**Parsha Potpourri**

**Parshas Behar– Vol. 11, Issue 33**

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**כי תבאו אל הארץ אשר אני נתן לכם ושבתה הארץ שבת לד' (25:2)**

Parshas Behar begins by introducing us to the mitzvah of Shemittah (the Sabbatical year), which requires us to allow the land in Eretz Yisroel to lie fallow every seven years. In Parshas Bechukosai, Rashi writes (26:35) that the Jewish people sinned by neglecting to observe 70 Shemittah years during the time that they lived in Eretz Yisroel, so they were correspondingly exiled to Babylon for 70 years in order to allow the land of Israel to rest in compensation for the 70 Shemittah years when it was denied respite.

Rav Yaakov Kamenetzky finds this statement incredulous. How is it possible that during the 490 years that the Jewish people lived in Eretz Yisroel during the period of the first Temple that they completely disregarded the mitzvah of Shemittah? It is incomprehensible that such great and righteous leaders as Dovid, Shlomo, Yehoshafat, and Yoshiyahu who ruled during this period would allow such an important mitzvah to be neglected on a national level.

Rav Yaakov answers this question based on an original insight into the structure of Parshas Behar and Parshas Bechukosai, the subjects of which he posits are all interrelated. Parshas Behar begins with the mitzvos of Shemittah and Yovel (the Jubilee year). It continues to discuss many other mitzvos, all of which he maintains are connected in some form to these two mitzvos. Specifically, the parsha proceeds to discuss the sale and redemption of ancestral land, the sale and redemption of houses in walled and unwalled cities, and the acquisition and freedom of servants and slaves, all of which are related to Shemittah or Yovel. Additionally, Rashi writes (26:1) that all of the topics discussed in Parshas Behar are potential punishments for somebody who fails to observe the laws of Shemittah, as he will first be forced to sell his possessions. If he refuses to correct his ways, his fortune will continue to decline until he is compelled to sell his ancestral land, his house, and ultimately himself into slavery.

Parshas Bechukosai begins by discussing the importance of Torah study, not merely engaging in it, but toiling in it with all of one’s focus and energy (Rashi 26:3). Rav Yaakov suggests that this is also a continuation of the themes of Parshas Behar, as when a person is working, it is difficult for him to properly concentrate on Torah study when he is constantly faced with so many other obligations and responsibilities that distract his mind. When the Torah specifies that the land must lie fallow in the Shemittah year, the purpose of this mitzvah is not only to strengthen the farmer’s trust in Hashem, but also to free him from the pressures of work for an entire year of intensive toil in Torah study.

During the festival of Sukkos that follows the Shemittah year, there is a mitzvah of hakhel, in which all of the Jewish people are commanded to gather together to hear the reading of the book of Devorim by the king (Devorim 31:10-11). Why is this mitzvah specifically performed at the conclusion of Shemittah? Since the Shemittah year serves to enable the Jewish people to engage in concentrated Torah study, the period of Yomim Tovim that immediately follows it is considered a continuation of that uplifting process, culminating with the mitzvah of hakhel in which the entire nation gathers together to collectively celebrate their year of spiritual growth and achievement.

In light of this explanation, Rav Yaakov suggests that when Rashi writes that the Jewish people were exiled as a punishment for neglecting 70 Shemittah years, he doesn’t mean that they transgressed the prohibition against working the land every seven years, as they certainly observed the letter of the laws of Shemittah and allowed the land to lie fallow. Rather, their mistake was that they failed to use their free time productively. The Torah intends “vacation” to be used for Torah study and spiritual accomplishments, not for catching up on sleep and replacing one set of distractions with another. Fortunately, the Jewish people learned their lesson, and they used their 70 years in exile in Babylon to lay the foundation for Talmud Bavli, which represents the ultimate in toiling to understand the depths of the Torah, and by correcting the mistakes that led to their exile, they merited returning to Eretz Yisroel.

**וספרת לך שבע שבתת שנים שבע שנים שבע פעמים (25:8)**

After relating the mitzvah of allowing the land to rest every seven years during Shemittah (the Sabbatical year), the Torah adds an additional requirement to count a series of seven cycles of Shemittah, as well as the years within each cycle, at which point work working the land is once again forbidden during the fiftieth year, which is known as Yovel (the Jubilee year). Although we certainly must keep track of the years and cycles in order to know when to allow the ground to lie fallow, why does the Torah mandate an actual mitzvah of counting the years and cycles?

In Pirkei Avos (1:15) Shammai teaches that one should make his Torah study fixed. In his commentary on this Mishnah, Rav Ovadiah Bartenura explains that a person's primary occupation throughout the day should be studying the Torah, and whenever he grows weary and needs a break, he may engage in mundane work. He should not adopt the opposite approach of spending the bulk of his waking hours involved in his job and studying Torah only when he has a bit of free time.

While it would certainly be ideal if everybody could devote the bulk of the day to Torah study, the S'fas Emes acknowledges that this is not always a realistic plan. Therefore, he suggests an alternative explanation for the obligation to make one's Torah's study fixed. He explains that the factor which determines what is considered the primary focus of a person's day is not the number of hours in which he is occupied in each activity, but what he mentally prioritizes and looks forward to as the most important part of his day.

If he works long hours to provide for his family but is constantly gazing at the clock to see how many hours remain until the shiur (class) that he attends, he has made Torah study the primary activity of his day. By the same token, somebody who is enrolled in a yeshiva but regularly checks his watch to see how much time is left until the end of the learning period or how many weeks remain until the end of the z'man (semester) is demonstrating that even though he spends countless hours in the study hall, the activities to which he most looks forward are mundane in nature.

In light of this explanation, the S'fas Emes explains that farming is an extremely labor-intensive profession. The amount of time and physical energy that a farmer must devote to his field in pursuit of a successful harvest is tremendous. In order to help him keep his priorities straight, the Torah commands the Sanhedrin to count the Shemittah cycles and years as a means of reminding the farmers to focus on looking forward to the Shemittah and Yovel years, during which they will be required to put their farm equipment away and spend an entire year engaged in uninterrupted Torah study.

**וכי תשיג יד גר ותושב עמך ומך אחיך עמו ונמכר לגר תושב עמך או לעקר משפחת גר**

**אחרי נמכר גאלה תהיה לו אחד מאחיו יגאלנו (25:47-48)**

The Torah discusses the case of a Jew who has reached such desperate straits as to have no other option but to take the degrading step of selling himself as a slave, not even to a Jewish master but to a non-Jew. Rashi notes that although the law is that he will automatically go free in the next Yovel year, the Torah obligates his relatives to redeem him immediately so that he not remain a slave and learn from his new master’s foreign ways.

The Darkei HaShleimus notes that Rashi explains (26:1) that the passages in Parshas Behar are written in a specific order to hint to a chronological order of events and punishments. A person who refuses to observe the laws of the Shemittah year will suffer financial misfortune and be forced to sell his possessions. If he refuses to correct his ways, his fortune will continue to decline until he is forced to sell his ancestral land, his house, and ultimately himself, not to a Jewish owner but to a non-Jewish master.

If we would witness this tragic chain of events transpiring, it would be very natural for us to feel no pity for somebody who not only blatantly transgressed the mitzvos, but stubbornly refused to open his eyes and accept the Heavenly rebuke. We would feel a certain satisfaction knowing that he is finally receiving what is coming to him. We would be tempted to leave him enslaved until he naturally goes free in the Yovel year, and we would certainly be unwilling to spend money to redeem him. However, it is precisely on such an individual – one of Hashem’s children – that the Torah has mercy and commands that he should be immediately redeemed to prevent him from falling even farther. This lesson teaches us the importance of never giving up hope on the soul of even one of our Jewish brethren, no matter how distant and estranged they may seem at present.

**Parsha Points to Ponder (and sources which discuss them):**

1. The Gemora in Shabbos (69b) records a dispute regarding the law for somebody who finds himself lost in the desert, and because he doesn’t know what day it is, is unsure when to observe Shabbos. One opinion maintains that the person should observe the next day as Shabbos and then count an additional six days before again observing Shabbos, while the other opines that he should first count six days and only then observe the first Shabbos. In the event that one is lost in Israel and doesn’t know when the Shemittah year is, would the same dispute apply as to how to proceed, and if not, what should one do if he finds himself in such a situation? (Mishmeres Ariel)
2. Rashi writes (25:14) that when a person buys products, he should buy them from a Jew, and when he sells merchandise, he should sell to a Jew. Although a person is required to spend money for the performance of mitzvos, to what extent is he required to buy from a Jew or sell to him if it would be cheaper or more profitable to make the transaction with a non-Jew? (Ahavas Chesed Dinei Mitzvas Halva’ah 5:7, Ayeles HaShachar)
3. In Parshas Behar, Hashem promises (25:19), “You will eat and be full.” In Parshas Bechukosai (26:5), one word is added – “You will eat *your bread* and be full.” What is the reason for this change? (Imrei Deah)

**Answers to Points to Ponder:**

1) The **Mishmeres Ariel** notes that the Gemora explains the reason for each of their positions. The first opinion derives his opinion from the first person, Adam, who was created on Friday. For Adam, Shabbos was the next day, followed by six days of the week and then another Shabbos. The other position focuses on the Creation of the universe, and from this perspective, first there were six days of the week and only then came Shabbos. According to their reasoning, in the case of Shemittah, where the Jewish people entered the land of Israel and spent 14 years conquering and dividing it before the laws of the Shemittah cycle became applicable, both opinions would agree that somebody in such a situation would first plant for six years and then observe the seventh year as Shemittah.

2) The **Chofetz Chaim** writes that just as a person is obligated to spend money for the performance of other mitzvos, so too should he spend money on the mitzvah to buy from a Jew. Therefore, even if a non-Jew offers to buy something for a little more money or if an item can be purchased for slightly less money from a non-Jew, it is still preferable to make the transaction with a Jew. Unfortunately, he doesn’t specify how much money is considered “a little” for this purpose. **Rav Shach** rules that if the merchandise made by the non-Jew is superior to that of the Jew, it is permissible to buy from the non-Jew.

3) The **Imrei Deah** cites Rashi’s comment (26:3) that the blessings in Parshas Bechukosai are specifically addressed to those who toil in Torah study. The Mishnah in Avos (6:4) teaches that the proper diet for a Torah scholar is a simple one, consisting of bread and water and no luxuries. Tosefos in Kesuvos (104a) writes that before a person prays that Torah should enter his body, he should first pray that delicacies should not enter his body, as a focus on earthly pleasures is a deterrent to success in spiritual pursuits. For this reason, Parshas Bechukosai, which is addressed to Torah scholars, stresses a diet of only bread.

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