

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Behar
May 25, 2024 *** 17 Iyar, 5784

Behar in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2033/jewish/Behar-in-a-Nutshell.htm

The name of the Parshah, "Behar," means "on Mount [Sinai]" and it is found in Leviticus 25:1.

On the mountain of Sinai, G-d communicates to Moses the laws of the Sabbatical year: every seventh year, all work on the land should cease, and its produce becomes free for the taking for all, man and beast.

Seven Sabbatical cycles are followed by a fiftieth year—the Jubilee year, on which work on the land ceases, all indentured servants are set free, and all ancestral estates in the Holy Land that have been sold revert to their original owners.

Behar also contains additional laws governing the sale of lands, and the prohibitions against fraud and usury.

Haftarah in a Nutshell: Jeremiah 32: 6-22

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/671842/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This week's haftarah discusses the purchase of a field by Jeremiah, echoing one of the themes of this week's Torah portion—the purchase and redemption of real estate.

Jeremiah was confined in King Zedekiah's royal compound for having prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of the Jewish people.

There, G-d revealed Himself to the prophet and informs him that he will be approached by his cousin Hanamel with an offer to purchase his ancestral lands. G-d instructs Jeremiah to accept this offer.

Indeed, Hanamel arrived in the compound with the offer, and Jeremiah accepted. Money was transferred and a document of purchase was penned in the presence of witnesses. The prophet then gave the deed to his disciple Baruch son of Neriah for safekeeping, and instructed him to store it in an earthenware vessel where it will remain for many years.

Jeremiah then conveys G-d's message, the symbolism inherent in this transaction: "So says the L-rd of Hosts, the G-d of Israel: 'Houses and fields and vineyards shall be purchased again in this land.'" Thus conveying a message of hope even on the

eve of destruction and exile. Yes the Jews would be exiled, but they would also eventually be returned to their land.

The haftorah ends with the prophet's prayer to and exaltation of G-d.

[Minority Rights: Behar by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l \(5771\)](https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/behar/minority-rights/)
<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/behar/minority-rights/>

One of the most striking features of the Torah is its emphasis on love of, and vigilance toward, the ger, the stranger:

Do not oppress a stranger; you yourselves know how it feels to be strangers, because you were strangers in Egypt. Ex. 23:9

For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the stranger residing among you, giving them food and clothing. You are to love those who are strangers, for you yourselves were strangers in Egypt. Deut 10:17-19

The Sages went so far as to say that the Torah commands us in only one place to love our neighbour but thirty-six times to love the stranger. (Baba Metzia 59b).

What is the definition of a stranger? Clearly the reference is to one who is not Jewish by birth. It could mean one of the original inhabitants of the land of Canaan. It could mean one of the "mixed multitude" who left Egypt with the Israelites. It might mean a foreigner who has entered the land seeking safety or a livelihood.

Whatever the case, immense significance is attached to the way the Israelites treat the stranger. This was what they were meant to have learned from their own experience of exile and suffering in Egypt. They were strangers. They were oppressed. Therefore they knew "how it feels to be a stranger." They were not to inflict on others what was once inflicted on them.

The Sages held that the word ger might mean one of two things. One was a ger tzedek, a convert to Judaism who had accepted all its commands and obligations. The other was the ger toshav, the "resident alien", who had not adopted the religion of Israel but who lived in the land of Israel. Behar spells out the rights of such a person. Specifically:

If any of your fellow Israelites become poor and are unable to support themselves among you, help them as you would a resident alien, so they can

continue to live among you. Lev. 25:35

There is, in other words, an obligation to support and sustain a resident alien. Not only does he or she have the right to live in the Holy Land, but they have the right to share in its welfare provisions. Recall that this is a very ancient law indeed, long before the Sages formulated such principles as “the ways of peace”, obligating Jews to extend charity and care to non-Jews as well as Jews.

What then was a ger toshav? There are three views in the Talmud. According to Rabbi Meir it was anyone who took it upon himself not to worship idols. According to the Sages, it was anyone who committed himself to keeping the seven Noahide commandments. A third view, more stringent, held that it was someone who had undertaken to keep all the commands of the Torah except one, the prohibition of meat not ritually slaughtered (Avodah Zarah 64b). The law follows the Sages. A ger toshav is thus a non-Jew living in Israel who accepts the Noahide laws binding on everyone.

Ger toshav legislation is thus one of the earliest extant forms of minority rights. According to the Rambam there is an obligation on Jews in Israel to establish courts of law for resident aliens to allow them to settle their own disputes – or disputes they have with Jews – according to the provisions of Noahide law. The Rambam adds:

“One should act towards resident aliens with the same respect and loving kindness as one would to a fellow Jew” Hilchot Melachim 10:12

The difference between this and later “ways of peace” legislation is that the ways of peace apply to non-Jews without regard to their beliefs or religious practice. They date from a time when Jews were a minority in a predominantly non-Jewish, non-monotheistic environment. “Ways of peace” are essentially pragmatic rules of what today we would call good community relations and active citizenship in a multi-ethnic and multicultural society. Ger toshav legislation cuts deeper. It is based not on pragmatism but religious principle. According to the Torah you don’t have to be Jewish in a Jewish society and Jewish land to have many of the rights of citizenship. You simply have to be moral.

One biblical vignette portrays this with enormous power. King David has fallen in love and had an adulterous relationship with Batsheva, wife of a ger toshav, Uriah the Hittite. She becomes pregnant. Uriah meanwhile has been away from home as a soldier in Israel’s army. David, afraid that Uriah will come home, see that his wife is pregnant, realise that she has committed adultery, and come to discover that the king is the guilty party, has Uriah brought home. His pretext is that he wants to know how the battle is going. He then tells Uriah to go home and sleep with his

wife before returning, so that he will later assume that he himself is the father of the child. The plan fails. This is what happens:

When Uriah came to him, David asked him how Joab was, how the soldiers were and how the war was going. Then David said to Uriah, "Go down to your house and wash your feet." So Uriah left the palace, and a gift from the king was sent after him. But Uriah slept at the entrance to the palace with all his master's servants and did not go down to his house.

David was told, "Uriah did not go home." So he asked Uriah, "Haven't you just come from a military campaign? Why didn't you go home?"

Uriah said to David, "The Ark and Israel and Judah are staying in tents, and my commander Joab and my lord's men are camped in the open country. How could I go to my house to eat and drink and make love to my wife? As surely as you live, I will not do such a thing!" 2 Samuel 11:6-11

Uriah's utter loyalty to the Jewish people, despite the fact that he is not himself Jewish, is contrasted with King David, who has stayed in Jerusalem, not been with the army, and instead had a relationship with another man's wife. The fact that Tanach can tell such a story in which a resident alien is the moral hero, and David, Israel's greatest king, the wrongdoer, tells us much about the morality of Judaism.

Minority rights are the best test of a free and just society. Since the days of Moses they have been central to the vision of the kind of society God wants us to create in the land of Israel. How vital, therefore, that we take them seriously today.

[Behar: Getting From Here to There by Rabbi Moshe Heyn](https://truah.org/resources/moshe-heyn-behar-moraltorah_2024/)

https://truah.org/resources/moshe-heyn-behar-moraltorah_2024/

These concluding parshiyot of Leviticus can feel like a slog. We are well past the excitement of Exodus and even the drama of the death of Aaron's two older sons. Weeks of readings about the minutiae of ancient Israelite life — agricultural laws, slavery laws, holidays — make us yearn for Numbers, where we will be off on the desert journey and things will start to happen again. (Though, in fact, it is not until Numbers 10:11, three weeks into the book, that the Israelites leave Sinai, so we have a ways to go still.)

Behar reminds us in its opening verse that the laws we encounter in this week's Torah portion were given by God to Moses on Mt. Sinai (Behar Sinai) — almost as if the Torah knows this is a hard read and wants to remind us of that spiritual high. These laws are intended to help the Israelites create a just and sustainable

society; how to come down from the mountain, if you will, and live as a people. A powerful metaphor.

Just two weeks ago in Parshat Kedoshim, we encountered one of the most fundamental teachings in the Torah — if not THE most fundamental teaching: “Love your neighbor as yourself; I am THE ETERNAL.” (Leviticus 19:18)

In this week’s portion, the teachings and laws are all about the details, the practicalities of daily living. They may seem anti-climactic, coming six chapters after Leviticus 19:18, but experiencing them that way misses a key point.

In her (M)oral Torah commentary on Kedoshim, Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg reminded us of the literary device called the chiasm, which is commonly found in biblical literature. She described it as “...something of a ‘sandwich’ structure (A-B-C-B-A) and in which the middle point — the middle word, verse, chapter, and so forth — is regarded as the most significant.”

That was certainly the case with Leviticus 19:18, which is located at the center of Leviticus, at the center of the Torah. From a literary perspective, in the weeks leading up to Kedoshim we were progressing from A to B to C, and now we are on our way back from C to B to A. We are returning from the mountain to the plains; from our highest ideals to the practicalities of daily living; from the most fundamental expression of holiness to where we are now.

When I think about where we are now, I think of the conflict in the Middle East and the horrors faced each passing day by both Israelis and Palestinians. How did we get here, so far from loving our neighbor? The gap between our highest ideals and our present reality requires a path, a practical means for getting us from where we are to where we hope to be. C to B to A.

And when I think about that path, I think of a reading in the Reform siddur, “Mishkan T’filah,” adapted from Michael Walzer’s “Exodus and Revolution”:

Standing on the parted shores, we still believe what we were taught before ever we stood at Sinai’s foot; that wherever we go, it is eternally Egypt; that there is a better place, a promised land; that the winding way to that promise passes through the wilderness. That there is no way to get from here to there except by joining hands, marching together.

Perhaps that path, that practical means of de-escalating, can take its cues from Behar: small details, pieced together one at a time, until a larger picture of a just society eventually emerges from them.

(Rabbi Moshe Heyn was ordained 25 years ago at the Cincinnati campus of HUC-JIR and just became a Doctor of Divinity along with his classmates. He currently serves the Coastside

Parshat Behar: The Mitzvah of Shmitah

<https://www.growtorah.org/vayikra/2022/05/18-parshat-behar-the-mitzvah-of-shmita>

Before the sin of Adam and Chava, the earth provided sustenance, not through the plotting and plowing of people, but rather through tefillah. In the Talmud, Rav Assi explains that the vegetation would not break through the earth until Adam came along and prayed to Hashem to have mercy on the earth. The rains fell and the earth sprouted.[1] The removal of the fruit from the Eitz Hada'at can be interpreted as a decision to derive pleasure from Hashem's Earth without thought to the consequences it would bring. As a result, humankind's working of the land was no longer within the context of safeguarding it; and thus, the earth is cursed, sprouting thorns and thistles, only giving forth its fruit by the sweat of our brow. In Parshat Behar, the mitzvah of shmitah is discussed. Here, Hashem enables a return to the ideal relationship between humankind and creation.

The halachot relating to the shmitah year are numerous and complex, but there are four general commandments in the Torah from which they are derived.[2]

1. The land should rest, as it says "and the land shall rest a Shabbat to Hashem." [3] It is humanity's responsibility to return all of creation into a proper relationship with Hashem. Through our refraining from planting, pruning, plowing, harvesting, or any other form of working the land, the land is allowed to rest and move towards achieving a Shabbat.
2. We must declare all seventh-year produce hefker—ownerless, and free for all to take and enjoy.
3. We must sanctify all seventh-year produce. We are prohibited from doing any business whatsoever with the produce and are obligated to ensure that it is consumed properly and equitably and does not go to waste.
4. We must absolve all loans from one Jew to another.

The conscious and meticulous observance of these laws and their rabbinic applications expands our awareness to the true nature of reality. The mandated abstinence from physical and commercial control of the land, and the positive commandment to relinquish all sense of ownership of its produce, free us from the enslavement of the constant pursuit of material goods and wealth. It dispels the illusion that physical acquisitions serve as a testament to our existence.

Additionally, the Shmitah year provides ample time to contemplate and understand that it is not through the strength or the might of our hand that the earth brings

forth its fruits. This not only instills a deeper sense of faith and trust in Hashem, but it allows a shift in how we relate to the earth. The earth must be viewed as a precious gift that has been entrusted to us and, therefore, we must treat it in a caring and sustainable manner.

The lessons we draw from Shmitah are vital today as we dangerously toy with destroying the beautiful world Hashem gave us. One example is the deforestation of vast portions of the earth's most essential ecosystems to support the growing demand for beef.[4] The "slash and burn" method of clearing land for agriculture, employed globally, by both small and large-scale cattle farmers, involves cutting the vegetation of a plot of land and allowing it to dry, at which point it is burned. The land is then cultivated for a few seasons, and eventually abandoned, left fallow for cattle pasture. Though this process may release nutrients that fertilize the soil, it is only sustainable on a small scale and on nutrient-rich soil. When applied on an industrial level to nutrient-poor soil, like the current situation in the Amazon Rainforest, the result is an ecological disaster [5]. As Richard Robbins puts it,

Hundreds of thousands of acres of tropical forests in Brazil, Guatemala, Costa Rica, and Honduras, to name just a few countries, have been leveled to create pasture for cattle. Since most of the forest is cleared by burning, the extension of cattle pasture also creates carbon dioxide, and, according to some environmentalists, contributes significantly to global warming. [6]

Such operations lead to erosion and remove all nutrients from the soil, leaving it desolate. The result is severe damage to the biodiversity of the rainforest, an increase in the release of carbon dioxide, and general biosphere instability. [7]

Instead of being elevated and sanctified, the earth has become trampled and disgraced. The frightening ecological reality we are facing morally obligates us to rethink our relationship with the land and the consequences of our actions. Many of our actions may be deriving pleasure from Hashem's earth without paying attention to the drastic consequences they bring.

Yet even with the damage humanity has caused, shmitah teaches us that we must have faith that Hashem is in control, waiting for us to return from our careless and selfish ways. We must also know that the fluttering of the wings of any change in our relationship with creation on the physical dimension will cause a ripple effect in the spiritual world.

The mitzvah of shmitah provides insight into one of the most puzzling episodes in the Torah. As Bnei Yisrael prepare themselves in the desert to enter Eretz Yisrael, Miriam Hanevi'ah passes away and the miraculous source of water that had sustained the people goes dry. Hashem commands Moshe to carry out one more

miraculous act to instill the true nature of the relationship with the land of Israel deep within the consciousness of the new generation. Hashem tells Moshe to speak to the rock to bring forth water. On this verse, Rav Simcha Meir Cohen of Dvinsk (Eastern Europe, 1843-1926), in his sefer, Meshech Chochmah, says Hashem wanted Bnei Yisrael to experience the Divine Speech flowing through Moshe's mouth, drawing even inanimate objects towards Hashem's will. The intention was for them to "see that which is heard"[8] in a similar manner to the awesome revelation at Mount Sinai where "the entire people saw the Voices." [9] This incomprehensible act would significantly strengthen their faith in Hashem's Providence over all. As a manifestation of this new-found emunah, they would also understand that this holy land, which they were about to enter, is not a land that is conquered, used and abused by the sticks wielded by humans. Rather, Eretz Yisrael is a celestial land, that will pour forth its abundant blessing according to the tefillah spilling from the lips of the Jewish people, a people who are sensitive and respectful to the needs of all of Hashem's creation.

Moshe, possibly shaken by the death of his dear sister and frustrated with the complaints of the people, tragically strikes the rock. Hashem rebukes Moshe and Aharon and says "because you did not have faith in Me to sanctify Me in the eyes of the Children of Israel, therefore you will not bring this congregation to the Land that I have given them." [10] Because they failed to express the sanctity of a proper relationship with the Land based on pure emunah in Hashem and not human strength, they could not lead Bnei Yisrael into the land.

When the Torah introduces shmitah, it says "Hashem spoke to Moshe on Har Sinai saying." [11] Rashi asks "Why is shmitah mentioned [specifically] by Har Sinai? Were not all the mitzvot said at Sinai?" In truth, living a life of shmitah consciousness is a constant reenactment of receiving the Torah at Sinai. Hashem gave us the Torah so that we could sanctify and reveal the truth of all of creation through the passionate and dedicated observance of the mitzvot. And so, when we come to a proper relationship with the earth and give it proper rest and respect through the mitzvah of the shmitah year, the splendor of its divinity is revealed. Should we choose to view the mitzvah of shmitah in a sophisticated and all-encompassing manner, we may be zochim to bring the world closer to a healthy and holy state. *(Rabbi Noam Sendor studied at Yeshivat Hamivtar from 2008-2011 and received his rabbinical ordination from the Joseph and Gwendolyn Straus Rabbinical Seminary. He is currently the rabbi at Blake Street Hebrew Congregation and a teacher at Leibler Yavneh College in Melbourne, Australia.)* [1] Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Chullin 60b [2] Sefer HaShemittah, HaRav Yechiel Michel Tukachinski (Mossad HaRav Kook). [3] Vayikra 25:2 [4] This is in addition to the inherent health issues with eating too much beef, and other practices of the meat industry which cause health and environmental problems. [5] Slash and burn

techniques have also been historically used by indigenous tribes, including those in the Amazon forest, to create very small plots of ground for growing crops for a few years. Because of the small plots and small, scattered populations, the effect on the forest dynamics was much less (but still evident) than that done in today's more industrial cattle farming. [6] Richard Robbins, *Global Problems and the Culture of Capitalism* (Allyn and Bacon, 1999) p.220 [7] Wikipedia [8] Cohen, Rav Meir Simcha Meshech Chochmah (Even Yisrael) pg. 297 (Parshat Chukat). [9] Shemot 20:15 [10] Bamidbar 20:12 [11] Vayikra 25:1-5

[What Can a Bird and a Seed Teach Us About Shemitah? By Yael Hammerman](https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/what-can-a-bird-and-a-seed-teach-us-about-shemitah/)
<https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/what-can-a-bird-and-a-seed-teach-us-about-shemitah/>

One spring afternoon a few years ago, I was walking along Riverside Drive, not far from JTS, when I heard a chirping sound. At that time, my phone was set to tweet like a bird when I received a text message. So, naturally, I took my phone out and checked it. I was surprised to see there were no new messages. I pushed the power button to see if I somehow missed a text, but no notification appeared. I heard the sound again, re-checked my phone, but still, no message. It took three rounds of this cycle to realize that the chirping wasn't coming from my cell phone—it was coming from a real live bird in Riverside Park! My brain had become wired to hear "tweet" and think that the more likely option in my day-to-day urban life was a text message on my phone, as opposed to an actual bird.

This tweet was the wake up call I needed to realize how disconnected I had become from the natural world—from the land, its sounds, and native inhabitants. I was ungrounded, and the birdsong was like a springtime shofar blast for sensory overload. It was the nudge I needed to spend more time outdoors, to mute my phone's pings and dings, and to look at the biblical concept of shemitah (release) with fresh eyes and newly attuned ears.

In Parashat Behar, God tells the Israelites that when they enter the land that God will give them, "the Land shall observe a Sabbath of the Adonai"—veshavta ha'aretz Shabbat l'Adonai ([Lev. 25:2](#)). This becomes known as the shemitah year. For six years, you can work to your heart's content—you can sow, prune, and gather, but in the seventh year, the land shall have a full, complete rest: shabbat shabbaton yihiyeh la'aretz ([Lev. 25:4](#))!

The concept of shemitah was radical in its original context in the Ancient Near East. For an agrarian society, dependent on self-sustaining agricultural production, it was a bold move requiring immense faith and forethought to leave land fallow every seven years. In fact, one reason for the decline of the flourishing Neo-Sumerian economy of Mesopotamia in the early second millennium BCE was the high alkaline content of the soil in areas of the Diyala River region. Irrigation was

overutilized, crop output faltered, and the economy failed.^[1] Thus, it was indeed radical for our Israelite ancestors to put their faith, fortune, and future in God's hand. It was brave of them to trust that God's land would produce more productively, if it had the opportunity for a shabbat shabbaton—a period of complete rest.

As radical as shemithah may have been for the ancient Israelites, perhaps the concept is even more radical for us today. We work "from the office" and "from home"—which actually means that we work wherever we are. We literally carry our work with us in our pockets. We sow at the supermarket, we prune on the pick-up line, and we gather while we wait for the green light. We toil until we can't tell the difference between a sparrow's trill and a sputtering social-media troll. It's hard enough for us to stop working at 5PM, and to shut our laptops for twenty-five hours over Shabbat. But a full year of complete rest from production?! Preposterous!

The Italian commentator Seforno (1475–1549) notes that "during the shemithah year, the farmer, instead of 'serving' the soil which requires cultivation, will instead turn his efforts to serving God directly. Just as the weekly Sabbath is a day set aside for intensive service of God, so the shemithah year is to serve the same purpose."^[2] Seforno seems to imply here that it's challenging to simultaneously serve God while also dedicating oneself wholly to one's labor. (Thanks for the validation, Seforno!) The farmers were only able to dedicate themselves fully to God when they set down their scythes.

How then might we serve God, if we don't have our own farms to leave fallow, and if we don't work in fields that allow us to set down our pruning shears every seven years? Perhaps we can infuse our lives with the spirit of shemithah through recognizing the blessings of nature and respecting the inhabitants of the land—from the birds that tweet to the seeds that grow. And we don't even have to wait seven years to do so. Shemithah offers us a vision of a world in which we can live in harmony with our environment. Perhaps it's an idealistic dream, yet it's one worth envisioning and pursuing for the sake of our ancestors, ourselves, and our children in generations to come.

I started with a bird, and I'll end with a seed. Researchers at the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies at Kibbutz Ketura recently harvested a crop of dates grown on palm trees from 2,000-year-old seeds retrieved from archaeological excavations.^[3] The Ketura ancient palm grove has a few trees—the most senior, nicknamed Methuselah, was planted in 2005 from a seed found at Masada during the excavations led by Yigal Yadin in 1960s. Since then, thirty-two seeds have been planted and six germinated, miraculously reviving an ancient variety of date.

These special fruits resemble modern dates, and have a very sweet taste, like honey.

These miracle seeds didn't just rest for one shemita year—they rested for two millennia! Imagine for a moment, a weary rebel or a tired mother near Masada, plucking a date from a nearby palm tree and sucking its honey for a boost of energy. Then dropping that seed on the ground, only for it to be re-discovered 2,000 years later, and then planted and harvested anew—so we today can savor its sweet honey and its even sweeter story.

Let the story of these date seeds give you hope: hope for a time when we can all enjoy the blessings of shemita, and hope for a world where people live in harmony with our land and its inhabitants. (*Yael Hammerman is the Associate Rabbi at Anshe Chesed in New York City.*) [1] Levine, Baruch. The JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus. Pg. 272, Excursus 10. [2] [Seforno on Lev. 25:2](#) [3] [Rosella Tercatin, Kibbutz harvests previously extinct dates eaten in Judea 2000 years ago](#), Jerusalem Post (August 14, 2021).

Yahrtzeits

Ronnie Klein remembers her father Walter Leibowitz on Sun. May 26th

Blossom Primer remembers Irwin's sister Anne Levinson on Mon. May 27th

Burt Solomon remembers his sister Judi Solomon Rosenberg on Wed. May 29th

Ilisia Kissner remembers her Aunt Sadye Rosenblum on Thurs. May 30th

Daniel Zwillenberg remembers his mother Myma Zwillenberg on Fri. May 31st