

## Why Teach the laws of Shmittah at Mount Sinai?

*Parashat BeHar*

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One of the most famous questions in Rashi's commentary on the Bible comes out of today's torah portion.<sup>1</sup>

Let me remind us of the scene:

The Children of Israel are in the Wilderness, at the foot of Mount Sinai. Although it doesn't say so in today's portion, that's where they got the Ten Commandments, which were described in the Book of Exodus, in a passage that we read back in January.

But that's not all they got. As we read in today's portion, they received other laws as well. In particular, as Perri reminded us in her dvar torah, they received the laws about the sabbatical year, known in Hebrew as the *shmittah* year. That's the year when the land must lie fallow – that is, you can't plant new crops.

Now the rules regarding the *shmittah* year don't apply everywhere. In the Torah it makes it very clear: it only applies in the land of Israel, the land where they're headed. They're not there yet, but they're headed that way.

Again, remember: They're at Mount Sinai – about half way between Egypt and the Land of Israel. They've been on the road for about two and a half months, so, as the crow flies they should be able to get to the Land of Israel in another two and a half months.

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<sup>1</sup> “*Mah inyan shmittah etzel har sinai?*” “Why are the laws of *shmittah* being taught at Mount Sinai?” There are various understandings of the meaning of Rashi's question. See the commentaries of Ibn Ezra, Ramban, and others.

But they're not crows. Even though the Land is not that far ahead, they've got a long way to go. As we – who've read the Torah again and again – know full well, it will take them **not a couple of months** to get to the Promised Land, but **many, many years**. They will have to wander in the Wilderness for forty years, as punishment for the way that the Israelite scouts maligned the Promised Land when they returned from scouting it out. The scouts went on an expedition that lasted forty days, and came back with false and disparaging reports on the Land, and so the people will be punished by wandering around in the wilderness for forty years.

Back to what's happening in our parashah. The people are getting instructed in a law that will not take effect until they enter the Promised Land and raise crops on it for six full years. Only then will they actually put into effect the law requiring them to let the land lie fallow on the seventh year.

So when, we might ask, will they really need to know what rules apply in the sabbatical year? Oh, in about 46 years!

So, here's the famous question that Rashi asks: *Mah inyan shmittah etzel har sinai?* What in the world is the Torah doing, teaching the Children of Israel—teaching *us*—the law of *shmittah* at Mount Sinai? It doesn't make any sense! Teach the laws having to do with how the people are supposed to behave in the Wilderness. But to teach a law that will only make any sense 46 years in the future – what is the point of that????

So that is the question. What's going on here? **Why focus on 46, 47 years into the future while everyone is standing at Mount Sinai?**

We could propose some answers to that question. We might say that the Children of Israel should get at Mount Sinai all of the laws that they will need even after they enter into the Land, so that they can study them and be ready to “hit the ground running” once they enter the land.

But still, does that really make much sense? I teach classes at the Hebrew College Rabbinical School to future rabbis. Sometimes I say to them: In two or three years, when you're out in the field, try to remember this. But I know that it's actually hard for them to learn material now that won't actually become relevant until they're already out in the field.

Why do we, and why do all professional schools do this – that is, provide information and techniques and principles that may not be of practical value for many years?

We could say that, once one's students are out in the field, they may be too busy to study such material in depth. So we teach it now, in the hope that when they really need to know it, they'll go back over their notes and refresh their recollection.

**But there's another, deeper reason why it might make sense to teach about the *shmittah* year now, even though it won't be relevant for many years into the future.**

When we think of the *shmittah* year, many of us think naturally about the land, about not raising new crops on it. And that is a big part of it. Preserving and protecting the fertility of the land. Not allowing it to be degraded.

But there's another crucial practice that also takes effect only once every seven years at the end of the *shmittah* year. Namely: all debts are forgiven. **All debts are forgiven.** We learn about this later in the Torah, in the passage in the book of Deuteronomy that talks about the sabbatical year. We'll read that next on the holiday of Shmini Atzeret, which falls this year on October 17th. (See Deuteronomy 15.)

That's an extraordinary piece of legislation, isn't it? It's wild. It sounds so, **outrageous**, so **radical**, ... so, well, **socialist**! How, we might ask, could it be that money which is owed to us doesn't have to be paid! It seems unfair!

And yet that is what the Torah teaches us.

Now, of course, if we look at it not from the perspective of the lender, but from the perspective of the borrower, it looks different, doesn't it?

This seems to be a provision to allow an economic reset for those who got themselves into economic jam over the past several years. It allows everyone to get back on their feet. It gives people another chance.

And yet, for those of us who've worked hard, and established ourselves, and amassed assets and equity, it can seem unfair, right?

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If the members of a society aren't prepared to forgive one another's debts, it's going to be very, very hard to put such a law into effect.

A society needs time to get used to the idea. *Maybe lots of time.* Now, you might think that six years would be plenty of time, but perhaps the purpose of teaching the law of *shmittah* so early is to make the point that this law is so important, that Israelite society needs decades to get used to it. And why is that? Because the people need to develop the love for one another, the mutual caring, that make such a rule **natural** rather than **radical**.

That can take time—a lot of time. Years. Maybe dozens of years.

That could be the reason that the law of *shmittah* is taught at Mount Sinai.

**Being kind to and forgiving of one another requires that we adopt a certain, perhaps un-natural, perspective toward one another.**

Leviticus is teaching the Israelites (and us as well) that we should view society as a community of equals. The British philosopher Thomas Hobbes saw society as a collection of self-interested actors each vying with one another for scarce resources. Leviticus is teaching us that we should view one another as brothers and sisters, as neighbors. And it's teaching us the economic implications of that perspective.

None of us, it teaches us, has a greater right to the land than anyone else. Those of us who happen to own a lot of land have no greater claim on it than anyone else. **We are all tenants on the land.** See Leviticus 25:23:

... כִּי־לִי הָאָרֶץ בְּיֹגְרִים וְתוֹשְׁבִים אַתֶּם עָמְדִי:

... for the land is Mine; you are but strangers resident with Me.

In essence, no matter what any deed that has been recorded in any registry of deeds says, the land, and one's property on the land, doesn't really belong to any of us.

Getting used to that idea can take time. It's necessary to develop communal solidarity, to internalize mitzvot like, "*Love thy neighbor as thyself*," (Leviticus 19:18) which was taught six chapters ago.

And so, yes, it is important to let the Israelites know, even while they're still at Mount Sinai, what kind of societal transformation is going to be necessary in order to fulfill God's will in the Land of Israel.

There's another reason why it makes sense to talk about the sabbatical year way back at Mount Sinai, a reason that has to do with today's celebration.

Perri, as we all know, is celebrating becoming a bat mitzvah. Now, to a certain extent you could say, it's a celebration of a stage in life. A boy or a girl attaining this age becomes responsible for the commandments. It's about becoming a teenager.

But of course it's not just about becoming a teenager. It's about becoming an adult—which is a process that will go on for a while. Now it sounds silly to be talking that way when a young person is only 13, but it isn't silly at all. Because, before you know it, you're going to be older than 13. Before you know it, you'll be in high school and then, God willing, off on your own, perhaps at college, perhaps doing a gap year. And then, God willing, you'll be in your 20s. Adulthood may seem way off right now, but it's coming.

And that is a lesson conveyed by teaching the laws of the sabbatical year already back at Mount Sinai: In order to be prepared for adulthood, it's good to know what is in store for you.

Perri: You're becoming an adult at a very unusual time. Your brother became a bar mitzvah just after we shut down our building; you're becoming a bat mitzvah as we're taking steps fully to open our building. We can see a vision on the horizon. We're not quite there yet, but we're certainly a lot closer than we were two years ago.

My hope and prayer for you is that, when that time comes—when these masks will no longer be necessary, when we'll have other things to think about—you will be prepared to take your rightful place in helping to shape the Jewish future. Shabbat shalom!

## NOTES:

And the answer that we can give today is deceptively simple: the whole purpose of the covenant at Sinai is to create a society that observed Shmitah. It is in a land where Shmitah is observed that human beings will learn to respect the Earth herself, by remembering that none of us can own the land. “For the land is mine,” G-d declares, “and you are strangers and settlers with me.” (Lev. 25:23) And if none of us can own the land, cannot sell it and buy it, then what we do own is ultimately not ours, then the difference between rich and poor is not “just the way things are,” then a person cannot be owned and the difference between slave and master is not real and the slave is loved by God. ...

Only in such a society, where “property” does not designate the right to use up what one owns, but rather a kind of fleeting relationship to what one cares for, can people learn the true meaning of justice. Only in such a society can people learn to share their wealth, nurture the poor alongside everyone else, relieve debts, end hunger, and respect the fundamental human right to be free.

See: [What does shemitah, the sabbatical year, have to do with Mt. Sinai? | Yehuda Lave | The Blogs](#) .