Preparing The Garden For Shemitah, #2: Melachot Derabanan During Shemitah

L ast week, we learned about four or five melachot pertaining to shemitah, which are forbidden by the Torah.

However, there are many more melachot that do not appear in the Torah. The Mishna (Shevi’it chap. 2) enumerates 17 melachot and the Rambam (Shevi’it 1,5) includes them too. Rav Kook lists more than 20 melachot in his book Shabbat Ha’aretz (1,5), as does the Chazon Ish (Shevi’it 17, 19).

The well-known melachot are the following: watering and irrigation, weeding, fertilization, mowing (grass), spraying and crop-dusting. Are they forbidden derabanan, or permitted?

Ukmei ilana and avruyei ilana

The Gemara (Avoda Zara 3) writes that any melachah directed toward keeping the tree alive (in Aramaic, “ukmei ilana”) is permissible, but a melachah to improve or strengthen the tree (avruyei ilana) is forbidden.

For example; there are many plants that will die if they don’t receive water during the summer. Therefore, watering these plants fall into the category of okmey ilana and is permissible during Shemitah. On the other hand, it is forbidden to cut old branches of a tree so that the tree will grow better. Why? Because the goal is to “improve” the tree, to make it grow better. Fertilization is usually avruyei ilana, thus forbidden, because generally the tree or plant will survive without fertilization. Chazal didn’t want that our plants would die during shemitah, but only that we do the minimum needed to ensure their survival.

Ukmei ilana or ukmei peira (fruits)

Rav Kook believed that only actions taken to preserve the tree are permitted, while activities to preserve the fruits are forbidden. By contrast, the Chazon Ish was lenient with regards to the fruit as well. For example, spraying trees against pests that attack the tree’s fruit, would be forbidden to Rav Kook but acceptable to the Chazon Ish. Lema’aseh, the general custom is to be lenient like the Chazon Ish.
Given the above, any *melacha* whose goal is to avoid loss of a plant or its yield – is permitted during shemitah.

There are activities that are sometimes permissible and sometimes forbidden. It depends on whether the activity is directed to strengthen the tree, or merely to keep it tree alive.

In light of these principles, there are many *melachot* that we must perform before shemitah, during the end of the sixth year. We will discuss this next week.

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