



## Parades's Parsha Discussion with Rabbi Alex Israel

TORAH TO DISCUSS WITH TEENS AND ADULTS AROUND YOUR SHABBAT TABLE

### Behar-Bechukotai. Reset!

We live in an era of extreme economic disparities. Gaps between rich and poor are increasing. (In 1965 a CEO was paid on average twenty times that of the lowest paid worker. In 2018, in large corporations he was paid 300 times more than the lowest paid!)

- Does Judaism have anything to say about our economic systems?
- How does it deal with those widening disparities?
- Does it favor a socialist model or a capitalist one?



I once quipped that Judaism believes in six years of Capitalism followed by a single year of Socialism. Why? Because of Shemitta and Yovel, the Sabbatical and Jubilee years. These essentially function as a periodic socio-economic recalibration.

How so? In Shemitta the farmer may not work the land, his own field! He may not even store or stockpile his own produce. As a result, all people from all economic classes and levels have equal access to the most basic commodity - food. In the Shemitta year, loans are annulled, and a person who has fallen into debt gets a release on his or her debt. The Jubilee year frees all slaves and returns land to its ancestral family – in an agrarian society, landowning was a sure way to be financially secure. This is like a reset button on the economy!

What does this do to our socio-economic landscape? Here is the explanation of Maimonides:

As to the laws of Shemitta and the Jubilee year, some of them are to foster sympathy with our fellow and promote the welfare of all individuals as it states: "That the poor of thy people may eat" (Ex. 23:11); in addition, the land will also increase its produce and improve when it remains fallow for some time. Other precepts of this class prescribe kindness to servants and to the poor, by renouncing claims to debts [in Shemitta] and relieving the slaves of their

bondage [in Yovel]. There are some precepts in this class that serve to secure for the people a permanent source of maintenance and support by providing that the land should remain the permanent property of its owners, and that it could not be sold: "And the land shall not be sold for perpetuity" (Lev. 25:23). In this way the property of a person remains intact for him and his heirs, and he can only enjoy the produce thereof. (Moreh Nevuchim 3:39)

Rav Kook sees a spiritual dimension as well:

Life can only be perfected through the affording of a breathing space from the bustle of everyday life. ...What the Sabbath achieves regarding the individual, the Shemitta achieves with regard to the nation as a whole.

This nation in which the Divine spirit dwells prominent and eternal has special need of expressing from time to time the revelation of its own Divine light at its fullest brightness, not suppressed by the cares and toil of the passions and rivalries of everyday life

... the coarseness which is bound to be present in public life causes the deterioration of moral standards, and there is a constant conflict between the ideal of loving-kindness, truthfulness, compassion and pity, on the one hand, ... the pressure for material gain, inevitable in daily life, on the other, causing the distancing of the Divine. ...The periodical suspension of the normal social routine raises this nation—when morally settled—spiritually and morally.

In other words, for Maimonides the world can be cruel to the “have-nots”, our economic environment can shut out people who get into debt or who fall out of the system. If I fell into slavery will I ever become free? If I sold my field will I ever regain my financial footing? Shemitta and Yovel offer people a fresh chance.

And Spiritually, Rav Kook suggests that we risk, in our societal need for comfort and prosperity, in the heady race to get ahead, to be successful, our frenetic pursuit of material gain, we risk the eclipse of the spiritual. Not only does the dog-eat-dog world have a detrimental societal effect, but in trying always “to have” we never have an opportunity “to be!” Shemitta allows is to radically stop, to reassess and recalibrate our spiritual world. To find ourselves again. To ask ourselves if we have become synonymous with our work. What Shabbat does for the individual, Shemitta does for the nation.

### Please Discuss

- How does our western societies address the disparities of income in our economy?
- How do we ensure that everyone gets a chance to begin anew? Is this method effective?
- Rav Kook views Shemitta as a recalibration of the corrosive spiritual effects of our economic environment. What are these corrosive effects?
- When he speaks about affording a “breathing space”, what could a year such as Shemitta do to a person, and to a society?
- Again, are these elements present in our 2020 world? If so, how do they manifest themselves?

Shabbat Shalom!