

A Few Thoughts on the Double Parashah Behar-Bechukotai (Leviticus 25:1 - 27:34; Jeremiah 16:19 - 17:14) May 7, 2021
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Of the 613 *mitzvot* (commandments), many of which no longer directly impact us because they pertain to the Temple, 26 are applicable only in the Land of Israel. Two of these – *shmitah* and *yovel* are the main focus of this week's reading. The word *shmitah* derives from the Hebrew root שָׁמַט (to leave, to release). Anyone who has been in academia knows that a sabbatical is a year off, whether for study and research, or for vacation. It is a *shabbat* year, i.e., a year of release. The root שָׁבַת means to stop working, which is what we (should) do on Shabbat and on our *chagim*. What is good for us is also good for our earth. Our ancestors understood that letting the fields lie fallow for a year helps to restore the earth's balance and replenish the soil's nutrients, which diminish with consecutive yearly planting and harvesting. In addition, after 7 *shmitah* cycles, a Jubilee Year was declared – a year of complete reset. Although we certainly cannot strictly and literally observe the rules of *shmitah* and *yovel*, we can derive great benefit from the teachings they contain. Years ago, I saw a poster with a profound message: WORSHIP GOD, LOVE PEOPLE, USE THINGS. Unfortunately, many people interchange these nouns and verbs, to the detriment of us all. It is noteworthy that the discussion about *shmitah* and *yovel* ends with an injunction against idol worship. We humans love to win, to own things, and to be in control. Have our ambitions and our possessions become our idols? Do we take the earth and all its inhabitants so much for granted that we forget that we are sojourners here, and only a small part of a greater whole? Have we sacrificed our integrity on the altar of personal gain? With climate change ever more apparent, the message of our double-parashah, encapsulated in the 2nd paragraph of the *shema yisrael*, has never been timelier. Today, most people live in cities, far removed from the sources of the materials that nourish and sustain them. Not surprisingly, the necessity of protecting our resources is often overlooked by people whose food comes neatly packaged and often refined beyond recognition.

One of the many benefits of living out in the country is going for long walks with my dog on the tractor paths that bisect the fields surrounding our villages and watching the earth change with the seasons. The heavy, rich soil of Germany's Wetterau is ideal for growing the 5 grains mentioned in our scriptures, along with sugar beets, corn for biofuel and fodder, and rapeseed. Gathering a few stalks of the different grains and tying them into a bundle to decorate our synagogue room in Frankfurt has always been a spring highlight. Last year the bundle decorated my little Zoom synagogue, but if our unusually cold spring doesn't turn warm and sunny very soon, this year's bundle – once again destined for my Zoom room – will have few, if any, grain heads rising from the stalks. No matter where we live, the weather impacts us all, but those of us who live close to farms see it firsthand. We agonize with the farmers over nature's vicissitudes, and delight in bountiful harvests. As I write this, gale force winds are whipping the blossoms off the fruit trees. Will there be enough apples for Frankfurt's famed "Äppelwoi" (apple wine)? What about the cherries and plums that grow so plentifully in our region? How will the unseasonably cold weather affect the fields, and will there be another drought this summer? When weather events like this happen, one kind of field usually emerges largely unscathed – the fallow fields interspersed among the cultivated ones. They vary from year to year; some are sown with plants that replenish the soil, others are simply left to their own devices. All gradually fill with grasses and flowers abuzz with insects, whose vital importance we are slowly, painfully learning to appreciate. Communities now create strips of wildflowers to attract insects, and many of us have done likewise in our lawns and gardens. Plants like dandelion and yarrow, once reviled as weeds that we expended much time and energy to purge from our manicured lawns, have become welcome additions to our yards, tables, and medicine cabinets. We are gradually understanding that monoculture and other attempts to achieve outward perfection are simply more useless idols.

Shmitah and *yovel* are reflected in the Omer counting. Instead of counting years and cycles of years, we count days and weeks in our progression from the drudgery of being slaves to Pharaoh to the responsibility of being servants of HaShem. We are now in the 6th week, identified by the *sephirah* of *yesod*, the attribute of foundation, connection, bonding, commitment, and male sexuality. *Yesod* connects us to HaShem and to the earth and all that it holds, bidding us to let go of our drive to control and possess in order to give the earth the freedom it needs to rest and replenish. It also inspires us to realize that we are connected to all of our fellow inhabitants of the earth, both flora and fauna. We are free to partake of HaShem's bounty, not in greed, but with an eye to the future. *Potei'ach et yadeicha u masbiya et kol chai ratzon* (You open Your hand and satisfy every living thing its desire. Ps. 145:16) HaShem's hand is perpetually open in giving. Let us do likewise, opening our hands and hearts to release, so that we may receive.

Shabbat shalom!