**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**THE PHILOSOPHY OF *SHEMITTA***

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**Shiur #09: *Bein Adam La-Makom* II-*Gibborei Khoach***

**The *Gevura* of *Shemitta* Observance**

In our last lesson, we introduced some of the *bein adam la-Makom* messages of *shemitta*, specifically focusing on *shemitta*'s role in imparting *emuna* (faith) and *bitachon* (trust) in God to the Jewish people. What is especially interesting is that the *mitzvot* of *shemitta* achieve these lofty spiritual messages through a system which is very demanding and extremely challenging. The challenge involved in *shemitta*, the test of faith, is not lost on the Sages, who characterize those who observe *shemitta* without complaint as “mighty in strength,” based on the verse in *Tehillim* (103:20), "Bless God, you angels of His, you mighty in strength [*gibborei khoach*], who fulfill His word, hearkening to the sound of His word.”

The Midrash (*Vayikra Rabba* 1:1) comments:

“The mighty in strength who fulfill His word” (*Tehillim* 103:20).To whom does the verse refer? Rabbi Yitzchak said: “To those who are willing to observe the sabbatical year. In the way of the world, a man may be willing to observe a commandment for a day, a week, a month, but is he capable of doing so for an entire year? But throughout this year, this person sees his field fallow, his vineyard fallow, this mighty man sees his field declared ownerless, his fences broken down, but he pays his taxes without saying a word. Can you conceive a person mightier than he?”

Observing *shemitta* requires angelic patience and strength of character for an extended period of time; the Midrash extols the virtue of silence displayed by one who may not necessarily comprehend the need to allow his field to lay fallow, but nevertheless abides by the *mitzvot* of *shemitta*.

The Midrash goes on to quote Rav Huna’s view in the name of Rabbi Acha: this verse refers to the Jewish people’s angelic declaration at Mount Sinai,*"Na'aseh ve-nishma," "*We will do and we will listen” (*Shemot* 24:7). These two terms, *asiya* (doing, fulfilling, acting) and *shemia* (listening, hearing, hearkening) are integral. Both the angels and the people put them in that order, as the Talmud (Shabbat 88b) points out:

When the Jewish people [at Sinai] gave precedence to "We will do" (*na'aseh*( over "we will listen" )*nishma*(, a Heavenly voice went out and said: "Who has taught them this [heavenly] secret that the angels use, as it is stated: ‘Bless God, you angels of His, you mighty in strength, who fulfill His word, hearkening to the sound of His word.’ At first they do, and then they listen.”

The connection between *shemitta* and Sinai is very deep, as will become apparent, and it is fitting that the title of *gibborei khoach* be applied to those who rise to the occasion of *shemitta* observance as well as those who accept the Torah.

**Distinguishing Between *Gevura* and *Koach***

Let us analyze these these terms: *gevura* (might), *koach* (strength) and *shemia* (listening).

Although the terms *gevura* and *koach* are often used interchangeably, they are distinct attributes; in the morning liturgy, we recite two different blessings associated with these qualities, one for each: "Who girds Israel with *gevura*” and "Who gives the faint *koach*.”

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (*Catharsis*) distinguishes between the terms *gevura* and *koach.* *Koach,* he explains, is the power to move forward and conquer, readily understandable to modern man, who is used to viewing the conqueror as the victor. This is a trait that can also be found in animals. However, the Mishna (*Avot* 4:1) provides a different explanation for identifying a *gibbor*, one who has *gevura*:

Who is a *gibbor*? One who conquers his desire.

This desire, *yetzer*, represents the natural urges that one possesses. One who is able to overcome these urges and conquer his innate desires expresses *gevura.* *Gevura* consists primarily of the capacity to withdraw, to overcome oneself, to purge or to purify one's existence. Whenever, for a more lofty cause, one can hold back and stop, Rabbi Soloveitchik adds, this *gevura* may more accurately be rendered “heroism.”

Rabbi Soloveitchik adds that in fact, this is the defining factor of the Torah's view of heroic action and the character of the hero.  The strongest do not receive this title; rather, it is the one who is driven by a calling and has the inner strength to live within self-imposed limits.

This Jewish concept of heroism is so significant because it doesn't only express itself in a moment of victory, but throughout one’s life.

It is perhaps the central motif in our existential experience. It pervades the human mind steadily, and imparts to man a strange feeling of tranquility. The heroic person, according to our view, does not succumb to frenzy or excitement. Biblical heroism is not ecstatic but rather contemplative; not loud but hushed; not dramatic or spectacular but mute. The individual, instead of undertaking heroic action sporadically, lives constantly as a hero. (*Catharsis,* p. 42)

In a similar manner, in one of his speeches to the Mizrachi Convention, Rabbi Soloveitchik (*The Rav Speaks*, p. 102) distinguishes between *koach* and *gevura*; defining *koach* as power, a physical force shared by man and beast, and *gevura* as "something found only in the human-spiritual realm… heroism. The hero is not the one who is physically strong, but the one possessed of the quality of heroism… Heroism means to fight even when the chances of victory are slim, when reason advises capitulation because logically the battle seems lost. Heroism implies doing the paradoxical, the absurd."

Rising to the occasion, defying logic and chance, is heroism, and Rabbi Soloveitchik identifies this heroism as the defining characteristic of a Jew: “to be able to fight against himself and against his own cold logic."

He goes on to describe the heroic aspects of Jewish existence in the modern world, which includes primarily the ability to observe *mitzvot*, which often involves overcoming one's natural, instinctive driving force to act rashly, and to act heroically instead.

Based upon this definition of *gevura*, the *gevura* of “the sun rising in its might” (*Shofetim* 5:31) is the ability to express true heroism, along with the power to ignore insults. This entails a lifelong pursuit of the composure to answer to a higher calling, and this represents true heroism.

This understanding of *gevura* is truly relevant for the *shemitta-*observer's heroic behavior. The real heroes are the farmers who withstand the daily challenge of watching one's field underproduce, for not one day but an entire year, and to have the inner conviction to be able to rely on God with the *emuna* and *bitachon* that we mentioned in the last lesson. *Shemitta* reshapes one's perspective on God's role in the world and one's everyday sustenance, while allowing one to work on himself until he can relinquish his feelings of ownership and abide by the Will of God.

It is also now very understandable why our Sages (*Shabbat* 88b) extol as *gibborim* those who are silent in the face of verbal attack, who hear and listen rather than act and respond.

They may be humiliated, but they do not humiliate; they may hear their disgrace, but they do not reply; they act out of love and rejoice amidst suffering. Of them, Scripture says (*Shofetim* 5:31): “But they that love Him are like the sun rising in its might.”

The ability to be silent and continue to do what is incumbent upon one is the mark of a true *gibbor.*

**The *Shemitta* Test**

This aspect of *gevura* is based on *bitachon*, as we mentioned in the last lesson. Although there we cited two understandings of *bitachon*, a maximalist approach and a minimalist one, *bitachon* certainly refers to the recognition that God is in the picture. All that happens comes from God, and one must certainly rely on him when the Torah tells us to do so. What is especially interesting is that according to the Chazon Ish's understanding of *bitachon*, *shemitta* observance calls for something that is not usually required; beyond displaying the confidence that whatever outcome happens due to the challenging observance is Godly ordained, man is asked not to worry about what he will have to eat during the *shemitta* year — taking the initial approach to *bitachon* which he generally rejects.

This idea is expressed powerfully by Rav Berel Wein (<http://www.torah.org/learning/rabbiwein/5760/behar.html>), explaining why *shemitta* serves as a test:

The difficulty inherent in the observance of the mitzva of Shmita is apparent to all. The Torah itself addresses the issue by saying that one should not be deterred from Shmita observance by the obvious impracticality of the mitzva. Thus, Shmita, unlike many other mitzvot, becomes a test of belief and faith. The Torah, which otherwise adamantly dictates a practical approach to life, here demands a leap of faith and an abandonment of the everyday practicalities of living.

After comparing *shemitta* to the *Akeida*, the Binding of Yitzchak, he states:

This correlation between the akeidah and Shmitah can help us understand why it is the mitzva of Shmita, over and above any other mitzva, that was chosen to represent the divinity of Torah from Sinai. For to all of us today, Sinai is a matter of faith. It is a belief that our ancestors were not liars, that their transmission of the Torah and its values was correct in form and in interpretation, and that the standards of behavior outlined in the Torah are of an eternal nature. For many in the Jewish world, that is a tall order of belief to demand. The modern world is long on narcissistic pleasure and short on faith and sacrifice. But without faith, without a feeling of the spiritual and supernatural, life is a very scary place and experience.

The concept of viewing *shemitta* as a means of embracing *bitachon* through an extreme divergence from the normal mode of living should not be dismissed lightly. Without *shemitta*, many people might develop the perspective that nature takes its course, and God's Hand is at best behind the scenes, rarely expressing itself in an open manner. One without *bitachon* often finds it hard not to agonize over everything, and their whole existence is fraught with constant worry.

Thus, as Rav Yisraeli writes, the Torah addresses the natural concern that one will not have enough to eat and God’s promise in kind:

In addition to the generosity that this mitzva demands of one, there is the need for a tremendous measure of faith in God's day-to-day providence… There is here a promise that providence will manifest itself in a way that is not natural, as the commentators have explained well.... A blessing that comes especially in this year is not by any means to be understood as natural: this is a manifest display of providence. Nonetheless, in order to merit this heavenly blessing, it is necessary to be strong and first to become full of the trait of fearless faith that the blessing will indeed be sent in this year…

He reiterates that *shemitta* is not a problem, but a test of faith:

We thus learn that any planning, even if pursued within the guidelines of Halakha, that takes advantage of agricultural experience and scientific accomplishment to "solve," as it were, the "problem" of *shemitta* stands in opposition to that very mitzva, its objective, and its spirit. *Shemitta* is not a "problem" given to us to surmount obliquely. The Holy One, Blessed is He, does not treat His creatures despotically, and His aim is not to burden Israel needlessly. It is an invaluable test, the test of faith and of conviction. Simultaneously, it is a tool of supreme providence that serves to bring about its indubitable manifestation in our world. All the artfulness, all the plans made to reduce or void the practical difficulties that the mitzva puts before a man of Israel, brings to naught the principle aim of this mitzva—and this is not the will of the Torah. This is the aspect of the mitzva between man and God.

*Shemitta* observance imparts *emuna* and *bitachon* through its extreme nature; it is a test of faith, its first teaching in the *bein adam la-Makom* realm. The difficulty of observing *shemitta* is an inherent part of its message. It is a trial year, a year of *nisayon*.

The purpose of a *nisayon* is not for God, who knows man's capabilities, to test man; rather, it is an opportunity for man to raise his banner (*nes*) and witness his capabilities. Will he observe the *mitzvot*, or will he forgo the opportunities and look for loopholes to circumvent obligations? *Nisayon* comes from the root *nes*, as man is enabled to raise a new banner and achieve things he never realized he was capable of. This is the opportunity that *shemitta* provides, allowing one to exhibit *gevura* in a way that will redefine his character, shaping his perspective with *emuna* and *bitachon*.

**Sanctifying Time**

*Shemitta* does not only contain a rest and recess from the harrying world we live in, wherein man races against the clock; instead, he enjoys *kedushat zeman*, the sanctification of time.The period is holy, but it also enables man to invest his time with purpose.

What is the farmer to do with his time during the sabbatical year? Had Judaism extolled vacation and physical rest without a deeper purpose, then the year could be viewed as a year to take it easy. In fact, the modern term for taking a year off one's work is none other than sabbatical, and in some circles it is given every seven years.

The difficulty is that the concept of rest for the sake of taking it easy or just being lazy, while often championed in our day and age, is generally antithetical to the Torah. In fact, whenever the Torah mentions a mitzva of Shabbat, either regarding the weekly Sabbath or the *shemitta* year, the Torah always precedes such a mitzva with a description of the preceding work: "Six days you shall labor,” “Six years you shall plant,” etc. *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai* views the work of the other six days as an obligation:

In the same way that Israel was commanded concerning the Shabbat, so in the same way were they commanded regarding performing work [for the six days].

The Mishna (*Avot* 1:10) says "Love work," and *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* (1:11) explains why:

"Love work” — how is this? It teaches us that a man should love work, for just as the Torah was bestowed with a covenant, so too work was bestowed with a covenant, as it is written: “Six days shall you …do all your labor, and on the seventh shall be a Sabbath for Lord your God.”

The Mishna in *Avot* (3:4) decries those who waste their time:

Rabbi Chanina the son of Chakhinai would say: “One who stays awake at night or travels alone on the road and turns his heart to idleness, has forfeited his life.”

This Mishna’s harsh language, whether it is to be taken literally or not, is a clear indication of the Jewish outlook on time.

If so, how can one take a full year off?

*Shemitta* teaches us that besides the devastation of wasted time, there is also a problem with occupying one's time with work, work, work, in a manner that will cause one to lose sight of the purpose of his toil and the purpose of existence altogether. The Abarbanel notes that time is man's most important commodity, and therefore, wasting it is nothing short of destructive behavior.

It is appropriate that wholesome people be more concerned with loss of their time than with loss of all possessions and money that they have, for the days of one’s life form the path on which one walks to attain his perfection… In order that one always keep this in mind, divine wisdom saw fit to awaken him through its *mitzvot* to the brevity of his days and his limited lifespan.

Thus, the Torah states that the Creator created His world in seven days, so that one who is alive may take note that the days of his years total seventy years; therefore, he must not spend them in vain, but performing deeds which the Creator has mandated. Then, on the seventh day, he may rest and repose in the spiritual world.

There also are many sevens in the Torah that serve as a reminder of this…all for the purpose of reminding us that the days of our years total seventy years...

Indeed, for this very reason, He (may He be blessed) issued the commandments of *shemitta* and *yovel*, for in the *shemitta* [cycle], there are six years of cultivating the land, and the seventh year is one of comprehensive rest, which serves to awaken us and inculcate that the span of one's years totals seventy. For fifty years after childhood, he is a powerful man, owner of the land; accordingly, he plants his field and prunes his vineyard and gathers his produce. However, in the seventh year, which alludes to the final ten decade of his life, it is not appropriate that he work any longer, for he has reached his limit; whether he resides in the domain of old age or in that of the grave. Thus, "the land shall have a complete rest" and "a rest for God," because then the soul adheres to its Creator and abandons physical pursuits. Indeed, the purpose of the law of *shemitta* is that one may recalled that the days of his life are numbered...

**Time for the Important Things in Life**

The *mitzvot* of *shemitta* directly impact the farmer's life and livelihood by restricting that which he can do in the field. While each and every limiting aspect has a unique purpose and message, there would also seem to be a liberating element of all of the *mitzvot* together. When the farmer relies on God to provide his needs, he is free to occupy himself with other matters—possibly even extremely important matters that one doesn't normally have the proper time for! This rest allows one to realize what is important in life, especially what one usually lacks the opportunity to do the rest of the year.

This teaching of the Abarbanel, like that of Rav Yitzchak Arama ([Lesson 7](http://www.vbm-torah.org/archive/shemitta75/07shemitta.htm)), focuses on the elements of turning from evil, presenting *shemitta* as a year without corporeal concerns, preventing the darkness of materialism from pervading.

Others note that a year without occupation in the field allows for a positive experience as well; thus, it is related to the Sinai experience, a concept alluded to by the Midrash as cited above, as well as by the fact that the main passage of *shemitta* is taught “on Mount Sinai.”

The Seforno (*Vayikra* 25:3) explains that the Shabbat element of *shemitta* indicate how to spend this year:

The whole year one should be completely free of cultivation of the soil, ready to serve God, as is the case with the Shabbat of Creation… The purpose is to learn and to teach, to observe and to do. So too, all those who work on the land, when they rest in that year, should be inspired to seek God…

Similarly, Rav Tzvi Hirsch Kalischer identifies resting from work for spiritual gain as part of the rationale for *shemitta*.

Yet another reason: In order that they should not always be preoccupied with working the soil to provide for their material needs. For in this one year, they will be completely free. The liberation from the yoke of work gives them the opportunity to study Torah and wisdom. The unlettered will be occupied with crafts and building and supplying these needs in the Land of Israel. Those endowed with special skills will invent new methods in this free time for the benefit of the world. Whoever is endowed with the knowledge of the Torah will occupy himself with Torah and the fear of God, for in this lies the true happiness.

Thus, we have seen the Midrashic analogy between *shemitta* observance and the “*Na'aseh ve-nishma*” declaration, which we will explore further in our lesson on the connection between *shemitta* and Mount Sinai. *Shemitta* is a year of returning to the Mount Sinai experience, culminating with *Hakhel*, a reenactment of the communal acceptance of the Torah.

**The *Koach* Element**

Although our focus on *gibborei khoach* has been on the *gevura*, the ability to heroically accept the challenges of *shemitta* quietly without complaint, the aspect of *koach* in the verse is also significant. In a different essay, Rabbi Soloveitchik (*Five Speeches*) makes reference to the verses in *Yeshayahu*:

But they that wait for God shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not be faint. (40:30-31)

A connection to God enables one to renew one's *koach*, strength, in two ways; it prevents them from being weary or faint. Rabbi Soloveitchik distinguishes between these two terms: *ayefut*, faintness, grows out of failure and unsuccessful effort; on the other hand, *yegia,* weariness, is the opposite, as it is the result of seeing blessing in one's work which brings one to contentment. It involves the recognition of having succeeded at being fruitful and creative.

When you eat the weariness of your hands, you shall be happy and it will be well with you. (*Tehillim* 128:2)

Although weary, one sees blessing in his actions and is content with his accomplishments.

Each of these moods, faint and weary, are dangerous; faintness might bring about feelings of despair and hopelessness, while weariness might grow into self-satisfaction and self-righteousness.

The blessing described in the verses in *Yeshayahu* states that those who wait for God will be girded with the *koach,* strength, to prevent the negative effects of either mindset, of weariness or faintness. They will be successful yet will not become intoxicated by their achievements, as they will recognize that they must continue their efforts, which are endless. Yet, at those points when they are walking and experience setbacks and difficulties, they will not allow faintness, despair or frustration to overcome them.

*Koach* is that strength which pushes one forward against adversity or complacency.

The *gibborim* are able to withstand the intellectual challenge of *shemitta*, but they need *koach* to inculcate the values of *shemitta*. These values are applicable in times of distress, when one may focus on the difficulty and think about giving up, but one also needs *koach* when feeling proud of one's *shemitta* accomplishment. In the midst of contentedness, there is a danger of losing sight of the values of this lifelong struggle for *gevura*.

May we all garner the *koach* and *gevura* to learn and inculcate all that *shemitta* has to teach.