**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

**\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\***

**THE PHILOSOPHY OF *SHEMITTA***

**By Rav Binyamin Zimmerman**

**Shiur #23: *Shabbat Ha-aretz* and Mount Sinai in *Parashat Behar***

**Introduction**

The largest discussion of the *mitzvot* of *shemitta* in the Torah is in *Parashat Behar.* Firstly, it provides the directives for a number of very significant *mitzvot* involving the laws of *shemitta*. Secondly, its presentation of *shemitta* involves a context and terminology that highlights *shemitta's* importance in the overall framework of *mitzvot*.

The name of the portion comes from its first verse (*Vayikra* 25:1), which tells us that “God spoke to Moshe *be-har Sinai (*on the mountain of Sinai).” The Book of *Vayikra* opens with similar phrasing but a different location:

God called Moshe and spoke to him in the Tent of Meeting.

Both Chapter 26 and 27 conclude by saying that the above laws were given on Mount Sinai. In other words, despite the book of *Vayikra* beginning with laws taught in the Tabernacle, *Behar* and *Bechukkotai* are a complete section transmitted to Moshe at Mount Sinai. *Shemitta* and *yovel* figure prominently in this unit as laws to be kept, under pain of severe penalty. *Shemitta* is known from *Shemot*, but *Vayikra* stresses its Sinaitic provenance.

**“What does the sabbatical year have to do with Mount Sinai?”**

Rashi (ad loc.) asks a famous question which has become a colloquialism for off-topic discussions, based on *Torat Kohanim*: “What is the connection between *shemitta* and Mount Sinai?” Why are we told explicitly, before the laws of *shemitta* are set out, that God said this “at Mount Sinai”? “Were not all the laws taught at Sinai?”

The Rashbam replies rather straightforwardly: the Torah is indicating that these laws were taught earlier, "before the erection of the Tabernacle." Why do we need to know this? Rav Yoni Grossman explains that choosing this non-chronological order allows the reader to maintain focus and realize that holiness is not restricted to the Tabernacle, though it begins with laws of holiness that are focused on a specific place, the Tabernacle, and primarily regarding specific individuals, the *kohanim*:

Here the discussion concerns the sanctity of place and necessitates specific conduct. There may be a specific place where God causes His presence to be manifest, but by the same token "the whole earth is mine." Through these laws, every tiller of the land must realize that the entire world belongs to God and that by His will alone it is given to man to work it and to derive sustenance. When the nation as a whole desists from working the land every seventh year, it indicates God's ownership of the whole earth, and not only the place of the Temple where His presence is manifest.

Rashi, however, gives the Midrashic answer.

[It teaches us that] just as the generalities, specifics and details of the sabbatical year were taught at Sinai, so generalities and details of all the commandments were taught at Sinai.

Rashi goes on to explain that even those *mitzvot* which the Torah mentions at the Plains of Moab (at the end of the forty-year journey) were initially taught in full detail at Sinai and repeated at the Plains of Moab.

The Ramban, on the other hand, follows a more literal interpretation of *Torat Kohanim*: *shemitta* was chosen as an example to indicate that just as *shemitta's* general principles were taught at Sinai, as mentioned in *Parashat Mishpatim*, so too were *shemitta's* details, as recorded in *Parashat Behar*. This then serves as an indication that all other *mitzvot* as well were taught at Sinai, both their details and their specifics.

**The Importance of the Generalities and Specifics**

To gain a better understanding of Rashi's response, it is important to identify the significance of the generalities and specifics. Many people can identify with the overall outlook of Torah, but find the particulars to be difficult to comprehend or even distressing. If God wants me to perform a mitzva is the precision with which it is commanded really part of His will? To this, the Torah responds, in the context of *shemitta*, an astounding: Yes! In fact, in a world where our knowledge grows daily, despite being a small fraction of true understanding, we recognize that God created a world of intense depth and exactness, with meticulous accuracy. This applies to His Torah as well, as “God used the Torah as the blueprint of Creation.”

In *Orot Ha-Torah* 3:8, Rav A.Y. Kook cites the idea of the Kuzari (1:68-9) that just as we recognize the greatness and vastness of God's creation, we must recognize the beauty in His precision and exactness. He cites the verse in *Tehillim* (92:6): “How great are your actions, God!” He adds that one must also say: How precise — to the smallest detail — are your actions, God!

In the same manner in which we are overcome with wonder at the great luminaries, the wondrous expanses filling the amazing universe, and the powerful natural forces, so too, we are overcome with wonderment when looking at the depth of precision in all aspects of creation, in the details seen in the limbs of the smallest creatures, etc. And through this complete analysis of the two extremes [the big picture and the small detail], the image of reality will become full in one's heart.

Then Rav Kook goes on to say that in the same way that one can become enamored with these two aspects of the natural world, the general and the specific, one may see the wonderful principles which are explicated in the Torah regarding how one should think of the ways of righteousness and spiritual wisdom. He makes reference to a Talmudic passage which depicts Rabbi Akiva deriving mountains of laws from every jot and tittle of the Torah. Torah greatness requires the whole scene: the big picture of the forest as well as the detailed aspects of the trees.

This is reminiscent of passage at the end of Tractate *Megilla* (31a) which states: "Any place in which you find the greatness of God there you find His humility," proving this from various verses. This idea is repeated throughout Tanakh, showing that the same precision with which God creates the solar system, He applies to caring for the orphan and the widow. This passage is often quoted by HaRav Yehuda Amital, who writes:

It seems that the Torah was concerned with the possibility that people would observe the general principles but not the details. People are sometimes prepared to accept the general principles of the Torah, but when it comes to the smaller details, whose relation to the overall idea is not immediately apparent, they have difficulty in fulfilling them. The general principles of Judaism are easy enough to "sell," but the details present much greater difficulty.

Let us take, for example, the laws of Shabbat. The idea of one day of rest from work every week is accepted and practiced today worldwide, but if it also entails a prohibition of switching on lights, etc., the whole package becomes less attractive. Rav Kook writes that the reason for secularization in his generation was not contempt for the ideals of the Torah, but rather that people were not prepared to live up to the detailed daily demands of the law.

HaRav Amital goes on to say, however, that the opposite perspective, losing sight of the forest for the trees, is also a major flaw.

On the other hand, the reverse phenomenon also exists: there are people who are so engrossed in the details that they lose sight of the general principles. Today, the search for extra stringencies and the desire to set up new "boundaries around the Torah" has sometimes led people to ignore the goals of the *mitzvot*. The Torah thus wished to stress the importance of both the general principles and the nitty-gritty details.

**The Difficulty**

This statement of the Midrash, however understood, would initially indicate that in fact, there is no major connection between *shemitta* and Sinai. After all, *shemitta* is used for illustrative purposes to indicate that all *mitzvot* were taught in great detail at Sinai. It teaches us the importance of the generalitiesand the specifics, the need to see the big picture of the Torah's forest, and to analyze the beauty of every tree. On the other hand, it indicates that one must not become lost in the details.

This is truly an important lesson, but why associate it with *shemitta*? Is there in fact no inherent connection between *shemitta* and Sinai? If so, surely another mitzva could be used for these illustrative purposes; essentially Rashi's question has not been fully answered!

Ibn Ezra, for instance, explains that *shemitta*‘s association with Mount Sinai is indicative of its being taught before the rest of the Book of *Vayikra*. He explains that it is particularly because *shemitta* appears in *Mishpatim* that it must be taught at Sinai. After discussing the licentious relationships and other sins that bring about exile in Chapters 18-20, the Torah discusses *shemitta* and *yovel* in *Behar* and then blessings and curses in *Bechukkotai*, to indicate that our covenant at Sinai includes the observance of *shemitta* as a precondition for remaining in the Land of Israel.

The idea of *shemitta's* central role in the covenant at Sinai is also stated by the Midrash (*Mekhilta Yitro* 3), which cites Rabbi Yishmael’s view that only once the Jewish people accepted *shemitta* and *yovel*, along with the blessings and curses associated with their fulfillment, was God willing to give the Torah to them.

While Ibn Ezra's approach is certainly different from that of Rashi, a similar question still arises. What is it about *shemitta* that is so connected to Sinai and so central to the Sinaitic covenant?

**The Context**

Rav Hirsch also makes reference to the context of *Behar*, explaining the connection between *shemitta* and the previous chapter in the Torah which concludes *Parashat Emor*, i.e., the episode of the blasphemer.

The concluding verses of the preceding chapter teach us that God is the source of all justice; the personality of God is the basis for all the laws governing the rights of men and pertaining to the things men mark out as their property. The present chapter deals with the narrower sphere of agrarian law, and it teaches us that the Land of Israel and every man of Israel and his property are owned by God alone; and on the basis of this legal principle, it develops a code of agrarian, personal, and property law. *Shemitta* and *yovel*, the redemption of land, houses and servants, the laws of usury — these are all logical outgrowths of one legal principle: Israel and its land belong to God, Who has the sole legitimate claim to them.

Rav Hirsch notes that in the episode of the blasphemer, Moshe has to consult God to find out the penalty. Therefore, the Torah stresses that the *mitzvot* of *shemitta*, although not applicable until the Jewish people inhabit the land of Israel, was taught with all its principles and specifics at Sinai, to indicate that all *mitzvot* other than blasphemy were taught in this manner. It was only in reference to blasphemy (evidently the Torah did not want to raise the possibility that such a grave offense would occur) that it left the matter as a general principle without teaching its details until history made it necessary.

Rav Hirsch indicates that *shemitta's* connection to Sinai is only that its lack of direct connection to immediate relevance when the Torah was given allowed it to serve as a model for indicating that the general principles and specifics of all *mitzvot* were taught at Sinai. Others, however, find a more direct connection either between the principles and specifics of *shemitta* or regarding the connection between *shemitta* and Mount Sinai.

HaRav Amital elsewhere explains why specifically *shemitta* is chosen as the topic to teach the significance of the general principles as well as the details. He notes that many search for reasons for *shemitta*, but a basic reason already appears in the Talmud itself:

God said to Israel: Plant for six years and let it lie fallow the seventh so that you will know that the land is Mine. (*Sanhedrin* 39a)

Rashi there (s.v. *Kedei*) explains:

So that your heart will not grow haughty with the prosperity of your land, leading you to forget the Yoke of His Kingship.

The Talmudic passage is explicating an idea that is essentially expressed in the Torah itself:

And the land shall not be sold for eternity, for the land is Mine, for you are strangers and sojourners with Me. (*Vayikra* 25:23)

The Torah is indicating that *shemitta* comes to teach us that even if one works the land it yields fruit, he must always recall that he is not its owner; it belongs to God. HaRav Amital goes on to say that if this is the goal of *shemitta*, then it is easy to identify the connection between its specific laws and this general principle.

In light of all of this, it is understandable why the Torah chooses the laws of *shemitta* as the opportunity to teach us that we are obligated to observe not only the general principles but also the details. *Shemitta* is one of the very few *mitzvot* where the function of every detail is understood - the Torah forbids us to sow, reap, prune, etc., in order that we should remember that we are not the real owners of the land. Every detail comes to teach the same lesson: that only God decides what will happen to the land, because the land is in fact His and not ours. Therefore, the Torah wishes to tell us that just as in the case of the mitzva of *shemitta* it is understood that we are to fulfill both the principle and all the details, likewise when it comes to all the other *mitzvot*, both aspects must be observed even though sometimes the connection between them is less clear to us.

**An Indication of Importance**

While all this is true, there are a number of commentators who note that the reason *shemitta* is rooted in Sinai, an essential part of the covenant, and the place to teach the importance of both the principles and the details is due to the importance and centrality of the *mitzvot* of *shemitta*.

Rav Shlomo Yosef Zevin explains based on what we saw in Shiur #07. It is specifically because *shemitta's* message is so broad, containing *bein adam la-Makom*, *le-chavero,* and *le-atzmo* elements, that *shemitta* was chosen for these purposes.

This idea is expressed a little earlier in glorious terminology by the Ketav Sofer (*Behar*). He notes that *shemitta* encompasses such fundamental lessons that it is only appropriate that it be taught at Mount Sinai. It represents the pillars of all aspects of Jewish ideals: faith, humility, kindness: “It seems that this mitzva is the basis and foundation of all commandments.”

Firstly, he quotes his father, the Chatam Sofer, who describes *shemitta's* central role in providing lessons of *emuna* and *bitachon*:

I heard in the name of Father, the Light of the Exile (let the memory of the righteous be blessed) that *shemitta* makes visible to the eyes of all that the Torah is from heaven and Moshe did not proclaim it of his own accord, for how would it have been possible for him to promise, "it shall produce the crop of the three years," which is unnatural? Rather, the Torah surely is from heaven.

The Ketav Sofer himself personally adds that *shemitta* also teaches one humility, a tremendous pillar of the Torah, and something connected to the humble mountaintop which God chose for the giving of the Torah. It therefore serves as a lesson for all aspects of the Torah, which also require much humility. In his next piece, however, the Ketav Sofer goes even further:

"At Mount Sinai, saying." “What does the sabbatical year have to do with Mount Sinai…?” The question is, it is indisputable that the Torah was given at Mount Sinai. Why, then, did He specify here "at Mount Sinai"? **Because this *mitzva* is the basis and foundation of all commandments**, he writes here that it was proclaimed from Sinai and inclusive of all commandments.

He goes on to describe many of *shemitta's* lessons which we have already discussed in the past. The centrality of *shemitta*, its connection to Sinai, is due to its being the foundation of all *mitzvot*, something which clearly should inspire us to want to know more about it.

**Connection to Torah and Sinai**

Let us return to the original question: “What does the sabbatical year have to do with Mount Sinai?”The answer: everything.

For both practical and fundamental reasons, *shemitta* affords an opportunity for the Jew to reconnect with Mount Sinai, and its lessons of not only learning Torah but re-experiencing the revolutionary event of the Sinai experience that is so central to our identity.

A number of the practical reasons we discussed earlier, in Shiur #09. The sabbatical year is a year off of work, affording the opportunity to reconnect to Torah learning. The awe-inspiring experience of *shemitta* also ensures this study will be undertaken humbly, which is so essential (as the Ketav Sofer notes).

Additionally, Abarbanel (*Behar* II) notes that *shemitta* allows one to realize that man's days on earth are numbered, where many individuals only have 50 years of active life after their first 20 years of youth. He writes:

While the farmer relies on God to provide his needs, he is free to occupy himself with other matters, possibly even extremely important matters that one doesn't normally have the proper time to contemplate:

… it is appropriate that wholesome people be more concerned with loss of their time than with loss of all possessions and money that they have, for the days of one's years and one's life are the path in which one walks to attain his perfection, …It therefore is appropriate that one not waste his time… In order that one always keep this in mind, divine wisdom saw fit to awaken him through its *mitzvot* to the brevity of his days and the limited number of his years. … Indeed, for this very reason, He (may He be blessed) gave us the commands of *shemitta* and of *yovel*, for in the *shemitta* [cycle] there are six years of cultivating the land and in the seventh year is comprehensive rest, which serves to awaken and imply that the span of one’s life is seventy years…

He goes on to say that the mitzva allows man to realize that life is too short to focus on merely attaining wealth, especially in that it won't remain with one after death.

While few will argue with this reality, there is good reason to believe that beyond the practical utility of the sabbatical year, there is also a fundamental connection between the Torah of Sinai and the sabbatical year.

The unifying elements of *shemitta* break down class barriers and allow people to unite “as one man with one heart,” as happened at Sinai. Most of all, the Sukkot after the *shemitta* year features the mitzva of *Hakhel,* which is a reenactment of the Sinai experience and acts a fitting culmination of the *shemitta* year.

While much more could be said about *shemitta's* connection to Sinai, in truth, the Midrash’s question may be formulated a little differently — perhaps causing the question to fall aside totally. Stay tuned for our next lesson, as we'll introduce the *mitzvot* of *Parashat* *Behar* with what very well might be an explicit answer to this question in the Torah.