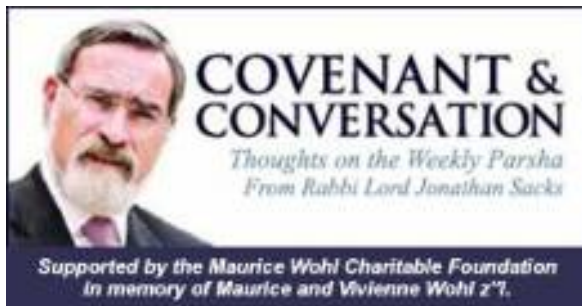


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On Leadership: "We the People"

In Bechukotai, in the midst of one of the most searing curses ever to have been uttered to a nation by way of warning, the sages found a fleck of pure gold.

Moses is describing a nation in flight from its enemies:

I will bring despair into the hearts of those of you who survive in enemy territory. Just the sound of a windblown leaf will put them to running, and they will run scared as if running from a sword! They will fall even when no one is chasing them! *They will stumble over each other* as they would before a sword, even though no one is chasing them! You will have no power to stand before your enemies. (Lev. 26: 36-

37)

There is on the face of it nothing positive in this nightmare scenario. But the sages said: "They will stumble over each other" - read this as "stumble because of one another": this teaches that all Israelites are sureties [i.e. responsible] for one another." (1)

This is an exceedingly strange passage. Why locate this principle here? Surely the whole Torah testifies to it. When Moses speaks about the reward for keeping the covenant he does so collectively. There will be rain in its due season. You will have good harvests. And so on. The principle that Jews have collective responsibility, that their fate and destiny are interlinked: this could have been found in the Torah's blessings. Why search for it among its curses?

The answer is that there is nothing unique to Judaism in the idea that we are all implicated in one another's fate. That is true of the citizens of any nation. If the economy is booming, most people benefit. If there is a recession many people suffer. If a neighbourhood is scarred by crime, people are scared to walk the streets. If there is law and order, if people are polite to one another and come to one another's aid, there is a general sense of well-being. We are social animals, and our horizons of possibility are shaped by the society and culture within which we live.

All of this applied to the Israelites so long as they were a nation in their own land. But what when they suffered defeat and exile and were eventually scattered across the earth? They no longer had any of the conventional lineaments of a nation. They were not living in the same place. They did not share the same language of

everyday life. While Rashi and his family were living in Christian northern Europe and speaking French, Maimonides was living in Muslim Egypt, speaking and writing Arabic.

Nor did Jews share a fate. While those in northern Europe were suffering persecution and massacres during the Crusades, the Jews of Spain were enjoying their golden age. While the Jews of Spain were being expelled and compelled to wander round the world as refugees, the Jews of Poland were enjoying a rare sunlit moment of tolerance. In what sense therefore were they responsible for one another? What constituted them as a nation? How - as the author of Psalm 137 put it - could they sing God's song in a strange land?

There are only two texts in the Torah that speak to this situation, namely the two sections of curses, one in our parsha, and the other in Deuteronomy in the parsha of Ki Tavo. Only these speak about a time when Israel is exiled and dispersed, scattered, as Moses later put it, "to the most distant lands under heaven." There are three major differences between the two curses, however. The passage in Leviticus is in the plural, that in Deuteronomy in the singular. The curses in Leviticus are the words of God; in Deuteronomy they are the words of Moses. And the curses in Deuteronomy do not end in hope. They conclude in a vision of unrelieved bleakness:

You will try to sell yourselves as slaves-both male and female-but no one will want to buy you. (Deut. 28: 68)

Those in Leviticus end with a momentous hope:

But despite all that, when they are in enemy territory, I will not reject

them or despise them to the point of totally destroying them, breaking my covenant with them by doing so, because I am the LORD their God. But for their sake I will remember the covenant with the first generation, the ones I brought out of Egypt's land in the sight of all the nations, in order to be their God; I am the LORD. (Lev. 26: 44-45)

Even in their worst hours, according to Leviticus, the Jewish people would never be destroyed. Nor would God reject them. The covenant would still be in force and its terms still operative. That meant that Jews would still be linked to one another by the same ties of mutual responsibility that they had in the land - for it was the covenant that formed them as a nation and bound them to one another even as it bound them to God. Therefore, even when falling over one another in flight from their enemies they would still be bound by mutual responsibility. They would still be a nation with a shared fate and destiny.

This is a rare and special idea, and it is the distinctive feature of the politics of covenant. Covenant became a major element in the politics of the West following the Reformation. It shaped political discourse in Switzerland, Holland, Scotland and England in the seventeenth century as the invention of printing and the spread of literacy made people familiar for the first time with the Hebrew Bible (the "Old Testament" as they called it). There they learned that tyrants are to be resisted, that immoral orders should not be obeyed, and that kings did not rule by divine right but only by the consent of the governed.

The same convictions were held by the Pilgrim

Fathers as they set sail for America, but with this difference, that they did not disappear over time as they did in Europe. The result is that the United States is the only country today whose political discourse is framed by the idea of covenant.

Two textbook examples of this are Lyndon Baines Johnson's Inaugural of 1965, and Barack Obama's Second Inaugural of 2013. Both use the biblical device of significant repetition (always an odd number, three or five or seven). Johnson invokes the idea of covenant five times. Obama five times begins paragraphs with a key phrase of covenant politics - words never used by British politicians - namely, "We the people."

In covenant societies it is the people as a whole who are responsible, under God, for the fate of the nation. As Johnson put it, "Our fate as a nation and our future as a people rest not upon one citizen but upon all citizens." In Obama's words, "You and I, as citizens, have the power to set this country's course." That is the essence of covenant: we are all in this together. There is no division of the nation into rulers and ruled. We are conjointly responsible, under the sovereignty of God, for one another.

This is not open-ended responsibility. There is nothing in Judaism like the tendentious and ultimately meaningless idea set out by Jean-Paul Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* of 'absolute responsibility':

The essential consequence of our earlier remarks is that man, being condemned to be free, carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulders, he is responsible for the world and for himself as a way of being.(2)

In Judaism we are responsible only for what we could have prevented but did not. This is how the Talmud puts it:

Whoever can forbid his household [to commit a sin] but does not, is seized for [the sins of] his household. [If he can forbid] his fellow citizens [but does not] he is seized for [the sins of] his fellow citizens. [If he can forbid] the whole world [but does not] he is seized for [the sins of] the whole world.(3)

This remains however a powerful idea and an unusual one. What made it unique to Judaism is that it applied to a people scattered throughout the world united only by the terms of a covenant our ancestors made with God at Mount Sinai. But it continues, as I have argued, to drive American political discourse likewise even today. It tells us that we are all equal citizens in the republic of faith and that responsibility cannot be delegated away to governments or presidents but belongs inalienably to each of us. We are our brothers' and sisters' keeper.

That is what I mean by the strange, seemingly self-contradictory idea I have argued throughout these essays: that *we are all called on to be leaders*. Surely this cannot be so: if everyone is a leader, then no one is. If everyone leads, who is left to follow?

The concept that resolves the contradiction is covenant. Leadership is, I have argued, the acceptance of responsibility. Therefore if we are all responsible for one another, we are all called on to be leaders, each within our sphere of influence, be it within the family, the community, the organisation or a larger grouping still.

This can sometimes make an enormous difference. In late summer of 1999 I was in Pristina making a BBC television programme about the aftermath of the Kosovo campaign. I interviewed General Sir Michael Jackson, then head of the NATO forces. To my surprise, he thanked me for what "my people" had done. The Jewish community had taken charge of the city's twenty-three primary schools. It was, he said, the most valuable contribution to the city's welfare. When 800, 000 people have become refugees and then return home, the most reassuring sign that life has returned to normal is that the schools open on time. That, he said, we owe to the Jewish people.

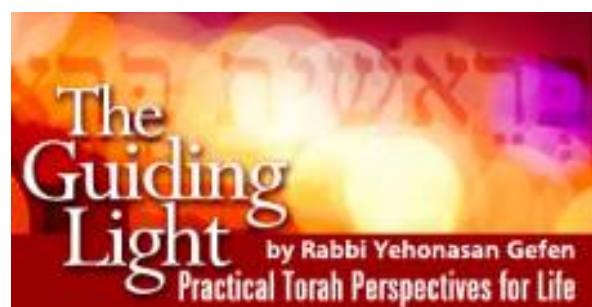
Meeting the head of the Jewish community later that day, I asked him how many Jews were there currently in Pristina. His answer? Eleven. The story, as I later uncovered it, was this. In the early days of the conflict, Israel had along with other international aid agencies sent a field medical team to work with the Kosovan Albanian refugees. They noticed that while other agencies were concentrating on the adults, there was no one working with the children. Traumatized by the conflict and far from home, they were running wild.

The team phoned back to Israel and asked for young volunteers. Every youth movement in Israel, from the most secular to the most religious, sent out teams of youth leaders at two-week intervals. They worked with the children, organizing summer camps, sports competitions, drama and music events and whatever else they could think of to make their temporary exile less traumatic. The Kosovan Albanians were Muslims, and for many of the Israeli youth workers it was their first contact and friendship with children of another faith.

Their effort won high praise from UNICEF, the United Nations children's organisation. It was in the wake of this that "the Jewish people" - Israel, the American-based "Joint" and other Jewish agencies - were asked to supervise the return to normality of the school system in Pristina.

That episode taught me the power of *hessed*, acts of kindness when extended across the borders of faith. It also showed the practical difference collective responsibility makes to the scope of the Jewish deed. World Jewry is small, but the invisible strands of mutual responsibility mean that even the smallest Jewish community can turn to the Jewish people worldwide for help and achieve things that would be exceptional for a nation many times its size. When the Jewish people join hands in collective responsibility they become a formidable force for good.

1. Sifra ad loc., Sanhedrin 27b, Shavuot 39a.
2. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes, New York, Washington Square Press, 1966, 707.
3. Shabbat 54b.



Showing Sensitivity to Others

Vayikra, 25:17: "And a man may not afflict his fellow, and you must fear your God, because I am Hashem your God."

Rashi, 25:17: Dh: *Veloh sonu* -- *Not afflict*: "Here the Torah warned

about hurtful words, that one may not harm his fellow, and not give him advice that is not suitable for him...

The Torah commands us not to afflict our fellow. This includes hurting him with words or in any other way. For example, Rav Yehuda holds that included in *onaat devarim* (hurtful words) is looking at an item in a store as if he wants to buy it, but when he does not have any money on him. This can cause pain to the store owner because it gets his hopes up that he will make a sale, only to lead to disappointment when it does not materialize. If we were thinking of examples of hurtful words we would probably think of far more blatant examples of hurting our fellow, such as insulting him or making fun of him. The Gemara demonstrates a much higher sensitivity to causing any pain to our fellow.

The following story shows just how far a person must go to avoid causing any pain to his fellow.¹ Rabbi Moshe Chevroni Rosh Yeshivah of Chevron and a nephew of the great Rabbi Isser Zalman Meltzer, related this story in his eulogy for his uncle. He described the period of the war of Independence, when there was a strict curfew in Jerusalem. It was forbidden to leave one's home from six o'clock in the evening until six o'clock in the morning. Anyone who went out was suspected of being a spy, and was liable to be arrested or even shot. One night, Rabbi Chevroni relates, he heard knocking on the door, and it was none other than Rav Meltzer. Rabbi Chevroni was terrified at what horror made his uncle risk his life late at night.

However, his uncle had a big smile on his face

and told him that there was nothing to worry about. He came because there was a Rambam that he could not understand and he thought that Rabbi Chevroni could perhaps help explain it. The fact that Rav Meltzer was willing to put himself in danger showed Rabbi Chevroni how great Rav Meltzer's love of Torah was.² After some thought, Rabbi Chevroni suggested an answer which his uncle was satisfied with. He remained in the house, learning, until the curfew was lifted and then he went home. Rabbi Chevroni recounted this story to demonstrate Rabbi Meltzer's tremendous love of Torah. While this was of course accurate, there was a whole different reason why Rabbi Meltzer made this perilous journey to ask his nephew a question in learning.

Rav Meltzer wrote a seminal series of works on the Rambam, 'Even HaEzel'. One night, after a long period of preparation he was ready to publish the last volume and was preparing to bring it to the publisher the next morning. Then he suddenly said to his wife that he could not print it tomorrow. In response to her understandable astonishment, he explained: "My book includes a question asked by my brother-in-law, Rabbi Aharon Cohen, the Rosh Yeshivah of Chevron. Elsewhere, in the book is the answer to the question, provided by my brother-in-law's son-in-law, Rabbi Yechezkel Sarna, another Chevron's Roshei Yeshivah. Just now, I realized that my nephew, Rabbi Moshe Chevroni, is not mentioned in the book. I'm afraid that if I publish the book as it is now, his grandchildren will ask, 'How come our grandfather is the only Chevron Rosh Yeshivah who's not mentioned in your book? It might make him feel bad. If even one person feels bad because of my book, I don't want to print it!

Better for me to put it into genizah than to cause someone to feel bad.”

Rabbi Isser Zalman suddenly had an idea. He had a question on the Rambam, and he had ten possible answers to the question. However, he decided to go in the middle of a curfew to his nephew to ask the question. “He’s a great Torah scholar – he’ll surely find an answer to the question. Then I can add his answer to my book!” And that’s what he did. He ran to Rabbi Chevrone’s house, explained the question and listened to his answer. The next morning, he ran home and wrote his nephew’s answer in his book!

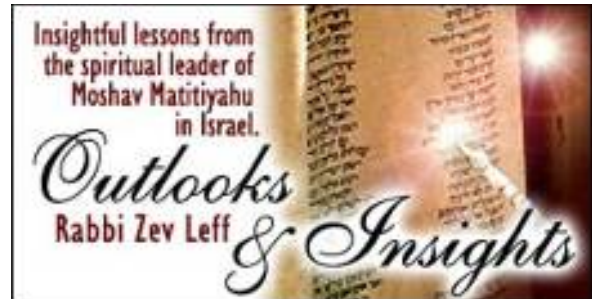
A number of lessons can be derived from this incredible story. Firstly, it teaches that even the performance of a great Mitzva such as publishing a book is not worth potentially causing even a small amount of pain to one’s fellow Jew.

Secondly, while clearly, Rav Meltzer was on an extremely high level in his sensitivity to others, his concern for what could have happened many years later, can teach each person on his level to try to consider consequences of our own words and actions. For example, if one is talking to a person who has a weakness in a certain area, or is suffering in a certain way, then one should avoid bringing up the success of other people in that area, as doing so will likely cause the listener at least a degree of pain.

May we all merit to emulate in some way Rabbi Meltzer’s concern to avoid causing any pain to our fellow.

1. “A Treasury of Stories for Rabbis and Teachers, Part 2, Middot, pp.47-50.
2. It should be noted that according to Jewish law, it is forbidden to put oneself in danger for Torah learning. As explained below, Rabbi Meltzer really had a different reason,

that perhaps he felt was justified according to Jewish law. Alternatively, perhaps he felt that the risk of danger to go out on one occasion was not high enough to prevent going to Rabbi Chevrone’s home.



Toiling in Torah

"If you walk in My statutes..."
(Leviticus 26:3)

Walking in God's statutes, say the Sages, refers to toiling in Torah. Upon that toil, God's blessing is contingent. And so, too, do the curses follow from the failure to strive in the study of Torah.

The Sages (Talmud – Nedarim 81a) tell us that the Land of Israel was lost and the Jewish people were exiled because they failed to make the proper blessing prior to learning. Ran, quoting Rabbeinu Yonah, explains that the blessing is on the toil and effort that one must put into Torah, and when that is lacking, *churban* (destruction) results.

The first question that arises is: How is effort in Torah learning hinted to in "*walk[ing] in My statutes*"? Since when does "*walking*" imply toil and effort?

The Sages tell us that the Torah is an elixir of life to those who approach it as "rightists," and a poison to those who approach it as "leftists." Rashi defines "rightist" as one who uses his strong right arm to delve into the Torah and

discover its secrets (Talmud – Shabbos 88b). One must delve deeply into the Torah to uncover its true meaning, to discover God, Who is the soul of the Torah. Without effort and toil, one gains at best a superficial understanding of Torah, which, in turn, leads to a superficial and shallow observance of its Mitzvot. On the other hand, one who exerts all his efforts gains the fear of Heaven that is the very essence of Torah.

We are exhorted to literally walk after God, to walk in His footsteps. Toiling in Torah is discovering the footsteps of God, the immutable laws of spiritual nature that contain the essence of God's attributes. By subjugating his mind to the demands of the Torah, and rejecting all that is superficial and simplistic, the student of Torah finds God in the Torah and is able to emulate Him.

The antithesis of toiling in Torah is *"If you will not listen to Me"* – if you fail to hear God in the Torah. You think you possess Torah, but it is Torah which is empty of God. That type of Torah can be easily distorted and lead even to idolatry, immorality and murder.

SEQUENCE OF TROUBLE

The prophetic warning concerning our future failings contains the following sequence of events: God will send an enemy to invade the Land of Israel, and the Jews will gather within the protective walls of Jerusalem. The encircled Jews will fall prey to a plague from which many will die. Since it is prohibited to leave a corpse in Jerusalem, the bodies will have to be taken out the city, and in this manner the people will be delivered into the hands of the enemy (see Rashi to Leviticus 26:25)

This sequence is at first glance astounding. The

prohibition of leaving a corpse in Jerusalem is Rabbinic. Even had it been a Torah law, the danger to life involved in burying outside the walls would have taken precedence over the rule that burial is forbidden in Jerusalem. Another problem: the generation the Torah is describing is one in which murder, idolatry and immorality were rampant. Would people steeped in such crimes risk their lives to fulfill a Rabbinic law?

But that is just the point of the rebuke. When one studies Torah superficially, one's perspective is necessarily fragmented and distorted and his emphasis will be askew. What he will be lacking is a view of Mitzvot as part of a totality and in the light of the totality.

A superficial view of Torah can lead to a disproportionate emphasis on even those things which are in fact of the greatest importance in the Torah's view, such as the holiness of Jerusalem. That holiness, however, not only does not mandate that one give up his life to avoid any corpses remaining in Jerusalem; it expressly forbids it, for the value of life takes precedence. Such distortions are inevitable without an overarching view of the unity of Torah.

The reward for toiling in Torah is harmony in the natural world culminating in the blessing of *shalom*, peace. Torah scholars, say the Sages, increase peace in the world by harmonizing the physical and spiritual worlds through their understanding of the Torah's secret foundation.

Conversely, the punishment of not toiling in Torah is a natural world gone haywire, where nothing goes right. That is the spiritual result of the failure to discover God's footsteps in the Torah and to walk in His ways – the consequence of viewing Torah as a series of

unconnected "do's" and "dont's." Without toil, Torah is seen not as a way of life but as an intrusion into life. And the punishment is that one's life is intruded into by a multitude of curses.



The Joy of Opportunity

Greetings from the holy city of Jerusalem!

In this week's parsha, we find the following verse:

"If your brother becomes poor and his hand fails with you [an expression indicating poverty], you should uphold him." (Leviticus 25:35)

A number of questions confront us when reading this verse:

1. Why does the Torah use a double expression of poverty? Doesn't the first part of the verse suffice to explain the situation?
2. Why does the second expression of poverty ("his hand fails with you") include the words, "with you"? These words would seem to imply that the potential giver also became impoverished, which is not true!
3. The Midrash (Vayikra Raba 34:1) states that this verse clarifies the verse in

Psalms (41:2) that reads, "Fortunate is one who considers the poor person; on a bad day, God will save him." What does the Midrash mean? What is the connection between these two verses?

4. Furthermore, it would seem more sensible for the verse in Psalms to read, "Fortunate is the one who *gives* to the poor person." What is the benefit in merely *considering* the poor? What is the meaning behind the choice of words in Psalms?

We can begin to approach these questions by examining an interesting statement about *tzedakah*. According to the Arizal, the act of giving *tzedakah* to a poor person is not only a mitzvah; it actually forms the Name of God! The coin is essentially a dot, which represents the Hebrew letter that is most dot-like: *yud*. The giver then takes the coin in the five fingers of his hand. The hand thus represents the Hebrew letter with the numerical value of five: *hei*. The giver stretches out his hand to give the coin, forming a straight line with his arm that resembles the shape of the Hebrew letter *vav*, whereupon the poor person opens his hand (*hei*) to receive the coin. In this way, God's Name (*yud*, then *hei*, then *vav*, then *hei*) has been spelled in order.

We can use this idea to explain the verse, "A rich man and a poor man meet; God makes them all" (Proverbs 22:2). Although the literal interpretation of the verse is as we just stated, we could also understand it, based on the Arizal's idea, to mean, "A rich man and a poor man meet; all together, they make God (*oseh kulam Hashem*)"! [God's Name is spelled out in the verse]. In other words, the encounter between the giver and the recipient of *tzedakah*

enables the two people to form the Name of God.

This is true, however, only if the giver initiates. If the poor person must request *tzedakah* before the giver provides it, God's Name is spelled out of order. In this unfortunate scenario, the poor person opens his hand (*hei*) and stretches out his arm (*vav*), whereupon the giver reaches out his hand (*hei*) and gives the coin (*yud*). These are still the letters of God's Name, but the Name is spelled backwards (*hei-vav-hei-yud*).

According to the Tikkunei Zohar (10a), it is auspicious for the letters *yud* and *vav* to come before the *hei*'s in God's Name. (When God's Name is spelled in order, the letter *yud* comes before the first *hei* and the letter *vav* comes before the second *hei*.) Having the letters in this order represents mercy, life, and peace, because they spell God's Name in the correct order.

When God's Name is in order, life flows in order. When God's Name is out of order, however, and the *hei*'s come before the letters *yud* and *vav*, a scenario of strict justice, death, and poverty is indicated. Chaos results from God's Name being spelled out of order. Such a situation can come about, as we saw before, when a poor person must initiate the mitzvah of *tzedakah*, thus spelling God's Name backwards (*hei-vav-hei-yud*).

OUTSTRETCHED HAND

According to the Tiferet Shmuel, these ideas will help us understand the answer to the first question. The phrase, "and his hand fails with you" (*u'matah yado imach*) is not repetitious. Rather, it can be translated as, "and his hand moves with you" - in other words, stretch out your hand first! The Torah is cautioning us that

when a poor person stretches out his hand, he should be following our lead. We - not the poor - should initiate the mitzvah of *tzedakah*.

This also answers the second question, regarding the problematic words "with you." We can understand these words as an instruction, meaning, "See to it that the poor person's hand is *with* your hand, not by itself." If the poor person's hand is alone, it indicates that he had to reach out first, which is undesirable. If the poor person's hand is *with* your hand, however, it shows that you initiated the giving.

The Midrash we mentioned earlier picks up on these nuances, which is why it connects this verse to the verse in Psalms, "Fortunate is the one who *considers (maskil)* the poor." Now we can see why the verse does not define as fortunate one who merely *gives* to the poor, which will answer the fourth question. The word "*maskil*" comes from the word "*sechel*," meaning "intelligence." A person who gives *tzedakah* without intelligence, by waiting until he is asked, creates the energy of death and destruction in the world. A person who gives with intelligence, however, and is ready to reach out his hand to the poor before he is asked for assistance, creates the Name of God in the world, which brings the energy of life and health.

This answers the third question as well. The Midrash understands the intent of the verse in this week's portion, which is why it connects it to the verse in Psalms. Both verses refer to the same situation.

How can we learn to be proactive, and to initiate giving rather than merely responding to requests for aid? The key is to develop love for the mitzvot we've been given. If we cultivate an

attitude of joy and love toward mitzvot, we will be on the lookout for any opportunity to fulfill them. The Arizal, for example, attributed all the incredible greatness he achieved to the joy he put into performing mitzvot. (A story is told that, once, when the Arizal went to buy the four species before Sukkot, he was so excited that he threw his entire wallet full of money to the store owner, saying, "Take whatever you want!")

ENTHUSIASM ON SINAI

This week's parsha gives us a hint about how to develop enthusiasm toward mitzvot. The parsha opens by describing the agricultural laws of the Sabbatical year ("*shmita*"), in which the land is required to rest every seventh year. We notice one seemingly unnecessary detail before the presentation of these laws. The verse says, "God spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying..." (Leviticus 25:1).

Rashi asks the obvious question: wasn't every law given to Moses on Mount Sinai? Why are the laws of *shmita* specifically singled out? Rashi answers that, just as God taught Moses the general laws of *shmita* as well as all the intricate details relating to it, so, too, did He teach Moses the general principles and the details of *all* the mitzvot at Mount Sinai.

But this only answers half the question. Why was *shmita*, in particular, the mitzvah chosen to serve as an example? Any mitzvah could have taught us this lesson! We can resolve this problem if we examine the fundamental nature of the mitzvah of *shmita*.

The *shmita* laws are completely counter-intuitive. To farmers who rely on yearly crop yield, it would seem that keeping this mitzvah

would inevitably lead to catastrophic financial loss. Yet God promises that no loss will come about through the fulfillment of the *shmita* laws. On the contrary; He assures us that performing this mitzvah will lead to profit and gain! This is why *shmita* was used as an example. It is the ultimate demonstration that we cannot lose by fulfilling mitzvot - even mitzvot that we would expect to result in severe monetary loss.

This, in turn, teaches us how to relate to all the other mitzvot that require spending money (buying the four species for Sukkot; restocking our kitchens for Passover; giving *tzedakah*). We learn from the *shmita* laws that we will never lose by performing a mitzvah. With this knowledge, we can develop an attitude of eagerness and enthusiasm towards mitzvot - even those that require us to dig deep into our pockets.

May we be blessed to have such love for the performance of mitzvot, that we initiate opportunities to give a helping hand to others. And in this merit, may we be blessed with only gain in life.

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