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Steven Exler – The Bayit

What Does Shemittah Have to Do with Mount Sinai – And Why Environmental Consciousness Matters

Rashi is pretty well-known as Biblical commentators go, but perhaps one of his more unexpected appearances was on an episode of Kojak.

A number of years ago, a rerun of Kojak was playing in Israel. When one of the characters asked, “what’s that got to do with the price of tea in China?”, the subtitles flashed across the screen, **מה ענין סיני** – “What does the sabbatical year have to do with Mount Sinai?” – the famed words of the midrash which Rashi quotes in his opening comments to the first of this morning’s 2 parashiot.

The question is a good one. What does one thing have to do with the other? Why is it that the mitzvot of letting the earth rest, of the sabbatical and jubilee years, are the only ones in our Torah introduced by our being told that they were told to Moshe at Har Sinai – the only ones! What’s so special about them?

And this week’s double parashah has another distinction – the Talmud tells us (Megillah 31b), **עזרא** – Ezra the Scribe, all the way back in the beginning century of the Second Temple, enacted for Israel that they read the portion of the curses in Vayikra – our second parashah, Behukotai, which makes significant mention of how the land will suffer from our not following God’s laws, that we read that portion before Shavuot (with a one week buffer of Bamidbar), and the portion of the curses in Devarim before Rosh Hashanah.

There are very few rules about what Torah portions need to be read when. What’s so special about this portion that it controls the alignment of the calendar with the Torah readings just so that we get Behukotai in before Shavuot? We’ll return to this question.

So **מה ענין שמיטה אצל הר סיני** - What is the relationship between the laws of shemittah and Mount Sinai as the location at which they were given?

Among the many interesting answers that have been suggested, I want to look one answer that deepens our appreciation of the centrality of this mitzvah. It is the powerful answer of the Sefat Emet,

who writes, simply, ומדתלינהו בשמיטה. משמע שהיא מצוה שכל המצות תלוין בה – since the Torah links Mt. Sinai, where we received the whole Torah, to this mitzvah, it implies to us that all the commandments are dependent upon this one. It is in some way the linchpin, the foundation stone, for our very relationship with Torah.

The Sefat Emet goes on to explain that this is because letting the land lay fallow – letting go of our need to work it, to work, to be productive, to control our future – leaving that in God's hands, that is the foundation of the entire Torah, which necessitates a measure of submission to God's will and a relinquishing control in this world. To embrace a life of Torah, one needs a measure of letting go.

That is deeply true.

But I want to take the Sefat Emet's claim and add a different explanation.

What does it mean that the whole Torah is dependent upon the laws of Shemitah? It means, very simply, that the entirety of our religious lives, our spiritual lives, are built upon the very physical reality of a functioning earth.

None of the world of Torah gets off the ground – literally – unless the ground is healthy. We cannot do anything without an earth which is nourished, sustained, sustainable, and healthy.

If we have no clean air to breathe, no clean water to drink, no clean soil to plant in, then we have no foundation in which to root – literally – our religious lives.

It is a simple, basic truth: we need to take care of our earth to have a future upon it.

This is more or less what retired NASA climatologist Dr. James Hansen had to say this month among a chorus of voices responding to the sobering – or should I say terrifying – news that this March was the first time since climate recordkeeping began to be possible that the levels of carbon dioxide stayed over 400ppm for an entire month, when most scientists have said that 350ppm is the upper safe limit.

Dr. Hansen said, "If humanity wishes to preserve a planet similar to that on which civilization developed and to which life on Earth is adapted, paleoclimate evidence and ongoing climate change suggest that CO₂ will need to be reduced ... to at most 350 ppm." If humanity wishes to preserve a planet similar to that on which civilization developed and to which life on Earth is adapted!

The scientific evidence documenting that the earth is heating up as a result of the rampant burning of fossil fuels and increased release of carbon dioxide is unassailable. There is no scientific debate about this.

If we want to live to maintain our religion, or to do anything, we need to reconnect to the earth and make sure she is healthy and well.

And let me go one step further. This is not abstract. The way we live our lives in terms of ecological consciousness – what products we use, what kinds of foods we eat, how we treat our environment, does not just have impact on the long term health of the earth, but even on our own physical wellbeing. It behooves us to think carefully and research what we put on and in and around our own bodies for the fulfillment of the Torah's ultimate value, וחי בהם ("and live by them") – to ensure our healthy and long lives.

In a complicated world, and in our busy lives, how do we navigate the complex web of what to eat, what to clean with, how to recycle, and the like?

We are blessed in our Bayit to have dedicated laypeople who do that work for us – who create resources for us to benefit from, and who are themselves resources in these areas, and I refer to our Green Team. Alisa, Shira, Ann, and more recently with Jack and Becca, have not only made this Green Shabbat and Green Kiddush, but have over the years actually produced meticulously researched product guides available on our website about what kinds of household cleaning products, cosmetics, food, lawn care products are healthy, and which are dangerous. I encourage you to find them on our website or pick them up this Shabbat and put them into practice in your own life. And I encourage you to join the Green Team, many of whose accomplishments are listed on a poster in the lobby – and bring your passion and knowledge and initiative.

So much of the work has been done for us. It is up to us to commit to make it real – for our own safety, and the safety of our children and the future generations. We would love to see every Bayit household recycling fully, cutting down on waste as much as possible, and getting our whole families and others excited about conservation.

Our Bayit is hard at work on these commitments. Thanks to Bryan's efforts, our shul now achieves full compliance with recycling guidelines. He is a certified Green Professional, and he applies his "green maintenance" knowledge to use supplies and energy efficiently and safely.

Let us return to our second question. Why are these portions specifically read now, at this time of year? Why do we complete the curses of Devarim before Rosh Hashanah and of Vayikra before Shavuot? The Talmud explains, *כדי שתכלה שנה וקללותיה* – as we approach the New Year, we pray that the previous year with all its curses, all the bad things that happened in it, that we leave it behind and go forward into a better year ahead. But the Talmud asks, I understand that for Rosh Hashanah – a real New Year, but what sort of New Year is Shavuot?

The Talmud answers, it is the time of year when we are judged on the fruit of the tree, *פירות האילן*. When we are evaluated – and we evaluate ourselves – on how we did in the ever-present intersection between the natural world and the human one. It is the season of bikkurim, of first fruits. It is a new year of agricultural possibility, and so we try to put the curses behind us and start again.

The call is loud and clear. As we read this Shabbat of the desolation of the earth if we don't obey God's commandments, we know that desolation of the earth will come if we remained detached from the reality that our own behaviors are responsible for the scary state of our planet. Our role may be a small one, and our capacity to stop the march of industrial manufacturing and the major causes of CO2 growth may be limited, but since when have those things stopped our Bayit and each of us as individuals from doing what we know is right?

תכלה שנה וקללותיה – may the years of harming our earth and ourselves, and their accursed consequences, end today.

May a new year of first fruits begin. The fruits of our decisions to take care of our planet and ourselves through thoughtful decisions of what we buy and what we eat and what we support.

And may we reconnect to land this Shemittah year. *שכל המצוות תלויות בה* (upon which all the commandments depend). The whole Torah – our whole world – depends upon it.

Shabbat shalom.