Devarim. There, the focus shifts from how the land needs to rest in the seventh year to how there is remission of debt in the seventh year. The pesukim describe that at the end of every seven year cycle, people who had to sell themselves into slavery because of debt are released from their owners and people who owe money to others will be released from their debt. It also recognizes that, knowing this, a person may not lend to someone who is in need as it gets closer to the seventh year for fear that he will not get his money back. The Torah therefore stresses that it is a mitzvah to give tzedakah to the poor by extending loans even if one knows that he will not be paid back.

Here the Torah builds in a system to address the inequalities in society so that we are always acting in a way that is compassionate and kind. It creates a system where we are actively looking out for the person who is so destitute that he has to sell himself into slavery or the person who has encountered some bad breaks and who may need a loan to get back on his feet. Shemita here allows us to realize that life is not only about the pursuit of money, but about acting in a way that is moral and ethical.

If we put these pieces together a picture emerges of a powerful institution that provides a counterbalance to a competitive, wealth driven society and that en-

courages us to take time out to focus on each other, on our relationship with Hashem, and on how we grow as people.

In today's times, the extent of our connection to shemita is mostly to check the packaging on fruits and vegetables to make sure that they can be eaten during the shemita year. But if we think about the deeper principles that are at the core of shemita, we can learn valuable lessons for how to control affluenza. If we treat each person with dignity, if we take time out to work on our relationship with Hashem, if we try to find meaning, if we recognize that our money is not our own, and if we give charity and work to make society a kinder place, we will not be part of the social capitalism that is victim to affluenza. We all want to feel that our lives have meaning, that we are connected to something greater than ourselves, and that we are walking down a path of morality and ethics. Often, the secret to such an existence is in the Torah. All we need to do is take a deeper look to uncover those secrets.

An Interesting Pasuk

Aden Lyons ('23)

This week's parsha, Parshat Behar, talks about many different laws Hashem commanded the Jews regarding Israel and land ownership, such as shemita, yovel, and prohibitions against fraud, usury, and interest. Regarding the law prohibiting interest, the Torah says

אַל תִּקַּח מֵאִתּוֹ נֶשֶׁךְ וְתִרְבִּית...וְחֵי אָחִיךָ עִמָּךְ

“Do not take from him interest and increase...and let your brother live with you” (Vayikra 25:36).

But why does the pasuk mention letting your “brother” live amongst you regarding interest? These two topics have seemingly nothing to do with each other, so why does the Torah include them in the same pasuk?

The Alshich answers this question by revealing human psychology when it comes to interest. When lending interest, the lender makes more money as time passes while the borrower loses more money as time passes. Therefore, the lender prays for days to be shorter or to go by faster to maximize profits. The borrower, on the other hand, wants the days to go by slower and draw out each day to its fullest in order to lose less money.

These two outlooks regarding the days and time

split apart the nation. In order to avoid this, Hashem commanded Jews not to charge interest, in order for the Jewish nation to be unified in beliefs and desire. Therefore, the phrase “let your brother live with you” is not some random sentence just thrown in the pasuk, but rather a message from Hashem to maintain a unified nation with the same outlook on time. May we stay unified as a nation for all the days to come. Good Shabbos!

Always Watching

Shoshana Stadlan ('22)

In this week's parsha, Parshat Behar, the Torah outlines the laws regarding the shemita and yovel years. Surrounding the yovel year, when selling or buying property from a neighbor, the Torah warns

וְלֹא תוֹנוּ אִישׁ אֶת אָחִיו – “you shall not wrong one another” (Vayikra 25:14). A few pesukim later, after it is stated that a person selling their land should charge only for the remaining crop years left, the Torah includes a separate pasuk, repeating the warning from earlier that says,

וְלֹא תוֹנוּ אִישׁ אֶת עַמִּיתוֹ וְיִרְאתָ מֵאֱלֹקֶיךָ כִּי אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹקֶיכֶם

– “Do not wrong one another, but fear your God; for I am Hashem your God” (25:17).

Why did the Torah repeat the seemingly same warning twice, and furthermore, why specifically here is it stated to fear Hashem when that sentiment is not included in the earlier warning?

Rashi writes that the first pasuk is referring to monetary matters. It is a caution against overcharging and manipulating the price outright. On the other hand, the second warning of the same wording has to do with one's words and intentions, אֲנוּאֵת דְּבָרִים. A person cannot take advantage of another by giving advice that would hurt the seller or buyer in order to benefit themselves or provoke another through their words. However, one might believe that no one can actually know their intentions, and therefore it is not sinful. That's why the Torah comes along to remind us וְיִרְאתָ מֵאֱלֹקֶיךָ, fear Hashem, since everything is revealed to Him. Hashem sees every person's true internal thoughts and therefore this addition should act as a deterrent.

The Ohr HaChaim suggests another interpretation in regards to these two pesukim. He says that the first pasuk was only connected to moveable personal property. For that type of property, one is prohibited

from overcharging. However, this might lead one to think that it is permissible to overcharge for their real estate and land because it was not included earlier. The second warning was necessary to ensure that people understood it is also prohibited to charge extra for land. But, there are no consequences from the legal system when this law is broken. Instead, the pasuk adds כִּי אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹקֶיכֶם, to show that Hashem Himself will exact retribution on one who is guilty of this prohibition.

Both commentaries focus on the idea that Hashem expects more from us and that He is always watching. We may think that we can get away with causing someone harm without their knowledge of our true intentions or can take advantage of a gray area in law since technically nothing illegal was done. But these pesukim come to remind us that Hashem sees us and knows we have the potential to be incredible people, even when we are tempted to do wrong. We must remember that we are not alone, and hopefully that knowledge will lead us to make the right choices even when no one else is around.

Tremendous Trust

Talia Hochner ('25)

וְשָׁבְתָה הָאֲרֶץ שַׁבָּת לַה' – “and the land shall rest a Shabbat for Hashem” (Vayikra 25:2) This phrase from Parshat Behar tells us that the Jewish people are allowed to work their land, but every seventh year they must take a break. The land technically gets its own Shabbat. This concept seems simple, but it's quite the opposite. The Jewish people have to take a break from tending their land. Farming is a source of income for many Jews and because they stop for a year they don't have a way to support themselves. The fact that the Jewish people abide by this shows their *emunah* in Hashem. They believe in Him so much that they are willing to take a break from farming for one year and understand that they aren't going to be able to financially support themselves and their families. These farmers don't touch their land simply because Hashem told them so. They are such a great example of having faith in Hashem and trusting His ultimate plan.

My Fellow Brother

Eitan Himelstein ('25)

וְכִי תִמְכְּרוּ מִמֶּכָר לְעַמִּיתְךָ אוֹ קָנָה מִיַּד עַמִּיתְךָ אֶל תוֹנוּ אִישׁ אֶת אָחִיו

“When you make a sale to your fellow or make a pur-

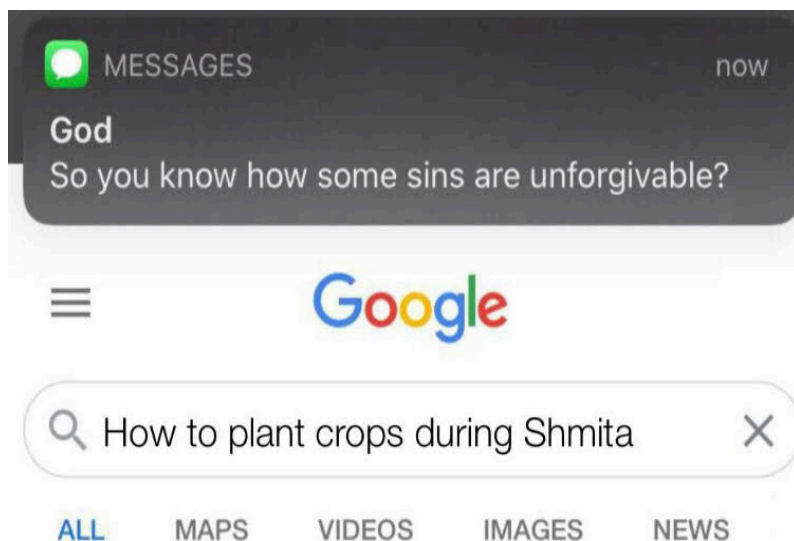
chase from the hand of your fellow, a man shall not aggrieve his brother” (Vayikra 25:14)

Isn't it unlawful to swindle anyone? Why is the emphasis on one's "brother"? Reb Nachum of Chernobyl, a great Chassidic Rabbi, was once approached by a distinguished-looking gentleman who volunteered to teach him Torah secrets. "I cannot accept your offer until I talk with my Rebbe," Reb Nachum responded. "It is excellent that you came to ask, because that individual was a representative of the spiritual forces that fight holiness," the Mezritcher Maggid said when he sought his Rebbe's advice.

"What gave you the idea of inquiring before adopting his suggestion?" the Rebbe questioned his disciple incidentally. "When I was young, my mother died, and my father remarried," Reb Nachum explained. My stepmother treated me badly. When I returned home from yeshiva for lunch one day when my stepmother wasn't there, I discovered she had left some fried eggs on the stove. I opted to serve myself rather than waste time and took a smaller piece than she would normally offer me. While I was eating, she arrived home and smacked me across the face. 'Why did you hit me?' I began to cry, pleading with her. I only took half of what I usually get!' 'I'm punishing you because *alain nemt men nit* — No one should take anything alone without permission,' she answered. I've learnt not to take anything without permission since that day, no matter how good or pleasant it may be."

It may be easy to rationalize that cheating a brother is acceptable because that brother should be expected to provide help to his family members in need. Furthermore, as a "brother," he will undoubtedly comprehend and forgive. As a result, the Torah said, "A man shall not aggrieve his brother" – it is unlawful to take from anybody without their knowledge and permission, including and especially a brother.

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