

During a leap year like this one, most of the usually doubled parashiot are read separately. Synchronizing the weekly cycle of Torah portions with the number of Shabbatot in each year is an intricate procedure that is determined by several different factors. More on that at the end of July when we read the double parashah that ends the Book of Numbers. This week we have the opportunity to have a closer look at Parashah Behar without its companion Bechukotai. The main focus is on the concept and implementation of *shmitah* and *yovel*, two of the 26 *mitzvot* that are applicable only in the Land of Israel. The word *shmitah* derives from the Hebrew root שָׁמַט (to leave, to release). As those in academia know, a sabbatical is a year off, whether for study and research, or for vacation. It is a *shabbat* year, i.e., a year of rest. The Hebrew root שָׁבַת means to stop, to rest. We encounter it the first time in Genesis 2:2, on the 7<sup>th</sup> day, the day HaShem ceases the work of creation and rests. In verse 3 HaShem blesses the 7<sup>th</sup> day and sanctifies it, i.e., declares it holy. But only later, in Parashah Yitro when the newly freed Israelites are standing at the foot of the mountain to receive the Torah, is this reiterated (Exodus 20:11), although it is alluded to in Chapter 16 in the instructions for gathering manna. As we read in succeeding chapters, HaShem's special relationship with Israel is grounded in observing Shabbat and encapsulated in the words those who attend Shabbat services know well: "The children of Israel shall observe the Sabbath, to make the Sabbath throughout their generations an everlasting covenant. Between Me and the children of Israel it is forever a sign that [in] six days HaShem created the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day ceased and rested." (Exodus 31:16-17) The universal need for respite from work is honored in Exodus 23:12 and Deuteronomy 5:14-15 (part of the Shabbat morning kiddush), which mandate Shabbat rest for everyone, including servants, strangers, and animals. And now, Shabbat rest is extended to the land itself. What is good for us is also good for our earth. Our ancestors understood that letting fields and vineyards lie fallow for a year helps to restore the earth's balance and replenish the soil's nutrients. In addition, after 7 *shmitah* cycles, a Jubilee Year is declared – a year of complete reset. Although we cannot strictly and literally observe the rules of *shmitah* and *yovel*, even in present-day Israel, we certainly can derive great benefit from the teachings they contain. Sustainability has become one of the watchwords of our age, but measures for realizing it are fraught with controversy. Sadly, deforestation to serve our appetite for meat is still rampant, as are overfertilization and indiscriminate use of pesticides to ensure bountiful harvests. And animals still suffer on factory farms that also contribute in no small measure to air, water, and soil pollution. More than 60 years ago my father often remarked that there is no second earth waiting for us after we've exhausted this one. Little did he know how prophetic his words were, and he was only referring to small things like not letting the water run while we were brushing our teeth, and saving yard clippings and kitchen waste to compost for the garden. But these simple measures reveal the essence of how we are commanded to honor and respect the earth and all it holds. HaShem renews it continually for us to use, but not to misuse; and being good stewards starts with the little, everyday things. Understanding how to put this into practice equitably for all of the earth's inhabitants is a daunting challenge that requires more cooperation than we humans have ever been able to muster. The optimist in me says that it is not too late, but the realist knows that progress is painfully slow and sporadic. This year Parashah Behar comes shortly after the midpoint of our Omer counting, the cycle of days and weeks between Pesach and Shavuot that reflects both *shmitah* and *yovel*. Instead of 7 counting years and 7 cycles of years, we count 7 days and 7 weeks as we progress from the drudgery of being slaves to Pharaoh to the responsibility of serving HaShem. We are ending the 5<sup>th</sup> week, the week of *hod*, which is the attribute of radiance, majesty, and multifaceted splendor. The glorious diversity of our universe is too precious and fragile to be taken for granted. We must all work hard to preserve it for those who will come after us. Our parashah ends with a curious juxtaposition: "You shall not make idols for yourselves, nor shall you set up a statue or a monument for yourselves. And in your land you shall not place a pavement stone on which to prostrate yourselves, for I am the Lord, your God. You shall keep My Sabbaths and deeply respect My sanctuary. I am HaShem." Our world is highly materialistic. We see it in the dizzying array of "must-haves" advertised in the media, in the large and small power structures built on ruthlessness, and in the latent discontent of those whose ambitions have enslaved them to the idols of their own making. Keeping HaShem's Sabbaths and respecting HaShem's sanctuary requires us to put ourselves, our possessions, and our ambitions into proper perspective. No matter how beautiful, talented, fortunate, or otherwise great we may be, our own glory is only a miniscule part of HaShem's magnificent universe. This single, short chapter of the Torah reminds us that we ephemeral beings are only sojourners, and teaches us how to care for the land we inhabit and those with whom we share it, for our own benefit and for the benefit of those who come after us.

Shabbat shalom!