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SHEMITTA IN OUR TIME

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With the sound of the Shofar ringing in our ears reminding us of the approach of Rosh Hashono, we focus on the Days of Judgment when we are all judged as to what will happen to us during the coming year based on our performance during the past year.

We renew our commitment to do our best to fulfill our obligations in the future and put our hope and trust in His kindness and mercy that He will grant us a full and meaningful year.

This year, however, Rosh Hashono brings to us another dimension that requires our attention.

It is the beginning of the Shemitta year.

For us in the Golus, more often than not, we treat this lightly, taking the point of view that, after all, the Shemitta laws apply only in Eretz Yisroel and even there, according to most opinions, it is only a Rabbinical prohibition when, as now, there is no Beis Hamikdosh. All we have to know are a few practical Dinim concerning what we can eat of the imported fruits and vegetables, which can also be avoided if we use only the home grown produce which is readily available.

But upon a closer look, we will realize that there are some fundamental lessons to be learned from the Din of Shemitta which apply to all of us at all times.

וידבר ד' אל משה בהר סיני לאמר
דבר אל בני ישראל ואמרת עליהם כי תבאו אל הארץ
אשר אני נותן לכם ושבתה הארץ שבת לד'
(ויקרא כ"ה א) - And Hashem spoke to Moses on
Mount Sinai saying, "Speak to the Children of
Israel and say to them, when you come into the
land which I give you, then the land shall keep a
Shabbos to Hashem."

Rashi explains the words בהר סיני to teach us that, just as the laws of Shemitta were taught on Mount Sinai, in all their generalities and their details, so too, all the laws of the Torah come from Sinai.

לשם ד', a Shabbos to 'ד'. Rashi explains
לשם ד', כשם שנאמר בשבת בראשית
unto the Name of Hashem, just as it was stated regarding the
Shabbos of the Creation.

Both points mentioned by Rashi raise questions. Why in particular was the law of Shemitta chosen to teach us that all knowledge originates from Sinai. Is there a special connection between Shemitta and Mount Sinai more than between any other commandment? Secondly, why is לשם ד' mentioned in the Torah in relation to the laws of Shabbos and Shemitta more than, for example, the laws of the Yomim Tovim (asked by the Ramban) or for that matter any other mitzvoh?

On the similarities between Shabbos and Shemitta, Rav Hirsch explains that that which Shabbos Bereishis - the seventh day - has in relation to the earth, the seventh year has in relation to the Land. The one is a day of acknowledgment of G-d as the Creator and Master of the world, the other is a year of acknowledgment of G-d as the Owner and Master of the Land.

It is appropriate to elaborate further on the connection between the two mitzvos. The Posuk says (דברים ה' ט"ו)
וזכרת כי עבד היית בארץ מצרים ויצאך ד' אלקיך משם
ביד הזקה ובזרע נטויה על כן צוך ד' אלקיך לעשות את
יום השבת - You should remember that you
were a servant in the land of Egypt and Hashem
brought you out from there by a mighty hand and
an outstretched arm; therefore He commanded
you to keep the Shabbos.

We are commanded to keep the Shabbos because of our redemption from Egypt. This is something we mention also in the Kiddush every Friday night - כי הוא יום תחלה למקראי קדש וזכר - ליציאת מצרים - This is the day which is first among all the days of a Holy Convocation, a remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt.

But what is the special connection between the Exodus, which took place earlier, and Shabbos which was given as a commandment later?

Rav Hirsch explains that Shabbos was given to us to teach us that the source of one's יד and one's זרוע - one's strength and power - is Hashem. We are reminded of the truth that every ounce of one's strength and every grain of one's power and all that one might come to think was one's own production, comes from G-d and belongs to G-d. This is the G-d Who showed us His strength and His power in the midst of the might and power that the great Egyptian state had on the "slaves" who had been bereft of all strength and power. It is He Who has given us the strength and power we now enjoy and which some are tempted to call their own, and Who expects us to acknowledge this fact with the twenty-four hour Shabbos observance by ceasing to exercise our creative power and our regulation of things.

By nature, a person is very attached to what he has created, so much so that our Sages say that a person would rather have a measure of his own produce because it is the fruit of his own labor, than nine times that amount if it comes from someone else. שבת לר' teaches us that we must look upon everything as a heavenly gift.

Similarly, a person is very much attached to his land, to his heritage in his own country, with such a very strong attachment and feeling that people are even willing to sacrifice their lives for their country. The year of Shemitta teaches us שבת לר' that the land is really not ours, we are only tenants, and our tenancy is conditional upon the fulfillment of Hashem's wish. In this way the laws of Shabbos and Shemitta stand out in their similarity.

The 'מד"ר ויקרא א' quotes the posuk from ברכו ד' מלאכיו גברי כח עשי: תהלים ק"ג - Bless Hashem, His messengers armed with strength that fulfill His word. To which messengers does the Posuk refer? Our Sages explain: א"ר יצחק בשומרי שביעית

The Posuk refers to those who observe the laws of Shemitta. The strength of the mighty is needed to negate one's ownership and rights for a full year by not cultivating the land and by letting others eat of its produce without expecting acknowledgement or thanks. It is הפקר - free for all. This requires the inner strength of a גבור, so much so that we can ask, is it not too much of a נסיון to expect from every farmer?

The Medrash explains that when the Children of Israel stood at Mount Sinai and said נעשה ונשמע - we will do and we will listen, they accepted all the commandments. Before they even knew what was expected of them they displayed the same גבורה דברו - to obey the voice of His word.

This explains the special connection between the laws of Shemitta and Mount Sinai, because to observe the laws of Shemitta that גבורה is necessary which was displayed on Mount Sinai when the Torah was given.

The non-observance of Shemitta was the cause of גלות. אז תרצה הארץ את שבתתיה. (ויקרא כ"ו ל"ד) - then the land will appease its Shabbos. The Medrash ('מד"ר בראשית ה') explains this with a parable - a king allowed some guests to live in one of his palaces. After a time, they claimed that they were the owners. Upon hearing this, the king evicted them. It is the same with Eretz Yisroel - it is the King's palace. By observing the laws of Shemitta, we acknowledge that Hashem is the Owner, but if we make a takeover bid, we will be evicted.

The main difficulty in fulfilling fully and generously the commands of the Torah when it affects our ownership is that we perceive ourselves as owners and therefore as givers. What Shemitta and Shabbos teach us is that the possession of our land is a lease given to us in trust to discharge our obligations and that which we create is but a blessing of Hashem. As the Mishna says, (אבות פרק ג' משנה ח') תן לו משלו שאתה ושלך - Give Him of His as you and yours are His.

It is with this in mind as we usher in the year of Shemitta, that we salute the many thousands of farmers who, at great cost to themselves, show the strength of the mighty to observe the Shemitta. They deserve every help and support we can give them and in that z'chus we will merit a וחתימה טובה and גאולה שלמה בב"א.