

A Year of Rest for the Land

“The Lord spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai: Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: When you enter the land that I assign to you, the land shall observe a sabbath of the Lord” (Leviticus 25:1-2).

In previous Torah texts we heard that every seven days the Jewish people observe the *Shabbat* (‘sabbath’), a holy day given over to the Lord when the people cease from work. Now here in Leviticus 25 we learn of another kind of sabbath: the *Shemittah*, ‘Sabbatical Year.’ Every seven years the land is to be left untilled. No plowing, no sowing, although the people may share in eating whatever produce the land brings forth. The people rest from working the land, and the land too rests for one year.

Read about the Sabbatical Year in 25:1-7. The text makes a point of saying that this commandment was given by the Lord to Moses on Mt Sinai. So, it must be important! In conversation with a friend, share your ideas about the possible meaning, significance and benefits of the Sabbatical Year.

In Jewish tradition we find a variety of interpretations of this text. The *Sefer HaChinuch*¹ poses a moral reasoning: the Sabbatical Year is a reminder that the soil alone cannot produce its bounty. Ultimately, the Creator is master of the land and source of its gifts.

The Sabbatical Year is also said to increase trust in God and to curb greed; for it takes courage to abandon one’s agricultural work for one year, relying on Providence. The Torah itself acknowledges this in verses 20-22:

“And should you ask, ‘What are we to eat in the seventh year, if we may neither sow nor gather in our crops?’ I will ordain My blessing for you in the sixth year, so that it shall yield a crop sufficient for three years.”

Maimonides² offers an agricultural perspective: by allowing the land to lie fallow, its fertility is restored. Some sages oppose this view, preferring a religious reason. According to Ibn Ezra³ the Sabbatical Year allows people to study Torah for a whole year. A 20th century voice, Rav Kook,⁴ describes it in terms of spiritual renewal. Freed from the ‘sacrilege of excessive worry’ associated with

the pursuit of one’s livelihood, the soul blossoms in the seventh year.

Other Jewish commentators point to elements of generosity, gratitude, tranquillity and goodwill. No one—rich or poor—has directly contributed to the produce of the seventh year, therefore strictly speaking no one owns it. Since quarrels usually develop from the insistence that ‘This belongs to me!’ the Sabbatical Year brings an equalizing factor which is a recipe for peace.

There are more Jewish views, including messianic and cosmological perspectives. But let’s pause here for your own voice to mingle with those of the sages. As you ponder this Torah text, how does the word of God speak to you, call you, challenge you, reassure you?

The idea and practice of sabbath rest is ingrained in the life of an observant Jew. In what way does sabbath rest, to which the Torah attests in different ways, find its place in your own Christian life? •

Who’s who

Our Jewish voices this week are:

- Sefer HaChinuch. A famous medieval education book.
- Maimonides (1135-1204). His full name: Rabbi Moses ben Maimon (also known as Rambam). Born in Spain, settled in Egypt. A giant of a scholar, the influence of his teaching extends beyond the Jewish world.
- Ibn Ezra (Born 1092, Spain). Renowned bible commentator, astronomer, poet.
- Rav Kook (1865-1935). Orthodox rabbi passionately devoted to the revival of a Jewish state. Emigrated from Russia to Palestine in 1909; appointed Chief Rabbi in 1921.

Bibliography: Eskenazi & Weiss, *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary* (New York, 2008); Munk, *The Call of the Torah: Vayikra* (New York, 1992); Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, (New York, 2006). Scripture: NJPS.

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