

# The Seasonal Jew

*Why do Americans have seasons for everything, and what does Shemittah teach us about it?*

## **Holiday Season**

“Holiday season” is a phrase that is very common here. Just as there is tax season and the tourist season, there is also “holiday season.” Each season has its business: in “tax season” everyone is busy finding tax refunds, and during the holiday season — Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur — they go to the synagogue and devote a little more time to Judaism.

How does Judaism view such an approach?

In this week’s parsha, Behar, we learn about a mitzvah that can only be observed in the Land of Israel. Right at the beginning of the parsha, the Torah says, “When you will come to the land...and the land shall rest a Sabbath for G-d.” How exactly does it work? “Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall sow your vineyard... And the seventh year is a Sabbatical year for the land...don’t plant your field and do not prune your vineyard.” During the seventh year, known as shemittah, Jews in the Land of Israel are not allowed to work the land.

In fact, this year is a shemittah year.

What is the practical implication?

Let's take, for example, a farmer who sells Jaffa oranges to markets in Europe. He has a field of orange trees, agricultural equipment, a team of dedicated workers who pick, pack and ship, and wholesalers abroad who buy the oranges from him every year.

Suddenly, it's the year of the shemitah. He informs the workers that in the coming year he will not have work for them. These workers won't sit at home until he employs them again the next year; they immediately go out looking for another job.

The wholesalers who have been purchasing from him for six years, turn to other markets to satisfy demand as soon as they hear that he doesn't plan to supply them with goods in the coming year.

The banks who expect monthly payments for the loans necessary to purchase expensive agricultural equipment are not interested in shemita; they want their monthly payments.

But most importantly, he has no income. He is not allowed to do business with the oranges grown in his field. According to Torah law, the fields do not belong to him; they are *hefker*, ownerless-free-for-all, and any person can come and take a day's supply of oranges for his family.

After the shemita year, he has to start rebuilding his entire business from scratch, finding workers, buyers, and so on and so forth. This is a mitzvah that requires a lot of trust in G-d.

## **What is Special About Shemitah?**

The Torah precedes this mitzvah with the words, "And G-d

spoke to Moses at Mount Sinai, to say...” Rashi asks, “What does shemitah have to do with Mount Sinai? Were not all commandments given on Sinai? Rather, just as regarding shemitah, its general rules and minute details were ordained on Mount Sinai, so, too, all commandments with their general rules and their minute details were ordained on Mount Sinai.” Rashi explains that the Torah chose the mitzvah of Shemita as an example and explicitly wrote that it was said at Sinai, to teach us that all the commandments written in the Torah were said at Sinai.

The Rebbe asks: What is special about shemita that it was chosen to be the example of all the mitzvos?

Let’s go deeper: Why didn’t they choose a mitzvah that belongs to every Jew, and that remains relevant at all times and in all places? Like tefillin, or fasting on Yom Kippur, which are obligatory both in Israel and abroad, whether the Temple exists or not. Why does the Torah highlight a mitzvah that can only be observed in the Land of Israel, and only by farmers, and only when a majority of the Jewish nation lives in Israel, which renders it a rabbinic mitzvah in our day?

The Rebbe therefore says that there must be something that sets shemitah apart from all the other commandments in the Torah.

## **Shinui**

Every other mitzvah is observed for a short period of time. Lighting Shabbat candles on Shabbat evening takes no more than a few moments. Putting on tefillin takes no more than five

or ten minutes. Some mitzvot are observed for 24 hours, such as Shabbat. There are holidays, Pesach for example, that are seven or eight days, Sukkot is nine days, and we even have a mitzvah that we observe for 49 days — the longest mitzvah in the year — “Sefirat HaOmer,” in which the Torah commands us to count fifty days between Pesach and Shavuot.

What sets shemita apart is that it lasts a whole year! In Hebrew, the word for year, “shana,” has another meaning: “shinui,” which means “change.” A year includes the changes of all the seasons, summer, autumn, winter, and spring.

I’ll tell you something personal: as you know, I grew up in Israel. Yeshiva students in Israel are exempt from serving in the army as long as they study Torah in Yeshiva, because the government recognizes that Torah study protects the nation and the land. As soon as they stop studying in the Yeshiva, they need to enlist in the army. But the law states that they must study Torah at a yeshiva in Israel; they cannot do so abroad. If a yeshiva student wants to go abroad, he must obtain a permit from the army.

Now, the Chabad yeshiva students really wanted to come to New York to study near the Rebbe. In the early 1960s, they pulled connections with a prominent politician, Mr. Zalman Shazar — who would later become Israel’s third president — who came from the Chabad family and was very close to the Rebbe. He convinced the heads of the army and the state to recognize the deep connection that exists between a chassid and a Rebbe, and how important it is for them to learn in his presence. After great efforts, the Yeshivah students were

allowed to leave for the United States to be with the Rebbe for six months.

A few years later, the Rebbe explained to Mr. Shazar that it was very important for the boys to remain in 770 for a whole year, because then they would have the opportunity to experience all the holidays and all the seasons of the year with the Rebbe. He pulled through, and since then, Chabad Yeshivah students in Israel, come to the Rebbe for an entire year (Nasi v'Chassid p. 236).

## **A Jew in All Seasons**

My friends, there are mitzvos that are done in the spring, like Pesach. There are mitzvos that are celebrated in the fall, and mitzvos — like Chanukah — in the winter. But shemitah is a mitzvah that is celebrated all year round. This mitzvah signifies our connection to G-d throughout all the seasons of the year. We celebrate our connection not only when the weather is nice, but also when it is cold or hot.

This is also about life: every person has a period of “spring,” when he is young and “blooming” and everyone tells you how beautiful and talented you are. There are periods in life that are more like wintry, rainy, cloudy days, when you are in low spirits and have no desire to leave the house. You’re getting old, nobody compliments your appearance, and in general, life is dull. Shemitah teaches us that we must remain connected to G-d in all seasons of life — when things seem nice and when things seem otherwise.

We also learn this idea from the etrog. According to the Talmud,

one of the unique elements of the etrog is that it grows all year round and is not limited to a specific season. “In the course of the year,” the Rebbe says, “there are changes from one extreme to the other. That’s why a year is called *shana*, from the word *shinui*, because it encompasses all the different seasons” (Kuntres Chag HaSukkos 5747). The etrog remains on the tree all year round, and therefore contains all the different seasons.

The lesson: It’s not enough to be a Jew during the holiday season. You need to be a Jew during tax season and during all seasons — regardless of the weather.

(20 Iyar 5734. Toras Menachem v. 76 pg. 155).