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The Gemara Shabbat states the following warning: “Due to the sin of prohibited illicit relations, idol worship, and abdication of the Sabbatical and Jubilee Years, exile comes to the world and they exile the Jewish people from their land..” While the first two reasons for exile seem justified, for what reason would Israel’s desecration of Shemittah merit such dire consequences? What makes Shemittah so fundamental to the creation and preservation of a nation?

To attempt to understand the essence of what makes Shemittah so crucial to society, we must delve into the verses. There are three consecutive verses that seemingly have varying accounts of who or what the utility of this command comes to serve. They state:

“But in the seventh year the land shall have a sabbath of complete rest, a sabbath for the Almighty, you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your untrimmed vines; it shall be a complete sabbath for the land. This sabbath shall be for you to eat; for you, you slaves, your laborers who live with you.”

It begins by attributing the seventh year

of rest to God, it is for his sake that we rest on Shemittah. However, it then quickly transitions to stating we give the land rest for the sake of the land itself. Finally, it assigns the purpose of this command to the people themselves, for all those who work and benefit from the land to sit and rest. So which is it? Why do we have the laws of Shemittah and who exactly are they for?

The answer comes from a later verse in our Parasha that at first glance seems misplaced. Right in the middle of the discussion of all the laws and intricacies of Shemittah comes a verse that states “Do not wrong one another, but fear your God”. The essence of Shemittah is the creation of a foundation of morality that permeates every area of our society. While we usually think of morals as the appropriate behavior we have towards the world, Shemittah challenges us to move beyond that. It is to cultivate a perspective of humility, compassion, empathy, and faith within the communities we create. To leave things up to God, to give things to the less fortunate around you, and to forgive in the present on behalf of a brighter future.

What then do we make of these three different attributions in the verses? It was Lawrence Kohlberg, a psychologist and moral philosopher, who outlined three main stages of moral development. The first is pre-conventional morality, which entails an individual’s motivation for acting justly as overall obedience to authority.

Right and wrong are defined by the powers that be, and despite our wishes, we must go along in fear of punishment. The next stage is conventional morality, morality based on social norms and expectations of the people around us. For the sake of approval or social utility, we adhere to morals, knowing that it is what the land demands of us. The final stage, post-conventional morality, is where a person transcends mere pragmatic motivations and acts with an intuitive sense of justice. For no reason other than transcendent principles is justice required, even when it stands at odds with the world around them.

These are the very same stages the Torah was referring to for society. When we begin creating a society, we act in relation to authority, a seventh year of rest “A sabbath for God”. Once we begin to settle and build institutions, our morals must be in line with the land and community around us. To feel true compassion for the less fortunate, to sacrifice from our own in service of others. To understand what the nation requires of us and to act in accordance. A “sabbath for the land”. But to truly create a just and moral society, to create a people that are righteous no matter the circumstance, we must eventually derive our

ethical motivation from ourselves. To feel the responsibility, to emulate the Divine, and to truly recognize the intrinsic morality that the world requires. To allow the field to rest, to allow all to share, and to forgive all things because it is what God would do. “A sabbath shall be for you”.

We can now answer our original question. Why are the laws of Shemittah considered to be so axiomatic for the maintenance of society? It was Einstein who said it best “Only morality in our actions can give beauty and dignity to life”. We exist as Jews in service to a higher ideal, believing that all are created in the image of the Divine. We owe dignity and beauty to God, to those around us, and to ourselves. Without them, without morality, we are as fleeting as the wind. It is only through the internalization of those values that our nation can flourish and stand as a model to the world. We must craft a perspective of intrinsic morality, from the ground up, and have that serve as our guiding light while building our communities and ourselves. ■

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