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*Ancient  
environmentalism  
and work life  
balance*

*Rabbi Alon Meltzer*

*A New Page of Talmud –  
Behar 5782*



Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: When you enter the land that I assign to you, the land shall observe a sabbath of Hashem. Six years you may sow your field and six years you may prune your vineyard and gather in the yield. But in the seventh year the land shall have a sabbath of complete rest, a sabbath of Hashem, you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard- **Vayikra 25:2-4**<sup>1</sup> so that during this whole year the farmer instead of “serving” the soil which requires cultivation, will turn his efforts to serving God directly instead. Just as the weekly Sabbath is a day set aside for intensive service of the Lord, so the sh'mittah year is to serve the same purpose.- **Seforno on Vayikra 25:2**<sup>2</sup> What Shabbat does for

the week, the concept of shmittah does for the cycle of years . . . in an agricultural society, a year off for the land is also a year-long sabbatical for most of the populace. Indeed, the biblical shmittah is a stirring example of an entire society

choosing to live at a significantly lower material standard for a year in order to devote itself to more spiritual pursuits than the daily grind.- **Dr Jeremy Bernstein**<sup>3</sup> However, the Torah does not merely say, “Let the land rest;” rather, it says “let the land rest a Shabbat to Hashem.” Like the commandment to rest every seven days on Shabbat, Shemita not only provides physical benefits but also enables humanity to develop spiritually and experience the unity of Creation. It also seems designed to shift our how we relate the Earth. The Earth is not merely some resource to be used and abused. If we want to live on the land, it is our responsibility to let it rest. The Torah warns us that if we fail to keep the mitzvah of Shemita, “Then the land shall enjoy her Sabbaths”-- when we are expelled from it and it lies barren. This is a consequence, for the Earth will rest regardless of our actions. If we want to live on this land and receive sustenance and protection, we must internalize the responsibilities of being in a

... the land shall observe a Shabbat of Hashem.

**וְשַׁבְּתָה הָאֲרֶץ שַׁבַּת לַיהוָה ...**  
**Vayikra 25:2**

relationship. – **Rabbi Noam Yehuda Sendor**<sup>4</sup> With regard to all the commandments that we have enumerated in Laws concerning the Sabbatical Year and the Jubilee... some of them are meant to make the earth more fertile and stronger through letting it lie fallow. – **Maimonides, Guide to the Perplexed III:39**<sup>5</sup> The Israelites were therefore commanded to conserve the soil by giving it periodic fallow years and not pursue short-term gain at the cost of long-term desolation. – **Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, The Dignity of Difference**<sup>6</sup> “Just as it was said about the Sabbath of creation, ‘it is a Sabbath for God,’ so, too, it was said about the Sabbath of shmita, ‘it is a Sabbath for God.’” The

distinctive character of the people and the land dovetail with each other. Just as the people has a special aptitude for reaching spiritual heights from within the depths of everyday life, so, too, the

land—God’s land—forms the people who dwell there as an everlasting inheritance that comes through a covenant and promise, with faith in the Eternal One of Israel, and is founded on the divine nature immovably infused in this wonderful country, which is married to the people whom God chose. The soul of the people and the land intertwine, working from the basis of their being to bring into existence the intricate patterns of inner holiness that lie within them during the sabbatical year. The people works with its soul force on the land, and the divine seed is revealed through its spiritual influence; the land, too, works on the people, refining their character in line with the divine desire for life inherent in their makeup. – **Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, Shabbat haAretz**<sup>7</sup>

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