

Ancient environmentalism and work life balance

Behar 5782/2022

2022 is the year of Shemitta, a year in which the Land of Israel is required to lay fallow – be in a constant state of rest, with farming ceased, produce being left ownerless, and both a people and the land allowing time for rejuvenation.

Described in several places in the Torah, in this week's Parasha, it is described as a "Shabbat of Hashem", in fact it is described like that twice. Firstly, as a direct command, and then following the explanation of what is meant, is bookended again with this statement referring back to God¹.

What is this referring to?

The Seforno explains that the shemitta is an opportunity for the farmer to become more spiritually connected, to have a break from the hardships of real life and lean into Godliness and Godly practice. It is like a Shabbat, but on steroids². Dr Jeremy Bernstein qualifies this by acknowledging the realities of an agrarian society – imagine the daily grind – and now imagine the ability to have a year off³. Rabbi Noam Sender goes a step further and explains that there is a mixture of work life balance, with ancient environmentalism happening. Yes, the people are getting a rest, but at the same time they are also understanding that the importance of understanding the complexities of the earth, and the relationship we should have with it⁴.

This beautiful mash-up of two very modern, and important, concepts lies at the heart of this Shabbat to Hashem.

If we are created in the image of God, with the mission of imitating Him, then we have to understand that sacred task in its fullest.

God simultaneously commands us to take pause of our creativity each week, while also charging us with protecting the world. Two different commandments, that can be found in the micro of the weekly Shabbat, and in the macro every seven years.

The Rambam, in the Guide to the Perplexed explains that shemitta makes the earth more fertile and stronger, a concept that is known well to farmers and environmentalists but can be applied to human beings (remember how revitalising a proper night sleep, or a vacation is?)⁵. While Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks tells us that shemitta gives us the ability to realise creation to its fullest by avoiding short-term gain at the expense of long-term desolation⁶.

But it is the first Chief Rabbi of Palestine, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the beautiful weaver of the spiritual and realist, who sums it up best. In his book *The Rest of the Land*, he explains that the Jewish people's deep connection with land, a foundational pillar of our people, and the land itself as a creative act of God, work in tandem with one another in bringing Godliness into the world – both in creative and rest mode.