

## **Facing the Test**

**Rabbi Pinchos Lipschutz**

Parshas Behar opens with the mitzvah of Shmittah. The discussion of the topic begins by stating that Hashem told these halachos to Moshe Rabbeinu on Har Sinai. Rashi immediately asks: Mah inyan Shmittah eitzel Har Sinai? Why does the Torah single out this instance of the halachos of Shmittah to tell us that they were given to Moshe at Sinai, when we know that all the 613 mitzvos were delivered there by Hashem to Moshe?

Many answers are offered to address that age-old question and we will offer one as well.

Shmittah is portrayed as one of the most trying mitzvos to fulfill. In a pre-industrial time, every person had a plot of land upon which they grew crops and/or fed and cared for their livestock, and from which they fed and nourished themselves and sold produce for income. Yet, the Torah commands us to set aside the field and let it lie fallow for a full year. Imagine letting go of your source of income and sustenance for a year, without knowing where your next meal will come from and how you will manage.

It is as if someone told us to leave our place of employment for a year and join a kollel. Imagine someone who owns a business with many employees and lots of computers in a large office building. Tell him to shut the lights, lock the door, go home, and come back in one year... and everything will be just fine.

I had never looked at it that way until the last Shmittah year, when I went to visit Mr. Patichi on his farm outside of Beit Shemesh. It was the first time he was observing Shmittah, and he had toured the United States telling his story. He came to my shul as well and invited me to visit him when I'd be in Israel. I took him up on his offer.

We arrived at his home, which is located on his farm, on a hot summer day. It was breathtakingly quiet. All we could hear were some chickens clucking. We saw some other farm animals lazing around in the sun, seeking shade. Tractors were sitting motionless, with air oozing out of their tires. Nobody came and nobody went as we viewed his "We proudly keep Shmittah" sign and the dusty expanse.

Farmer Patichi proudly started up a tractor, and with a broad smile, he loaded us up on it and we set out on a tour of his farm. I saw genuine pride, because he was very proud of his farm and even prouder that he wasn't growing anything that year. With a broad smile, he showed us acres and acres of brown dirt. He told us what he grew here and what he grew there and who he sold it to. He told us about his European customers and his hopes that they would still be interested in buying from him when Shmittah would end and he would begin growing crops again.

He showed us where his property ended and the next farm began. It wasn't hard to tell. His fields were dusty brown as far as we could see, and right alongside them were luscious green fields, glistening in the sun.

He was so proud as he pointed out the difference and spoke of his neighbor, who did not have the zechus to observe the mitzvah.

“Baruch Hashem,” he said, “after all the years that my family has been farming here, I finally have the zechut to be shomer Shmittah.”

I realized the magnitude of the sacrifice that is involved in Shmittah. A person shuts down his business, his source of livelihood and food, for a full year. He does it for one reason: Because Hashem said so.

Shmittah reminds the farmer and everyone else that everything they have is from Hashem. They may have bought this land several decades ago, and generations of the family may have slaved over it from morning until night, but every seven years they are reminded that the land doesn't belong to them. They don't produce fruits and vegetables and spices because of their hard work. Rather, the lands are Hashem's, and they produce such fine products because Hashem willed it so. They are also reminded that whether they will have customers to sell their produce to, bringing them an income, is also dependent on Hashem.

During the first six years of the cycle, everything runs according to the natural way – planting, fertilizing, watering, weeding, harvesting, processing, selling, pocketing a profit (hopefully), and then starting the cycle all over again.

But in the seventh year, the laws of nature and finance are put on hold, as the farmer spends his time pondering his existence, recognizing that all is from Hashem.

From where do the farmers derive the strength of faith that is required to make that commitment? Would we be able to simply walk away from our jobs for a year and leave ourselves with no income?

In last week's parsha of Emor, the posuk (22:32) discusses the severity of causing a chillul Hashem. Rashi cites the Toras Kohanim that when “a person is going to his death to be mekadeish sheim Shomayim, he should go willing to die rather than to transgress on the mitzvos of Hashem, because anyone who goes to his death in such an instance with the hope that a miracle will take place and his life will be spared does not receive the miracle and will be put to death. But if he goes to his death willingly and believing that he will die al kiddush Hashem, then he can merit a miracle.”

The Maharal, in his sefer Gur Aryeh, explains this concept. He writes, “When a person gives himself over to death without hoping that a miracle will be performed for him and his life will be spared, he is called a kadosh, just like Yitzchok Avinu at the Akeidah, who was tied to the

mizbeiach and became a kadosh with that. So too, this person becomes a kadosh because he gave himself over to be killed to sanctify Hashem.

“Hashem performs miracles for kedoshim, and since this person is now a kadosh, Hashem will miraculously save his life.

“When a person doesn’t consider whether he should value his life over kiddush sheim Shomayim, then he is a kadosh, a supremely holy person, and because he is a kadosh, he is separated from this world and the way the world runs... Therefore, a miracle – which is beyond the natural tendencies of the world – is performed for him.”

In other words, if a person overcomes his nature and his natural way of thinking and separates himself from teva and olam hazeh, Hakadosh Boruch Hu will no longer deal with him with the hanhogah of olam hazeh and teva. He will relate to him lemaalah miderech hateva, in a manner higher than teva, and therefore he’ll be saved.

Perhaps we can say that this is the reason the posuk tells us that the laws of Shmittah were delivered on Har Sinai where Moshe received the entire Torah.

Torah raises the level of those who study and observe it. Through Torah, we can become kedoshim, holy people, for it connects us with Hashem and gives us the foundation and fortitude to rise above teva and olam hazeh. It gives us the strength and determination to overcome the yeitzer hora’s temptations and human failings.

With Torah, a person can reach high levels of kedusha, enabling him to resist not only human desires, but also the natural way of thinking.

To observe the laws of Shmittah, a person has to be able to separate himself from the natural way of thinking. He has to be able to say to himself that although he doesn’t know where his food and income will come from, he is separating himself from his farm, from his work, and from his business. He has to be able to say that following Hashem’s commandments is more important than anything else in this world. Only a person who studies Torah and observes mitzvos can overcome normal human thinking and reactions. Only a person whose life has been sanctified by Torah can maintain the levels of emunah and bitachon to pass the Shmittah test.

It is not only the Shmittah farmer who faces this test. It affects all of us daily.

Every day, from the minute we wake up and the yeitzer hora tells us to stay in bed longer, come late to davening, talk during davening, or daven without kavonah without saying every word, we are faced with this test.

If we are in kollel, he tells us to take it easy, not to horeveh so hard, and not to push ourselves to really understand the sugya. He tells us that we don’t have to try to write down our he’aros, and

it's okay if we come late and leave early and spend some time in the coffee room debating whether the Democrats will dump Biden.

If we work, he tells us that we don't have to be so straight. He says that we don't have to tell people the truth about our product and what we do. He tells us to skim a little here and there. "It's fine. Everyone does it."

When we drive, he tells us that the rules of the road are for other people, not for us. Courtesy is old and passé. It's fine if we take up two spaces in a crowded parking lot because we are too lazy to park correctly.

A person who follows his yeitzer hora is not only lacking in emunah and bitachon. He or she places their own wants and desires over kiddush Hashem. Such a person is not a kadosh.

If we want Hakadosh Boruch Hu to go beyond teva for us so that we will be well, have nachas, and possess enough money to cover our ever-mounting expenses, then we have to learn the lesson of Shmittah and remember that everything we have is from Hashem. If we follow His mitzvos and strive to elevate ourselves beyond the base level of humanity, carefully considering each action in terms of whether it will bring us more kedusha or the opposite, and whether it will cause a kiddush Hashem or a chillul Hashem, we will transcend our natural inclinations. In doing so, Hashem will deal with us on an elevated level, beyond the natural order, and will bless us with goodness.

We face this test every day several times a day. Torah enables us to pass it.

We live in a historically precarious time, with so many threats pointed at us from outside and within. The hatred the goyim have for us has shot up to extremely dangerous levels. The world is united against Israel. And make no mistake about it: When they say Israel and when they say Zionists, they mean the Jews, all of the Jews, including us.

We have seen great miracles in the ongoing war in Gaza and the side-war with Iran. Just this week, the world experienced something that nobody could have foretold and another prime enemy of the Jewish people is gone. Nobody knows where this will lead, but two things are definite: the world is a better place without him and he is dead because Hashem willed it so as He prepares the world for the coming of Moshiach.

Hashem is doing His. We have to do ours.

We are now in the days of Sefirah, each day representing another of the 48 steps with which Torah is acquired. Each day, we need to be considering those 48 steps, improving ourselves, and climbing higher and higher, until we reach the pinnacle, as our forefathers did so many years ago when they prepared themselves to be worthy of accepting the Torah at Har Sinai.

Let us put all other considerations aside as we study the seforim we need to lift ourselves so that we can be worthy recipients and students of Torah, earning all the brachos of Hashem as recorded in the Torah and meriting the ultimate supernatural geulah of Moshiach tzidkeinu, b'meheirah b'yomeinu. Amein.