



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Behar 5771

By Dani Passow

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Parshat Behar begins with a bold and challenging *mitzvah*: “For six years you may sow your field and for six years you may prune your vineyard, and you may gather in its crop. But the seventh year shall be a complete rest for the land, a Sabbath for God.”¹ *Behar* describes this sabbatical—or *Shmita*—as a year when nothing may be planted and any food that grows naturally on the land must be free for all to take.

Rabbi Yonatan Eybeschütz, an 18th-century Polish-German Talmudist, explains *Shmita* as a direct challenge to our materialistic tendencies:

How great is this commandment and the idea behind it, that the Israelites know that our days are like a passing shadow over the land, transient like our ancestors... and know that it does not lead to human perfection to occupy oneself acquiring possessions and amassing material things.²

This understanding of *Shmita* as a guard against materialism, and *Shmita*'s cycle of six units of work followed by one of rest, reminds us of another “Sabbath”—the one that we observe weekly today. Indeed, *Shmita* can be viewed as a prolonged Shabbat—and in both cases, the “rest” prescribed by the Torah is not only about taking a break, but about restoring a more just order to society.

Parallel to the *Shmita* obligations of granting rest to farm workers and allowing the poor to glean freely, with regards to Shabbat the Torah also discusses labor rights, dictating that one's workers are to be given time off: “The seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God, in it you shall not do any manner of work, neither you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant...”³ In fact, Shabbat and *Shmita* are so similar in their core values that a *midrash* discusses whether or not one would even need to observe Shabbat during a *Shmita* year,⁴ suggesting that doing so might be redundant.

Several commentators make it clear that these values supersede even the legal prohibitions of the *mitzvot*. According to the Ramban, business-like behavior violates the Torah's ideal for Shabbat even if it doesn't technically violate any *melachot*, or Shabbat prohibitions. He writes:

We are commanded by Torah to have rest on the holidays, even from matters that are not specifically prohibited forms of work... [If certain technical circumstances were in place, it would be possible] for the marketplace to be full of business transactions, stores open [etc.]... All this would be possible on the holidays and even Shabbat itself, without violation of a single prohibition.⁵

¹ Vayikra 25:3-4.

² Yonatan Eybeschütz, *Urim Ve-tumim*, Choshen Mishpat 67:1.

³ Shemot 20:9.

⁴ Mechilta D'Rebbe Yishmael, Mishpatim Masechta D'Kaspa 20.

⁵ Ramban on Shemot 23:24.

In other words, even though loopholes would make it technically possible to conduct business on Shabbat, the Ramban understands the Torah to dictate that Shabbat should remain a commerce-free day. Abraham Joshua Heschel offers an explanation for why this pause is so crucial:

Six days a week we wrestle with the world, wringing profit from the earth; on the Sabbath we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in our soul... Six days a week we seek to dominate the world, on the seventh day we try to dominate the self.⁶

According to Heschel, Shabbat provides us with the opportunity to take a break from our materialist selves, from focusing on profit and exploitation of resources—both human and earthly. Outside the Land of Israel, Shabbat can stand in for *Shmita* as a weekly reminder to focus inward, dwelling on improving ourselves and the world.

The need for such a countermeasure against rampant pursuit of profit is particularly relevant today. Our materialist behavior has had broad and far-reaching consequences. Few of the products we buy are meant to last for any great length of time, filling landfills and increasing pollution levels across the planet. Additionally, in a globalized world, many hands produce the items we purchase, often under slave-like labor conditions. These practices are sustained by our consumer dollars, but often remain hidden from us. In this sense, Shabbat offers a pause from such engagement. For one day a week, at least, we vow not to spend, earn, waste or exploit others or the earth we depend on.

Many Hassidic thinkers understood Shabbat to be a concept whose values can and should infuse the rest of the week.⁷ In this vein, each day is an opportunity to consider the impact of our purchases in light of the lessons of Shabbat. We can research the labor practices of manufacturers, support companies that are careful about their environmental impact and treat their workers well, and, perhaps most importantly, limit how much we buy altogether. One day a week we are given the gift of Shabbat; let us reciprocate during the other six days by giving the values of Shabbat to the world.



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⁶ Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *The Sabbath*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951. p. 13. I'd like to thank my student, Solomon Wise, for pointing out this source to me.

⁷ For a discussion of one particular Hassidic master's thinking on this issue, see: Fishbane, Michael. "Transcendental Consciousness and Stillness in the Mystical Theology of R. Yehuda Arie'el Leib of Gur." *Sabbath: Idea, History, Reality*. Ed. Gerald L. Blidstein. Beer Sheva: Ben Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2004. pp. 119-129. Available at <http://hsf.bgu.ac.il/cjt/files/Shabbat-Book/Shabbath-English-119-130-Fishbane.pdf>.

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