

As an ancient document the Torah includes several passages that, at first, may not seem immediately relevant to our modern lives. But when we dig deeper we find that in fact even some of the more obscure elements have eternal meaning that continues to teach us lessons for our lives today. Later this month we will read from parshat Behar which includes the rules for the sabbatical year. Today that term is used to refer to a period of time taken away from work but in its biblical context it is about agriculture in the land of Israel. For six years you could work the land but the seventh was to be a complete sabbath for the land. Already by the time of the Rabbis, our sages wondered about the continued relevance of this law for a people in Diaspora. Today, when most Jews are neither involved in agriculture, nor do they live in Israel, the relevance of the sabbatical year is even less obvious.

A simple answer is that leaving the land fallow for one year in seven, is simply good agricultural practice, allowing the land to rest and replenish its nutrients and fertility. But there are undoubtedly deeper spiritual meanings to the practice.

First there is the parallel with Shabbat. Just as we rest on the seventh day from our work, the land rests every seven years from its work. In Genesis God creates for seven days and then rests making Shabbat as part of the fabric of creation. By extending Shabbat to the land itself we are told that this ideal of rest is encoded in the nature and being of the universe. When we rest on Shabbat, when we observe Shabbat, we are not simply creating space for our psychological wellbeing, for personal refectation and refreshment. Rather, we are tuning into a fundamental reality of the world that affects not only people but even the earth itself.

Moreover we read later in the portion that: "The land shall not be sold permanently, for the land belongs to Me, for you are strangers and [temporary] residents with Me." The basis of the sabbatical year is that despite what we may think we do not own the land. Indeed, according to our tradition we do not really own anything. All is created by God and thus all, ultimately, belongs to God. We live in an increasingly consumerist culture in which we are judged by how much we own and are defined by our material wealth. But in this Torah portion we are told that this "stuff" is not really ours. The land is God's and we are merely temporary residents on it. Indeed, not only the land but all people belong to God. This goes against everything we learn in modern life in which the individual is sovereign and the value of all around us, both things and people, is often reduced to how much value they have to us and how much they can do for us.

Thus the sabbatical year reminds us that we should be instilled with humility in the face of the nature of creation, and, inspired by that humility, that we should always exercise our power over

the land and all the people of the world, with the responsibility and respect demanded of us by God and by our tradition.

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