**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**THE PHILOSOPHY OF *SHEMITTA***

**By Rav Binyamin Zimmerman**

**Shiur #24: Preparing for a Sinaitic *Shabbat Ha-aretz* Experience**

***Shabbat Ha-aretz* and Sinai**

In our last lesson, we began our analysis of *shemitta's* portrayal in *Parashat Behar* with Rashi's question from the Midrash: “What does the sabbatical year have to do with Mt. Sinai?”We provided a number of approaches, including the idea that a primary goal of *shemitta* is to allow the nation to reconnect to both the Torah and the experience of receiving it.

Now let’s take a second look at *Parashat*. Going through it, ironically enough, one will not find a single thing about *shemitta*! This is not to say that the portion does not deal with the unique laws of the seventh year — as we have already pointed out, it contains the longest discussion of its laws — but the word *shemitta* is absent. *Parashat Behar* refers to the seventh year as *Shabbat ha-aretz*, using the root *shaved* seven times. As we noted in earlier lessons, the term *shemitta* per se appears only in reference to the unique financial aspects of the seventh year. So what does *Shabbat ha-aretz* mean?

With this in mind, let's return to the verses at the beginning of *Parashat* *Behar* and rephrase the question. *Shemitta* really is not juxtaposed to Mt. Sinai, while *Shabbat ha-aretz* is. With this in mind, the question should really be formulated: “What does *shabbat ha-aretz* have to do with Mt. Sinai?”

In that case, we may say that the link is obvious: the Convocation at Sinai was a transformative event which required extensive preparation. To make the sabbatical year spiritually uplifting and meaningful, to reconnect both individually and collectively to Sinai, one must get ready.

In fact, this idea of preparation is experienced weekly in anticipation of Shabbat. To understand how to ready ourselves for *shemitta,* we should examine the weekly preparation for Shabbat and the historical preparation for the revelation at Sinai.

**The Sinai Model**

The preparation for Sinai starts at least immediately upon leaving Egypt, but in truth far in advance. In fact, the Sages tell us that from the dawn of Creation, God made the existence of the world conditional upon the ultimate acceptance of the Torah at Sinai by the Jewish people. The Midrash, cited in Rashi, notes that although all the days of Creation are mentioned without the definite article, “the sixth day” does have it (*Bereishit* 1:31).

Another explanation for “the sixth day”: They [the works of creation] were all suspended until “the sixth day,” referring to the sixth day of Sivan, which was destined for the Giving of the Torah (*Shabbat* 88a).

However, this date was never inevitable; the Jewish people had to prepare for the Giving of the Torah via a countdown — or count-up, to be more exact. This is the mitzva of *sefirat ha-omer,* counting the days and weeks from Pesach to Shavuot. The Ramban (*Vayikra* 23:36) notes that Shavuot, the holiday of the Giving of the Torah, is always referred to as *Atzeret* in rabbinic literature, a term usually used for the final day of an extended festival such as Pesach and Sukkot, coming after *chol ha-moed*, the intermediate days during which certain types of labor are allowed. Thus, the period of *sefirat ha-omer* is akin to *chol ha-moed*, as Shavuot is the culmination of the Exodus. The Chinnukh states that Pesach is merely a prelude to receiving the Torah, and the counting expresses the eager anticipation of the newly freed Jews to receive the Torah, affirming the overwhelming importance of Torah in Jewish life.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik develops this theme at length in an essay entitled "Sacred and Profane." He argues that time consciousness is a prerequisite for freedom. After explaining the lack of time-consciousness found in slaves, and in the Jews before the Exodus, he writes (p. 16):

When the Jews were delivered from the Egyptian oppression and Moses rose to undertake the almost impossible task of metamorphosing a tribe of slaves into a nation of priests, he was told by God that the path leading from the holiday of *Pesach* to *Shavuot*, from initial liberation to consummate freedom, leads through the medium of time. The commandment of *sefira* was entrusted to the Jew; the wondrous test of counting forty-nine successive days was put to him. These forty-nine days must be whole. If one day is missed, the act of numeration is invalidated.

A slave who is capable of appreciating each day, of grasping its meaning and worth, of weaving every thread of time into a glorious fabric, quantitatively stretching over the period of seven weeks but qualitatively forming the warp and woof of centuries of change is eligible for Torah. He has achieved freedom.

In “Reflections on *Sefirat ha-Omer*,” Rav Michael Rosensweig adds (<http://www.torahweb.org/torah/1999/moadim/rros_sefira.html>):

On this basis, many of the peculiar and seemingly incongruous facets of *sefirat ha-omer* can be justified. The very act of counting acquires significance and requires a *berakha* in as much as it represents a process whose aim is to sensitize man to this indispensable religious dimension of time-consciousness. If we identify *sefirat ha-omer* with time-awareness, then our act of counting is more than a simple marking of time between *Pesach* and *Shavuot…* rather, *sefirat ha-omer* becomes a means of effecting an important psychological and religious transformation, which is most effectively achieved by verbal articulation and daily expression. The Ramban's allusion, an analogy to the concept of *Chol Ha-moed,* is particularly apt inasmuch as *sefirat ha-omer* constitutes an essential period of transition between the slave mentality of the immediate post-*Pesach* era and the time-conscious mindset of true freedom that is a prerequisite for receiving the Torah on *Shavuot*.

*Sefirat ha-omer* is only part of the preparation; six days prior to the revelation, they arrive at Sinai. In fact, the Talmud (*Yoma* 3b) notes that Resh Lakish explains Sinai as the source for the High Priest’s yearly preparation before entering the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur, separating from his wife and others for seven days.

And a *baraita* was taught in accordance with the opinion of Resh Lakish that sequestering is derived from Sinai: Moshe ascended in the cloud, and was covered in the cloud, and was sanctified in the cloud, in order to receive the Torah for the Jewish people in sanctity, as it is stated: “And the glory of God abode upon Mt. Sinai and the cloud covered him six days, and He called to Moshe on the seventh day from the midst of the cloud” (*Shemot* 24:16).

For Sinai to be meaningful, it had to be prepared for, and the Torah ensures that this miraculous experience of revelation will not be forgotten:

Only beware for yourself and greatly beware for your soul, lest you forget the things that your eyes have seen and lest you remove them from your heart all the days of your life, and make them known to your children and your children’s children. (Devarim 4:9)

The Ramban (ad loc.) states that this is an actual mitzva:

This, in my view, is a biblical prohibition, concerning which Moshe is giving severe a warning... that you should not forget the revelation at Mt. Sinai and all the things your eyes saw there: the thunder and lightning, God's glory and His greatness and His words that you heard from amidst the fire. And you shall tell all the things that you saw on that auspicious occasion to your children and grandchildren forever. The reason for this is that God performed that revelation in order that you will learn to fear Him all the days, and that you will teach your children for all generations; in other words, if you do this, then you will not forget Him. So before listing [in chapter 5] the commandments that were given there, he warns — with a negative command — against forgetting anything of the revelation or removing it from our hearts, forever. He also commands — with a positive command — that we teach it to all our offspring, from generation to generation, all that happened there, what we saw and heard.

This powerful event requires preparation, and serves as the model for spiritual events that can transform a nation and the entire world; for them to happen, they must be adequately prepared for.

**Weekly Shabbat Preparation**

Similar to Sinai, the Torah introduces Shabbat with the call for preparation. At the dawn of time, Shabbat appears right after the sixth day, the day anticipating the Torah's arrival. Their connection is apparent from the weekly *Kiddush* Friday night, which begins by mentioning “the sixth day.”

There are four [dimensions] to the [observance of] the Sabbath: two originating in the Torah, and two originating in the words of our Sages, which are given exposition by the Prophets. In the Torah are the commandments "Remember (*Zakhor*)" and "Observe (*Shamor*)."

Those given exposition by the Prophets are honor (*kavod*) and pleasure (*oneg*), as (Yeshayahu 58:13) states: "And you shall call the Sabbath a delight, sanctified unto God and honored.'’

(Rambam, *Hilkhot Shabbat* 31:1)

The Vilna Gaon explains the distinction between the latter two: *oneg* involves enjoying Shabbat itself, while *kavod* involves preparing for it. This may be viewed as a functional necessity, as many things cannot be done after the onset of Shabbat; if nothing is prepared, then there can be no enjoyment, *oneg Shabbat*. This is expressed in the following line (*Avoda Zara* 3a):

One who has toiled on *Erev Shabbat*, will eat on Shabbat; one who has not toiled on *Erev Shabbat*, what will he eat on Shabbat?

However, preparing for Shabbat seems to have something more to it. The Talmud tells us that the principle “it is preferable that one do the mitzva himself rather than rely on his agent” applies to Shabbat preparation. If the point were results, there would be no need for personal involvement. Yet the Talmud and Shulchan Arukh tell us that even one who has many attendants must be personally involved in at least one element of Shabbat preparation.

The first two elements of Shabbat, which are explicit in the Torah, *Zakhor* and *Shamor*, both point in this direction. The Ramban (*Shemot* 20:8) notes that the mitzva of *Zakhor* does not only mean to remember Shabbat, but to anticipate it, to count the days of the week in reference to Shabbat. Chizkuni and others point out that *Shamor* as well does not only mean safeguarding the Shabbat by refraining from labor on that day; one guards that which is precious. *Shamor* requires one to anxiously await Shabbat.

The week prior to the next Shabbat is not only a period of longing, but a period of preparation; the Talmud records Shammai and Hillel's Shabbat preparation from the beginning of the week until the end (*Beitza* 16a). Yet, this preparation takes on a new dimension on Friday, *Erev Shabbat*. Here as well this is more than pragmatic; it is a mitzva in its own right. When the Torah describes the Jewish people's first Shabbat in the desert, it describes the need for preparation (*Shemot* 16:5) and the gathering of a double portion of manna. Seforno adds that this is a mitzva to prepare for Shabbat:

The Torah states “They shall prepare” to awaken one to be zealous in [preparing to] delight on Shabbat with tasty foods and express this on *Erev Shabbat.*

The Shulchan Arukh (*OC* 250) cites this verse as a source that one should wake up early on Friday morning to prepare for Shabbat. The *Sefer* *Chasidim* (149) explains the seriousness with which one must perform this mitzva, emphasizing its practical basis:

One must be zealous in preparing Shabbat needs with speed and alacrity just as one who hears that the queen is coming and will be staying in his home or the bride and her entourage are arriving at one's house; what would one do? He would be extremely happy at the arrival of such illustrious individuals to partake of his hospitality… he would personally take part in the preparations, even if he has thousands of servants. [So too] who do we have more significant than Shabbat, bride and queen, who is called "delight,” so one must personally prepare…

Personal involvement in the preparation is nothing less than an indication of one's recognition of the arrival of the Shabbat queen, the privilege and opportunity. Rabbi Soloveitchik (*On Repentance,* pp. 88-89 fn.), eloquently expresses the lost feeling of anticipation for Queen Shabbat:

Allow me, please, to make a ‘private confession’ concerning a matter that has caused me such loss of sleep. I am not so very old, yet I remember a time when ninety percent of world Jewry were observant and the secularists were a small minority at the fringes of the camp. I still remember – it was not so long ago – when Jews were still close to G-d and lived in an atmosphere pervaded with holiness. But, today, what do we see? The profane and the secular are in control wherever we turn. Even in those neighborhoods made up predominantly of religious Jews one can no longer talk of the “sanctity of the Sabbath day.” True, there are Jews in America who observe the Sabbath. The label “Sabbath observer” has come to be used as a title of honor in our circles, just like “HaRav HaGaon” – neither really indicates anything and both testify to the lowly state of our generation. **But it is not for the Sabbath that my heart aches, it is for the “eve of the Sabbath.”** There are Sabbath-observing Jews in America, but there are not “eve-of-the-Sabbath” Jews who go out to greet the Sabbath with beating hearts and pulsating souls. There are many who observe the precepts with their hands, with their feet and/or with their mouths – but there are few, indeed, who truly know the meaning of service of the heart!

The mitzva of “They shall prepare” would seem nothing less than the call to become this *Erev Shabbat* Jew, whose longing for Shabbat actually permeates the entire week, who is so overcome by the feeling of *kedusha* that his eyes are on Shabbat throughout the week. Throughout the day on Friday, after waking up early to prepare, the longing continuously increases along with the preparation, until reaching an acme moments before Shabbat begins.

The Talmud (*Bava Kama* 32a) states that if one runs in haste in a public domain and accidentally causes damage, he is liable, unless it is on *Erev Shabbat* close to sunset, as one is permitted to run at that time. The Talmud then details an early practice of *Kabbalat Shabbat*, going out to greet the Shabbos Queen, citing the practices of two scholars. Rabbi Chanina ran outside to greet Shabbat, while Rabbi Yannai would clothe himself with his *tzitzit* and rise to invite the queen to his house. Both would greet the Shabbat bride verbally twice (as later codified in *Lekha Dodi*).

The Maharsha, while explaining the two customs, notes that the repetition of the words "Come, bride" is indicative of the two stages of marriage, betrothal and consummation. Friday is the period of betrothal, a time of loving anticipation and desire to be unified. Only after this betrothal can there be a marriage in which the couple lives together.

Rav Hutner, in an essay in *Pachad Yitzchak* (originally in Yiddish) expresses the deeper meaning of this by pointing out that *Erev Shabbat* is not only a day of preparation for Shabbat:

Friday has its own source of holiness. In fact, to some extent, the holiness of Friday opens the door to the possibility of Shabbat, in effect serving as an impetus for Shabbat to arrive. There is an explicit verse to this effect…: “See that God gave you the Sabbath; therefore He gives you on the sixth day enough bread for two days” (*Shemot* 16:29).

The verse explicitly states that the proof of the gift of Shabbat is Friday. This shows that the preparation for Shabbat that takes place on Friday represents the intrinsic holiness of Friday… The meaning of betrothal is that there is a level of commitment that obligates the man to complete the process of marriage...

As Rav Hutner explains, *Erev Shabbat* is not only a time of preparation, but of creation. Shabbat does not come without a day of preparation, a day with an intrinsic holiness, a time devoted to opening the world to a certain truth, allowing the arrival of Shabbat to embody that truth. The *Erev Shabbat* Jew that Rav Soloveitchik discusses understands this.

This idea that *betrothal* can be more potent and powerful than marriage itself is expressed powerfully by Rav Kook, who focuses on the longing that it represents (*Siddur Olat Re’iya,* p. 35):

Even though after marriage they are closer to each other than during the stage of betrothal, there is a special element in betrothal, as it expresses an elevated element of cleaving to God… It turns out that it exists forever, as the verse states: "And I will betroth you forever.”

The longing of *Erev Shabbat* is a necessary prerequisite for a meaningful "marriage" and union with God on Shabbat itself.

***Shabbat Ha-aretz* Preparation and Lasting Message**

The role of preparation for the one-time Convocation at Mt. Sinai, and the weekly Shabbat is readily apparent from all the sources we have seen. What the introductory verses to *Parashat Behar* indicate clearly is that this is true not only for the weekly Shabbat and for the Giving of the Torah on Mt. Sinai, but for the year that merges both elements: the sabbatical year which, among other things, takes us back to Mt. Sinai. While Shabbat epitomizes temporal holiness, Sinai represents locational holiness. *Shemitta* combines these elements, as it is rooted in time, the seventh year, and relegated specifically to the Land of Israel.

“What does *shabbat ha-aretz* have to do with Mt. Sinai?” The answer is that in order to be appreciated as a full Sinai experience, *shemitta* must be prepared for.

Rav Tzaddok of Lublin (*Kedushat Shabbat* 1) explains that the six days of *melakha* (labor) are a preparation for the seventh of *menucha (*repose*)*, and **the same holds true for *Shabbat ha-aretz*.** As one prepares for Shabbat throughout the week, so too throughout the six years, one is supposed to prepare for the upcoming *shemitta*. Rav Tzaddok (*Peri Tzaddik, Behar*) explains that the Torah introduces the sabbatical year by mentioning the six years, indicating that:

Corresponding to the intent [towards the seventh year] that one has in one's work over the six years will be the holiness of *shemitta*.

He adds that *sefirat ha-omer*, counting towards Sinai, is also very similar to the mitzva to count ***shemitta*** years leading up to *yovel*.

The court counts every year, as the closer one gets to *shemitta*, the greater is the recognition that the land belongs to God; similarly every week there is greater recognition… So too in relation to eating, the *shemitta* fruits have sanctity just like eating on Shabbat.

Counting throughout the fifty years of *yovel* is an act of preparation, and the level of preparation, specifically in regard to the years that immediately precede *shemitta*, will determine its power.

It is thus not surprising that *shemitta* serves as the source for expanding holiness of time. One who appreciates the period prior to the onset of the holy period has a strong desire to extend that time.

Similarly, the Tiferet Shelomo (*Parashat Behar*) states:

“And you shall sanctify” [in reference to *yovel*] indicates preparing and inaugurating — meaning: prepare yourselves through your righteous actions for the fiftieth year, which is *yovel,* during which “each one will return"… which is the language of repentance and returning to God…

As a general rule, for just about anything in life to be meaningful, it must involve preparation. Nevertheless, the Torah goes out of its way regarding the unforgettable experience at Mt. Sinai: in order for it to be fully meaningful, it requires various forms of preparation. Regarding the weekly Shabbat as well, preparation adds new dimensions which in some ways elevate *Erev Shabbat*. The Torah's mention of *Shabbat ha-aretz* in conjunction with Sinai may underscore this lesson as well. For *shemitta's* message to be powerful, it requires spiritual preparation. While on the one hand, reading this message at this point during the *shemitta* year might be disheartening, *shemitta* still continues, and the more we prepare to maximize the experience, the more memorable and unforgettable it will be (until we are ready to prepare for the next *shemitta*, six years hence).