**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**THE PHILOSOPHY OF *SHEMITTA***

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This shiur is available in the archives at:

[www.vbm-torah.org/archive/shemitta75/13shemitta.htm](http://www.vbm-torah.org/archive/shemitta75/13shemitta.htm)

**Shiur #13: The Gift of Israel — The Condition of *Shemitta***

**The Integral Aspect of the Land**

In last week's [lesson](http://109.74.206.98/en/shiur-12-between-man-earth-and-his-land), we saw *shemitta's* importance in man's relationship with land in general and the Land of Israel in particular. A deeper look at the way in which the Torah explicitly formulate this connection reveals that the story of the Jewish people in *Eretz Yisrael* can be told only in the context of *shemitta*. This link, which attaches significance, meaning, and even meta-history to the trials and travails of a people who were exiled from their land, dispersed, and attempted to return can be understood through the eyes that the Torah gives us, i.e., the lens of *shemitta*.

First and foremost, the Torah's initial presentation of the *mitzvot* of *shemitta* calls into question a longstanding assumption of many Jews who attribute to *Eretz Yisrael* national and even spiritual significance but do not see it as an integral part of the Jewish soul, either on an individual or collective plane. Their rationale is rather simple; although the forefathers (*Avot*) of our nation were promised that their children would inherit *Eretz Yisrael*, the Torah itself is given in the desert, on Mount Sinai, outside of the land, indicating that *Eretz Yisrael* is not an integral need of a nation which would ultimately be exiled from its land. Let's take a quick look at this approach and see if it stands up to the test of *shemitta*.

After Avraham is commanded to leave his home and birthplace, and to go to "the land which I will show you" (*Bereishit* 12:1), the destiny of the Jewish people is presumed to lie in *Eretz Yisrael*. It is there that his children will become a nation, and it is there that they are meant to settle.

From this point forward, every departure — Avraham’s in time of famine, Yaakov's to find a wife — is transitory; the people can only become a nation in the Land that God has given them. Even as Yaakov prepares to bring his entire family to Egypt amidst the famine after Yosef reveals himself, he is trepidatious. Despite his desire to see Yosef, Yaakov only agrees to go when God reassures him, in response to his offerings, that this journey will be beneficial for the nascent nation:

And He said, "I am the God who is the God of your father. Do not be afraid of going down to Egypt, for there I will make you into a great nation. I will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up, and Yosef will place his hand on your eyes.” (*Bereishit* 46:3-4)

Yet, as Moshe Rabbeinu is introduced and given the task of bringing the people out of Egypt, he also presents a new model for the people. At his appointment, when he is invested with his mission at the Burning Bush on Mount Sinai, God responds to Moshe that the ultimate sign of his leadership will be at Mount Sinai.

And He said, "For I will be with you, and this is the sign for you that it was I Who sent you: when you take the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain." (*Shemot* 3:12)

Moshe becomes God's agent in saving the people, but he also emerges as "Rabbeinu," our master and teacher. The fact that he receives the Torah on behalf of the people outside of Israel may indicate that a full Torah lifestyle may be lived in the Diaspora. In fact, Moshe himself never enters the Land, though it is his most fervent wish. So we might say the specific territory promised to our forefathers is not essential to the character or the purpose of our people, but merely serves as the site to build the nation; technically speaking, it could have been anywhere else in the world.

This approach may be challenged for numerous reasons, but the fact that the Torah is given on Sinai and not in Israel is a recurring point of interest. Rav Yosef Carmel notes that there is good reason to interpret the Torah's introductory remarks in *Parashat Behar* surrounding *shemitta* as a disproof of such an outlook. Although the Torah is given on Mount Sinai, on foreign soil, emphasizing its relevance in the Diaspora, nevertheless, "one must remember that the purpose of the giving of the Torah is creating the complete Jewish life of our people in *Eretz Yisrael*. This complete Jewish life includes undoubtedly includes the central *mitzvot* of the *shemitta* year."

This perspective notes the transient *kedusha* of Sinai, which vanishes when the Jews leave. The Tablets are placed in the Holy Ark, and from there it is transported to *Eretz Yisrael* and ultimately placed at the center of the Temple, an indication that the central point of the nation, not just its home, is *Eretz Yisrael.* The unique nature of our people is represented by the *mitzvot* particular to *Eretz Yisrael*, as these were the ones Moshe wanted to enter the land in order to fulfill (*Sota* 11a). *Shemitta* is the pinnacle of these *mitzvot*, and therefore, it is not at all strange that it is used for refuting the vision of Diaspora Judaism as being complete.

**The Present Tense**

As *Eretz Yisrael* is a necessity, the Jewish people's rights to the land are already clinched by the relationship with the *Avot*. However, within the presentation of *shemitta*, a different picture emerges. The Torah uses very interesting terminology in its reference to *Eretz Yisrael* in the context of *shemitta*, referring to it in the present tense:

When you come to the land which I am giving (*noten*) you, the land shall rest a Sabbath to God. (*Vayikra* 25:2)

This contrasts with other instances in which the Land of Israel is described as “the land which I have given,” as far back as *Bereishit* 35:12.

The Or Ha-chayim in his comments to these verses derives a powerful lesson from the present-tense formulation of "which I am giving.” He states:

We need to know why the Torah finds it necessary to mention that… specifically this legislation was revealed at Mount Sinai…

Perhaps the fact that here God describes His gift to the Jewish people of *Eretz Yisrael* is a reason for Him to remind the people that the gift of the land is conditional on the observation of the *mitzvot*, as they accepted when they stood at Mount Sinai and received the Ten Commandments. The present tense “which I am giving” ties the gift to Mount Sinai where the Israelites undertook their oath to keep the Torah.

Thus, *shemitta* makes clear that *Eretz Yisrael* is a constant but conditional gift.

**The Alshikh**

The Alshikh (ad loc.) vividly expresses similar sentiments. As Rashi (*Bereishit* 1:1) explains, it is through *Eretz Yisrael* that God exhibits His claim of ownership to the earth, showing the world that He is its creator, and therefore He has the right to give the land to whomever He desires. Thus, in *shemitta*, “a Sabbath to God,” the “land flowing with milk and honey" will continue to provide even when unworked.

First, the Alshikh poses a question: what does it mean for the land to rest? What significance does a year of rest have for dirt? Even if man were to rest from his work in the field, man would rest, not the land. Why then does the Torah formulate it in this manner?

The Alshikh offers the following response:

It is possible that the Torah wishes to make the point that even land can be holy. Just as the Jew receives an additional spiritual force on the Shabbat*,* so does the land in Israel during the *shemitta* year. There is a precedent for this in the sanctity of Mount Sinai during the revelation experience, when the people are warned that they will die if they ascend or touch the mountain (*Shemot* 19:12)

The potential sanctity of *Eretz Yisrael* stems from the fact that God is giving it to us. The souls of the Jewish people are deeply attached to the Holy Land, as demonstrated by the terms for travelling to the land… Avraham is told “Go for yourself,” as he is moving towards himself, to his true essence, as one is truly at home only in *Eretz Yisrael*.

The concept of a land which rests is uniquely applicable to *Eretz Yisrael*, and it is there that the Jewish people may find their essence.

**A Seven-Year Gift**

A similar idea of the status of the Land of Israel is expressed in the future tense used in the blessing Yaakov receives from Yitzchak:

And may God give you of the dew of the heavens and of the fatness of the earth and an abundance of grain and wine. (*Bereishit* 27:28)

Rashi cites from the Midrash the meaning of the term*:*

May He give and give again. (*Bereishit Rabba* 66:3)

*Eretz Yisrael* and the blessing therein are a constant gift from God. Unlike the snake of Eden (*Bereishit* 3:14) or Esav (*Bereishit* 27:39), who are given their due at one point and have no recourse to speak to God or develop a connection with Him in the future, the Jewish people remain connected to God and maintain a constant relationship with Him through the land, which requires a constant flow of rainfall and divine beneficence to show its true, majestic colors.

This reinforces a point made by the Or Ha-chayim elsewhere, in regards to the weekly Shabbat (*Bereishit* 2:3): “The world lacked the ingredients which assured it of permanence until the Sabbath came into existence.” He notes that the Torah states (*Shemot* 20:11): “For six days, God made the heavens and the earth, the sea and everything in them,” He explains:

At the time God created the universe, He invested it with only enough power to endure six days, for reasons known only to Himself… So God created one day which would be able to invest the world with staying power for another six days. If God had not created the Shabbat, the nothingness and chaos preceding these six days would have returned and God would have had to start the process of creation ex nihilo all over again. Due to the infusion of the "soul" of Shabbat, the universe was fixed on a more permanent basis…The words “for on it He rested” indicate that by means of this special day, He was able to rest from all His work... i.e., creation ex nihilo which only He can do…

This comment of the Or Ha-chayim, that the world is created anew every Shabbat (a favorite of the Hasidic masters) may additionally apply to *shemitta*, *Shabbat ha-aretz*, in turn imbuing it with a message of renewal, *hitchadshut*.

The Shem Mi-Shmuel (*Vayikra* 25:1, p. 347) explains that the reason the Torah refers to *shemitta* as Shabbat is that the world is created seven days at a time, and it renews itself every Shabbat for another seven days.

Just as the created world in general, so too is the inheritance of *Eretz Yisrael* for the Jewish people; it is given to them only for seven years at a time to work the land, and then it is given to them again after another seven years. Therefore, its fruits are holy… And this too is Shabbat: the weekly Shabbat for the world and *Shabbat ha-aretz* expressing the nature of *Eretz Yisrael* as a constant gift to the people.

This approach. both to Shabbat in general and to the *Shabbat ha-aretz* of *shemitta* in particular, is advocated by the Sefat Emet (see *Toledot* 5634). He notes that "which I am giving*"* indicates that *Eretz Yisrael* is a perennial gift, allowing constant renewal and a continual relationship between God and His people (*Behar* 5648). In another piece (*Behar* 5635) he states that this constant gift allows for a feeling of renewal in man's acceptance of the entire Torah and all its *mitzvot*, and this is the reason that *shemitta* is taught in the context of Sinai. (See *Shabbat U-mo’ed Bi-shvi'it*, chapter 9.)

Moreover, this allows to understand why the Jewish presence in the Land of Israel depends on the observance of *shemitta* observance (see lessons [4](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5CYossie%20Bloch%5CAppData%5CLocal%5CTemp%5CShiur#04: The Interdependence of the Man and the Land)-[6](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5CYossie%20Bloch%5CAppData%5CLocal%5CTemp%5CShiur#06: The Return)). The constant gift of *Eretz Yisrael* requires the constant connection that *shemitta* provides. In fact, the Land is only granted to us until the following *shemitta*; at that point, the observance of the mitzva entitles the people to a renewed gift of seven years on the land. Failure to observe *shemitta* is almost tantamount to a refusal of the gift and thus entails exile.

With this in mind, we can appreciate the work of Rav Avraham Yitzchak Ha-Kohen Kook (1865-1935). He witnessed the ingathering of exiles into *Eretz Yisrael* in his lifetime, and his broad vision for the future of the land and the nation was expressed in the context of *shemitta*. In his introduction to his work *Shabbat Ha-aretz,* he discusses the concept, its goals, its challenges and its implications. To understand his words, we must take a moment to review some of the philosophical underpinnings of his approach to *Eretz Yisrael*, based on Rav Yehuda Ha-Levi's *Kuzari*.

**Rav Yehuda Ha-Levi's Outlook on the Land**

The uniqueness of the land and its special character appears throughout the *Kuzari*. There Rav Yehuda Ha-Levi discusses the unique nature of *Eretz Yisrael*, in response to the queries of the Khazar king regarding the special advantages of *Eretz Yisrael*. His interlocutor, the *Chaver,* explains that Israel’s uniqueness is expressed in *shemitta* (II, 17).

Do you not see that even the land was given its Sabbaths, as it is said: “Sabbath of the land” (*Vayikra* 25:6), and “When you come to the land which I am giving you, the land shall rest a Sabbath to God.” (ibid. v. 2). It is forbidden to sell it forever, as it is said: “For Mine is the land” (v. 23). Observe that the “feasts of God” and the “Sabbaths of the land” belong to the “land of God.”

This small section of the *Kuzari*'s argument is found in the midst of his description of the necessity of *Eretz Yisrael* for the Jewish people, both as individuals and as a collective (an idea he alludes to in I, 95). There the *Kuzari* presents a parallel to the natural world where only certain things grow.

*Eretz Yisrael* is a unique land, especially suited to nurture the Jewish people and to allow it to achieve its spiritual aspirations. He explains that the concept of a chosen land is very understandable, in that all agree that certain lands are more uniquely suited for physical growth and for the cultivation of certain crops. The same is true in the spiritual realm (II, 10):

You will have no difficulty in perceiving that one country may have superior qualities to others. There are places in which particular vegetables, minerals, or animals are found, or where the inhabitants are distinguished by their form and character, since perfection or deficiency of the soul are produced by the mingling of the elements.

In response to the King's wondering what unique aspects are the lot of those who live in the Land, the *Chaver* responds (II, 11-12):

In the second instance, it would belong to the country, on account of the religious acts connected with it, which I would compare to the cultivation of the vineyard. No other place may share the distinction of the divine influence, just as no other hill country may be able to produce a variety of fine wine.

The land can bring the nation to realize its potential, as it is only in *Eretz Yisrael* (or on account of it) that prophecy is attainable for mankind.

**Rav Kook's Outlook on the Land**

Rav Kook's outlook on *Eretz Yisrael* is heavily based on the outlook of the *Kuzari*. In his well-known opening statement regarding the Land (*Orot*, *Eretz Yisrael* 1), he takes issue with two perspectives about *Eretz Yisrael* which see in it primarily practical significance. In his rebuttal, he echoes the *Kuzari*'s sentiments and even takes it a little further:

*Eretz Yisrael* is not a superficial matter, a superficial asset of the nation, merely a means to achieve the objective of overall unity and material, or even spiritual, survival. *Eretz Yisrael* is an essential element bound with a living connection to the people, linked by its inner essence to the people's existence.

He is very adamant that the Land is not merely "a means to achieve the objective of overall unity and material… survival" of the nation, what is sometimes referred to contemporarily as a safe haven. Additionally, it is not necessary merely for the "overall unity and… even spiritual survival" of the nation. Rav Kook posits that this perspective "cannot survive, for its foundation is shaky… the true adoption of the idea of Judaism in the Diaspora will only come from its deep implantation in *Eretz Yisrael*…” Such a conception fails to recognize how the destiny of the Jewish people is intertwined with that of the land.

What serves as the source for both Rav Yehuda Ha-Levi and Rav Kook regarding this level of connection between the people and the Land? Quite simply, *shemitta*. The Torah conditions the Jewish presence in Israel upon its observance; the terminology “which I am giving to you*”* connects it to the right to receive the gift of *Eretz Yisrael;* and it is through the re-emergence of *shemitta* that the Jewish people's return to the land is manifest.

It is therefore understandable that Rav Kook chooses the introduction for his work on *shemitta* to be the place where he explains the nature of the Jewish connection to Israel and the significance of the rebirth.

Nevertheless, it might seem strange for other reasons. The focus of *Shabbat Ha-aretz* is creating a halakhic basis for the rationale of the *heter mekhira*, the controversial means of selling *Eretz Yisrael* to non-Jews in order to allow cultivation during *shemitta*. At first glance, this might appear to be an attempt to employ leniencies rather than rise to the challenge of *shemitta* observance. Yet it is specifically in this context that Rav Kook expresses his historical outlook on the people, their land, their exile, and their restoration — amid the challenges and opportunities of *shemitta* observance.

In next week's lesson, we will deal with this anomaly while analyzing Rav Kook's approach, thereby gaining a fascinating perspective on the past and the present, and hopefully some insight into the future as well.