YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**SUKKOT 5783**

**The Mitzva** **of *Hakhel***

**Harav Yaakov Medan**

The mitzva of *hakhel –* the obligation to assemble all of Israel in order to hear the king of Israel read sections of the Torah – is associated in Scripture with two special time frames: the year of *shemitta* (the sabbatical year) and the festival of Sukkot:

And Moshe commanded them, saying: At the end of every seven years, **in the set time of the sabbatical year, during the festival of Sukkot**, when all Israel is come to appear before the Lord your God in the place which He shall choose, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Assemble the people, the men and the women and the little ones, and your stranger that is within your gates, that they may hear, and that they may learn, and fear the Lord your God, and observe to do all the words of this law; and that their children, who have not known, may hear, and learn to fear the Lord your God, as long as you live in the land where you go over the Jordan to possess it. (*Devarim* 31:10-13)

What is the meaning of the three-way connection between the festival of *Sukkot*, the *shemitta* year, and the mitzva of *hakhel*?

**The Ten Commandments, *Shemitta*, and *Yovel* (the Jubilee Year)**

*Shemitta* is mentioned in *Parashat Behar* as a mitzva that was given to Israel at Sinai:

And the Lord spoke to Moshe **at Mount Sinai**, saying: Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: When you come into the land which I give you, the land shall observe a sabbath to the Lord. (*Vayikra* 25:1-2)

The Midrash and the biblical commentators noted the special mention of Mount Sinai with respect to the mitzva of *shemitta*, and learned from it (by way of the hermeneutical principle of *binyan av*) that *all* the *mitzvot* were given, both their principles and their details, at Sinai (see Rashi, ad loc.). It seems, however, that on the level of *peshat* (the plain sense of the verses), a special connection is indicated between the revelation at Sinai and the *mitzvot* of *shemitta* and *yovel* (the jubilee year, whose laws are described beginning in verse 8, following those of *shemitta*). Perhaps the intention of the Midrash is to extend this connection to all the *mitzvot*.

The entire *parasha* of *Behar* essentially consists of only two sets of *mitzvot*: the laws of *shemitta* and of *yovel*. The *parasha* has one introductory verse, and the end of the *parasha* lists four brief *mitzvot*. Here is the introductory verse along with the *parasha's* conclusion, written as a single continuum:

And the Lord spoke to Moshe at Mount Sinai, saying:

For to Me the children of Israel are servants; they are My servants whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God. You shall make you no idols, neither shall you set you up a graven image, or a pillar, neither shall you place any figured stone in your land, to bow down to it; for I am the Lord your God. You shall keep My sabbaths, and revere My sanctuary: I am the Lord. (*Vayikra* 25:1 and 25:55-26:2)

The four *mitzvot* with which *Parashat Behar* closes are identical to the four *mitzvot* of the covenant that open the revelation at Mount Sinai and the Ten Commandments: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage," "You shall not make to you a graven image, nor any manner of likeness," "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain" (which parallels the mitzva of "You shall revere My sanctuary"[[1]](#footnote-1)), and the observance of Shabbat (*Shemot* 20:2-11).

The meaning of the (artificial) set of verses above is that God declared the Ten Commandments (or at least the first four of them) to Moshe at Mount Sinai. But in the middle, between the mention of the revelation at Mount Sinai in verse 1 and the mention of those commandments at the end of the *parasha*, the Torah inserts the *mitzvot* of *shemitta* and *yovel.*

Note also that the statement that brings to mind the beginning of the Ten Commandments – "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage" (*Shemot* 20:2) – comes immediately after commanding the release during the *yovel* of a Jew who had been sold into slavery to a non-Jew:

And if he be not redeemed by any of these means, then he shall go out in the year of jubilee, he, and his children with him. For to Me the children of Israel are servants; they are My servants whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God. (*Vayikra* 25:54-55)

The *mitzvot* of *shemitta* and *yovel* appear between the mention of Mount Sinai and the mention of the first four *mitzvot*, and the verse which concludes the passage dealing with the *mitzvot* of *shemitta* and *yovel* is the verse with which the *mitzvot* of Mount Sinai open. Let us go back to our question: What is the connection between *shemitta* and Mount Sinai?

**The Blessings and Curses – For What?**

Immediately after the *mitzvot* of *shemitta* and *yovel* in *Parashat Behar*, the Torah moves on to the blessings and curses in *Parashat Bechukotai*. The framework that opens with the first verse of the *mitzvot* of *shemitta* and *yovel* – "And the Lord spoke to Moshe at Mount Sinai, saying" (*Vayikra* 25:1) – ends with the last verse of the passage discussing the blessings and curses: "These are the statutes and ordinances and laws, which the Lord made between Him and the children of Israel **at Mount Sinai** by the hand of Moshe" (*Vayikra* 26:46).[[2]](#footnote-2) That is to say, the special connection between the *mitzvot* of *shemitta* and *yovel* and the revelation at Mount Sinai also applies to the blessings and the curses.

Here too, the connection between the verses of Mount Sinai and the verses of the blessings and the curses is not merely external. The blessings end with a reference to the mitzva of "I am the Lord your God":

I am the Lord your God, who brought you forth out of the land of Egypt, from being their bondmen… (*Vayikra* 26:13)

The curses also conclude with an allusion to the revelation at Mount Sinai:

And yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them, neither will I abhor them, to destroy them utterly, and to break My covenant with them; for I am the Lord their God. But I will for their sakes remember the covenant of their ancestors, whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, that I might be their God: I am the Lord. (*Vayikra* 26:44-45)

It seems, then, that the blessings are intended primarily for the observance of the mitzva of *shemitta.* In the passage dealing with *shemitta*, it is stated: "And the land shall yield her fruit, and you shall eat until you have enough, and dwell therein in safety" (*Vayikra* 25:19). Corresponding to this, it is stated in the passage of the blessings: "And the land shall yield her produce, and trees of the field shall yield their fruit… and you shall eat your bread until you have enough, and dwell in your land safely" (*Vayikra* 26:4-5). Further, the Torah states regarding the mitzva of *shemitta*: "And you shall sow the eighth year, and eat of the produce, the old [crop]" (*Vayikra* 25:22), and among the blessings, it is promised: "And you shall eat old [grain] long kept" (*Vayikra* 26:10).

In parallel fashion, it seems that the curses are intended primarily for the violation of the mitzva of *shemitta*. This is precisely what is stated in the passage dealing with the curses:

Then shall the land be paid her sabbaths, as long as it lies desolate, and you are in your enemies' land; even then shall the land rest, and repay her sabbaths. As long as it lies desolate it shall have rest; even the rest which it had not in your sabbaths, when you dwelt upon it… (*Vayikra* 26:34-43)

Similarly, Scripture later states that the exile came upon the people of Israel due to violation of the mitzva of *shemitta*:

And those who had escaped from the sword, he carried away to Babylon; and they were servants to him and his sons until the reign of the kingdom of Persia; to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Yirmeyahu, until the land had been paid her sabbaths; for as long as she lay desolate, she kept sabbath, to fulfill seventy years. (II *Divrei Ha-Yamim* 36:20-21)

It is also clear from the prophets that the final national sin, before the destruction that sealed Israel's sentence, was the re-enslavement of Jewish slaves after they had been emancipated during the seventh year:[[3]](#footnote-3)

Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: I made a covenant with your fathers in the day that I brought them forth out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage, saying: At the end of seven years you shall let go every man his brother that is a Hebrew, that has been sold to you, and has served you six years, you shall let him go free from you; but your fathers hearkened not to Me, neither inclined their ear... But you turned and profaned My name, and caused every man his servant, and every man his handmaid, whom you had let go free at their pleasure, to return; and you brought them into subjection, to be to you for servants and for handmaids.

Therefore thus says the Lord: You have not hearkened to Me, to proclaim liberty, every man to his brother, and every man to his neighbor; behold, I proclaim for you a liberty, says the Lord, to the sword, to the pestilence, and to the famine; and I will make you a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth…Behold, I will command, says the Lord, and cause them to return to this city; and they shall fight against it, and take it, and burn it with fire; and I will make the cities of Yehuda a desolation, without inhabitant. (*Yirmeyahu* 34:13-22)

For the failure to observe the laws of *shemitta*,it was decreed that the land would be repaid its sabbaths; for the failure to release slaves appropriately, it was decreed that Israel would be subjugated to the king of Babylon for seventy years.

**The Book of the Covenant**

In *Parashat Mishpatim*, the Torah describes the reading of a “book of the covenant” at Mount Sinai:

And Moshe wrote all the words of the Lord, and rose up early in the morning, and built an altar under the mount, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel. And he sent the young men of the children of Israel, who offered burnt-offerings, and sacrificed peace-offerings of oxen to the Lord. And Moshe took half of the blood, and put it in basins; and half of the blood he dashed against the altar. **And he took the book of the covenant and read in the hearing of the people**; and they said: All that the Lord has spoken will we do and we will hearken. And Moshe took the blood, and sprinkled it on the people, and said: Behold the blood of the covenant, which the Lord has made with you in agreement with all these words. Then went up Moshe, and Aharon, Nadav, and Avihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel. (*Shemot* 24:4-9)

The *Rishonim* disagree whether this reading took place before the giving of the Ten Commandments or afterwards. We will follow the approach of Rashi (*Shemot* 24:1), in whose view the book of the covenant was read in the hearing of the people *before* the giving of the Ten Commandments.

What was in this book? According to Rabbi Yishmael, it was "*shemitta*, *yovel*, the blessings, and the curses" (*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael*, *Yitro* 3). His position may be based on a later reference to "words of the covenant," mentioned in the book of *Devarim* immediately after the detailed presentation of blessings and curses:

These are **the words of the covenant** which the Lord commanded Moshe, to make with the children of Israel in the land of Moav, beside the covenant which He made with them in Chorev. (*Devarim* 28:69)

The "book of the covenant" is also mentioned in the book of *Melakhim*, in the account of King Yoshiyahu's reading of the book in the Temple in the hearing of the entire people:

Go, inquire of the Lord for me, and for the people, and for all Yehuda, concerning the words of this book that is found; for great is the wrath of the Lord that is kindled against us… And the king went up to the house of the Lord, and all the men of Yehuda and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem with him, and the priests, and the prophets, and all the people, both small and great; and he read in their ears all the words of **the book of the covenant** which was found in the house of the Lord. (II *Melakhim* 22:13-23:2)

The book of the covenant deals with the blessings for heeding the word of God and the curses for rebelling against Him. That is to say, as argued by the Ibn Ezra (*Vayikra* 25:1), the chronological location of the passage containing the blessings and the curses at the end of the book of *Vayikra* is in the book of *Shemot*, in the account of the revelation at Mount Sinai. The blessings and the curses were read to the people at the time of the making of the covenant, before the giving of the Torah. About them it was stated: "And he took the book of the covenant, and read in the hearing of the people," and regarding them Israel responded: "All that the Lord has spoken will we do and we will hearken" (*Shemot* 24:7).

According to this, we can understand *Chazal's* great praise of the might of those who said, "we will do and we will hearken":

Rabbi Elazar said: When the Israelites gave precedence to "we will do" over "we will hearken," a Heavenly Voice went forth and exclaimed to them: Who revealed to My children this secret, which is employed by the ministering angels, as it is written: "Bless the Lord, you angels of His. You mighty in strength, that fulfill His word, that hearken to the voice of His word" (*Tehillim* 103:20). First they fulfill, and then they hearken. (*Shabbat* 88a)

This praise is due to the fact that the people of Israel accepted the curses with all their terrors even before they knew what God would command them in His Torah. They were like angels, who are ready at all times to complete God's missions without reservation and without fear.

This praise of Israel is mentioned elsewhere as well:

Rav Huna taught in the name of Rabbi Acha: These [messengers] are Israel, about whom it is stated: "You mighty in strength, that fulfill His word, that hearken to the voice of His word," in [reference to the fact] that they gave precedence to doing over hearkening. Rabbi Yitzchak Nafcha said: These are those who observe the *shemitta* year. So why were they called mighty in strength? When [such a one] sees his field abandoned, his trees abandoned, his fences breached, and sees his fruit trees eaten, he suppresses his drive and does not speak. And our Rabbis taught (*Avot* 4:1): "And who is mighty? One who subdues his drive." (*Tanchuma Vayikra* 1)

Those who observe *shemitta*,despite the difficulty involvedand the measures of trust and faith that must be mobilized in order to observe it, are like those who say "we will do and we will hearken." The identical exposition in these two realms (observance of *shemitta* and the declaration of "we will do and we will hearken" at Mount Sinai), together with the fact that the passage dealing with *shemitta* and *yovel* constitutes a single unit with the passage discussing the blessings and curses, lead to the conclusion that the book of the covenant that was given at Mount Sinai included both the passage dealing with *shemitta* and *yovel* and the passage discussing the blessings and the curses.

**The Revelation at Mount Sinai and Inheriting the Land**

Why was the book of the covenant, which included the *mitzvot* of *shemitta* and *yovel*, given to the people of Israel before the Ten Commandments?

A preliminary answer to this question requires linking the revelation at Mount Sinai to God's giving us the land of Israel as an inheritance. *Shemitta* and *yovel* are key *mitzvot* relating to the sanctity of the land of Israel. If they are the only *mitzvot* that were given at the time of the making of the covenant and they entered the book of the covenant at the time of the giving of the Torah, we are almost forced to say that the main point of the book of the covenant is the connection between the giving of the Torah and the inheritance of the land.

Ostensibly, the land of Israel was not specifically mentioned at the revelation at Mount Sinai. Moreover, if we compare the Ten Commandments to the Covenant of the Pieces in the book of *Bereishit*, it seems that the land of Israel was deliberately omitted from the Ten Commandments. In the Ten Commandments, it is stated: "I am the Lord your God, **who brought you out of the land of Egypt**, out of the house of bondage" (*Shemot* 20:2), whereas in the Covenant of the Pieces, it is stated: "I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur Kasdim, **to give you this land to inherit it**" (*Bereishit* 15:7).

However, I learned from my revered teacher, Rav Yoel Bin-Nun, that the first five commandments – "the first tablet" – should be understood within a single framework, that has an opening and a closing:

I am the Lord your God, **who** **brought you out of the land of Egypt**, out of the house of bondage… that your days may be long **upon the land which the Lord your God gives you**. (*Shemot* 20:2-11)

In this way, we can see the parallelism between the Ten Commandments and the Covenant of the Pieces.

There is a clear connection, at Mount Sinai and in other places in the Torah, between the giving and keeping of the Torah and inheriting the land. This connection is mainly reflected in the obligation to observe the *mitzvot* of *shemitta* and *yovel*. These commandments are difficult to keep due to the financial loss they involve, but they express God's ownership of the land and contain clear mention of the historical principles of faith: the exodus from Egypt, the giving of the Torah, and the inheritance of the land. For this reason, God made a covenant with Israel about observing the *mitzvot* of *shemitta* and *yovel*, and about the blessings and curses involved, even before He gave them the Ten Commandments.

***Hakhel* and the Revelation at Mount Sinai**

Now we can explain the connection between the *shemitta* year and the mitzva of *hakhel.* If we examine the command regarding *hakhel* that was quoted at the beginning of this *shiur* (*Devarim* 31:10-13)*,* we can see a clear parallel between it and the description of the revelation at Mount Sinai in the book of *Devarim*:

The day that you stood before the Lord your God in Chorev, when the Lord said to me: **Assemble** [*hakhel*] to Me the people, and I will make them hear My words, that they may learn to fear Me all the days that they live upon the earth, and that they may teach their children. (*Devarim* 4:10)

The parallelism is explicit:

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| Assemble to Me the people, | Assemble the people, |
| and I will make them hear My words  that they may learn | that they may hear, and that they may learn, |
| to fear Me | and fear the Lord your God, |
| all the days that they live upon the earth, | as long as you live in the land |
| and that they may teach their children. | and that their children, who have not known, may hear, and learn |

The revelation at Mount Sinai cannot remain a one-time event in the history of the nation; it must be renewed every seven years. It is true that the Divine revelation before all the people, with God's word from heaven and Moshe's prophecy, were miracles that took place only once and cannot be renewed on a regular basis. But the second miracle of the revelation at Mount Sinai – the acceptance of the Torah on the part of the entire nation through their saying: "We will do and we will hearken" – is a miracle that *can* reoccur, and it must be renewed every seven years, "in the set time of the sabbatical year, during the festival of Sukkot."

**Ingathering of Faith**

So far, we have dealt with the question of the connection between the mitzva of *hakhel* and the year of *shemitta*. We will now deal with the second question: What is the connection between the mitzva of *hakhel* and the festival of Sukkot?

On the simple level, Sukkot closes the *shemitta* year and constitutes its climax. Indeed, the Torah explicitly notes that the *hakhel* assembly takes place "at the end of every seven years, in the set time of the sabbatical year, during the festival of Sukkot" (*Devarim* 31:10). The festival of Sukkot – the festival of ingathering – marks the end of the agricultural year, and the eighth day of the festival is the beginning of the next year.

In an ordinary year, the festival of ingathering concludes the work of the farmer over the course of the entire year. In a year of *shemitta*,there is no ingathering of produce, for the land was not cultivated for the whole year and its produce was declared ownerless. During the year, the farmer goes on a "sabbatical," recharging himself with faith and Torah study in preparation for the next six years of working his fields. The festival of ingathering at the end of the *shemitta* year is not an ingathering of produce, but rather an ingathering of Torah and faith, and it is marked by a renewed acceptance of the Torah at the *hakhel* assembly.

**Hakhel in the Sukka**

Sukkot has another meaning as well, which also relates to the *hakhel* assembly that takes place at the end of the festival. The Torah explicitly states that the purpose of Sukkot is to return us to the wilderness in which the people of Israel wandered from the time they left Egypt until they entered the land of Israel:

You shall dwell in booths seven days; all that are home-born in Israel shall dwell in booths; that your generations may know that I made the children of Israel to dwell in booths, when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God. (*Vayikra* 23:42-43)

The *sukka* is meant to remind us of how we lived in the wilderness; going into the *sukka* is like going into the wilderness in order to experience a nomadic way of life, without a home or property. This experience stands in clear contrast to the experience of gathering produce, which finds expression in the mitzva of taking the four species:

But on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the fruits of the land, you shall keep the festival of the Lord seven days; on the first day shall be a solemn rest, and on the eighth day shall be a solemn rest. And you shall take for you on the first day the fruit of goodly trees, branches of palm-trees, and boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days. (*Vayikra* 23:39-40)

When the farmer gathers in his crops, he is liable to forget God and think that it is only due to his own efforts that he succeeded in accumulating all his property. This concern is stated explicitly in the Torah:

Lest when you have eaten and are satisfied, and have built goodly houses, and dwelt therein; and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and your gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied; then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the Lord your God, who brought you forth out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage; who led you through the great and dreadful wilderness, wherein were serpents, fiery serpents, and scorpions, and thirsty ground where was no water; who brought you forth water out of the rock of flint; who fed you in the wilderness with manna, which your fathers knew not, that He might afflict you, and that He might prove you, to do you good at your latter end; and you say in your heart: My power and the might of my hand has gotten me this wealth. (*Devarim* 8:12-17)

The mitzva of dwelling in a *sukka* is intended to diminish the self-confidence associated with owning property in the land, and to remind us of our dependence on God and our duty of expressing our gratitude to Him precisely on the festival of ingathering. Going out to the *sukka* on the festival of Sukkot serves as preparation for Shemini Atzeret – the agricultural new year, when we merit re-entering our homes. By virtue of the prayer for rain, we also merit re-entering our fields and eating of their produce over the course of another rainy and fertile year, thus inheriting anew the land of Israel.

The experience of the festival of Sukkot is doubly significant at the end of the *shemitta* year. During the *shemitta* year, we release the land with an explicit declaration that we are not the owners, but rather, "you are strangers and settlers with Me" (*Vayikra* 25:23). The land turns entirely into wilderness, abandoned and uncultivated, until it reaches the state of "what they leave the beast of the field shall eat" (*Shemot* 23:11). The people of Israel are fed during the *shemitta* year by the grace of God, which finds expression in the blessing of the crops in the sixth year for the purpose of the seventh year and the year after that:

And if you will say: What shall we eat in the seventh year? behold, we may not sow, nor gather in our increase; then I will command My blessing upon you in the sixth year, and it shall bring forth produce for the three years. (*Vayikra* 25:20-21)

Similar to the manna in the wilderness, which expressed God's lovingkindness and was given in a double portion on the sixth day to be eaten on the seventh day as well, God commands His blessing in the sixth year so that its produce will suffice for the seventh and eighth years. The people are fed by the hand of God during the *shemitta* year in a manner similar to the way we were fed manna during our wanderings in the wilderness; thus, we re-experience those wanderings.

During the *shemitta* year, as stated, the agricultural significance of the festival of ingathering is very limited. In "exchange" for that, it is precisely in that year that the significance of the Sukkot festival is intensified through an assembly of "we will do and we will hearken" conducted by the entire people – the *hakhel* assembly of receiving the Torah anew by the mighty heroes who observed the mitzva of *shemitta* in all its details. They accept the Torah after having abandoned their fields during the *shemitta* year and after having abandoned their homes on the festival of Sukkot at the end of that year. By virtue of that reacceptance of the Torah in the *hakhel* assembly, we reacquire our fields and homes for another six years.

This is similar to the meaning of walking in the wilderness in the words of the prophet Hoshea:

And I will lay waste her vines and her fig-trees… and I will make them a forest, and the beasts of the field shall eat them. And I will visit upon her the days of the Baalim… Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. And I will give her her vineyards from there, and the valley of Achor for a door of hope; and she shall respond there, as in the days of her youth, and as in the day when she came up out of the land of Egypt. (*Hoshea* 2:14-17)

In Hoshea, a sort of unwilling *shemitta* – where the land is laid waste and “the beasts of the field shall eat them” (compare to "what they leave the beast of the field shall eat," *Shemot* 23:11) – once again leads the people of Israel into the wilderness. Because of this, a new covenant is made with God at the end of the *shemitta* year, on the festival of Sukkot – a covenant similar to the covenant with the people of Israel in the days of their youth at the revelation at Mount Sinai.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. The prohibition of taking God's name in vain is frequently expressed in Tanakh within the commandment of revering the Temple, in the place where God will choose to set His name. For example: "Who shall ascend into the mountain of the Lord? and who shall stand in His holy place? He that has clean hands, and a pure heart; who has not taken My name in vain, and has not sworn deceitfully" (*Tehillim* 24:3-4). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This framework also includes the *mitzvot* of *arakhin* (vows of the values of people) and *haramot* (things devoted to God). These *mitzvot* deal with the sanctity of man and the sanctity of the land (and property) by virtue of human vows. They parallel the *mitzvot* of *shemitta* and *yovel*,which deal with the sanctity of the land by virtue of the explicit command of God. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Slaves are not necessarily freed in the year of *shemitta*; rather, each slave is freed in the seventh year of his own servitude. But there is a clear connection in the Torah between the mitzvaof freeing slaves in the seventh year and the mitzvaof the *shemitta* year. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)