

לעילוי נשמת  
ר' בנציון בן ר' דוד ע"ה  
נלב"ע ו' אלול ה'תשע"ט  
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נדפס ע"י בנו  
הרה"ת ר' שמואל אהרן וזוגתו מרת חנה  
ומשפחתם שיחיו  
נובאק



## The Shemitah Fund

"A Jewish man bought a vineyard in Chevron, and he leases it out to a non-Jew who works the land and takes an allotted amount of the produce each year. In this city, it is impossible to keep land unless you have non-Jews working it, because the

non-Jews are the dominant majority, and if they don't have stakes in the land, they will destroy it or steal the crop in the middle of the night... The question is: What should he do during the *Shemitah* year to ensure that the non-Jew's plowing and sowing of the land don't cause the Jewish owner to

transgress the prohibition of working his land during *Shemitah*..."<sup>1</sup>

This question was posed to Harav Mordechai Ruviyo, the Av Beis Din in Chevron in the second half of the 16th century. It seems that in his time, it was starting to become more common for Yidden to own land in Eretz Yisroel and the laws of *Shemitah* were

# A Spiritual Sabbatical

## שנת השמיטה — שבת לה'

On the threshold of the Shemitah year of 5782\*, we present some of the Rebbe's insights into the meaning of Shemitah, as well as the Rebbe's involvement in promoting the fulfillment of this mitzvah in Eretz Yisroel today.

thus becoming relevant again in a very practical sense.

Even though *Shemitah* is an important mitzvah in the Torah, for much of Jewish history it rarely had any practical implication. Being a mitzvah directly connected to the land of Eretz Yisroel, it would only apply when Yidden lived and owned

agricultural land there, which was not the reality for centuries, until fairly recently.

When the main waves of immigration arrived from Eastern Europe beginning in the year 5642\*, scores of families made their livings by working the land and relied heavily on its produce for their daily sustenance.

When *Shemitah* came around in 5649\*, many rabbonim had to deal with the reality that these families would lose a full year of *parnasa*, in what was already a barely manageable economic environment.

Some rabbonim proposed what became known as a "*heter mechira*," a method through which the Yid sells

\*📅 5782-2021, 5642-1882, 5649-1889

his land to a non-Jew for the year of *Shemittah* and thereby releases the holy status of *shevi'is* from the produce, allowing them to be sold for profit.

Many other rabbonim, however, vehemently opposed this proposal, unwilling to so easily dismiss a beautiful mitzvah that was finally once again becoming part of our practice and possibly causing people to transgress *issurim d'Oraisa* (according to some *poskim*).

In order to make keeping this mitzvah feasible, rabbonim and communal activists set out to raise the funds needed to help these families make it through the year. *Shadarim* were sent out to various Jewish communities in Europe to help collect money for the newly established fund.

As the years went on, more funds were established for this purpose, and even more so once the huge waves of Holocaust survivors and other Yidden flocked to Eretz Yisroel after the second World War, and the “State of Israel” was established in Eretz Yisroel in 5708\*.

It took many decades until the various funds consolidated their efforts and formed one unified organization to help people fulfill the mitzvah of *Shemittah*.

We see a hint at this in a letter from the Rebbe to two distinguished rabbonim from Eretz Yisroel who had written to the Rebbe, asking for his support of their *Shemittah* fund:

“When the founders of the *Shemittah* Fund of New York visited me, they specifically told me that they have designated monies to assist any person in Eretz Yisroel who keeps *Shemittah*, without distinction. These people can certainly be trusted for their word, especially considering that offering assistance to people in all settlements is what the Torah would demand of them. I am surprised that you don’t mention in your letter whether you receive assistance from

that fund. You will certainly reach out to them now, if you haven’t done so yet.

“Either way, based on the *possuk* ‘חבר אני לכל אשר יראוך—I am a companion to all who fear You,’ I have enclosed a personal check...

“P.S. Regarding your request for a letter of approbation, it is well known that this practice is not customary in Beis Harav...”<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the ensuing years, the Rebbe offered encouragement and support to the various individuals and organizations that promoted *Shemittah* observance. One of the famous personalities active in raising funds was Rabbi Binyomin Mendelson, the Av Beis Din of Komemius in Eretz Yisroel. The Rebbe corresponded with him on many occasions and at times offered financial support for his work as well.<sup>3</sup>

At a farbrengen just before the *Shemittah* year of 5747\*, the Rebbe called upon everyone to contribute to the Keren HaShemittah, quoting the *possuk* “גבורי כח עושי דברו—Those who have immense strength and follow the words of Hashem,” which the Midrash says, applies to people who keep *Shemittah*.<sup>4</sup>

## The Early Years

The first *Shemittah* after the State was established in Eretz Yisroel was 5712\*. It would prove to be a very difficult year for *frum* Yidden, as the new country was in its infancy and enough nutritious food was hard to come by even in regular years. Many Jews chose to rely on the “*heter mechira*,” selling their land to non-Jews and continuing production even through *Shemittah*. The Rebbe strongly discouraged this.

In a letter to Reb Shneur Zalman Garelik, the rav of Kfar Chabad, the Rebbe wrote: “According to my sources, the *frum* communities in Eretz Yisroel do not intend on relying



on any leniencies and will keep *Shemittah* in its proper form...”<sup>5</sup>

The newly established village of Kfar Chabad was occupied by many Chassidim who had escaped the persecution of the Soviets and just barely avoided the horrors of the Holocaust. Sympathizing with their plight, the various government ministers in Eretz Yisroel worked hard to allocate large portions of land for the Chassidim to work with, even supplying the necessary machinery and assistance with training. The Chassidim were afraid that all this goodwill would disappear if a mere few years after starting on their



4 SIVAN 5747, LEVI FREIDIN VIA JEM 5740

agricultural experiment, they would take a full-year sabbatical.

The Rebbe brought this up with Mr. Mordechai Surkis, head of the city council in Kfar Saba and an important member of the Histadrut (labor union) when he visited the Rebbe in *yechidus*. The Rebbe soon wrote to Rabbi Garelik: "You write that rumor has it that the government might force farmers to work the land during the *Shemitah* year. Mr. Surkis, a member of the Histadrut who holds close ties with government officials, visited me recently and when we spoke about this subject he promised me that he will do everything in his power to ensure that



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the residents of Kfar Chabad will be able to act as they see fit, without any external pressure...”

As the beginning of *Shemittah* approached, the Rebbe guided and assisted the leaders of the village on how to procure the necessary means to support the fledgling community throughout the coming year.<sup>6</sup>

## Shabbos L'Hashem

In addition to the practical observance of the mitzvah of *Shemittah*, the Rebbe called on everyone to recognize the inner meaning of the mitzvah—as the Torah calls it: a “Shabbos for Hashem.”

“It is obvious,” the Rebbe writes in a letter, “that although the practical aspect of the mitzvah only deals with agricultural ventures, and is only applicable in Eretz Yisroel and not in the diaspora, this does not mean that the meaning of the mitzvah, and the practical lessons derived from it, are in any way limited. They apply to each and every Jew, in each and every place...”

“...The fact that the Torah frees a person from investing their time and energy in working the land during this

hallowed time, obligates (and offers the privilege) that he or she should instead dedicate their time to the most important pursuits of a person’s life; spiritual pursuits like davening, learning Torah, and working on one’s *middos* and emotions...”<sup>7</sup>

The Rebbe explains that this is not just due to the technical fact that because a person is given more free hours to their day, he is supposed to use the time for learning. It’s more than that: the Torah is freeing a person’s heart and mind from worry and indulgence in the material world. This newfound serenity offers the person the opportunity to live more elevated and engage in *ruchnius* properly.<sup>8</sup>

Another beautiful aspect to the mitzvah of *Shemittah*, and the meaning behind the words “Shabbos L’Hashem:”

The Chinuch explains that the mitzvah of *Shemittah* is meant to remind a person that ultimately, all his possessions are not his own, but they belong to Hashem.<sup>9</sup>

In a sense, the Torah commands a person to renounce his personal

ownership over his hard-worked and hard-maintained property, and to consider it “*hefker*” for the year, allowing all people to harvest it at will.

“...The *Shemittah* year emphasizes the concept that although the Creator has given the earth to man, for food and use, he must remember that the real and permanent proprietor is G-d, as it is written, ‘To G-d belongs the earth and everything contained therein, the world and those that dwell in it.’ In order to emphasize and reinforce this awareness at all times, so that it be actualized and implemented into the daily life, G-d set aside the Seventh Year as a Shabbos-like (“Sabbatical”) year, when all work in the field and orchard ceases for the duration of the entire year... This is how a Jew attests to the fact that the true Master of the World is G-d...”

The lesson that the Rebbe teaches from this concept is that in the year of *Shemittah*, recognizing that Hashem is the ultimate owner of all our possessions, we should increase in the mitzvah of *tzedakah*:

“...Needless to say, the practice of *Tzedakah* is not limited to money, but includes ‘money, body and soul,’ spiritual *Tzedakah*, which obligates every Jew to help another Jew who is ‘poor’ in Torah and Mitzvot. However much a person values his time and efforts to use them for his own Torah edification and the practice of the Mitzvot, he is told that he must not consider himself as the exclusive proprietor, but must devote of his time and efforts to the dissemination of the Torah and Mitzvot among those who are ‘poor and needy’ in these matters.”<sup>10</sup>

## It’s Not About Land Preservation

In a fascinating letter written in response to an individual whose perception of *Shemittah* was quite limited and even ill-conceived, the

Rebbe laid out a beautiful explanation of the inner meaning of this mitzvah:

The writer had suggested that much like Shabbos, which was given by Hashem in order for the person to replenish the energy lost during the past week of hard work and to regain strength for the coming week, *Shemitah* was given to replenish the minerals lost to the crop of the previous six years and to replenish for the coming seasons.

The Rebbe explains that this approach is, in the best case, a gross misconception.

Imagine, says the Rebbe, a person who gives charity to a needy individual. Would you say that the main thing occurring on here is a hand placing a piece of food into another person's possession? Of course not! There is so much more to the act of charity, beginning with the kindness found in the heart of the giver, the "*chesed*" that stems from his *neschama*, which in turn is ingrained in him by the *middas hachessed* of Hashem. To say that all that is happening is a mere technical transaction of goods is obviously a very small-minded, even mistaken, perception of events.

The same is true with Torah and mitzvos: The most important element of Torah and mitzvos is the fact that they were given by Hashem; they are therefore divine ordinances, which are intrinsically holy, and are the best formula for human conduct. This is true of every single mitzvah, whether a material benefit from it is apparent or not. It is also possible that the mitzvah carries with it an obvious and tangible benefit as well, like feeling rested after keeping Shabbos or the like. But this is certainly not all there is to the mitzvah, and not even a fundamental part of it.

As a matter of fact, modern science doesn't see any real reason to keep a field fallow for a whole year in order to enhance its fertility. On the contrary,

keeping the seeding cycle going and constant fertilization are actually better for the land than letting it sit idly.

Obviously then, there is a deeper reason and meaning to the mitzvah of *Shemitah*.

In this regard, the Rebbe notes an interesting phenomenon:

The early Romans considered the Jewish people "lazy" for needing a day off from work every seven days. When the world finally caught on and almost all of civilization adopted the idea of a once-a-week sabbath (whether on Sunday or on Friday), it was their way of "giving in" to the weakness of the human spirit and "admitting" that the human body needs that time to rest.

But this is exactly not what the Torah's Shabbos is about! The Jewish approach to Shabbos is a completely positive one. The Midrash states that when Hashem looked back at creation after six days, He saw that everything was "very good," except that one thing was missing: "*menucha*" (rest). So He introduced Shabbos—and with it the concept of rest came to the world.

In other words, Shabbos and *Shemitah* are not just mere "timeouts" from the hustle of everyday life. The Torah tells us that "a person was created to toil," and a meaningless "vacation" has no place in Hashem's world. Hashem gave us Shabbos and *Shemitah* as a **positive** force; a time to change our focus from the mundane to the spiritual. A time to rejuvenate our *neschamos* with Torah and mitzvos, spending more time on spirituality than we could on a regular workday.<sup>11</sup>

## Announce It!

Based on the above, the Rebbe called on people to utilize the year of *Shemitah* for what it was originally intended, and to increase Torah study in all ways possible.

In a lengthy conversation with Harav Pinchas Menachem Alter (the

"Pnei Menachem," then *rosh yeshiva* and later Rebbe) of Ger and Harav Menashe Klein, the Rebbe called on them to come out with a "*kol koreh*" or the like, encouraging people to increase in Torah study during the coming *Shemitah* year.

"You can do it as a 'suggestion' or a 'good idea,'" said the Rebbe, "and offer *brachos* to anyone who will follow. This way you're not forcing anything on the population. But this is an idea cited in many early sources and holy *sefarim*; it is not a new thing..."<sup>12</sup>

## Pruzbul

One of the important practical points the Rebbe discussed about *Shemitah* is the *halachos* of "*pruzbul*."

According to Torah law, any loan that is still outstanding as a *Shemitah* year passes is considered void and no longer collectable.

However, *Chazal* instituted that a person can perform a formality known as a "*pruzbul*," where he transfers the ownership of the debt to *beis din*, making them the creditors instead of the lender himself.

Nowadays, according to most *poskim* there is no need to perform a *pruzbul* anymore. However the Alter Rebbe in Shulchan Aruch says that a *yarei Shamayim* should be scrupulous and do it in its proper time, at the end of the sixth year before *Shemitah*.

The Rebbe writes that it is a "*mitzvah lefarsem*"—it is incumbent that we publicize this ruling of the Alter Rebbe about doing a *pruzbul* before Rosh Hashanah of a *Shemitah* year. (Sefer Haminhagim p. 86)

"Because we cherish the institutions of our *Chachamim*, and we are especially keen on following in the ways of the Alter Rebbe, it is worthwhile to lend money to one another before *Shemitah*, just to be able to perform a *pruzbul*..." (Likkutei Sichos vol. 24, p. 317)



29 ELUL 5747, LEVI FREIDIN VIA JEM 11500

FOLLOWING HATORAS NEDORIM, THE REBBE RECITES THE PRUZBUL, AT THE CONCLUSION OF SHNAS HASHEMITAH, EREV ROSH HASHANAH 5748.

The Rebbe himself would recite the words of the *pruzbul* immediately after performing *Hataras Nedarim* on Erev Rosh Hashanah of the sixth year, going into a *Shemithah* year. On some occasions, the Rebbe also recited the *pruzbul* at the end of the *Shemithah* year itself (which is mentioned by some *poskim*), but not always.

At the end of the *Shemithah* year of 5747\*, the Rebbe recited the *pruzbul* and instructed that everyone should do so at the end of a *Shemithah* year as well. (Hayom Yom, Shalshes Hayachas 5747. See Otzar Minhagei Chabad, Elul-Tishrei, p. 40)

## Chabad

In conclusion, let us take a look at a lesson that the Rebbe derives from the words of the Torah describing the commandment of *Shemithah*:

שנת שבתון יהי לארץ, שבת לה:

The word “שבתון” means to “stop.” In a deeper, spiritual sense, the Torah indicates that the year of *Shemithah* should influence the Jew to a lasting

“cessation” and rest from all that is “earthly” and coarse; that he must become more spiritual and refined.

It should bring him to “שבת לה”—to be dedicated to Hashem, and not to the cause of false ideals and ideas which, high-sounding though they may be, drag down humanity into the mire of materialistic selfishness and coarseness. Only the ideals of Torah and mitzvos translated into everyday life lead to true refinement and elevation of the soul. This is the way of our patriarch, Avraham Avinu, who sacrificed his life for this ideal, and he passed it down to his children—that is how our people, the Jewish nation, has lived for more than 3,000 years!

The message of the *Shemithah* year is, therefore, a call for lasting cessation from the earthly and material, and a dedication to the higher things in life, in accordance with the Torah and mitzvos. A call to spirituality which should permeate every phase of one’s daily life, one’s thought, speech

and every action, including eating, business, and general conduct.

Let us heed this call and rededicate ourselves to a life which is spiritually fuller, richer and more perfect, bearing the imprint of the Torah and mitzvos in everything we do, in our thought, word and deed. With such resolution in our hearts, we may be confident of a

① שנה טובה ומתוקה, בטוב הנראה והנגלה.<sup>13</sup>

1. Shaalos U'Teshuvos Shemen Hamor, Yoreh De'ah siman 4.
2. Igros Kodesh vol. 18, p. 253.
3. Nitzutzei Rebbe, Hiskashrus #683.
4. Shabbos Parshas Re'eh 5746.
5. Igros Kodesh vol 4, p. 154.
6. See Igros Kodesh vol. 5, p. 28. Vol. 21, p. 165.
7. Michtav Kloli, Rosh Chodesh Cheshvan 5747.
8. Shabbos Parshas-Matos Masei 5747.
9. Sefer Hachinuch, Mitzvah 328.
10. Michtav Kloli, 6 Tishrei 5733.
11. Letter in English, 20 Iyar 5740. Kfar Chabad #1593.
12. Sichos Kodesh 5739 vol. 3, p. 765.
13. Michtav Kloli, 3 Selichos 5711.