**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**THE PHILOSOPHY OF *SHEMITTA***

**By Rav Binyamin Zimmerman**

Archive: <http://etzion.org.il/en/shiur-14-rav-kooks-preface-shabbat-ha-aretz>

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**In Memory of Sheine Hendele Bas Greiman z”l**

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**Shiur #14: Rav Kook's Preface to *Shabbat Ha-aretz***

**Introduction**

In [last week's lesson](http://109.74.206.98/en/shiur-13-gift-israel-%E2%80%94-condition-shemitta), we discussed *shemitta's* role in the exile and redemption of the Jewish people. It is not hard to understand how the prominent rabbinical discussion about the return of the nation to agricultural settlement in the Land of Israel centered on *shemitta*.

For some, the return to the observance of *shemitta* in the Land of Israel demonstrated that the Jewish return was not natural, but a miraculous expression of Divine promise. For this reason, return to agriculture without observance of *shemitta* was tantamount to blasphemy, raising the threat of a return to exile, as non-observance of *shemitta* brought it about originally.

Others saw the observance of *shemitta* as an obstacle to Jewish return; if there was going to be an agricultural revolution in Israel, then the nation needed to plant as much as it could. Before the first *shemitta,* there could only be a maximum of six years of planting, so there would not be much to live off of during the *shemitta* year. For many of the nonobservant farmers, *shemitta* might even be seen as that the new settlement could not observe the traditional laws if it was interested in its survival. On the other hand, a number of religious settlers who personally acknowledged the importance of *shemitta* felt that for practical reasons caused by the extenuating circumstances of the time, traditional *shemitta* observance was not yet possible. *Shemitta* after the exile of the Ten Tribes is only a rabbinical mitzva according to most authorities; could the observance of such a mitzva be worthy of the Divine promise that sufficient produce would grow in the sixth year for the nation to continue to survive during the *shemitta* year as well? Therefore, they reasoned, it was an instance of *pikuach nefesh*, mortal danger, and in order to save life (and deal with a host of other problems), *shemitta* could not be observed. A means had to be found to permit working the land.

The return to the land should have been the return to the *mitzvot ha-teluyot ba-aretz,* the agricultural commands that ensure proper settlement of the land. All these *mitzvot* have their elements of challenge, but many, including some of the financial sponsors of the new settlements, saw *shemitta* as an obstacle that might actually destroy any chance for successful resettlement of the Land of Israel.

As the numbers of pioneers grew, the challenge of *shemitta* became all the more formidable, as there were more mouths that needed to be fed and more fear that the *shemitta*-year harvest would not provide sufficient yields. Through a series of halakhic deliberations that are beyond the current purview, one of the opinions which was presented was what became known as the *heter mekhira*, i.e., selling the soil of the Land to non-Jews in order to permit working the land during *shemitta*.

In our last lesson, we noted the paradoxical outlook of Rav Kook regarding this question. On the one hand, he acknowledged more than others how the agricultural rebirth of the land was a fulfillment of the initial stages of redemption, so long as it was accompanied by the *mitzvot* which uniquely express the sanctity of the land. Yet, at the same time, Rav Kook felt that the time had not come where full *shemitta* observance was practical, and therefore, on the eve of the 1909-1910 *shemitta* year, he published *Shabbat Ha-aretz*, a halakhic work dealing with *shemitta*, with a particular emphasis on the rationale behind the *heter mekhira.* Rav Kook, who saw the *heter mekhira* as a temporary necessity, introduced his work with his fascinating expression of the power of *shemitta*, detailing his outlook regarding the meta-historical realities which he felt the Jewish people were living. The gist of Rav Kook's entire preface is that the *heter mekhira* is, as summarized by HaRav Aharon Lichtenstein, a halakhic tragedy: the resettlement of the land, due to historical necessity, must commence without the observance of the agricultural *mitzvot*.

It is this preface that deserves special notice in order to appreciate *shemitta*’s role in Jewish history according to Rav Kook.

**Background of Rav Kook**

*Shabbat Ha-aretz* begins with a description of the deep significance of *shemitta* and *yovel*, specifically within the context of the role they play from a Jewish national perspective.

The very same effect that is produced for every individual by the Shabbat is produced by the *shemitta* for the nation as a whole.

We hope there will be an opportunity to devote a further lesson to explain his ideas on the nature of *shemitta* and how *shemitta* allows the nation as a whole to remove the harmful aspects of secular society and in the process to manifest its true light with full radiance, which although extremely powerful, is beyond the purview of our current discussion. His preface does not just focus on *shemitta's* general purpose and the implications of the Shabbat of an entire nation in its land, as Rav Kook recognizes *shemitta's* unique role in history, particularly during his lifetime.

Some biographical and historical background will hopefully allow us to better appreciate the issues that Rav Kook addresses in his monumental preface. Avraham Yitzchak Kook, born in 1865 in Latvia, gained renown in his youth as a child prodigy, and later learned in the prestigious Volozhin yeshiva where he was a close disciple of the *rosh yeshiva*, Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (the Netziv). After a series of rabbinical posts in Europe, he moved to the land of Israel in 1904 where he served as the rabbi of the city of Jaffa as well as the local settlements. Many of these settlements were founded by secular Jews, while some were inhabited by religious individuals. The question of *shemitta* observance was an issue for many.

On the one hand, there was a feeling that the full return of the *shemitta* year, alongside *yovel,* must wait until the messianic era. (See Rambam, *Hilkhot Melakhim* 11:1, who lists this among the markers of that period.)

To understand Rav Kook's perspective, we must realize the radical nature of his thinking. A nation which had all but lost its connection to its land couldn't imagine a mass return if not by the miraculous coming of the Messiah. Rav Kook explained that the return of the Jewish pioneers to the land proved a tremendous miracle, as the Land of Israel had started growing again for the Jewish people. This blessing indicated that the time of the revealed redemption was at hand.

*Shemitta,* symbolizing both exile and redemption, was re-emerging historically as a reality for the Jewish people, indicating the significance of the period but also calling for temporary measures to ensure the new settlements would be capable of dealing with these new realities.

**The Land and the Nation**

For this reason, a major portion of Rav Kook's preface is devoted to his penetrating description of the connection of the Land of Israel to the Jewish nation, *shemitta's* role in maintaining that connection, and why exile is the only available option for a nation that has lost sense of the connection:

The special character of the land and the special character of the nation fit well together. In the same way that the nation is distinguished by divine elevation in the deepest parts of her being, so in the same way it is the land, the land of God, which prepares and refines the people who inhabit it as an everlasting inheritance and which is theirs through a covenant and an oath based on trust in the eternal glory of Israel. This is firmly founded on the divine nature which is fixed in the very nature of this wonderful, desirable land, a land that is betrothed to this people that God has chosen for His special treasure. The soul of both the nation and the land function together at the very basis of their existence, fulfilling their roles in realizing during the sabbatical year the full potential of their longing and yearning which emanate from the depths of their holiness.

On the one hand, the people work with their spiritual strength on the earth, and so the seed of God becomes manifest through His spiritual influence. On the other hand, the land acts on the people in refining its inner qualities to suit the desire for a godly life that is perfect in its form and structure. A sabbatical year is an absolute necessity for the nation and for the land.

Rav Kook goes on to describe exactly how the sabbatical year fulfills this role of liberating and educating the people, inculcating the holiness that is so natural and necessary for the Holy Land. He goes on to discuss why it is that when the nation falls and loses sight of their treasured status and the behavior necessary for maintaining that status, they lose perspective. They no longer understand the message of *shemitta* and cease to observe it. As the nation regresses spiritually, the land is contaminated and can no longer maintain its physical beauty; it is a land which responds physically to the spiritual status of its beloved people.

Due to the national character of *shemitta*, losing touch with *shemitta's* message is paramount to losing touch with the essence of national life in Israel. If the Jewish people attempt to model their national existence in Israel after that of other nations, their acts are tantamount to completely abrogating and losing touch with the singular, unique spiritual core of the nation; this involves becoming disconnected from the Torah, both as individuals and as a collective.

**Spiritual and Physical Distance from the Land**

With this in mind, Rav Kook advances one of his innovative ideas in this context. He states that when the nation has distanced itself from the spiritual aspects of its national character and become totally engrossed in the physical building of the land at all costs, even at the cost of nonobservance of *shemitta*, then their remaining in the land is not beneficial. He states that specifically in this context, the connection to the land is detrimental for the spiritual solitude of the nation. The nation must be distanced from their land for their own good, as misuse of its potential will only bring about destruction. The people contaminate the land through their actions, and something must be done.

At this point there are essentially two options: God can choose to eradicate the people, as they are in fact deserving of punishment; it is they who have sinned. Alternatively, God can put in place a system that would rehabilitate heal the sinners and allow them to return to their land.

A strict measure of justice would surely entail the former option. After a nation has been given numerous warnings, has worshipped other gods, has mistreated its unfortunates, and has deviated so greatly from its mission, the harsh logic of justice would dictate that the nation is hopeless and has been given too many chances already. By this token, rather than being exiled from the land, the people should be eradicated.

True, the land which is integrally connected to the Jewish people has been contaminated due to the nation's sins, however, it is not the land which deserves punishment. Logic would dictate that the land should remain intact, and it, with the Temple, be given over to another people who will more faithfully fulfill the word of God.

While this might be the logical response of untempered justice (and some faiths have embraces this philosophy), this is certainly not God's plan. God knows how to make good choices. He selects a nation, selects a land, and selects a place in the land to serve as His Temple, but God doesn't make bad choices; people do. God invests within the eternal nation the ability to repent and one day return to their land with a new perspective, one that can allow them to successfully build a model society. It is for this reason that God does not eradicate the Jewish people but sends them into exile.

The prophecies of *Parashat Bechukkotai* ([see lesson 6](http://109.74.206.98/en/shiur-06-return)) reveal the punishment for nonobservance of *shemitta* and general decadence: scattering the people from the land and the land remaining in a state of perpetual *shemitta*. However, the curses of *Bechukkotai* are dual blessings in disguise. The destruction of the land remains until the Jewish people's return; this, as the Ramban reveals, is a good tiding, indicating that the Land of Israel would remain true to the Jewish people. It would not allow any other nation to revive it, reflecting that the Jewish return may not be imminent, but it is only a matter of time. This destruction and inability to build the wasteland of Israel is vividly described by Mark Twain in *Innocents Abroad*, as he described Palestine as:

A desolate country whose soil is rich enough, but is given over wholly to weeds — a silent mournful expanse... A desolation is here that not even imagination can grace with the pomp of life and action... We never saw a human being on the whole route... There was hardly a tree or a shrub anywhere. Even the olive and the cactus, those fast friends of the worthless soil, had almost deserted the country.

The second blessing in disguise is that the land would be punished for the sins of the people, rather than the people itself being eradicated. This proves that there is a chance for altering destiny.

**The Consolation**

The idea of a blessing in disguise in some of the worst moments of destruction in our nation's history is not only the perspective of Rav Kook. In fact, it is a tradition with very firm roots.

In *Tehillim* (79:1), the verse states:

A song of Asaf: O God! Nations have come into Your heritage, they have defiled Your Holy Temple, they have made Jerusalem into heaps.

The Sages question this: logic would dictate that the destruction of the Temple should not be a cause for singing, but rather a cause for lamenting (see Rashi, *Kiddushin* 31b).

The Midrash, therefore, explains that the joy in the devastation is that "God exhausted His fury on the wood and stones of the Temple," allowing the Jewish people to survive.

In fact, the Vilna Gaon explains that the mourning of the Ninth of Av is lightened at midday because that is when the Temple actually started burning. Although logic would dictate the opposite, that specifically at the moment of destruction one should be more overcome with pain, it is specifically when the Temple burns that permission is granted for the mourners to get off the floor and sit on chairs. The Vilna Gaon, explains based on the aforementioned comment of the Sages, that although the destruction is anything but a cause for celebration, nevertheless, the fact that God takes out his anger on the physical building of the Temple is a cause for some modicum of consolation.

In essence, the Temple has done nothing wrong, the people have. If God wants to abrogate His relationship with the Jewish people and adopt a new nation, then He would destroy the people and keep his home. But he does just the opposite, wrecking his Temple, in order to save the people, and give them another chance. Therefore, the moment of the destruction, midday, is the time to realize, amidst the heart-wrenching ruins of the Temple, the knowledge of God's immense love for the Jewish people and His desire to give them another chance.

This is essentially the essence of the whole outlook of consolation that follows the destruction of the Temple. The Shabbat after the fast of the Ninth of Av is *Shabbat Nachamu*, the Shabbat of consolation, as it recognizes that God retains His nation and gives them another chance.

With this in mind, the curse of exile can be explained. Has any other nation retained its identity in exile? Does it make sense that a nation destroyed more than once would survive when all its oppressors have long since been consigned to the dustbin of ancient history?

This historical outlook is the only approach that can explain another one of Mark Twain's well-known remarks (September 1897, quoted in *The National Jewish Post & Observer*, June 6, 1984) regarding the Jewish people:

If the statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one quarter of one percent of the human race. It suggests a nebulous puff of star dust lost in the blaze of the Milky Way. Properly, the Jew ought hardly to be heard of, but he is heard of, has always been heard of. He is as prominent on the planet as any other people, and his importance is extravagantly out of proportion to the smallness of his bulk… He has made a marvelous fight in this world in all ages; and has done it with his hands tied behind him. He could be vain of himself and be excused for it. The Egyptians, the Babylonians and the Persians rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greeks and Romans followed and made a vast noise, and they were gone; other people have sprung up and held their torch high for a time but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, and have vanished.

The Jew saw them all, survived them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities, of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert but aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jews; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?

With this outlook in mind, it is possible to understand one of Rav Kook’s radical explanations of the purpose of the exile. If the scattering of the nation is a sign of divine love for the people, then the exile must serve a purpose other than punishment. But what could that purpose be? This takes someone of the magnitude of Rav Kook to explain.

**The Purpose of Exile**

Rav Kook begins by explaining why the rights and even benefits of remaining in the land were not applicable during the exile. (We will use the recent edition bilingual edition put out by Rabbi Julian Sinclair, [Rav Kook’s Introduction to Shabbat Ha’Aretz](http://jewish.convio.net/site/R?i=-SWEJ-L8WHv2QNfK65HvFQ), Hazon, 2014).

When Israel's awareness of its own spirit became foggy… forgetting their inner strength and pride, looking superficially at the underdeveloped and wild environment made them forget their inner greatness. The yearning for a refined godly life slipped from their hearts… The light of justice was dimmed. In its place came the coarse imagination of a lawless society… (p. 117)

As Rav Kook enunciates the horror of such a situation he also notes that, due to the connection between man and the land, this reality affects the land as well.

As the people became spiritually weaker, the special quality of the land could no longer find fulfillment… the people absorbed bad influences, which coarsened its pure nature… when national life became defiled the power of ethics increased [Sinclair note 46 explains the intention: Although there were outbursts of moral intensity, in the absence of supporting political institutions, they were unsustainable], but with the surrounding political turmoil, the result was simply inner anguish and confusion. These two elements, the people and the land, which, when healthy, had given each other so much grace and power for good — made each other sicker and more corrupt. Finally they had to take the cruel-kind medicine, the dreadful surgical operation of separating the people from the land.

The options to educate the nation through punishment could include allowing another nation to conquer and subjugate Israel, but when *shemitta* is forgotten, and with it the sense of understanding of the nation's purpose, subjugation within the boundaries of the nation's land, will not be able to do the trick; as the whole national life, from the economy to the festivals, have become rotten to the core.

The sad result is the most fearful of punishments, that which is described in *Parashat Bechukkotai*. A nation which has lost understanding of its purpose and its land, needs to undergo surgery, to be excised from its land.

Finally they had to take the cruel-kind medicine, the dreadful surgical operation of separating the people from the land…

As the Musaf prayer states, "Due to our sins we have been exiled from our land;” Rav Kook builds on this to explain exactly how the exile is to serve as the antidote to this deeply rooted dilemma of national proportions.

It is specifically because the people living in the land of Israel are aiming to create a commonwealth and society which merges the physical and the spiritual that the stakes are so high and the challenge so great.

Rav Kook then goes on to quote the scary prophecies in *Parashat* *Bechukkotai* which detail this frightening reality.

But this is not the end. The process concludes with hope. The purpose of exile is not to supplant life in Israel, nor to make exile a lasting option (as the Abarbanel so keenly observes). Rather, the nation as a nation can only survive and exist in the Land that God has destined for it.

Religious life in the Diaspora is so limited that it is possible to refocus on at least the spiritual aspects of existence in order to prepare for a return to Israel, as individuals prepare to reform the nation. When the nation is out of its land, it cannot apply itself to building up the physical part of the nation; it has no land, no national economy, and no connection to the challenges of merging a secular society with a divine mission.

In our next lesson, we will see how Rav Kook explains the historical significance and the challenge of the Jewish return to the land.