

Shemittah and Sinai?

And Hashem spoke to Moshe at Mount Sinai saying: 'Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them: "When you enter the land that I am giving to you, and the land shall rest a Sabbath for Hashem"' (Lev. 25:1-2). Rashi cites the famous words of the *Toras Kobanim*. What does the subject of *shemittah* (letting the land go fallow in the seventh year) have to do with Mount Sinai? Rather, just as with the law of *shemittah* the general rule and all its details and intricacies were said at Sinai, so is it true about all the commandments that the general rule, all its details and intricacies were said at Sinai. The problem with this explanation is that in the very last passage before discussing *shemittah*, the relates the story of the Blasphemer in which Moshe only knew the general idea that a Blasphemer ought to be punished, but he did not seem to know the details of exactly what must be done to punish the Blasphemer. That passage suggests that not all the details and intricacies were said at Sinai!

We could answer that Moshe did indeed know the details and intricacies which were said at Sinai, but he did not want to rule in practice with that knowledge until Hashem told him that he should teach those details to the Jewish People and when it comes to the prohibition of blasphemy and how to punish the offender, Hashem had not yet told Moshe to teach those laws to the Jewish People, so Moshe refrained from putting his own Sinaitic knowledge to practice.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch asks this question in his commentary to the Torah (here). He answers in the name of Rabbi Naftali Hertz Weisel that the point of the previous passage was to teach that the sin of Blasphemy is so repugnant that nobody would ever suspect that regular Jew would ever commit such an atrocity and the only type of person we can imagine committing this sin must be somebody of Egyptian lineage.

It seems that one might have thought that there are two types of *mitzvos*. One type of *mitzvah* is akin the prohibition of blasphemy which is so farfetched to actually happen, that we say about this type of sin *chas v'shalom* or *bar minan* or the like. We only speak about these type of prohibitions if and when it actually happens, otherwise we eschew talking about it. But there are other types of *mitzvos* like *shemittah* which are supposed to be considered standards. That *mitzvah* leads a person to such a level of belief and trust in Hashem that he is even willing to stop his own livelihood for a year and rely wholly on Hashem in order to show that everything belongs to Him. Learning about

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the laws of *shemittah* then have a point even when they are not technically relevant (e.g. if it is many years until the next *shemittah*). This is because the laws themselves teach us important and powerful lessons and can facilitate spiritual growth. Sabbatical commandments like *shemittah* and Shabbos are, in fact, the *raison d'etere* of the Jewish People's existence,¹ for they help spread the message about Hashem and His role in creating the world.

Nonetheless, Rashi's first comment obviates this message. We derive from the fact that the Torah needlessly mentioned Sinai next to *shemittah* that all commandments with all their full details were said at Sinai. There is no such thing as a commandment that it is worthwhile to learn about and a commandment that should be on the hush-hush until it is relevant. The entire Torah is always relevant and any facet of the Torah can propel a person to the heights of spiritual connection to Hashem.

Every Seven Years

Six years you shall sow your field and fix years you shall trim your vineyard and gather your produce. And in the seventh year, a Shabbat Shabbaton shall be for the land, a Shabbat for Hashem—your field shall you not sow and your vineyard shall you not trim (Lev. 25:3-4). Rabbi Chaim Yosef David Azulai, also known as Chida (in *Chomaa Anach* 1 and *Nachal Kedumim* 1) explains that “six years you shall sow your field” is a commandment, just like we find in the Talmud that Rava told his students (*Brachos* 35b), “I beg of you, do not see my face during the days of Nissan nor during the days of Tishrei² [in which

¹ In fact, as the Vilna Gaon explains, the Midrash says that when Hashem created the world, He gave each day of creation a “spouse” with whom it was joined. For example, the first day in which He created light and darkness was joined with the fourth day in which He created the celestial bodies. The second day in which He divided the upper waters and the lower waters into the sky and sea was joined with the fifth day in which He created the fish and birds. The third day in which He created the flora on the land was joined with the sixth day in which He created the fauna of the land. Yet, the seventh day is left alone and is unconnected to any other day. The Midrash says that Hashem told the Seventh Day that its partner is the Jewish People. (This is why the imaginary of *Kabbalat Shabos* refers to the Seventh Day as a bride or queen.)

² [The Kollel Question](#)

Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin (*Nefesh HaChaim* 1:8) points out that during those two months in which Rava told his students not to come to the Study Hall, they did not completely forsake Torah Study, rather it means that they studied only at home between work, even though they did not show up to the Study Hall. Moreover, the Talmud (there) explains that this notion of working during agricultural peaks seasons and learning the rest of the year reflects the opinion of Rabbi Yishmael and this is the position endorsed for the masses. But there is also the opinion

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people are otherwise expected to be tending to their fields].” Accordingly, there were two months per year in which the Jewish masses were expected to tend to their fields and not show up in the Study Hall. After six years, they had racked up twelve months in which they were working their fields instead of studying. For this reason, the Torah says that after six years of work (i.e. two months out of the year), the seventh year should be a year of complete rest to make up for those lost twelve months of Torah study. Rabbi Ephraim Lenchitz, author of the *Kli Yakar*, offers a similar explanation in his work *Sifsei Daas* (end of Parshas Behar).

Yom Kippur in plural

On the Day of Atonements, you shall pass a shofar throughout your land (Lev. 25:9). Why does the Torah always call Yom Kippur the “Day of Atonements” in plural (*Yom HaKippurim*)? Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky writes in *Taama D’Kra* that this is an allusion to the idea that besides the people who are alive, the dead are also judged and atoned on Yom Kippur (as the Rema writes in *Orach Chaim*, end of *siman* 621).

of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai who holds that one should never engage in work but should rather *always* study Torah. The Talmud says that when the masses try to adopt this approach, they will be unsuccessful but individuals can spend their entire lives studying Torah without ever having to work.

Rabbi Shimon ben Zemach Duran, also known as Tashbetz, writes in his responsa *Tashbetz* (vol. 1 *siman* 148) that nowadays that people are more prone to forgetting the Torah that they had learned, if a person would sometimes have to work, then he will never be successful in his Torah Study because the effort of work will cause him to forget his Torah learning. Instead, he resolves that the Torah Scholars *must* toil day and night in only Torah Study so that they will be able to provide Halachic rulings for the Jewish People, and they should be supported by the community, and there should be no shame in this, it should be considered a valid form of piety. Rabbi Chaim ibn Attar, author of *Ohr HaChaim*, writes a similar thing in *Rishon L’Tzion* (Yoreh Deah 246) that “nowadays that the hearts have been ‘lessened’... it is better to learn the entire day.” The Chofetz Chaim (in *Shem Olam, Shaar Hachzkat HaTorah* ch. 11) writes that some people think that it is better to be self-sufficient and to forgo mastery of Torah study, but he rejects that notion and writes that self-sufficient while it is a virtue extolled by the rabbis is not such an important trait, and even if it was a real *mitzvah* it would still not trump the Eternal Riches that one can earn by studying Torah. Rabbi Yosef Karo, author of the *Shulchan Aruch*, writes (in *Kesef Mishnah* to *Talmud Torah* 3:10) that even in the Tannaic period, there were hundreds of thousands of students who received public support. See also Rabbi Moshe Feinstein’s famous responsum in responsa *Iggros Moshe* (Yoreh Deah vol. 2, *siman* 116) in which he fully supports the idea of studying Torah and accepting a stipend for doing so, rejecting those who say it is better to work and fully support oneself.

*Much of the material presented in **Oneg!** has been translated by Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein from Rabbi Elchanan Shoff's weekly Hebrew 'Aalefcha Chochma' parsha sheet. To sign up to the **Oneg!** weekly email list, or to sponsor a week of **Oneg!** send an email to BKLashul@gmail.com*

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Ten Essentials for every City

And you shall dwell on the land assured (Lev. 25:18). The Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 17b) says that it is forbidden for a Torah Scholar to live in any city which does not have the following ten elements: ¹⁾ a *Beis Din* which gives lashes and punishments ²⁾ A charitable fund which is collected with two officers and is disbursed with three officers ³⁾ a synagogue ⁴⁾ a bathhouse ⁵⁾ bathroom ⁶⁾ doctor ⁷⁾ bloodletter ⁸⁾ scribe ⁹⁾ slaughterer and ¹⁰⁾ children's teacher. Rabbi Akiva adds that the city must also have fruits, because fruits help enlighten the scholar's eyes. (Some versions of his list omit the slaughterer.)

Rabbi Chaim Yosef David Azulai, also known as Chida (in *Birkei Yosef, Yoreh Deah* 245:7) writes in the name of his grandfather, the author of *Chesed L'Avraham* that these ten things are alluded to in the ten letters of the words "on the land assured" (על הארץ לבטח): ¹⁾ The letter ע alludes to the bathhouse (עין מים) ²⁾ ל alludes to the children's teacher (לימוד תינוקות) ³⁾ ה alludes to the synagogue (היכל הקודש) ⁴⁾ א alludes to the bloodletter (אומן) ⁵⁾ ר alludes to the doctor (רופא) ⁶⁾ צ alludes to the charity fund (צדקה) ⁷⁾ ל alludes to the scribe (לבלר) ⁸⁾ ב alludes to the bathroom (בית) ⁹⁾ ט alludes to the slaughterer (טבח) ¹⁰⁾ ח alludes to the beis din (חכם).

I was thinking that it could be that these ten elements corresponds to another list of ten found in *Avos d'Rabbi Nosson* (ch. 34) which says that there are ten elements which called "alive": ¹⁾ Hashem = doctor (as it says that "Hashem is our healer") ²⁾ Torah = children's teacher ³⁾ Israel = bloodletter (because the Jews *believe* in Hashem, and believe is מאמין which is similar to אומן) ⁴⁾ the Righteous = scribe (because Torah Scholars are called scribes) ⁵⁾ Garden of Eden = bathroom (because the word for bathroom literally means House of the Throne, which alludes to Hashem's Divine throne and glory whose Earthly home is in the Garden of Eden) ⁶⁾ The Tree = fruits (according to Rabbi Akiva) ⁷⁾ Land of Israel = synagogues (which retain a degree of holiness like the Holy Land, and Rav Hai Gaon was said to have said that every synagogue is built with some stones of the Holy Temple) ⁸⁾ Kindness = charity fund ⁹⁾ Wiseman = Beis Din (per the Chida above) ¹⁰⁾ Water = bathhouse. All of this fits neatly with the version of the Gemara that omits the slaughterer from the list.

The Punishments for those who don't keep *Shemittah*

And you shall dwell on the land assured (Lev. 25:18). Rashi explains that this assurance teaches that as retribution for the sin of failing to keep the *Shemittah*, the Jewish

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people are punished with exile. This punishment is on a national level. On an individual level, the Talmud (*Kiddushin* 20a) says that as punishment for failing to keep *shemittah*, Jews will be sold as slaves to gentiles. Why is the commandment of *shemittah* so important that it brings these quite severe punishments if it is not kept? Perhaps we can understand in light of the commentary of the *Chesed L'Avraham* (to Avos ch. 3). The Mishnah asserts that a “fence” for keeping in wisdom is silence. The *Chesed L'Avraham* explains that one might think that the best way to become wise is to constantly argue and debate others in order to sharpen one’s own understanding, so the Mishnah teaches otherwise that the best way to attain wisdom is being silent. We similarly find this sort of counterintuitive reasoning in the assertion that giving tithes makes one rich. Or when the Talmud says that if one “starves” a certain limb, then it becomes satisfied and when one “satisfies” it, it becomes starved. The point is that sometimes one has to do the opposite of what you might otherwise think in order to attain your goal. Here too, when people do not keep the laws of *shemittah* this means that they do not appreciate Hashem’s gift to them in the form of the Land. In order for them to better appreciate that gift, Hashem banishes them from said land and subjugates them under the powers of others, which will eventually bring them to the realization of the good behind Hashem’s gift and bring them to a new appreciation of the Holy Land.

No resurrection for Jews who take interest from Jews

Do not take from him neshech and tarbis, and you shall fear from your God, and your brother will live with you (Lev. 25:36). The Midrash (*Shemos Rabbah* 31:6) says that if somebody takes interest from another Jew, then he will not be resurrected when Hashem will later resurrect the dead. Rabbi Moshe Sofer in *Chasam Sofer al HaTorah* (Parshas Behar, p. 75) explains that the idea behind the Resurrection of the Dead is that all Jews are attached to each other and to Hashe. Accordingly, whenever a person dies, he is like one withered branch of this great World Tree, and even if a tree’s branch becomes dry and withered, it can be rejuvenated because the rest of the tree and its roots are still moist and not withered. The reason behind the ban on lending fellow Jews with interest is that we are all branches of one big tree and interrelated to each other. Accordingly, if somebody denies that relationship and connection between all Jews by lending another Jews with interest, he has shown that he has effectively cut off his own branch from the Great Tree of the Jewish People. The result is he is no longer attached to a non-withered trunk or root, and when the time comes for the Resurrection of the Dead, he is not part of the tree.

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What's wrong with interest?

Do not take from him neshech and tarbis, and you shall fear from your God, and your brother will live with you (Lev. 25:36). Rabbi Ephraim Lenchitz in *Kli Yakar* explains that the main reason behind the prohibition of charging another Jew interest is that charging interest diminishes one's trust in Hashem. Every person invested in business keeps his eyes up towards Hashem because he is unsure whether he will profit or not. But when somebody lends money with interest, he knows with almost-certainty that he will profit, and believes whatever collateral he has in his hand, turning his heart away from Hashem. The borrower who takes money with interest also sins in this arrangement because he is the enabler for the lender to forget about Hashem and lower his level of trust in Hashem. Nonetheless, it is still permitted to lend money to a non-Jew with interest because non-Jews can assumed to be violent or thieves, such that even if the non-Jew is somehow subservient to the Jewish court, he will always have some recourse to not end up repaying his loan. Because of this, the lender still needs to rely on Hashem in order to profit, so lending a gentile does not take away his trust in God.

Charity and Resurrection of the Dead

And your brother will live with you (Lev. 25:36). It says in *Sefer Chassidim* (321) he who gives charity will merit to the Resurrection of the Dead. Rabbi Chaim Palagi (in *Tzedaka L'Chaim, Maareches Tav*, 757-758) uses this idea to explain the verse "He who chases after charity and kindness will find life" (Prov. 21:21). This too is related to what we wrote earlier from the *Chasam Sofer* about the connection between lending with interest and not meriting being a part of the Resurrection of the Dead.

The scary part of lending with interest

...and you shall fear from your God... (Lev. 25:36). Rabbi Moshe Alshich explains that a person should be fearful from lending another Jew with interest, because all of a person's financial gains are quoted on Rosh Hashanah, and Hashem does not earmark for that quota any funds for paying off interest. According, when somebody is paid back interest, Hashem takes those funds from monies that were originally destined to poor people and gives them to this treacherous lender. Because He had to use funds from the poor to pay this lender, Hashem will in turn decrease the amount of money due to the lender, and from this the lender should be afraid—be very afraid.

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Who is for me?

For the Children of Israel are slaves for Me (Lev. 25:55). The word “for me” (אני) recalls a famous statement of Hillel’s. Hillel said (Avos 1:14): “If I am not for myself, then who is for me?” Rabbi Elchanan Chefetz of Pozna (in *Kiryat Chana* to Avos) explains that since the Jewish People are not really independent, but really belong to Hashem, then Hillel realized that his own money is not really his, but belongs to Hashem as well. This is also taught by the prophet Chaggai who said in Hashem’s name: “For Me is the silver, and for Me is the gold—the word of Hashem” (Chaggai 2:8).