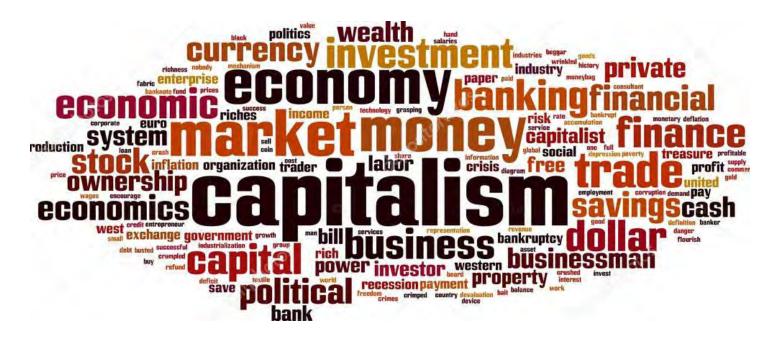
Beyond Agriculture: The Values of Shemittah in the Modern World

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CAPITALISM VS SOCIALISM: THE TORAH'S VIEW OF PRIVATE OWNERSHIP

he mitzvah of shemittah raises the question of the Torah's approach to private ownership. For six years, the Torah permits land to be privately owned and worked. This is followed by a shemittah year, in which all land is declared hefker. Simply put, this means all land is ownerless for one year. Alternatively, some also understand it as a year of collective ownership (see Sha'arei Yosher 5:23). This seven-year cycle reflects aspects of both capitalism, which encourages private ownership, and socialism, which is a system of collective ownership.

There are several values that underlie the Torah's nuanced system. Rabbi Moshe Avigdor Amiel highlights the importance of competition as motivation for production. If workers are not motivated to compete for higher income there will be decreased production and innovation. (See Derashot El Ami vol. 3 p. 98) This is one reason to encourage a capitalist economy. [Rabbi Amiel ibid suggests a form of controlled capitalism but does not connect it to *shemittah*. Rabbi Yitzchak Blau notes other values of private ownership, including the cultivation of a giving and generous character. One who does not own cannot choose to give and

therefore cannot become a generous person. [See Rabbi Blau's Rabbinic Responses to Communism, Tradition, vol. 40, no. 4. 2007, p. 13.] Another significant facet of capitalism is the ability to lead a life not dependent on others. The Rambam (Hilchot Zechiyah Umatanah 12:17) advocates a mentality of dependence on Hashem and not other people for financial success. Capitalism allows us to strive for this goal, while socialism requires us to be dependent on others. Furthermore, Ramchal writes that reward earned for our work affords us a sense of dignity, as opposed to the embarrassment that results from receiving reward for something we did not work for (See *Da'at Tevunot* no. 18).

While the aforementioned values encourage capitalism, there are negative traits that emerge from a system of total private ownership. In such an economy, we may forget that our income truly comes from Hashem and, in turn, develop a greedy

personality. Furthermore, when engaging in the physical world, we leave our spiritual qualities untended. For these reasons, among others, the Torah requires one year of *shemittah* in which we must relinquish ownership of our land (See *Sefer Hachinuch siman* 84 and introduction to *Shabbat Ha'aretz*).

When viewed in this way, the seven-year shemittah cycle creates an economy that best embodies

Torah values. It is primarily a capitalist system that advocates private ownership due to the values encouraged by such an economy. But it mandates one year of collective ownership in order to counteract capitalism's negative side effects.

SOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

Source#1: Rav Shimon Shkop, Sha'arei Yosher 5:23

נלע"ד שעיקר היסוד בזה שמה שהפקירה תורה בשמיטה עיקר הענין שיהא יד כל אדם שוה בו לעשות בו כל חפצו כמו עם דבר המופקר שלא יהא כח בעלים עדיף מכל העולם. וכן הפקירה תורה לצורך זה גם דריסת הרגל בשדה לצורך לקיטת הפירות.

It seems to me that the main idea is that when the Torah declares [produce or property] hefker, the idea is that every person has equal access to it, to do with it as they please, as if it were an ownerless object — the landowner's rights to it are no greater than anyone else's. The Torah also declares the field hefker for the purpose of enterring the field and gathering the fruit.

Source #2: Rambam, Hilchot Zechiyah Umatanah 12:17

הצדיקים הגמורים ואנשי מעשה לא יקבלו מתנה מאדם אלא הצדיקים הגמורים ואנשי מעשה לא יקבלו מתנה מאדם אלא ברוך שמו לא בנדיבים והרי נאמר ושונא מתנות יחיה. Sincerely upright men of good works do not accept gifts from men; they trust in God, blessed be He, and not in philanthropists. Indeed, it is written: "He who hates gifts will live" (Proverbs 15:27).

Source #3: Rav Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, Da'at Tevunot no. 18

זה הוא מה שרצה הוא ית"ש לברוא נבראים כדי שיוכל להטיב להם, כי אם אין מקבל הטוב אין הטבה. ואמנם, כדי שתהיה ההטבה הטבה שלמה, ידע בחכמתו הנשגבה שראוי שיהיו המקבלים אותה מקבלים אותה ביגיע כפם, כי אז יהיו הם בעלי הטוב ההוא, ולא
ישאר להם בושת פנים בקבלם הטוב, כמי שמקבל צדקה מאחה
His Blessed Name created His creatures in order to provide
good for them, for if their is no recipient of good, there is no
way to provide good. Nevertheless, in order to ensure that
His beneficence would be whole, He knew, with His great
wisdom that it is proper that those who receive, do so with
their own toil, so that they can earn their own blessings
without feeling embarrassed to receive it, like someone who
receives charity from another.

Source#4: Rav Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook, Introduction to Shabbat Ha'aretz

את אותה הפעולה, שהשבת פועלת על כל יחיד, פועלת היא השמיטה על האומה בכללה. צורך מיוחד היא לאומה זו, שהיצירה האלקית נטועה בקרבה באופן בולט ונצחי, כי מזמן לזמן יתגלה בתוכה המאור האלקי שלה בכל מלא זהרו, אשר לא ישביתוהו חיי החברה-של-חול עם העמל והדאגה, הזעף וההתחרות אשר להם, למען תוכל להתגלות בקרבה פנימה טהרת נשמתה בכללותה כמו שהיא.

What Sabbath does for the individual, shmita does for the nation as a whole. The Jewish people, in whom the godly, creative force is planted eternally and distinctively, has a special need to periodically reveal the divine light within itself with full intensity. Our mundane lives, with their toil, anxiety, anger, and competition do not entirely suffocate this creative force. On the shmita, our pure, inner spirit may be revealed as it truly is.