

Shmitah: The Original Sabbatical Year **Rabbi Maury Grebenau**

The very language of the Torah when it speaks about Shmitah tells us there is a direct connection to Shabbos. When the Torah tells us that we must let the land of Israel lie fallow every seventh year (Shmitah) it uses terms which are familiar in the context of Shabbos. Twice the Torah calls this year ‘*Shabbos LaHashem*’ – a Shabbos for Hashem (25:2,4). The same terminology is used to describe the 7th day of the week (see Shemos 20:10). Shmitah is also called ‘*Shabbos Shabbason*’ (25:4), again stressing the term of Shabbos. What exactly is this common thread between these two observances? Both are the seventh of a cycle, days and years, but what is the underlying connection between the two? We will examine two different approaches which will shed light on the purpose and goal of Shabbos as well as Shmitah.

Rashi translates ‘for Hashem’ to mean ‘*l’shem Hashem*’ – for G-d’s sake. One facet of Shabbos is certainly that it is a testimony to the fact that Hashem created the world. Just as Hashem rested on the seventh day of the very first week, so too we rest on the seventh day of each week. This shows our belief in the fact that Hashem is the Creator of all. We also show obedience and capitulation to Hashem by stopping our creative activity for a full day just as He commanded. This can take herculean strength. One only need recall that when Jews began to migrate to America in large number in the mid-nineteen hundreds, how difficult it was for Jews to keep Shabbos. Humanity has a drive to be creative and to ‘get things done.’ It is truly a demonstration of submission to Hashem for us to restrain these impulses each week.

The Sefer HaChinuch (Mitzva 84) explains that this indeed is the reason for Shmitah as well. We demonstrate our belief that the world was created *ex nihilo* and that it is owned by Hashem. He has complete dominion over the land and our schedule of working the land is dependent on His command. We also show a belief in the fact that the crops grow because of Hashem’s control and not because of any independent force of nature. We engage in a very risky type of crop rotation: all of our land is worked for seven years and then it all lies fallow for a year. The ‘safer’ rotation would be to plant part of our fields each year and give some of them a break to assure that the nutrients in the soil aren’t completely depleted. Seven years is much too long to plant any field uninterrupted, and what will one do the year that everything lies fallow? This system, much like the system of not working at all every seventh day, is not a system which would be expected to be beneficial in the natural world. By following Hashem’s command we demonstrate that our faith lies in Hashem fully to help us succeed under His system. We have no need to restrict ourselves to the laws of business and nature, we know Who is really pulling the strings.

There is a second aspect to Shmitah and Shabbos which is focused upon by the Seforno. He has a different perspective on the words ‘*Shabbos l’Hashem*’. He comments that the seventh year is for Hashem in that it will be free of work so that we will be ready to serve Hashem. The modern idea of a Sabbatical is really, according to the Seforno, what Shmitah is meant to

accomplish. Imagine the schedule of a farmer. He rises before it is light so that he can begin working as the sun peeks up over the horizon. He works in the hot sun all day in the fields. His work is difficult and exhausting. He retires each night completely depleted he has little time or energy for connecting with Hashem. The little snatches of spirituality he gets on Shabbos and holidays are a welcome respite, but they can only take him so far.

Every seventh year Hashem gives us a Sabbatical year, Shmitah. It is a time to recharge our spiritual batteries; to have an extended time to refocus ourselves to the task of serving Hashem. An entire year of faith in Hashem, trusting that He will provide for us; a year to delve into the Torah and unlock its precious lessons. This idea is also an integral part of our Shabbos experience. The Seforno and others explain that the concept of the *neshoma yeseirah*, 'extra soul', we have on Shabbos, is simply an added capacity to experience spirituality. We are more open to Torah study and Mitzvot on Shabbos. Each week (and each seven years) before we plunge into another cycle of work and worry, we have a day (and full year) to focus ourselves and make sure we are aimed in the right direction. Although in Chutz LaAretz we don't have the real experience of Shmitah, the lesson still needs to be part of the bedrock of our religious experience. We must be sure that we give ourselves ample time to focus our energies and make sure that we and our families are headed in the right direction.