

Behar: Shev V'al Taaseh: The Powerlessness (and Power) of the Farmer Rabbanit Dalia Davis, Class of 2022

My children ask me at least once a week, “*Ima*, why can’t we get a horse?” When I respond by explaining that we do not live on a ranch or a farm, they shower me with reasons why we should become farmers. Their arguments about farm life are so compelling that I find myself imagining what our lives would be like surrounded by nature, animals, and vegetables. In the recesses of my imagination, that lifestyle is animated by refreshing physical labor and deep feelings of peace and tranquility that emerge from working the land and caring for God’s creatures. I imagine the life of a farmer framed by routine and organized around agricultural cycles, engendering a sense of harmony and oneness with the world.

However, the laws of *Shemita* in *parshat* Behar, challenge this bucolic ideal.

*Sheish shanim tazria shadekha v’sheish shanim tizmor carmekha v’asafta et t’vuatah:
U’vashanah hashivi’it shabbat shabbaton yihyeh la’aretz shabbat la’hashem shadkha lo tizrah
v’kharmkha lo tizmor.*

Six years you may sow your field and six years you may prune your vineyard and gather in the yield. But in the seventh year **the land shall have a Sabbath of complete rest, a Sabbath of Hashem**. You shall not sew your field or prune your vineyard (Leviticus 25: 3-4).

This description of *Shemita* prescribes plenty of rest for the land but, notably, does not envision a year of rest for the farmer. The farmer is warned not to work the land, including preparations for the following year (Seforno), but the phrase that prescribes rest, *Shabbat Shabbaton*, is used with reference to the land alone. Why wouldn’t this special year, when presumably the farmer can finally rest from the rigors of farming, be described as a *Shabbat Shabbaton* for the farmer?

The answer may be rooted in the emotional rigors of *Shemita*. To cease farming is to stop the activities and rhythms that define one’s days. One’s sense of purpose and fulfillment can vanish as well. *Shemita* takes those whose days are full to the point of exhaustion and renders them aimless with the flip of a calendar page. Moreover, the farmer is asked to sit and watch without interfering as crops continue to emerge, growing wild. The trees may produce an abundance of fruit, a bumper crop in any other year. Alternatively, produce may wilt, wither, and deteriorate away as the farmer looks on mostly powerless to use the agricultural arts to improve things.

This reality is reminiscent of the halakhic concept of *shev ve'al taaseh*, sit and don't act. Tractate Berachot 19b-20a invokes *shev ve'al taaseh* in the midst of a discussion about ritual purity and human dignity. The Sages discuss the case of burying the dead immediately before Pesach. Contact with the dead renders one *tamei* (ritually impure) and therefore prohibited from partaking of the *korban* Pesach (Pesach offering). Due to the immense stringencies in the Torah associated with Pesach, the Sages treat very seriously the case of one who deliberately misses out on the *korban Pesach*. Burial of family immediately before Pesach is therefore forbidden, as it would render one impure (and thus unable to partake of the offering). The Sages do, however, permit burial of a *meit mitzvah*—one who has no family and could therefore “fall between the cracks” of society and end up unburied. The rabbis offer the delicate explanation that burying a *meit mitzvah* is not tantamount to deliberately forgoing the *korban Pesach*, rather one places oneself in a predicament wherein *shev v'al taaseh* is one's only option. One must remain as an observer during the offering of the *korban Pesach* and one may not participate and fulfill this *mitzvah* at the appropriate time during the holiday.

Considering the emotional state of this person, like the case of the farmer, *shev ve'al taaseh* is easier said than done. One moment, s/he is looking forward to celebrating Pesach, partaking of the *korban* with family and friends. However, all of that changes quickly with the discovery and burial of the *meit mitzvah*. The burier and the farmer are both fulfilling crucial Torah *mitzvot* and acts of kindness to the deceased and, arguably, to the land. However, in so doing, they must also sacrifice of themselves in the spirit of *shev ve'al taaseh*. They look on, as if through a glass window, as their usual realms of activity proceed without them.

Considering these scenarios of righteousness and imposed restraint, another group of selfless individuals comes to mind. For months my heart has been shattered thinking about the family members of the hostages. Their loved one's are so close geographically, but they are stuck behind an impossible barrier. With the flip of a calendar page from the 6th of October to the 7th, a most excruciating form of *shev ve'al taaseh* was imposed on all.

However, reflecting further on recent events, *shev ve'al taaseh* is entirely the wrong concept. I have never been so awed by the proactive measures taken by a group of people. Defying the powerlessness imposed upon them, the hostages' loved ones have found ever new, creative, thoughtful, and powerful ways to take action. They do not sit. They do not forgo action. They continue to care for their loved ones by any means necessary, meeting with government officials, sending *brakhot* from their balconies, rallying through music, art, and prayer in Hostage Square, traveling the globe to introduce their loved ones to the world, and screaming for them through loudspeakers at the border. No one should ever have to show love in such ways.

In light of the above, perhaps *shev v'al taaseh* is not the domain of the powerless after all. One who buries a *meit mitzvah* may be disqualified from the *korban Pesach*, but s/he will get to partake of a make-up *korban* on Pesach *Sheini*, savoring the thought that s/he had taken action when it counted the most. This is anything but powerlessness.

What of the idle farmer during *Shemita*? Ilana Toweg, a contemporary *Shemita*-observant farmer from Kfar Azarya, lectures about the “scores of people who arrive at her doorstep begging her to intervene on their behalf and appeal to God to bless them with good health, a child or a spouse. Every Friday evening after lighting the Shabbat candles, Ilana spends upwards of two and a half hours reading the requests she received.¹” The flocks of people who come to Ilana for a *brakha* believe that the *tefillot* of a farmer who observes the *Shemita* enjoy an elevated status and a more direct channel to God. Ilana’s Friday evening *tefillot* are a unique expression of her embrace of the power available to her during *Shemita* when the more traditional expressions of power are forbidden to her.

May the fulfillment of *shev ve'al ta'aseh mitzvot* afford us new and invigorating opportunities to take action and to nurture our souls and those of others. May all of the precious families facing the most unimaginable state of powerlessness see their incredible actions of strength and love bear fruit, and may they all be swiftly reunited with their loved ones.

Rabbanit Dalia Davis co-founded Uprooted: A Jewish Response to Fertility Journeys. She teaches Judaic studies at Heilicher Minneapolis Jewish Day School and is a research fellow for the Institute for Experiential Jewish Education. She is the creator of Ye'ud: Making Life's Liminal Moments Truly Sublime. Through this work she is creating community, offering pastoral support, and using her passions for Jewish text and the arts to support people along their life journeys.

¹<https://jweekly.com/2022/04/21/why-these-israeli-farmers-became-heroes-after-killing-their-crops-hint-its-in-the-bible/>