

## For six years you may sow your field... But the seventh year shall be a complete rest for the land. (25:3,4)

The *mitzvah* of *Shemittah* teaches us that Hashem rules the universe. He is the only force in the universe, not the laws of nature. By allowing his field to remain untended and unguarded, the Jew declares to the world that life is not about material bounty. When Hashem says, "Stop," we halt our work, our production – whether it is *Erev Shabbos* or *Shemittah*. We ascribe to a Higher Power, and we believe with complete faith that Hashem will provide for our needs. During the *Shemittah* year, all of the produce of that year is *hefker*, free for all to take; we have no restrictions. Why is it necessary to have our produce become *hefker*? It would have been sufficient simply not to produce, allow the field to remain fallow. If something grows anyway, why should the owner not keep it?

I once heard that *Shemittah* teaches us selflessness. It is not all (only) about us. There are other people in the world. A community is comprised of many individuals: some the same; others different; but we are all in this together. We must learn to place another Jew's interests – if not above our own – at least on par with our concerns. When it has to do with emotions, amenities and the various comforts of life, we are directed to act selflessly and put the feelings and needs of others before our own (unless it is a matter of life, then, *chayecha kodmin*, your life takes precedence).

Why do we find it so challenging to place our fellow's interests above – or at least on par with – our own? Private ownership. When man owns a parcel of property or any material possession, he claims complete mastery over this possession. It is "his," and no one can touch it. We do not want anyone to meddle in our businesses, our affairs, because they belong to "me." While we are comfortable being part of a community, a settlement, a family, when it involves private ownership – stay out! The "private" is the great divide between people. This attitude ultimately leads to an exclusionary, isolationist view on life.

The flipside of private ownership is initiative and incentive for personal achievement. We develop what is our own. We do not care to develop what belongs to someone else. Why toil for someone else?

The Torah presents us with an alternative to the negative aspect of private ownership: *Shemittah*. For six years you may – should – work. For six years it is your initiative, your incentive, your success. The sense of acquisition and domination is very real during those six years – but do not get ahead of yourself, because the seventh year is coming. The flipside/alternative is *Shemittah*. We, who have previously been private owners, now surrender our ownership. As a result, we develop a greater sense of fellowship, because now we have placed our fellow's interests above our own. The self-imposed walls of private enterprise which have separated us from the community have been demolished. Selfishness gives way to altruism and magnanimity; narrow-mindedness

concedes to tolerance and impartiality. During *Shemittah*, all Jews were equal, No one owned; no one controlled; no one manipulated. We were as we were meant to be: one people, without dividers between us; Jewish landowners working to develop, and hopefully maintain, a balanced perspective of life. *Shemittah* was when the individual realized that he was part of a larger community of Jews, in which all were equal.

I saw an exposition applying this idea of *Shemittah* inclusiveness to explain what at first glance appears as an ambiguous statement in *Pirkei Avos* (5:13), He who says, 'What is mine is mine and what is yours is yours' – this is a *middah beinonis*, ordinary/average; but some say this is *middas Sodom*." This is extreme. Just because a person wants to keep for himself – what is mine is mine and what is yours is yours – is he similar to the people of Sodom who warranted being destroyed? Yes, he thinks only of himself – never of others. Such a person will never experience a feeling of selflessness. He will be consumed by his selfishness, to the point that if anyone attempts to break through the wall, he will respond negatively. Life is all about him, with no allowance for anyone else. Indeed, why would he be called ordinary or average, unless he represents the contemporary human psyche.