

Faith, Famine, Feast, Food (Behar – Bechukotai)

Faith is not certainty. It is the courage to live with uncertainty. – Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Every seven years, God asks the Jewish people to commit to what, by conventional standards, would amount to economic and national suicide. In the land of Israel, farmers must let their land lie fallow (*Shmittah*). In our modern industrial era – where less than 5% of the population works in agriculture – we can't fully appreciate the magnitude of this command.

But in the pre-industrial world, where up to 95% of the population was involved in growing food from the earth, this sabbatical was the equivalent of telling modern-day people not to use any electronic devices for a year (cars, phones, computers, microwaves, etc. – just try to imagine that for a moment).

Actually, it was worse. We could survive – albeit inefficiently – without our electronic gadgets. But without agriculture, we would literally starve.

Rabbi Ovadia Sforno draws out some fascinating nuances in his analysis of how we survive the Sabbatical year.

Sforno divides the verses into two different demonstrations of faith – and their respective outcomes.

Leviticus 25:19 states:

“The land will yield its fruit, and you will eat your fill and dwell securely upon it.”

According to Sforno, this represents the highest level of faith. You trust that God will provide. As a result of this trust, God performs a **physiological** miracle: the small amount of food you consume satisfies you for an abnormally long time.

But the text continues:

“If you will say: What will we eat in the seventh year? Behold! We will not sow, and we will not gather our crops! I will command My blessing for you in the **sixth year**, and it will yield a crop sufficient for **three years**. You will sow in the eighth year, but still eat from the old crop; until the ninth year, until the arrival of the new crop, you will eat the old.”

By not planting or harvesting in the seventh year, and only planting in the eighth – with the resulting crop arriving in the ninth – *Shmittah* becomes the equivalent of a self-imposed three-year famine.

Sforno explains that for those with lesser faith, a more overt external miracle occurs. For the anxious souls who ask, “What will we eat?” God provides a “down payment”: a threefold crop in the sixth year, enabling even the worried farmer to confidently observe the sabbatical.

May we always merit miracles of either kind – whether being supernaturally satisfied or simply having enough – and may God grant us the strength and courage to do His will, even when we are afraid.

Shabbat Shalom,

Ben-Tzion

Dedication

To the fascinating Professor Gad Saad. <https://www.gadsaad.com/>