



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

VAYIKRA > Behar

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May 28, 2016

Behar

**Organic Gardening,
the Jewish Way**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

A magnificent story about a famous gardener, who hands over his garden to his sons on his deathbed, teaches us a most fruitful lesson for our personal lives.

What does he do to ensure that his sons work the field and produce delicious fruit? How does he guarantee that his children will turn the earth into heaven?

His solution, as well as a teaching from the *Zohar*, which discusses light, gardens and gardeners, will help make the commandment of *Shemittah*, the Sabbatical year, relevant to our modern-day (non-agricultural) lives.

As we learn in this sermon, there are two types of growth: active and passive. Within their difference lies the secret of planting, sowing and reaping. And it is a secret we must discover if we are to fulfill our mission on earth. For the Creator of the Universe expects that we, His children, will cultivate His garden, and in so doing, will sow and reap the most sublime fruit.

ORGANIC GARDENING, THE JEWISH WAY

1. The Gardener and His Sons (Beginning of the Story)

Adam was a gardener. He was pious. He was active. He was never lazy. Above all he was honest.

When he grew old and the end was near, he called his two sons to his bedside. "My dear boys," he said, "have you seen my garden?"

"Yes, father, of course, we have."

"You know that the trees in the garden bear sweet fruit?"

"Yes father. It is a very beautiful garden. Have we not tasted the fruits? Oh! They are delicious."

The gardener looked at his hands, gnarled by a lifetime of work, and then he looked at his sons' delicate hands. He was reminded that they had never really worked a single day in their lives. So he said, "My boys, now that I am leaving this world, I want to tell you that I have buried a great treasure between the two massive oak trees out in the garden. Go and dig it up. The treasure is yours. But you have to put strenuous effort into the digging. Otherwise it will lay forever hidden."

With those words, Adam the gardener shrugged off the mortal bonds of this earth.

The sons didn't delay. After the customary mourning period, eager to unearth the buried treasure, they took up spades and started digging the earth between two massive oak trees. They worked hard the whole week. They removed weeds, stones and shale. They turned the soil. But, alas, they didn't find any treasure ...

¹ Exodus 21:24. Cf. Deuteronomy 19:21.

How does this story end?

Wouldn't you like to know how this story ends?

But, before we get to the conclusion of the story, let us first take a minor detour through the holy words of our Torah portion.

2. Parshat Behar

This week's Torah portion opens with G-d talking to Moses "on the mountain." (Thus this portion is called *Parshat Behar*, which literally means "on the mountain.") And this is what G-d says:

*"Speak to the children of Israel and say to them: 'When you enter the land that I am giving you, the land must be given a rest period, a Sabbath to the Lord. You may sow your fields for six years, and for six years you may prune your vineyards and gather in its produce. But in the seventh year, the land shall have a complete rest, a Sabbath to the Lord; your fields you shall not sow, and your vineyards you shall not prune. The after-growth of your harvest you shall not reap, and the grapes of your vines you shall not pick. It shall be a year of rest for the land.'"*¹

Upon settling in the Promised Land, the Jewish people had to give the land a rest every seventh year – known as a Sabbatical Year (*Shnat HaShemittah*). For six years they could work the land (just as they could work it for six weekdays) but on the seventh was to be Shabbat, a period of rest.

During that seventh year of rest, the Jewish people were commanded to observe two agricultural prohibitions: As the Torah states:

First: *Your fields you shall not sow, and your vineyards you shall not prune.*

And second: *The after-growth of your harvest you shall not reap, and the grapes of your vines you shall not pick.*

¹ Leviticus 25:1-5.

The first prohibition relates to proactive sowing and pruning in order to produce a harvest. The second relates to the passive results of earlier efforts – such as an after-growth that springs up by itself,² or grapes that appear on the vine even when there had been no tending or pruning.³

The Torah is going out of its way to stress that both types of achievement – the intended product and the unintended byproduct – are off limits during the Sabbatical Year. Why?

The first makes sense, for there is to be no agricultural work during the year. But why can you not harvest the after-growth that springs up on its own?

What does this mean? And, more specifically what does this mean for us today?

To find the answer, let's get mystical.

3. The Zohar

This past week we observed Lag B'Omer, the day that commemorates the passing of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, the great Talmudic sage and mystic also known as Rashbi. In many communities bonfires were lit bringing to mind Rashbi's preeminent mystical work, the *Zohar*, the "Book of Radiant Light." May it illuminate our Torah portion and each of our individual lives.

In discussing the divine light that, day to day, energizes the world, the Zohar explains:

² Rashi ad loc.

³ See Rashi ad loc. Ramban, Saadia Gaon, and Radak for alternative meanings of nazir in this context.

This light the Holy Blessed One sowed in His Garden of Eden ... [by the hand of] the Tzaddik, the righteous one, who was the gardener of this garden and who took this light and planted it in rows, so that it produced fruit through which the world is sustained. This is what is written [in the Book of Psalms]: *A light is sown for the righteous...*⁴

But, with regard to times of exile, it is written [in the Book of Job]: *The waters of the sea fail, and the river has run dry.*⁵ How then is there growth [without water]? ... From the time the river ceased flowing, the gardener has not entered the garden. But the original light, perpetually sown, creates fruit, and from it, naturally and organically, seeds are sown as in the beginning, never ceasing. Like a garden producing after-growth ... of its own volition, it bears fruit like in the beginning.⁶

In so many words, the *Zohar* is saying that G-d sowed His divine light in the Garden of Eden, partnering with the righteous gardener – the human being – to cultivate and ultimately produce the most divine fruit by which the entire world would be sustained. (In short – in the making of G-d's garden here on earth.)

Then, when things did not go according to plan – do they ever? – and man was banished from Paradise, the garden that is the world has sustained itself in an organic way, without the proactive handiwork of the righteous gardener, but rather as the passive result of the original planting.

The Chassidic masters cite this passage from the *Zohar* to explain the two kinds of harvesting that is prohibited during the Sabbatical Year, which I mentioned earlier: 1. The proactive sowing and pruning which produces a harvest. 2. The passive unintended results of earlier efforts.⁷

⁴ Psalms 97:11.

⁵ Job 14:11.

⁶ Zohar II Terumah 166b-167a.

⁷ See Ohr HaTorah, Vayikra II, Behar p. 601.

4. As Then, So Now

As with the sowing, planting and harvesting of produce in the creation of the world, so is it with the sowing, planting and harvesting of real agricultural produce today.

Every time we work a field – be it a literal agricultural field, or any field in which we may toil, such as the field of finance, medicine, law or education – there are the intended and the unintended outcomes. There are the seeds we sowed that have borne fruit; and there are aftergrowths that appear as an unintended byproduct – the offshoots and spinoffs of the results we originally set out to achieve.

When we are spiritually active and awake, we are akin to the gardener actively working his garden, and proactively yielding produce. But when we are spiritually asleep, and *the waters of the sea fail, and the river has run dry*, experiencing dissonance and displacement (a state of exile), much of our life's gardening is, as we all know too well, of the passive, aftergrowth, reactionary variety. Things happen to us more than we should be making them happen. Yet, even then things grow as a result of the perpetual seeds planted in the original garden.

In the Sabbatical Year, a year of peace and tranquility, we cannot profit from either. Why?

So that we remember that both the active and the passive growth are gifts of G-d. And that there is a higher purpose to our existence, the true reason why we were born and toil here down below.

5. The Gardener and His Sons (End of the Story)

Now let us return to the conclusion of our story.

When, after much digging, the sons failed to discover the treasure between the two large oaks, they began to dig between other trees as well. They reasoned that perhaps their dying father had mistakenly conveyed the wrong location. They dug and dug but they did not find any treasure anywhere.

But after they had turned over all that earth, a strange thing began to happen: in short time all of the trees in the garden began to bloom, producing the sweetest most luscious fruit imaginable.

The two brothers began to harvest their inheritance, bringing the most exquisite produce to market and selling it for huge profits. Word got out that Adam the gardener's two sons have the sweetest, most enchanted, magical, sublime fruit you've ever tasted!

Looking back, the brothers understood the true treasure their father had left them. Sure they were successful and wealthy beyond their wildest dreams. But, even more, they understood the value of labor; they understood that the greatest treasure cannot be dug up but only sown and planted. And they understood that the most delicious fruit of all are the ones you partner in producing.

6. Personal Lesson

We are all gardeners charged with tending to the pastures of our lives.

There are two ways we may go through life: 1) expecting treasures to happen; 2) make the treasures happen.

The seventh year, the Sabbatical Year of rest, tranquility and divinity, is a time when we step back from what we are doing to remember why we are doing it. We don't work the fields in the seventh year to remind ourselves why we do the other six.

And when we step back, we see that there are two ways we could sustain ourselves in life – by planting and pruning or by collecting residuals. Both are gifts from G-d. Even in time of exile, when *the river has run dry*, we are sustained.

But we have a mission to fulfill. We must keep on digging. And when we continue to dig and toil, to sow and plow, certainly we shall reap a greater treasure yet: that of the fruit of our labor!

Some things grow organically, naturally. Others require much work. Some things – the more you let them be, the more they flourish. Others – the more you let them be, the more they go to wild abandon.

Redemption is like a cultivated, orderly, organized garden. Exile is like a wild, organic, randomly-sprouting garden. The Sabbatical Year is realizing where the growth comes from. And the after-growth.

Life is a garden. It flourishes and grows, sown by light. Even if we do nothing, fruits sprout. Imagine what can be produced when we do something.

The Sabbatical Year reminds us of the innate energy indigenous to all soil, sown there by G-d through the righteous. Even when life happens routinely, organically, seemingly as an after-growth, it is a miracle.

And let us remember that to everything we plant, there is a harvest but also an after-growth.

7. The Farmer (Humor)

A farmer purchased an old, rundown, neglected and abandoned farm with plans to turn it into a thriving enterprise. It was going to take a lot of hard work as the fields were overgrown with weeds, the farmhouse was falling apart, and the fences were broken down.

During his first day of work, the town rabbi stopped by to bless the man's work, saying, "May you and G-d work together to make this the farm of your dreams!"

A few months later, the rabbi stopped by again to call on the farmer. Lo and behold, it was now a completely different place. The farmhouse was rebuilt and in excellent condition; there were plenty of cattle and other livestock happily munching on grass in well-fenced pens, and the fields were filled with crops planted in neat rows.

The rabbi was amazed: “Look what G-d and you have accomplished together!”

“Yes,” agreed the farmer. “But remember what the farm looked like when G-d was working it alone!”

8. Conclusion

Surely G-d could work the earth alone, planting and cultivating a perfect garden. But G-d chose to do it differently. G-d chose man to partner with Him in taming the organic garden into a spectacular botanical masterpiece.

G-d chooses wisely, an understatement if there ever was one. The fact that G-d chose you to till His soil and cultivate His earth is the greatest gift you will ever receive and the biggest confidence boost you could ever have.

Shabbat Shalom!

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