**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**THE PHILOSOPHY OF *SHEMITTA***

**By Rav Binyamin Zimmerman**

**Shiur #16: The Shabbat Element of *Shemitta***

**Between Optimism and Reality**

In [last week's lesson](http://etzion.org.il/en/shiur-15-rav-kook%E2%80%99s-perspective-return), we began to see Rav Kook's take on the role the *mitzvot* of *shemitta* and *yovel* play in the nation's return to the Land of Israel, in a manner that manifests "the splendor of God;” *shemitta's* message serves as the antidote for the misplaced perspective that necessitates exile. Rav Kook powerfully describes how *shemitta* epitomizes the story of a nation returning to its land, ready to remedy the situation that brought about its exile.

Before analyzing exactly how *shemitta* and *yovel* educate the nation about a redeemed society, it's worth noting HaRav Amital's remarks regarding what parts of Rav Kook's vision still remain unfulfilled.

HaRav Yehuda Amital, Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Har Etzion and a Holocaust survivor, offers a fascinating discussion of Rav Kook's outlook from the historical perspective of seventy years after the latter’s death. Although Rav Amital credits Rav Kook with providing the spiritual nourishment that nurtured him during the years of the Holocaust, but that very catastrophe, coupled with the imperfect nature of the state born in its aftermath, convinces him of the limits of the chief rabbi’s optimism:

My spiritual outlook is based on and nourished by the writings of Rav Kook. His works sustained me during my difficult days in a Nazi labor camp, and in their merit I managed to withstand the difficult trials I have encountered. But specifically because of what I learned from his teachings, I believe that we, the followers of his approach, must view the current situation in accordance with reality, and not quote passages written eighty years ago without considering their applicability to our period.

…Our love of our country must not blind us from criticizing its shortcomings. We remain very, very far from the ideal Jewish State, and we must therefore do whatever we can to bring about its realization. A more just society and stronger public values are necessary prerequisites for its actualization. If we want to hasten the ultimate redemption, we must work harder to ensure moral values on both the individual and communal levels. Closing the social gaps, concern for the vulnerable elements of society, fighting poverty, and respectful treatment of the non-Jews in Israel - all these measures will bring us closer to the day for which we long. We hope and believe that our State will develop into the ideal Jewish State, "the foundation of the Divine Throne in the world, whose entire desire is that God shall be One and His Name shall be One."

**Rav Kook's Recipe for Full Redemption**

As noted last week, Rav Kook identifies an educational purpose of exile, as it purifies the nation who would focus its efforts on spiritual matters in the absence of the physical needs of a state. Rav Kook's optimistic view indicates that upon the nation's return, they would reconnect with the value system expressed in *shemitta* and create a spiritually-driven society that is also capable of effectively dealing with the physical needs of the nation.

While certain aspects of Rav Kook's historical perspective seem right on the mark, some of the optimism has remained as yet unjustified, as the return to the land often sees repeated expressions of the depraved behavior that made the Jewish people deserving of exile in the first place. Rav Amital therefore offers a slightly different model for a perspective on the overall Jewish return. We will try something a little different. Rav Kook's introduction also describes the role that the agricultural *mitzvot* in the Land of Israel, primarily those of *shemitta* and *yovel*, assume in preparing the society for its historic role. This is the ticket to understanding the aspects of *shemitta* which, if understood properly, may guide the nation towards achieving these optimistic goals. It may very well be that Rav Kook's model wasn’t flawed, but our perseverance in realizing *shemitta's* messages which has fallen short; therefore, studying it and remaining faithful to its calling will illuminate the path towards all we can hope for.

Among the various elements of *shemitta*, Rav Kook focuses on one in particular: the role that *Shabbat* and *shemitta* play in refocusing the energies of the Jew. It is not coincidental that Rav Kook entitles his work *Shabbat Ha-aretz*; the true character of the *shemitta* year can only be understood through this term, used by the Torah in its lengthy description in *Parashat Behar*.

**The Shabbat Element of *Shabbat Ha-aretz***

The connection between *Shabbat* and *shemitta* is something we have mentioned on a number of occasions. In fact, as we have seen, it is a theme that accompanies *shemitta* constantly. *Shabbat ha-aretz* would actually be a more appropriate name for the *shemitta* year, as that is the term in *Behar*.

Yet one might ask: what exactly is the relationship between Shabbat and *shemitta*? Besides the idea of resting from work in the field, is there any deeper connection between Shabbat and *Shabbat ha-aretz*?

The Sages view this connection as very significant and even entertain the possibility that there would be no need for the weekly Shabbat to be observed during the entire year of *Shabbat ha-aretz*. Although that possibility is swiftly rejected, it is indicative of some deeper connection, at the very least in purpose, between the two.

The connection is also expressed in the Torah's terminology; as Rashi notes, citing *Torat Kohanim*, the phrase “Sabbath to God” is used regarding only two subjects: Shabbat (Shemot 20:9) and *shemitta* (*Vayikra* 25:2-4). *Shemitta,* like the weekly Shabbat, teaches us how to merge the physical with the spiritual.

There are a number of explanations offered regarding the overall connection between Shabbat and *shemitta*. At the very least, what Shabbat is to the world, *Shabbat ha-aretz* is to the *aretz?* The Shabbat of the land is there to ensure that the Jewish people do not forget the spiritual element of their possession of the country.

Moreover, the numerical aspect is also significant. The *Midrash Aggada* (*Behar* 25, 6) notes that every number seven is significant in the eyes of God: Chanokh was the seventh generation of mankind, Moshe Rabbeinu was the seventh generation from Avraham, etc. Shabbat is the seventh day of the week; *shemitta* is the seventh year; and after seven periods of seven, there is the *yovel* year, just as the Giving of the Torah occurs seven weeks after the Exodus from Egypt.

The Ramban notes the eschatological element: the Sages describe the world as being extant for six millennia, followed by the seventh millennium, that of complete Shabbat and redemption. *Shemitta* is a reminder of this upcoming reality.

HaRav Aharon Lichtenstein notes that part of the parallel identified by the *Rishonim* between Shabbat and the sabbatical year is the following:

Both testify to God’s creation of the world… *Sefer Ha-chinnukh* (84) emphasizes the point that, like Shabbat, the sabbatical year indicates God’s creation of the world and negates the notion that the world had always existed. In his commentary to the Torah (*Vayikra* 25:2), the Ramban broadens this perspective. He sees the sabbatical year as a reminder and testimony not only to Creation itself, which is more the function of Shabbat, but also to what follows from it – or as he develops the idea at the beginning of the book of *Bereishit* (2:3), the nature of historical development in general. The Sabbath of *shemitta* parallels God’s Sabbath and the seventh millennium… At issue here is not only the Creation, but also the continued existence of the world, and to a certain degree the nature of its existence.

Similarly, Rav Hirsch poignantly expresses the goals Shabbat and *shemitta* share in recognizing God as the Creator of the universe and advancing a social goal:

Just as the Shabbat year of the land establishes the nation's standing in its country, the Shabbat day establishes man's standing in the world. By observing the Shabbat, man acknowledges God as the Creator and Master of the world and of himself. On the seventh day, man refrains for exercising his own mastery over any of God's creations and humbly subordinates himself and his world to the Creator. While he observes the Shabbat, the Shabbat teaches him to respect every other creature alongside himself, as all are equal before God, and all are His children.

This dismantling of man's mastery over all creatures is one of the objectives of the Shabbat, the day on which man pays homage to God, so that rest should come to the working animals and beasts of burden, and so that the son of your handmaid and the stranger in your midst shall "return to themselves,” become conscious of their own human dignity, and recognize that their purpose in life is their very own.

Rav Ben-Tziyon Meir Chai Uzziel, Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel, explains that to understand *shemitta* one must take a broad outlook on all aspects of *shemitta*, which indicates among other things the following:

The sabbatical year and the sabbatical day are connected and rooted in the same principle, each one completing the picture provided by the other one. The Shabbat day through its rest and holiness testifies regarding the Creator and *Ruler* of the world; the *shemitta* year, testifies regarding the King of the world, who created the world with kindness and compassion, as everything belongs to Him and we are fed by his goodness and compassion. All His creations on this world are opportunities for an eternal existence, as our tables are in fact His table, where we are His guests in order to prepare ourselves for the ultimate Shabbat while in the hallway to the World to Come. (*Mikhmannei Uzziel*)

*Shemitta* achieves these goals, not only by imparting truths regarding God's relationship with the world, but (as mentioned) by inculcating values and morals that affect one's personality. Not only does the land rest, but man rests from expressing his ownership over the land, as he renounces his proprietary rights to the produce that grows during the sabbatical year and learns more about the nature of ownership and possession. In the process, man recognizes God's mastery over the world, as the Chizkuni explains “a Sabbath to God” — “[*shemitta* is] a sign that the land is Mine, that it rests for the sake of my name.”

**The Practical Benefits of Shabbat and *Shemitta***

Putting a hold on one's daily activities in the field and the marketplace certainly have the potential for significantly affecting man's outlook, due to what man won't be doing as well as what he will be occupied with. HaRav Aharon Lichtenstein, echoing earlier thinkers like Rav Yitzchak Arama, states:

*Shemitta* detaches man from his material property and from that almost crazy idea that overcomes him the other six years of the sabbatical cycle, namely, that he must hold for dear life to his property and possessions. During the sabbatical year, we are inculcated with the idea of yielding and waiver, of detachment from the world of money and property. The *Chinnukh* noted this point and added to it the idea of *bitachon*, trust in God. During the *shemitta* year there is a sharpening of the sense of man’s dependence on God, which stands at the heart of religious consciousness and experience.

Similarly, Seforno (*Vayikra* 25:3) explains that the Shabbat element of *shemitta* indicates how to spend this year. The Yerushalmi (*Shabbat* 15:3) states that "The days of Sabbath and Festivals were only given to them to be used for Torah study.” Seforno writes:

The whole year one should be completely free of cultivation of the soil, ready to serve God, as is the case with the Shabbat of Creation… The purpose is to learn and to teach, to observe and to do. So too, all those who work on the land, when they rest in that year, should be inspired to seek God…

A year off from one’s toil enables man to focus on that which is important in life, both preventing him from being overly entrenched in the marketplace and the endless pursuit of wealth, on the one hand, and enabling man to spend the year engaged in Torah study, on the other hand.

The efficacy of such a period of rest in order to reconsider one's priorities and to focus on one's character is one of the all-too-necessary aspects of *shemitta* in our modern age.

Others have similarly noted that overwork in our society leads to many ills, and a return to the Shabbat rest of the *shemitta* year would positively transform society:

Our “affluent” society actually decreases leisure and family time, as more people not only choose to work to fulfill what they want to be, but feel compelled to work, in order to afford what society says they should have. Consumerism necessitates “producerism” to keep both supply and demand high. Yet as *shemitta* hints, people are indeed like the land, in ways that are more obvious in the modern world: For both, when overwork leads to exhaustion, we engineer continued “vitality” not with true renewal, but with chemicals...

The sabbatical principle, dictating periods of enforced restraint, rededication and redistribution, presents a compelling alternative to business as usual. Limiting the share that production and consumption have in our lives will create the space for higher pursuits. The economy must not be an engine that runs of itself, disengaged from social and environmental concerns, but a conscious expression of our spiritual and moral values. Wealth, both money and land, are not personal property to be accumulated, but divine abundance channeled through us to be shared for the benefit of all. (Dr. Jeremy Benstein, “Stop the Machine! The Sabbatical Year Principle,” *The Jerusalem Report,* May 21, 2001, p. 35)

However, Rav Kook, in his introduction to *Shabbat Ha-aretz,* explores the role of *shemitta* in transforming Jewish life in Israel, on a much more fundamental plane.

**Rav Kook's Perspective**

Rav Kook does not deny the practical role that *shemitta* can play in helping refocus one's energies, but he notes that as thinking Jews, we must try to look more deeply.

What makes the Jewish nation special is that it looks at all of life through the illuminating lens of holiness. With all its life-force, it recognizes that life is worthwhile only if it is infused with the Divine, and life lacking the Divine is worthless...

The potential of the nation, the Divine good which is embedded in it ... cannot be actualized within mundane life. Such life, with its constant chaos, hides the spiritual glory of the Divine soul... The urgency of developing and enhancing life needs to be actualized by taking a break and getting a rest from the chaos of normal life.

After this introduction, Rav Kook identifies how both Shabbat and *shemitta* allow for an escape from the mundane: Shabbat for every individual and *shemitta* for the entire nation.

*Shemitta* accomplishes for the nation what Shabbat accomplishes for the individual. This nation has a special need... Periodically, it needs to have the Divine light within it revealed in all its splendor.

This light must not be suppressed by daily mundane life – with all its toil and worries, anger and competition – so that the purity of its collective soul can be revealed within it...

Rav Kook speaks in similar terms to Seforno, but his focus is not only the ability to spend time learning Torah, but to reconnect to the purpose of a nation tasked with the challenge of merging the physical and the spiritual.

Rav Kook describes the natural good of the world and the Jewish nation which often finds difficulty expressing itself and even finding itself amongst the secular realities of existence.

This national treasure (*segula*) that is imprinted deep within us, the image of a world that is good, upright, and godly – aligned with peace, justice, grace, and courage, all filled with a pervasive divine perspective that rests in the spirit of the people – cannot be actualized within a way of life that is purely businesslike. Such a life, full of frenetic action, veils the glory of the divine soul, and the soul’s clear light is blocked from shining through the overpowering mundane reality. The impulsive push toward growth and self-realization needs space to come to fruition, by stopping the routine and awakening, while shaking off the wildness of daily life.

Shabbat serves the role of creating the medium for every individual to take one day a week off his weekly routine and to invest it with spirituality:

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The individual is able to shake off the secular mundane routine of life frequently once a week, for "when Shabbat comes, repose comes" (Rashi, *Bereishit* 2:2). The soul begins to be freed from its harsh chains, as “God has given you rest from your sorrow and trouble, and from the hard service that you were made to serve" (*Yeshayahu* 14:3), and [the soul] seeks more elevated pathways of spiritual desires, consonant with is nature spiritual core… [Shabbat is] a holy day, on which the innate inclination of the people for a godly life emerges in each individual, as a sign for the nation that it possesses a treasure (*segula*) in its soul, and has a need and an ability to rejoice in God, in the pleasure of the divine.

Rav Kook finds expression of this concept in the *neshama yetera,* the extra soul, granted on Shabbat, as he explains that the *segula* is in the soul of the nation and its ability to rejoice through the spiritual.

This is concentrated and gathered into the spiritual point of the *neshama yetera* which dwells within each individual among the populace.

With this in mind, Rav Kook explains his initial comment: that which Shabbat does for the individual, *shemitta* does for the collective nation.

The same effect which Shabbat brings about upon the individual, *shemitta* brings about upon the nation as a whole. There is a special need for this nation, in which the godly creative force is deeply implanted in its essence, in a distinct manner, to periodically reveal its godly light with its full illuminating intensity, in a manner in which the secular and mundane climate of society, with all its toil, anxiety, anger and competition, won't entirely suffocate the creative force of the nation; but it will be able to reveal [through *shemitta*] the pure collective soul [of the nation] as it truly is.

Rav Kook continues by describing the tension of recognizing one's inner spiritual core amidst involvement in the day-to-day pressure of the marketplace. The challenges which face one involved in the mundane aspects of existence can also rob one of his morality and connection to his spiritual core if not given a system of checks and balances.

The once-a-week individual Shabbat and the once-every-seven-years national *shemitta* are built into the fabric of time, to allow the nation the reprieve which will enable it to appreciate its core and learn how to exhibit the moral teachings of the Torah in a mundane reality that militates against it. The land and its spiritual character must express itself in the merging of the physical and spiritual, not with the corruption of either or both.

For this reason, *shemitta* is referred to as Shabbat, *Shabbat ha-aretz,* and much like the weekly Shabbat, it is “Sabbath to God.” *Shemitta* is necessary for the nation and necessary for the land.

The *segula* of the land and the *segula* of the nation complement each other. Just as the nation is unique in its aptitude to reach spiritual heights from the depths of its everyday life, so too, the land, God's land, prepares the nation who dwells in it as an everlasting inheritance, which comes with a covenant and an oath, with faith in the eternity of Israel, founded upon godly nature, which is immovably infused in this glorious land, married to the nation which God chose as His *segula*. The soul of the nation and the land together act to bring about the foundation of their existence; they demand their purpose: to actualize their potential and holy longings in this sabbatical year.

This is a mutual relationship, in which each needs the other:

The nation impacts upon the land with its soul-force, while the arm of God is revealed through its spiritual influence; and that land, too, impacts upon the people, refining their character in line with the desire for a complete spiritual life, which is inherent in their makeup.

A year of Shabbat is necessary for both the nation and the land.

In Rav Kook's conceptualization, *Shabbat ha-aretz* is not only an opportunity for the nation to engage its spiritual core; it also has specific applicability to the land. As we have mentioned, the Land of Israel is not only the homeland of the Jewish people, but it is also where the nation is supposed to establish a government that serves as the foundation for God's throne in the world.

Rav Kook uncovers part of *shemitta's* role, by focusing on, among other aspects, the *neshama yetera* of *Shabbat ha-aretz*. In our next lesson, we will discuss *shemitta's* presentation in *Parashat Mishpatim*, which might be understood as the source for a specific *neshama yetera* during the *shemitta* year; in the process, we will hopefully understand how Rav Kook's insights can provide the direction for the optimism he evokes.