

Parashot Behar-Bechukotai

Sharon Rimon



Exile, the Desolation of the Land of Israel and Shemita

- What is the focus of the descriptions of the exile in *Parashat Bechukotai*? (compared as opposed to the descriptions in *Parashat Ki Tavo*)?
- How is this topic related to the list of laws pertaining to *Shemita* [the Sabbatical Year] which appears at the beginning of *Parashat Behar*?
- Why does the land require a ‘sabbatical’?
- Why does the land become desolate when the Israelites are exiled?

A. The Desolation of the Land during Exile

Parashat Behar details the commandments pertaining to the *Shemita* and *Yovel* [Jubilee Year]. The section of curses and blessings appears immediately after these commandments, at the beginning of *Parashat Bechukotai*.

The section of curses may be divided into two parts. The first part (Lev. 26:14-30) contains descriptions of the disasters that will befall the nation **within the Land of Israel** should they disobey God’s laws. The second part (Lev. 26:31-41) describes the destruction of the land and the exile that would result from

if the nation going goes astray for an extended period of time. We will focus on the second, more severe portion section of the curses.

The second section opens begins(specifically) with a description of the state of desolation of in the Land of Israel:

| | |
|---|--|
| And I will make your cities a waste, and I will make your sanctuaries desolate, and I will not smell the savor of your sweet smells. And I Myself will make the land desolate; and your enemies that dwell therein shall be appalled at it. | וְנַתַּתִּי אֶת עָרֵיכֶם חָרְבָה וְהַשְׁמוֹתִי אֶת מִקְדְּשֵׁיכֶם וְלֹא אָרִיחַ בְּרִיחַ נִיחֻחְכֶם: וְהַשְׁמוֹתִי אֲנִי אֶת הָאָרֶץ וְשָׁמְמוּ עָלֶיהָ אֹיְבֵיכֶם הַיֹּשְׁבִים בָּהּ. וַיִּקְרָא כ"ו, לֹא-לֵב |
|---|--|

(Lev. 26:31-32)

Only in the third verse is there any mention of the nation's suffering in exile:

| | |
|---|--|
| And you I will scatter among the nations, and I will draw out the sword after you... (Lev. 26:33) | וְאַתֶּם בְּגוֹיִם וְהִרִיקְתִּי אַחֲרֵיכֶם חֶרֶב. שֶׁם, לֵג |
|---|--|

Immediately afterwards, the text continues describing the destruction and desolation of the land:

And your land shall be a desolation, and your cities shall be a waste. Then the land shall be paid its Sabbaths, as long as it lies desolate, and you are in the land of your enemies; then the land shall rest and be paid its Sabbaths. As long as it lies desolate it shall have rest, the rest which it did not have in your Sabbaths, when you dwelled within it. (Lev. 26:33-35)

וְהִיְתָה אֶרְצְכֶם שְׁמָמָה
וְעָרֵיכֶם יִהְיוּ חָרְבָה:
אִז תִּרְצָה הָאָרֶץ אֶת
שְׁבֻתֹתֶיהָ כָּל יְמֵי הַשְּׁמָמָה
וְאַתֶּם בְּאֶרֶץ אֹיְבֵיכֶם אִז
תִּשְׁבֹּת הָאָרֶץ וְהָרְצָתָ
אֶת שְׁבֻתֹתֶיהָ: כָּל יְמֵי
הַשְּׁמָמָה תִּשְׁבֹּת אֶת אֲשֶׁר
לֹא שְׁבַתְתֶּם בְּשְׁבֻתֹתֵיכֶם
בְּשְׁבַתְתֶּם עָלֶיהָ...
שם, לג-לה

Then, the Torah resumes describing the nation's suffering:

And those who remain of you, I will send a faintness into their hearts in the lands of their enemies; and the sound of a driven leaf shall chase them, and they shall flee as though from a sword; and they shall fall when none pursue them. (Lev. 26:36-39)

וְהִנְשֹׂאֲרִים בְּכֶם וְהִבְאֵתִי מִרְחַק
בְּלִבְכֶם בְּאַרְצֹת אֹיְבֵיכֶם וְרָחַף
אֶתְכֶם כּוֹל עָלָה נִדְחָה וְנָסוּ מִנִּסְת
חֶרֶב וְנִפְּלוּ וְאִין רָחַף: וְכָשְׁלוּ
אִישׁ בְּאַחִיו כְּמִפְּנֵי חֶרֶב וְרָחַף
אָזוּ וְלֹא תִהְיֶה לָכֶם תְּקוּמָה
לִפְנֵי אֹיְבֵיכֶם: וְאַבְדֶּתֶם בְּגוֹיִם
וְאַקְלָה אֶתְכֶם אֶרֶץ אֹיְבֵיכֶם:
וְהִנְשֹׂאֲרִים בְּכֶם יִמְקוּ בְּעוֹנִים
בְּאַרְצֹת אֹיְבֵיכֶם וְאַף בְּעוֹנֹת
אַבְתֶּם אֶתְכֶם יִמְקוּ.
שם, לו-לט

The following verses briefly describe the nation's confession of their sins and humble submission, which and that in turn move God will in turnto recall His

covenant with the Patriarchs. Here, too, the Torah repeats its account of the exile, which once again focuses on the state of the land:

And the land shall be forsaken of them, and shall be paid its Sabbaths while it lies desolate without them; and they shall be paid the punishment of their sin; because, even because they rejected My judgments and their soul abhorred My laws.
(Lev. 26:43)

וְהָאָרֶץ תִּשְׁכַּח מֵהֶם וְתִרְצוּ אֶת שְׁבֻתֹתֶיהָ בְּהִשְׁמָהּ מֵהֶם וְהֵם יִרְצוּ אֶת עֲוֹנֵם יֵצְאוּ וְיָגֵעוּ בְּמִשְׁפָּטֵי מֵאָסוּ וְאֶת חֻקֹּתַי גָּעְלוּ וְנִפְשָׁם. שׁ, מ

Throughout this section, the text places focuses on the land at the center of in its descriptions of destruction and exile. Not only do descriptions of the desolate land appear at the beginning and end of the section, but they are also repeated numerous times throughout the section.¹

The focal pointfocus of this section is not the exile of the nation, but the desolation of the land. This is particularly evident in verse 32: “And I Myself will make the land desolate” – not only will the nation

1 A closer reading reveals that theThe Torah repeats these descriptions exactly seven times. The word “**land**” appears seven times (six times in verses 31-41 and once more in verse 42); various forms of the word “**desolate**” are also used seven times (six times in verses 31-35 and once more in verse 43). The root **sh-b-t** [rest, Sabbath] also appears seven times (six times in verses 31-35 and once in verse 43). We have previously discussed at length the significance of the number seven; . in In this particular section, it is presumably also related to the phrase “sevenfold for your sins” which appears in verse 18.

be exiled, but God will personally see to it ensure that the land remains desolate. Why?

B. Desolation of the Land as a Punishment for Its Inhabitants

The
Shame of
Destruction
– Part of the
Punishment

The fact that both the destruction of the land and the exile of its inhabitants appear in one section seems to indicate that the desolation of the land is part of the nation's punishment. Why should this be? Why would the exiled people be upset by the destruction of their homeland if they were no longer living there?

Ibn Ezra explains:

“And [they] will be appalled at it” – It will be so desolate that even the enemies who live there will be appalled at it, as the opposite of “the joy of the whole earth.” (Ibn Ezra on Lev. 26:32)

“ושממו עליה” – כל כך תהיה שממה, שגם האויבים הדורים ישומו עליה, היפך “משוש לכל הארץ”.
ויקרא כ”ו, פסוק ל”ב

In his explanation, Ibn Ezra alludes to a verse in Lamentations:

All that pass by clap their hands at you; they hiss and shake their head at the daughter of Jerusalem: “Is this the city that they called the perfection of beauty, the joy of the whole earth?” (Lam. 2:15)

סָפְקוּ עָלֶיךָ בְּפִים כָּל עַבְרֵי דָרְךָ שָׂרְקוּ וַיִּנְעוּ רֵאשֵׁם עַל בֵּת יְרוּשָׁלַם הַזֹּאת הָעִיר שְׂיֵאמְרוּ כְּלִילַת יָפִי מְשׁוֹשׁ לְכָל הָאָרֶץ.
איכה ב', טו

The verse in Lamentations describes the complete upheaval that was resulted from the destruction of Jerusalem – a once-beautiful city became so desolate that every person who passed through felt the extent of the destruction. The total destruction and desolation are a source of shame for the people of the land and are therefore an integral part of the nation’s punishment.²

**A Testament
to the Sins**

When God speaks to Solomon after the Temple is completed, He warns the nation that the Temple may be destroyed if they sin, the Temple may be destroyed:

And I will cut off Israel from the land that I gave them; and this house, which I made holy for My name, I will cast out from before Me; and Israel shall be a proverb and a by word among all peoples. And this house which is so high, every one that passes by it shall be appalled and shall hiss, and when they shall say: “Why has God done so to this land and to this house?”

וְהִכַּרְתִּי אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל
מֵעַל פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר
נָתַתִּי לָהֶם וְאֶת הַבַּיִת
אֲשֶׁר הִקְדַּשְׁתִּי לְשִׁמִּי
אֲשַׁלַּח מֵעַל פְּנֵי וְהָיָה
יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמִשְׁלַל וְלִשְׁנִינָה
בְּכָל הָעַמִּים: וְהַבַּיִת הַזֶּה
וְהָיָה עֲלִיּוֹן כָּל עֹבֵר עָלָיו
יִשֹּׁם וְשָׂרַק וְאָמְרוּ עַל
מָה עָשָׂה ה' כָּכָה לְאֶרֶץ
הַזֹּאת וּלְבַיִת הַזֶּה: וְאָמְרוּ
עַל אֲשֶׁר עָזְבוּ אֶת ה'

2 This point is emphasized in verse 16 as well:

פָּצוּ עֲלֶיךָ פִּיָּהֶם כָּל אוֹיְבֶיךָ שָׂרְקוּ וַיִּחַרְקוּ שֵׁן אָמְרוּ בִלְעֵנּוּ אֶדְ זֶה הַיּוֹם שִׁקְוִיגְהוּ
מְצִאֵנוּ רְאִינּוּ:

All your enemies have opened their mouth wide against you; they hiss and gnash their teeth; they say, “We have swallowed her; certainly this is the day that we have hoped for, we have found it, we have seen it.” (Lam. 2:16)

They shall be answered: אֱלֹהֵיהֶם אֲשֶׁר הוֹצִיא
 “Because they abandoned the אֶת אַבְתָּם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם
 Lord, their God, who brought וַיַּחֲזִקוּ בְּאֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים
 for their forefathers out of the וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲווּ לָהֶם וַיַּעֲבֹדֵם עַל
 land of Egypt, and laid hold כֵּן הָבִיא ה' עֲלֵיהֶם אֶת
 on other gods, and worshiped כָּל הַרְעָה הַזֹּאת.
 them and served them; מַלְכִים א ט', ז-ט
 therefore God has brought all
 this evil upon them.” (I Kings
 9:7-9)

In these verses, God emphasizes another point:³ when the land remains desolate, those who pass through it will wonder why it was destroyed and will recall the nation’s sins, which that led to the destruction. The desolation of the land is a testament evidence for to the Israelites’ sins before the nations of the world. This intensifies their disgrace, as the shame of their sinshumiliationof their punishment is added to the humiliation of their punishmentshame of their sins.



3 A description of the exile had already appeared in Deuteronomy:

וַאֲמַר הַדּוֹר הַהֲסֵרוֹן בְּנֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר יָקוּמוּ מֵאֲחֵרֵיכֶם וְהִנָּכְרִי אֲשֶׁר יָבֵא מֵאֶרֶץ רְחוֹקָה
 וְרָאוּ אֶת מִפְּתֵי הָאָרֶץ הַהִוא וְאֶת תַּחֲלָאִיהָ אֲשֶׁר חָלָה ה' בָּהּ... וַאֲמָרוּ כָּל הַגּוֹיִם עַל מֶה
 עָשָׂה ה' בְּכֹה לְאֶרֶץ הַזֹּאת מֶה חָרִי הָאֵף הַגָּדוֹל הַזֶּה: וַאֲמָרוּ עַל אֲשֶׁר עָזְבוּ אֶת בְּרִית ה'
 אֱלֹהֵי אַבְתָּם אֲשֶׁר כָּרַת עִמָּם בְּהוֹצִיאֹ אוֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם.

And the last generation, your children that shall rise up after you, and the foreigner who shall come from a distant land, shall say, when they see the plagues of that land, and the sicknesses where God had made it sick... And they shall say: “Because they abandoned the covenant of the Lord, God of their fathers, which He made with them when he took them out of the land of Egypt. (Deut. 29:21-24)

The
Destruction
of the Land
Highlights the
Reality of the
Exile

Rashi suggests another explanation:

“And your land shall be a desolation” – that you shall not hurry to return to it, and from this “your cities shall be a waste” – they shall seem to you to be a waste. For when a man is exiled from his house and his vineyard and his city and he is fated to return, it is as though his vineyard and house are not destroyed; so it says in *Torat Kohanim*. (Rashi on Lev. 26:33)

“והיתה ארצכם שממה”
– שלא תמהרו לשוב
לתוכה, ומתוך כך
“עריכם יהיו חרבה”
– נראות לכם חרבות.
שבשעה שאדם גולה
מביתו ומכרמו ומעירו
וסופו לחזור כאילו אין
כרמו וביתו חרבים, כך
שנויה בתורת כהנים.
ויקרא שם, פסוק ל’ג

According to Rashi, part of the nation’s punishment is havingis that the destruction is etched into their memory to the extentcausing them tothat they would despair of ever returning to their land, . This making makes their exile that much more painful.

In addition, when the land remains desolate for so many years and no other nation is able to settle it, the Israelites will have much greater difficulty resettling it upon their return. For generations afterward, the desolate state of the land deterred many people from returning, out of fear that they would not be able to survive there. This adds further an additional painful significancehardship to the exile.⁴

4 The Netziv, in his commentary *Emek Davar*, explains the reason that the land will be desolate of all inhabitants, even non-Jews:

Summary:
Desolation
of the
Land as
Punishment

- A. The desolation of their land causes the nation to be ashamed;
- B. The desolation is evidence of the nation's sins that caused the land to be destroyed, further shaming them;
- C. The desolation causes the nation to despair of ever returning to their land, etching the exile into the people's **national consciousness** and causing it to last even longer;
- D. As the land becomes more desolate, it becomes **practically** more **practically** difficult to resettle it, causing the exile last even longer.

“והיתה ארצכם שממה” – אפילו מאומות העולם, כי אחר שיהיו בטוחים שלא תוכלו לשוב אז ילכו גם המה מארץ ישראל ותהיה הארץ שממה לגמרי.
“And your land shall be a desolation” – even from the nations of the world, for after they are sure that you will not be able to return, they too will leave the Land of Israel, and the land will be completely desolate.

The Netziv is commenting upon the apparent redundancy on one hand, and the contradiction on the other hand, in the verses: “And your enemies will be appalled at it” (meaning Israel's enemies would capture the land and rule over it in its desolation) and “Your land shall be a desolation” (indicating that it would be completely empty of inhabitants).

C. The Blessing in the Curse of Desolation

DESOLATION OF THE LAND – A LINK BETWEEN THE LAND AND THE NATION

Israel's
Enemies
will Not
Benefit
from the
Land

Although the desolation of the land is unquestionably a curse, some commentators have found positive aspects a silver lining to this state:

“And I Myself will make the land desolate” – this is a kindness, so that Israel would not say: “Because we have been exiled from our land, now our enemies have come and are enjoying it,” as it says: “And your enemies that dwell therein will be appalled at it” – even the enemies who come later will not enjoy it... (*Torat Kohanim* ch. 6)

”והשימותי אני את הארץ” – זו מידה טובה, שלא יהו ישראל אומרים הואיל וגלינו מארצנו עכשיו האויבים באים ומוצאים עליה נחת רוח, שנאמר: “וושממו עליה אויביכם היושבים בה” – אף האויבים הבאים אחרי כן לא ימצאו עליה נחת רוח... תורת כהנים, פרקו

This *midrash* suggests a different perspective on regarding the desolation of the land: the fact that the Israelites’ enemies will not be able to benefit from the land is a kindness to the nation.⁵ Had their enemies

5 This interpretation of *Torat Kohanim* apparently contradicts its statement in the very next chapter (ch. 7, see above) in which where it explains that the desolation of the land is intended to cause the nation to despair of ever being redeemed. *Chafetz Chaim* explains:

been able to resettle the land, the nation's suffering would have been immeasurably greater – the nations who drove them out are now would be enjoying the fruits of their former homeland! Therefore, God prevents the other nations from deriving any benefit from the Land of Israel.

**The Land
Remains
in Israel's
Possession**

Yet, it is not only God's concern for the nation's emotional well-being that causes the land's continued desolation. This state also (guarantees/keeps open the possibility) ensures that the Israelites may return and resettle the land, without having to consider whether that another nation might inhabit the land in the meantime.⁶ Furthermore, the inability of other nations to settle the land proves that the land still belongs to Israel. The land is anticipating the nation's return, refusing to respond to any other people. **The desolation of the land is a testament to the unique connection between the nation of Israel and the Land of Israel.**

"מידה טובה לישראל" – לפי שייחס אותה אליו יתברך, ואמר "והשימותי אני", ולזה אמרו שלא אמר זה אלא מפני שהיא "מידה טובה לישראל".
"A kindness to Israel" – for [the Torah] attributes this to [God], blessed is He, and says: "And I Myself will make the land desolate." About this they said that [the Torah] only said this because it is "A kindness to Israel."

The explanation in chapter 6 relates to the verse: "And your land shall be a desolation".; cClearly, the essential nature of the destruction is primarily a punishment of the nation. However, in chapter 7, the *Chafetz Chaim* comments on the verse: "And I Myself will make the land desolate," noting that if since God attributes this act to Himself, this indicates that there is an element of kindness in this fate.

6 Although there were conflicts when the Israelites returned to the land, they would have been much worse had the land been inhabited by another nation in the meantime.

Ramban writes:⁷

What it says here: “And your enemies...will be appalled at it,” these are great tidings that apply to all of the exiles, that our land does not welcome our enemies. And this is also great evidence and a promise for us that you will not find (!!)(Ramban on Lev. 26:15)

...מה שאמר בכאן “ושממו עליה אויביכם” היא בשורה טובה מבשרת בכל הגלויות, שאין ארצנו מקבלת את אויבינו. וגם זו ראייה גדולה והבטחה לנו, כי לא תמצא בכל הישוב ארץ אשר היא טובה ורחבה ואשר הייתה נושבת מעולם, והיא חרבה כמוה, כי מאז יצאנו ממנה לא קיבלה אומה ולשון, וכולם משתדלים להושיבה ואין לאל ידם...
רמב”ן, ויקרא כ”ו, טו

What it says here: “And your enemies...will be appalled at it,” this is a great tidings that applies to all of the exiles, that our land does not welcome our enemies. And this is also great evidence and a promise for us that in all of the inhabited places one cannot find a land as good and broad which was always inhabited and yet is now as ruined as this one is, for since the time that we left it has not accepted a nation and a language, and all attempt to settle it, to no avail... (Ramban on Lev. 26:15)

7 In his commentary on verse 15, Ramban explains the entire section of curses. In his opinion, the covenant in *Parashat Bechukotai* hints to the first exile, while the covenant in *Parashat Ki Tavo* refers to the second. He interprets the promise: “And your enemies will be appalled at it” as referring to both the first and second exiles.

(Evidence/
Testimony)
of Evidence
of the
Desolation of
the Land

Indeed, the land was desolate for the entire duration of the exile the land was desolate, as Mark Twain famously noted:⁸

Of all the lands there are for dismal scenery, I think Palestine must be the prince. The hills are barren, they are dull of color, they are unpicturesque in shape. The valleys are unsightly deserts fringed with a feeble vegetation that has an expression about it of being sorrowful and despondent... It is a hopeless, dreary, heart-broken land... Jericho the accursed, lies a moldering ruin, to-day, even as Joshua's miracle left it more than three thousand years ago... Nazareth is forlorn... Renowned Jerusalem itself, the stateliest name in history, has lost all its ancient grandeur, and is become a pauper village; the riches of Solomon are no longer there to compel the admiration of visiting Oriental queens...

Palestine sits in sackcloth and ashes. Over it broods the spell of a curse that has withered its fields and fettered its energies... Palestine is desolate and unlovely... [It] is no more of this work-day world...

8 Mark Twain visited Palestine in 1867 and recorded his impressions in "The Innocents Abroad." One hundred years later, in 1967, a new edition of Twain's book was published in Israel. The dramatic change in Israel's landscape amazed the American editor of the book, who wrote: "There is no doubt that Zionism has transformed this ugly valley into a green and blooming land." Henry Baker Tristram, who also wrote an account of his travels in Palestine during the same period entitled "The Land of Israel," makes similar observations about the desolate state of the land.

THE CLEAR END OF THE EXILE

The Nation Returns and Resettles the Land

The first of the pioneers to Israel did arrive in a desolate land covered in swamps, but wYet when they began to settle it, the land responded to them and began to bloom.⁹ The nation's successful return to, and settlement of, the Land of Israel after two thousand years of desolation is remarkably similar to the description in *Parashat Bechukotai*. However, there that the description focuses solely on the desolation of the land. The positive descriptions of the redemption appear in a prophecy in Ezekiel, in a prophecy that which describes how Israel will return to their homeland and the land will flourish:

| | |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| So said the Lord, God, to the | פֹּה אָמַר ה' אֱלֹהִים |
| mountains and the hills, to the | לְהָרִים וְלַגְּבוּעוֹת |
| streams and the valleys, to the | לְאֲפִיקֵים וְלַגְּאֵיוֹת |
| desolate ruins and the forsaken | וְלַחֲרָבוֹת הַשְּׁמָמוֹת |
| cities, which have become a prey | וְלָעָרִים הַנִּנְעָזְבוֹת אֲשֶׁר |
| and derision to the remnant of | הָיוּ לְבָז וּלְלַעַג לְשְׂאִרֵיתָ |

9 Rachel Yanait Ben-Zvi, one of the leaders of the “Second Aliyah” (the wave of immigration to Israel during the years 1904-1914) who later married Israel's president, Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, writes in her book, *We Come to Eretz-Israel*:

תחנת רמלה מאחורנו, ולפנינו מרחבי שדות. שדות בור שוממים המשתרעים עד האופק, עד רכסי הרי אפרים. למראה האדמה העזובה, שטפה אותי איזו שמחה, שמחה על ששמר הגורל את אדמת יהודה בלתי מיושבת, ועל שעודנה בשיממונה... ובעיני רוחי ראיתי אותה מתעוררת לתחייה בידי יהודים עולים...

The Ramle stop is behind us, and before us are (wide fields/ the wide spaces of fields). Desolate, fallow fields stretched to the horizon, to the mountain range of Ephraim. At the sight of this abandoned land I was overcome with some joy, joy for the fact that fate had kept the land of Judea unsettled and that it had remained desolate... And in my imagination I saw it come to life in the hands of immigrating Jews...

the nations all around... And you, the mountains of Israel, shall give forth your branches and yield your fruit to My people Israel; for they are approaching to come. For behold, I am for you, and I will turn to you, and you shall be (tilled) and sown; and I will multiply men upon you, the entire House of Israel, and the cities shall be inhabited, and the ruins shall be built. (Ez. 36:4-10)

הגוים אֲשֶׁר מִסְבִּיב...
 וְאַתֶּם הָרֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל עֲנֹפְכֶם
 תִּתְּנוּ וּפְרִיְכֶם תִּשְׂאוּ לְעַמִּי
 יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי קָרְבוּ לָבוֹא: כִּי
 הִנְנִי אֲלֵיכֶם וּפְנִיתִי אֲלֵיכֶם
 וְנִעַבְדְתֶם וְנִזְרַעְתֶּם:
 וְהִרְבִּיתִי עֲלֵיכֶם אָדָם כָּל
 בַּיִת יִשְׂרָאֵל כְּלָה וְנִשְׁבוּ
 הָעָרִים וְהַחֲרָבוֹת תִּבְנְיָנָה.
 יחזקאל ל"ו, ד-י

**Flourishing
 as a Sign
 of the
 Redemption**

The famous well-known *midrash* on these verses states:

And Rabbi Abba said: You have no clearer end [to the exile] than this, as it is said: "And you, the mountains of Israel, shall give forth your branches and yield your fruit to My people Israel; for they are approaching to come." (*Ketubot* 68a)

ואמר רבי אבא: אין לך
 קץ מגולה מזה, שנאמר:
 "ואתם הרי ישראל
 ענפכם תתנו ופריכם
 תשאו לעמי ישראל כי
 קרבו לבוא."
 כתובות סח, א

Indeed, the first generations of modern Zionists viewed the flourishing of the Land of Israel as a sign of the beginning of the redemption. Rav Kook writes:

The beginning of the redemption is certainly beginning to appear before us... Since the clear end of the exile began – since the time that the mountains of Israel began to give forth branches and yield fruit to the people Israel who were approaching to come. Since then was the beginning of the redemption. (*Iggerot HaRe'aya* III p. 155)

אתחלתא דגאולה ודאי הולכת ומופיעה לפנינו... מאז התחיל הקץ המגולה להגלות מעת אשר הרי ישראל החלו לעשות ענפים ולשאת פרי לעם ישראל אשר קרבו לבוא, התחילה אתחלתא זו... אגרות הראיה ג עמ' קנה

The desolation of the land – part of the curse laid upon the Israelites' curse as punishment for their sins – also contains a blessing and a promise:¹⁰ the Land of Israel will not respond to another nation. It will wait for its people to return and make it flourish. This (demonstrates /is evidence of) the unique relationship between the people of Israel and the Land of Israel.

10 In his work *Netzach Yisrael*, Maharal writes:

כל הדברים האלו באו להעיד על העדר הויה שיהיה קודם התחדשות הוית דור המשיח, ולפיכך אמר אין קץ מגולה, כמו זה מדכתיב "ואתם הרי ישראל ענפיהם תשא וכו'". מזה תלמוד שקודם זה לא היה דבר זה, שלא היו הרי ישראל נותנים פריים, וזהו קץ מגולה כאשר הדברים הטבעיים יהיו נעדרים. ואין זה מדרך הטבע, שהעולם כמנהגו נוהג ("ע"ז נד ע"ב).

All of these things are evidence of the absence of being that will exist before the renewal of being in the generation of the Messiah. Therefore, he said that there is no clear end [to the exile], as it says: "And you, the mountains of Israel, shall give forth your branches, etc." Learn from this that there was no such thing beforehand; that the hills of Israel did not give fruit, and the clear end will be when the natural things will be absent. And this is not against the laws of nature, for the world continues on as it is accustomed (*Avoda Zara* 54b).

D. The Land Belongs to God

FROM *BECHUKOTAI* TO *KI TAVO*

Bechukotai
- The
Desolation
of the
Land is the
Exile

Until this point, we have viewed the desolation of the land as an inseparable part of the nation's exile, either alleviating or exacerbating the nation's suffering. However, as we mentioned at the beginning of the lesson, the simple reading understanding of the verses defines the desolation of the land as an independent topic, while the exile of the nation from the land is of secondary importance.

Ki Tavo -
Exile of the
Nation

The Torah's emphasis of the desolation of the land in this section is particularly apparent when compared to the section of curses detailed in *Parashat Ki Tavo*. This section also describes the exile as the nation's most severe punishment:

...God will rejoice over you to cause you to perish, and to destroy you; and you shall be plucked from the land into which you are coming to inherit it. And God shall scatter you among all the nations, from one end of the earth to the other... And among those nations you shall have no calm, and there shall be no rest for the sole of your foot; and God shall give you there a trembling heart, and failing eyes, and a languishing

...וישׁיח ה' עֲלֵיכֶם
לְהַאֲבִיד אֶתְכֶם וְלְהַשְׁמִיד
אֶתְכֶם וְנִסְחֶתְכֶם מֵעַל
הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם בָּאִים
שָׁמָּה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ: וְהִפְצַצְךָ
ה' בְּכֹל הָעַמִּים מִקְצֵה
הָאָרֶץ וְעַד קְצֵה הָאָרֶץ...
וּבְגוֹיִם הֵהֱמָה לֹא תִרְגָּע
וְלֹא יִהְיֶה מְנוּחַ לְבַרְכְּךָ
וְנָתַן ה' לְךָ שֵׁם לֵב רָגֹז
וּרְגָלֶיךָ עֵינַיִם וְדֹאֲבוֹן נַפְשׁ:

soul. And your life shall hang in doubt before you; and you will fear night and day, and have no assurance of your life... And God shall bring you back to Egypt in ships...and you shall sell yourselves to your enemies as slaves and maidservants, and no one shall buy. (Deut. 28:63-68)

וְהָיָה חַיִּיךָ תְּלָאִים לְךָ מִיָּגֶד
וּפְחָדְךָ לַיְלָה וַיּוֹמֵם וְלֹא
תֵאֱמָיוּ בְּחַיִּיךָ... וְהִשְׁבִּיבְךָ
ה' מִצְרַיִם בְּאֲנִיּוֹת...
וְהִתְמַפְרְתֶם שָׂם לְאֲבִיבְךָ
לְעֲבָדִים וְלִשְׂפָחוֹת וְאִין
קִנְיָה.
דברים כ"ח, סג-סח

Here the exile is described from the nation's perspective: it focuses exclusively on their suffering and dispersion throughout other countries; the desolation of the land is not mentioned at all.

Exile – A Means of Allowing the Land to Rest

In *Parashat Bechukotai*, on the other hand, the exile is described from an entirely different angle: **it is described from the land's perspective, not from the people's perspective, but from the land's perspective.** The exile is not only the nation's punishment for their sins, but a means to ensure that the land will rest.

What is this the rest, this ("Sabbath of the land") mentioned seven times in this section (verses 34-35, 43)?

Behar – Shemita: A Rest for the Land

Let us return to the beginning of *Parashat Behar*:

Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them: "When you come to the land which I give you, then the land shall rest,

דַּבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם כִּי
תָבֹאוּ אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר
אֲנִי נֹתֵן לְכֶם וְשָׁבְתָהּ

a **Sabbath** for God. Six years you shall sow your field...and in the seventh year, a **Sabbath** of **rest** shall be for the land – a **Sabbath** for God; you shall not sow your field nor prune your vineyard. You shall not reap that which grows by itself of your harvest, and the grapes of your undressed vine you shall not gather; it shall be a year of **rest** for the land. And the **Sabbath** [produce] of the land shall be for you to eat... and for your cattle, and for the animals that are in your land; all of its produce shall be to eat. (Lev. 25:2-7)

הָאָרֶץ שְׁבֵת לַה': שֵׁשׁ
שָׁנִים תִּזְרַע שְׂדֶךְ...
וּבַשְּׁנָה הַשְּׁבִיעִת שְׁבֵת
שְׂפִתוֹן יִהְיֶה לְאֶרֶץ שְׁבֵת
לַה' שְׂדֶךְ לֹא תִזְרַע
וְכַרְמְךָ לֹא תִזְמֹר: אֵת
סְפִיחַ קִצְיֶיךָ לֹא תִקְצֹר
וְאֵת עֲנָבֵי נִזְיֶיךָ לֹא תִבְצֹר
שְׁנַת שְׂפִתוֹן יִהְיֶה לְאֶרֶץ:
וְהִיְתָה שְׁבֵת הָאָרֶץ לְכֶם
לְאֲכֹלָה... וְלִבְהִמְתָּךְ
וְלַחֲיָה אֲשֶׁר בְּאֶרְצְךָ תִּהְיֶה
כָּל תְּבוּאָתָהּ לְאָכֹל.
וַיִּקְרָא כ"ה, ב-ז

In these verses, God the Torah details the laws of *Shemita*. It is described here as a “Sabbath of the land” – the focus of this commandment is not man, but the land. The land must rest, and therefore man must refrain from performing certain actions that prevent the land from resting.¹¹

11 This interpretation may also have *legalhalachic* ramifications; for instance, whether a non-Jew may perform such labor during *Shemita*. See *Minchat Chinuch* 112; *Maharit* II:52; *Shabbat HaAretz* 1:1. Rabbi Yosef Bechor Shor hints to this as well in his commentary on verse 34: “Then the land shall be paid its Sabbaths’ – that work should not be performed by you or others” (Rabbi Yosef Bechor Shor on Lev. 26:34).

**The Land
Must Rest**

The descriptions in *Parashot Behar* and *Bechukotai* seem to indicate that the land needs to rest. If the Israelites do not allow the land to do so, as they are commanded to do in *Parashat Behar*, they will be exiled from the land so as to allow it to rest,¹² as described in *Parashat Bechukotai*.

WHY DOES THE LAND NEED TO REST?

**The Yovel
- “For the
Land is
Mine”**

Parashat Behar opens begins with the commandments regarding “the Sabbath of the land,” *Shemita*, followed by the laws of *Yovel* (Lev. 25:1-24). This commandment is presented as directly related to *Shemita*: counting seven seven-year *Shemita* cycles brings us to culminate in the fiftieth year, the *Yovel*. This year is an additional sabbatical for the land with all that it entails, with and has one additional commandment: “And each man shall return to his possession, and each man shall return to his family”

In contrast, the description of *Shemita* in *Parashat Mishpatim* (Ex. 23:10-11) emphasizes the social aspect of this the commandment; . it is described as beneficial to society, not to the land. Rambam writes in his Guide for the Perplexed:

ואמנם כל הימצאות אשר ספרנום ב"הלכות שמיטה ויובל", מהם לחמלה על בני אדם והרחבה לבני אדם כולם, כמו שאמר: "ואכלו אביוני עמך, ויתרם תאכל חית השדה וגו'".

And all of the ‘commandments’ we have enumerated in our *Hilchot Shemita VeYovel*, some of which [are meant to lead to] compassion and help for all human beings, as it says: “And the poor of your people may eat, and what they leave the animals of the field shall eat, etc.” (Guide for the Perplexed III:39)

12 The blessings at the beginning of *Parashat Bechukotai* also focus on the land. They parallel the blessings promised to the nation in chapter 25 should if they observe the laws of *Shemita* and *Yovel*. For an in-depth discussion on this topic, see Elitzur Emanuel, “*Shabbat HaAretz KeBitui LeRatzon Hashem BaBeriah*” (*Megadim* 23).

(Lev. 25:10). Each *Yovel*, all land returns to its original owners, and all slaves are freed and return to their families.

In verse 23, the Torah elaborates upon the commandment to return land to its owners:

And the land shall not be sold וְהָאָרֶץ לֹא תִמְכַּר לְצִמְתָּת
permanently, **for the land is** כִּי לִי הָאָרֶץ כִּי גֵרִים
Mine, for you are strangers and וְתוֹשְׁבֵימָם עִמָּדִי.
settlers with Me. (Lev. 25:23)

Shemita and *Yovel* express the idea that the land ultimately belongs to God.

In During most years, man considers the land his own property and uses it for his own purposes. However, once every seven years he must reacquaint remind himself with the fact that the land does not belong to him. Instead, he must treat it as though it is God's land – since it does not belong to man, he has no permission to use it.¹³

Returning the land to its original owners does not mean that the land actually belongs to them; . it It demonstrates that every part of the Land of Israel belongs to God and that human transactions cannot

13 This is also related in the Talmud:

אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא לישראל זרעו שש והשמיטו שבע כדי שתדעו שהארץ שלי היא והן לא עשו כן אלא חטאו וגלו.

The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Israel: Plant for six [years], and rest in the seventh, so that you will know that the land is Mine. But they did not do so; rather, they sinned and were exiled. (*Sanhedrin* 39a)

truly ultimately apply to it.¹⁴ This is a land that can never be permanently bought or sold by man.¹⁵ How is this unique aspect of the Land of Israel expressed?

14 Abarbanel writes:

שביאר בזה שהארץ אינה נתונה להם בהחלט, כי על כל פנים לה' הארץ ומלוואה, ולכן לא יוכל למוכרה לצמיתות ולא להשתעבד בה בפרך, כי הם היו גרים ותושבים בה, וה' הוא אדוני הארץ, ולכן ראוי שיתנהגו בה כרצונו ויתנו לה גאולה, שאם לא יעשו כן תבוא עליהם גלות, כי בעל הבית יתברך יגרשם מארצו...

It clarifies here that the land was not given to them completely, for in any case the land and all that is in it belongs to God, and therefore one cannot sell it permanently or be enslaved in it; for they were strangers and temporary inhabitants of it, and God is the master of the land. Therefore, it is fitting that they should treat it as He wishes and allow it to be redeemed, for if they do not do so they will be exiled, for the owner of the land, blessed be He, will drive them out of His land... (*Nachalat Avot* 5:11)

15 Malbim expresses this idea in his commentary:

"אז תרצה הארץ את שבתותיה וכו'" – ביאור הכתוב, שיען לא שמטו מצות שמטה נתייבו בשתיים: א. מצד שהיא חובת קרקע וצריך שתשמט הארץ כל הזמן שלא שבתה. ב. מצד טעם השמטה שהיא כמעט השבת להעיד על החידוש ועל שהארץ לה' היא. ומצד זה לא די במה שתשמט רק צריך שתגלו מן הארץ. וזה מדה כנגד מדה על שהחזקתם בה כאילו שלכם היא. יבוא בעל הארץ ויגרש אתכם מתוכה, ובוה תדעו כי הוא האדון.

"Then the land shall be paid its Sabbaths, etc." – the meaning of the text is that because they did not observe the commandment of *Shemita* they were held accountable twice: once for the fact that since the land is obligated to rest, and must now rest for all of the time it had not rested (Rabbanit??) as long as it has not rested; and again since the reason for *Shemita* is like that of the Sabbath: to testify to renewal and that the land belongs to God. And for this it is not enough that it rest(?); they must need to be exiled from the land. And this is measure for measure for the fact that you held [the land] as though it were your own. The owner of the land will come and drive you out of it, and by this you will know that He is the true owner.

E. The Connection between God and Man in the Land of Israel

“IT DRINKS WATER AS THE RAIN OF HEAVEN FALLS”

Before the nation enters the Land of Israel, the Torah describes the unique nature of the place they are about to enter:

For the land into which you come to inherit it is not like the land of Egypt which you left, where you sowed your seed and watered it with your food, like a garden of herbs. And the land through which you will pass to inherit it is a land of hills and valleys; it drinks water as the rain of heaven falls. A land which the Lord, your God, cares for; the eyes of the Lord, your God, are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year. (Deut. 11:10-12)

כִּי הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה בָּא
שָׂמָּה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ לֹא כְּאֶרֶץ
מִצְרַיִם הוּא אֲשֶׁר יִצְאָתָם
מִשֵּׁם אֲשֶׁר תִּזְרַע אֶת זֶרְעֶךָ
וְהִשְׁקִיתָ בְּרִגְלֶךָ כְּגַן הֶרְקִי:
וְהָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַתָּם עֹבְרִים
שָׂמָּה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ אֶרֶץ הָרִים
וּבְקָעוֹת לְמַטֵּר הַשָּׁמַיִם
תִּשְׁתָּה מַיִם: אֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר ה'
אֵלֹהֶיךָ דֹרֵשׁ אֹתָהּ תָּמִיד
עֵינֵי ה' אֵלֹהֶיךָ בְּהַמְרִשִׁית
הַשָּׁנָה וְעַד אַחֲרִית שָׁנָה.
דְּבָרִים י"א, י-ב

Egypt seems to have a distinct advantage over the Land of Israel: it has a constant supply of water, as opposed to being dependent on rain.

**Dependence
on God's
Blessing**

However, this the Land of Israel's disadvantage is also a blessing in disguise: the inhabitants of Israel are always dependent on God's generosity. Rain, in

contrast to a river, is not a steady source of water – it requires constant communication with God, as the Torah states:

And it will be, if you listen diligently to My commandments which I command you today, to love the Lord, your God, and serve Him with all your heart and all your soul; and I shall give the rain of your land in its season, the first rain and the last rain, and you shall gather your grain, and your wine, and your oil... Take care for yourselves, lest your heart be tempted, and you turn aside and serve other gods and bow to them. And the anger of God will be kindled against you, and He shall shut the heavens and there will be no rain, and the ground shall not yield its produce; and you will quickly perish from the good land that God gives you. (Deut. 11:13-17)

וְהָיָה אִם שָׁמַעַתְּ אֶת צִוְיֹתַי אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוֶּה אֶתְכֶם הַיּוֹם לְאַהֲבָה אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וְלָעֲבֹדוֹ בְּכָל לְבַבְכֶם וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁכֶם: וְנָתַתִּי מִטֶּר אַרְצְכֶם בְּעֵתוֹ יוֹרֵה וּמִלְקוֹשׁ וְאִסְפַּת דְּגָנְךָ וְתִירְשֶׁךָ וְיִצְהַרְךָ... הַשְּׁמֵרוּ לְכֶם כֵּן יִפְתָּה לְבַבְכֶם וְסַרְתֶּם וְעַבַדְתֶּם אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוִיתֶם לָהֶם: וְחָרָה אַף ה' בְּכֶם וְעָצַר אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְלֹא יִהְיֶה מִטֶּר וְהִאֲדָמָה לֹא תִתֵּן אֶת יְבוּלָהּ וְאִבְדֶּתֶם מִהָרָה מֵעַל הָאָרֶץ הַטֹּבָה אֲשֶׁר ה' נָתַן לָכֶם.
שם, יג-יז

THE LAND'S PRODUCE IS DEPENDENT UPON THE NATION'S SPIRITUAL STATE

Farming the land in Israel is unlike farming anywhere else. In other countries, the amount of produce yielded by the land depends on man's efforts, while in

the Land of Israel it depends on the nation's spiritual status: without rain, the crops will not grow without rain, and the rain is dependent on the nation obeying God's word. In the Land of Israel, rain expresses the connection between man's behavior (which determines his spiritual state) and his economic success.¹⁶

THE LAND OF ISRAEL – A RETURN TO THE GARDEN OF EDEN

Adam
Prays for
Rain

This connection is first mentioned in *Parashat Bereishit*:

וְכָל־עֵשֶׂב־הַשָּׂדֶה טָרֵם יְהִיָּה וְכָל־בְּאֶרֶץ וְכָל־עֵשֶׂב־הַשָּׂדֶה

And any shrub of the field had yet to appear in the land, and

16 The book *Toledot Yitzchak* describes the difference between Jacob's blessing and Esau's blessings as follows:

שביעקב אמר "ויתן לך", לשון נתינה, ובעשו לא אמר לשון נתינה. השינוי השני: בברכת יעקב הזכיר "אלהים", ובעשו לא הזכיר "אלהים". שברכת יעקב היא מן ה' יתברך בהשגחה פרטית כפי מעשי ישראל, ולכן הזכיר בה "אלהים", אבל בעשו אינו כן, אלא שהקב"ה יושיבחו בארץ שתהיה טובה מצד טבעה, ולזה אמר בו "מושבך", כלומר הקב"ה יתן לך מושב שיהיה טוב מצד עצמו. אבל ביעקב אינו כן, אלא אפילו שתהיה הארץ רעה מצד עצמה הקב"ה יעשה אותה טובה, ואם היא טובה יוסיף בה טוביות, ולזה אמר "ויתן לך האלהים", נתינה מיד האלהים...

For by Jacob he said: "And [God] shall give you" – it is described as giving; and by Esau he did not describe it as giving. And the second difference: in Jacob's blessing he mentioned God, and in Esau's blessing he did not mention God. For Jacob's blessing is from God, Blessed be He, in the form of Divine Providence over the deeds of Israel, and therefore he mentioned God. But by Esau it is not so; . rRather, God settled him in a land that is naturally good, and for this reason it says "your dwelling place" – that is, God will give you a dwelling place that will be good on its own. But by Jacob this is not so; rather, even if the land is bad by itself, God will make it good, and if it is good He will add goodness to it, and for this reason it says "And God will give you" – it is **given from the hand of God...**

See also *Yoma 75a* 27 ~

any grass of the field had yet to grow, for the Lord, God, had not caused rain upon the land, and there was no man to work the earth. (Gen. 2:5)

טָרָם וַיִּצְמַח כִּי לֹא הִמְטִיר ה' אֱלֹהִים עַל הָאָרֶץ וְאָדָם אֵין לְעִבֹד אֶת הָאֲדָמָה. בראשית ב', ה

Rashi comments:

And why is it that He “had not caused rain”? Because “there was no man to work the earth,” and no one to express gratitude for the rain. And when man came and knew that it was necessary for the world, he prayed for rain, and it fell, and the trees and grasses grew. (Rashi on Gen. 2:5)

ומה טעם “לא המטיר” לפי ש“אדם אין לעבוד את האדמה”, ואין מכיר בטובתם של גשמים, וכשבא אדם וידע שהם צורך לעולם התפלל עליהם וירדו וצמחו האילנות והדשאים.

In the Garden of Eden, the initial, ideal state of the world, there is a direct connection between man’s recognition of God and prayer to Him and the fruit produced by the land.

**Adam’s
Sin – A
Sense of
Ownership**

Adam’s first sin was to eating from the Tree of Knowledge. God permitted man to benefit from all of the trees in the garden except for one. This restriction reflects the factdemonstrates that the garden belongs to God, and man must recognize this fact. By eating from the tree, Adam rebelled against the owner of the garden, as though he were saying: “This, too, belongs to me, and I will use it as I see fit.” Adam’s

sense of ownership leads to a number of changes in the world, of which we will focus on two:

“Cursed is the earth for you; in sadness you shall eat from it” (Gen. 3:17): the land is cursed due to man’s sin. When man does not understand that the land belongs to God, he disconnects the land from its source of blessings. This thereby causing causes the land to become cursed and unable to produce fruit without hard labor. God’s land does not respond to man when he does not recognize that it does, in fact, belongs to God.

Man is driven out of the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:22-24) as he is no longer worthy of living there.

These two consequences may be related: in the Garden of Eden there was a direct connection between man, God and the land. Man could benefit from the land without any labor, since God had planted the garden for him: “And the Lord, God, planted a garden in Eden, eastward, and there He put the man whom He had formed” (Gen. 2:8). All that remained for man to do was pick the fruit.¹⁷ When man when was exiled from the Garden of Eden, he began a different existence, in which he was forced to toil in order to produce something from the earth; . where tThe link between his spiritual state and his economic success is was no longer so very direct:

¹⁷ While God does command Adam to “work and keep” the garden (Gen. 2:15), it is unclear what work this is referring to. Ibn Ezra explains that man only had needed only to water the garden and guard it from the animals (i.e., preserve the existing garden, as opposed to developing the land himself).

...In sadness you shall eat from it
 all the days of your life; and it shall
 grow thorns and thistles for you,
 and you shall eat the herbs of the
 field, by the sweat of your face you
 shall eat bread... (Gen. 3:17-18)

בְּעֵצְבוֹן תֹּאכְלֶנָּה...
 כָּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ וְקוֹיִן
 וְדַרְדָּר תִּצְמַיִחַ לְךָ
 וְאָכַלְתָּ אֶת עֵשֶׂב
 הַשָּׂדֶה בְּזַעַת אַפְּיֶךָ
 תֹּאכַל לֶחֶם...
 שֵׁם ג', יז-יח

And God cast him out of the Garden
 of Eden to till the earth... (Gen.
 3:23)

וַיִּשְׁלַח הוּא 'אֱלֹהִים
 מִגֶּן עֵדֶן לַעֲבֹד אֶת
 הָאֲדָמָה...
 שֵׁם ג', כג

Man's exile from the Garden of Eden caused a certain disconnect between God and the land. From this point onward, the land is entrusted to man, who must toil in order to produce food. The exile from Eden is the culmination of a process that began with man's sin. From this point on, there is a disconnect/separation between the development of the land and man's spiritual state.

**The Land
 of Israel as
 the Garden
 of Eden**

However, this direct connection between God and the land remained in one place – the Land of Israel. This land is called “the land of God,” a land in which “the eyes of the Lord, your God, are always upon it” (Deut. 11:12). This connection is preserved through the rain, which allows the land to produce fruit, depending on the nation's spiritual status. The Land of Israel is, in fact, the modern Garden of Eden.¹⁸

18 See also Rabbi Menachem Leibtag's lesson on *Parashat Nitzavim*: “*Gan Eden VeHaOlam HaZeh*” on the Har Etzion Yeshiva website.

SHEMITA – A RETURN TO EDEN

Shemita reflects the unique nature of the Land of Israel in the most powerful way: for an entire year man abstains from working the land and, thus returning returns to his initial, ideal state, as he was in the Garden of Eden.

How does man survive for an entire year without working the land?

And if you say, “What shall we eat in the seventh year? Behold, we may not sow nor gather in our produce.” And I will command My blessing upon you in the sixth year, and it shall bring forth produce for three years. (Lev. 25:20-21)

וְכִי תֹאמְרוּ מָה נֹאכֵל
בַּשָּׁנָה הַשְּׁבִיעִית
הֵן לֹא נִזְרַע וְלֹא
נִקְטָף אֶת תְּבוּאֹתֵינוּ:
וְצִוִּיתִי אֶת בְּרַכְתִּי
לְכֶם בַּשָּׁנָה הַשְּׁשִׁית
וְעָשְׂתָה אֶת הַתְּבוּאָה
לְשָׁלֹשׁ הַשָּׁנִים.
וַיִּקְרָא כ”ה, כ-כא

Man’s existence during the *Shemita* and *Yovel* is similar to his existence in the Garden of Eden: God blesses the land, thus causing and causes it to bear fruit from which man may benefit without having to work at all.

**Blessing
vs. Reward**

God’s blessings of abundance during *Shemita* seem to be a reward for observing His commandment – when man keeps God’s commandments, God removes man’s burden of supporting himself and blesses him with prosperity. But this is not only a reward for

observing His commandment; it is also a blessing: “And I will command My blessing upon you...and it shall bring forth produce...” By eating this blessed produce, man returns to his the initial state, in which he lived in the Garden of Eden and enjoyed the direct results of God’s blessings.

THE LAND OF ISRAEL BELONGS TO THE NATION ONLY WHEN IT BELONGS TO GOD

The unique nature of the Land of Israel is apparentevident when the nation of Israel inhabits the land and lives by God’s laws, thus reflecting expressingthe fact that the land belongs to God and that this nation is God’s chosen people. When the nation acknowledges this special connection, observes God’s commandments, and realizes that they are not the true owners of the land –then the land receives God’s blessing and bears fruit.

On the other hand, when the nation does not acknowledge the special nature of the land and does not observe the laws of the *Shemita*, it effectively cuts off God’s blessing from the land, which then ceases to bear fruit. When the land is no longer blessed by God, it becomes desolate and the nation is exiled. As long as the Jewish people do not return to Israel, the land remains in ruins (“And your enemies will be appalled at it”), since the nation of God no longer inhabits it. The Land of Israel does not respond to other nations not only to ensure that the nation of Israel will return to its land, but because **without the service of God by the nation of God, nothing can grow in the land**

of God. The Land of Israel can flourish only when the nation of Israel inhabits the land in full awareness of God's ownership of the land. This is expressed by observing the laws of *Shemita*, when God's presence is most strongly felt and the Land of Israel becomes a kind of Garden of Eden.¹⁹

The flourishing of the Land of Israel is the strongest indicator of the coming of the redemption. The blooming of the land upon the nation's return reveals the nature of the connection between the Jewish people and the land of God; it demonstrates our gradual return to the ideal state of being – that of the Garden of Eden, the land where “the eyes of the Lord, your God, are always upon it” (Deut. 11:12).

19 The ideal is not to allow the land to rest constantly; the nation is meant to work and develop the land. However, allowing the land to rest during *Shemita* leads man to become aware of God's ownership of the land – an awareness that accompanies him throughout the following years in which he works the land.