**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**THE PHILOSOPHY OF *SHEMITTA***

**By Rav Binyamin Zimmerman**

This shiur is available in the archives at:

[www.vbm-torah.org/archive/shemitta75/10shemitta.htm](http://www.vbm-torah.org/archive/shemitta75/10shemitta.htm)

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Dedicated by Aaron and Tzipora Ross and family in honor of the yahrzeits of our esteemed grandparents: Neil Fredman (Shmuel Nachamu ben Shlomo Moshe HaKohen, 10 Tevet), Clara Fredman (Chaya bat Yitzchak Dovid, 15 Tevet), and Walter Rosenthal (Shimon ben Moshe, 16 Tevet).

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Dedicated in loving memory of Richard J. Silvera A”H by his children   
Hillel (’91), Albert and Michelle

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Dedicated by the Wise and Etshalom families in memory of Rebbetzin Miriam Wise, ז״ל, Miriam bat Yitzhak and Rivkah, whose first yahrzeit is on 9 Tevet.   
 יהי זכרה ברוך

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**Shiur #10: Interpersonal Messages**

**The Interpersonal Passages of *Shemitta***

We have seen that *shemitta's* call for a radical departure from one's normal routine is described in different portions in the Torah in varied ways. The varied descriptions point to a multifaceted message, rooted in the four primary aspects of one's existence: *bein adam la-Makom* (between man and God), *bein adam le-chavero* (between man and man), *bein adam le-atzmo* (between man and himself), and *bein adam le-artzo* (between man and his land).

In the last two lessons, we focused on the *bein adam la-Makom* aspects of *shemitta* which are primarily rooted in the presentation of *shemitta* that appears in *Parashat Behar*, where *shemitta* is characterized as a year of Sabbath for God. While these elements are so pivotal to *shemitta* and play a primary role in the various agricultural *mitzvot* of *shemitta*, these laws appear in *Parashat Mishpatim* in a different light, where rather than focusing on a year dedicated to God, they appear to highlight the social and interpersonal aspects of *shemitta* that might be overlooked or absent in *Parashat Behar*, revealing a new dimension of *shemitta's* message.

Independent of *Parashat Mishpatim*'s description of the social aspects of agricultural *shemitta*, at least two other passages of *shemitta* also focus on interpersonal aspects of this year: the financial *shemitta* involving the cancelling of loans at the end of the year discussed in *Parashat Re'eh*, as well as the freeing of slaves and returning of land discussed in *Parashat Behar* in the context of *yovel*, after seven series of *shemitta* cycles. A broad look at these three passagesallows one to once again approach the other passages of *shemitta* and identify interpersonal elements merging with the other messages of *shemitta* as well. In fact, as we shall see, *shemitta's* interpersonal message is so extreme that it only makes sense if it has been divinely ordained.

**A Radical Form of Charity**

Let's begin with *Parashat Mishpatim*. It is there that the Torah introduces us to *shemitta* for the first time, and requires that in the seventh year, “*tishmetenna u-ntashtah.”* Although the exact translation of these words is subject to dispute, the Torah is very explicit that those who stand to gain are the poor:

And six years you shall sow your land and shall harvest its fruits. But [in] the seventh (*shevi'it*), you shall release it (*tishmetenna*) and let it lie fallow (*u-ntashtah*), and the poor of your nation will eat, and what they leave over the beasts of the field shall eat. So you shall do with your vineyard and with your olive grove. (*Shemot* 23:10-11)

The simple understanding of *tishmetenna* refers to the owners of the field releasing their hold and ownership over the produce growing in their fields and on their trees, essentially abandoning ownership of all they own. The poor are then free to partake of any and all produce growing in the land.

The benefits to the poor, so explicit in the verse, are highlighted by the Rambam ([Lesson 7](http://www.vbm-torah.org/archive/shemitta75/07shemitta.htm)), who mentions the compassion to the needy as the first reason behind *shemitta*. However, it is essential to point out that the poor's benefits from *shemitta* far surpass the right to eat the produce.

The concept of charity and gifts to the poor is not new to Judaism, as *tzedaka* lies at the heart of the Jewish mission as descendants of Avraham, who educated his progeny with the ideals of *tzedaka u-mishpat* (*Bereishit* 18:19). Yet when analyzing the way in which *shemitta* allows the needy to eat from the produce of the field, one realizes that the kindness involved far outweighs any common form of charity.

The Midrash (*Pittaron Torah,* *Behar*) notes a number of merciful elements which the sabbatical year possesses:

How much compassion is there in the acts of *shemitta*! Firstly, [compassion] upon the land, in order that the land may rest for one year, and find water and sun, in order that it be strong for the following year. Secondly, compassion upon the owners of the field who are spared a year of hard work in the field. Thirdly, compassion upon the animals who are freed from their work. Fourthly, compassion upon all mankind, as even the servant and maidservant and every worker cannot be refused to eat from one's produce, and they become like him [the owner]. Fifthly, compassion upon the animals who can eat whatever they want from one's field. Sixth, compassion upon Jews whose loans cannot be forcibly collected in that year.

The Midrash describes the laws of *shemitta* as being rooted in compassion; enabling man and animal to be free from working the field, but also giving equal access to owners, workers and animals.

In fact, this form of *tzedaka* goes well beyond standard charitable giving, as the farmer shares ownership with those who don't have land, as the Midrash says: “and they become like him.”

*Shemitta’s* unique form of "giving" allows for a host of interpersonal messages, affecting the outlook of the farmer and the perspective of the recipient, in the process unifying an often-splintered nation, while providing a remedy for the unequal distribution of wealth.

**An Equalizing Factor**

The idea that the equal rights to the produce of the fields provides for no distinction between the owner and servants is virtually explicit in the verses. In fact, the verses in *Mishpatim* (unlike those in *Behar*) would almost suggest that the owners have no rights to the produce at all, as it only mentions that "the poor of your nation will eat, and what they leave over the beasts of the field shall eat.” The landowners bear no special privilege in comparison to those who lack territory, almost as if in *Parashat Mishpatim*, only the poor have rights to the produce, as if to say they are the owners of the produce, not the landowners.

Not only does *shemitta* function as a charitable mitzva, but it does so in a way which educates towards appreciating one's fellow, realizing that the "giver" is not the real "giver," and in the process equalizing the perspectives of the haves and have-nots.

As we will see, a number of the *halakhot* applying to landowners reinforce this perspective, even some which appear in *Parashat Behar*. For instance, one is not allowed to harvest one's crop as normal. The Torah states:

You shall not reap the after-growth of your harvest nor gather the grapes of your untrimmed vines; it shall be a year of complete rest (*shenat shabbaton*) for the land. (*Vayikra* 25:5)

This verse cannot be interpreted as an outright restriction on harvesting altogether, as the Torah explicitly states that the *shemitta* produce is to be eaten. Therefore, Rashi (ad loc.) explains:

"You shall not reap" as if to hold onto it, as you would with other produce; rather, it must be abandoned for all to take.

Rashi explains that the Torah is informing us that the owner cannot express his ownership over the produce during the *shemitta* year, reaping it for his family or for commercial purposes. The Torah informs him very clearly that he is not the actual owner of the produce; his hold on that which grows is only permitted when God bestows the bounty upon him, while during the *shemitta* year, his job is to abandon it and to recognize that all have equal access to that which grows.

An equal right to the agricultural yield acts as a tremendous equalizing factor, precipitating aunitythat is unparalleled. The social castes and societal standings that are often used to characterize individuals and separate them based on earnings and property become meaningless and insignificant for an entire year. The wealthy landowner does not give, but rather shares, possessing no more rights than others; all take, no one gives.

**The Right to Receive**

In fact, besides teaching us the importance of sharing, it would seem that *shemitta* also teaches us the importance of the right to receive on at least two levels. Firstly, it addresses the proud pauper who doesn’t want to take from others. He is enamored of verses praising individual enterprise, such as: "When you eat the weariness of your hands, you shall be happy and it will be well with you” (*Tehillim* 128:2); and “He who hates gifts, shall live" (*Mishlei* 15:27). Now, he is afforded the opportunity to satisfy his needs without feeling belittled by taking from others.

Additionally, even the wealthy landowners who own thousands of acres eats of the produce during the *shemitta* year by the same rights that the poor, landless paupers do. Once owners realize that they themselves are not completely self-sufficient, they recognize that even they have what to gain and receive from other members of society.

Rav Tzvi Hirsch Kalischer (*Sefer Ha-berit, Behar*) notes this equalizing factor as one of the motivations behind *shemitta*:

It teaches us further that the rich should not lord it over the poor. Accordingly, the Torah ordains that all should be equal during the seventh year; both the rich and the poor have equal access to the gardens and fields to eat their full.

The Sefat Emet (*Behar*) adds the following:

The mitzva of *shemitta* allows for the achievement of unity, where the hands of the wealthy and needy are equal. This is why *shemitta* is taught at Sinai, as through *shemitta,* unity — the attribute of the acceptance of the Torah — is awakened by the Jewish people's singular Torah.

Rav Zevin explains this giving attitude:

*Shemitta* advocates such a kind of relationship with one's fellow man to the extent that every single living being, man and beast included, is equal in the right to make use of the food. No other nation has ever reached such a high plane, and even we cannot find this in any other mitzva.

**Eradicating Poverty**

Rav Chayim David Ha-Levi, former Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv, explains how *shemitta,* alongside other agricultural *mitzvot* for the poor, actually seeks to eradicate poverty as much as possible.

In general, the law of *shemitta* is inherently linked to numerous other *mitzvot* that were designated to give to the Jewish nation and to its state financial stability, by ensuring the stability of the poorer members of society…. If for whatever reason a poor man lost hold of his land, he is able to sustain himself by collecting the agricultural gifts of the poor, including gleaning, forgotten sheaves, the corner of the field and the poor man's tithe, and also through the mitzva of *tzedaka…* If he needs a loan, he can get a free loan… And in the seventh year the poor man is freed from any financial worries, as any vegetation growing can be taken by him for the benefit of his family. And if he did not succeed in cancelling out all his debts, the end of the shemitta year comes and dose so for him… And if even this doesn't work and he must sell his land — and in the worst case, he sells himself as a slave — the *yovel* year comes and frees all slaves and returns all land to its ancestral holders. At that point, everyone can begin their financial life anew. (*Mekor Chayim*, ch. 5, *Shemittat* *Kesafim*)

Rav Shaul Yisraeli (*Shemitta through the Generations*) illustrates how the various economic aspects of *shemitta* seek not only to give pride to the poor "recipient," but also to alleviate his financial instability and give him the ability to start again.

Let us now turn our attention to this mitzva in its full scope and comprehensiveness. First, the social aspect of the mitzva stands out. That the lands rests entails putting to rest private proprietary rights to all fruits of this year… If, during the six years of labor, class-based disparities have come about and taken root, for this year they are null and void. The master has no more right than the servant, the native no more than the sojourner; even the social disparities that normally develop with economic classes dissipate, as it were, for this year; moreover, they are muted going forward.

Rav Yisraeli adds that *shemitta's* economic interpersonal message affects the approach to money of both the wealthy and the poor. The mitzva to lend money actually ensures that deep economic and class differences won't remain in place for long.

Firstly, the Torah prohibits keeping money inert like some unmovable rock if someone is in need of it at any time: you bear an ongoing obligation to lend it to him, and this loan must be made gratis. The Torah, after all, prohibits interest with the full force of law and with quite a number of admonitions to the borrower, the creditor, and the witnesses. Yet the Torah does not make do with that: in addition to *shemitta* of the land and renouncing ownership of produce comes the mitzva of relinquishing debts, by which all debts not collected by the end of the *shemitta* year expire and cease to be subject to collection.

He goes on to explain how extreme this mitzva is, especially in light of all the *mitzvot* mandating honesty in business.

The money which has accumulated in a person's possession is thus his own money, and he has achieved it conscientiously and with much effort — and now you require him to lend it to his fellow gratis! He does this wholeheartedly; he does not demand any part of the profit that this money may bring his fellow. There is just one thought that gnaws at his heart, just one thing that he would assure himself: that he will in fact be returned his money — his own money, without any sort of profit. He merely seeks that his fellow not profit from his toils and travails and give back nothing. Our natural course of thought would tend to side with him entirely. Yet the Torah does not think thusly: it would be "contemptible" for such a thought to cross one’s mind. It demands geniality and kindheartedness of you when the loan is given, despite your knowledge that it is to be lost.

With this in mind, it is understandable how *shemitta* presents the recipe for a financial revolution.

One who walks in the way of the Torah, who observes this mitzva once admonished severely regarding it — no less than regarding any other mitzva — will effect a complete social revolution that quietly and peacefully, in one fell swoop, voids the economic and social disparities that have occupied human society since time immemorial. With the conclusion of the *shemitta* year, the whole nation's course of work and creativity begins anew, in a state where all people have virtually the same means at their disposal.

Rav Yisraeli concludes that the mitzva of *yovel* once every fifty years actually seals this interpersonal economic message.

And if this is still not enough, since the tool that is the *mitzva* of relinquishing debt can be implemented for cash in hand but not for money invested in real estate, where conspicuous disparities remain between the one who has succeeded in concentrating land under his ownership and the other who has been compelled to sell his, the *mitzva* of *yovel* comes, and every person returns to his inheritance and family. All transactions that might have concentrated land under the ownership of a few while another social stratum grows impoverished are null and void; every person again stands upon the inheritance of his fathers, ready to turn a new page.

**Balancing Wealth**

Based upon Rav Yisraeli's analysis, one might contend that *shemitta* should be the rule rather than a septennial exception. The Tzeror Ha-mor(*Vayikra* 25), however, offers a fascinating insight explaining why *shemitta's* breakdown of social standing is only once every seven years, and not all the time.

The subject matter of *shemitta* and *yovel* is one that is permeated by profound secrets deeply shrouded in mystery… including the existence of a material world and how the Torah's laws enable the world to function successfully. Strange as it may seem, the material world cannot endure unless there are both wealthy and poor people that live on it. By legislating the laws of *shemitta* and *yovel*, God endeavors to minimize the gross discrepancy between the lives of the poor and the wealthy on this earth…

He adduces proof that there will always be some more well-off than others from the verses themselves, "both for you and your servant" (*Vayikra* 25:7); "and the poor of your nation will eat" (*Shemot* 23:11). Therefore, the objective of the legislation is not to equalize everyone's wealth completely, as some people are destined to be servants, or at least some will possess economic dominance over others.

Furthermore, we know that the lives of the poor are fraught with anguish, and that they suffer all kinds of misery… As a result of the rich man’s feeling constantly at ease, he is apt to forget the troubles faced by the poor and needy.

By decreeing that landowners cannot conduct business as usual during the *shemitta* and *yovel* years, the Torah ensures that they will become aware of how the needy feel all the time… [Specifically when *yovel* follows *shemitta*] even the wealthy person will have to turn his eyes heavenward asking what is he going to eat in the following year, when all his sources of income have been inactive for two years running… He will realize that this is a question that the poor need to ask every day of every year, as their eyes are always turned heavenward, for they have no one else to turn to.

If there must be a distinction between those who have and those who don't, *shemitta* ensures that the haves focus on their responsibility rather than their privilege and recognize the feelings of the have-nots.

**Unity**

As mentioned before, the various interpersonal callings of the *shemitta* year encourage unity, as the poor are little different than the wealthy, and the wealthy are able to understand the plight of the poor. This interpersonal achievement justifies *shemitta* in its own right; however, it serves as an interpersonal bridge to an outright religious experience as well.

The fact that all Jews become equal and experience what it means to be "landless" and take from others is directed toward a purpose: unity. The Shem Mi-Shmuel points out that this is to be gleaned from the fact that the *mitzvot* of *shemitta* are addressed in the singular form, to the individual; however, their applicability to the entire Jewish people indicates that the singular terminology is for the purpose of unifying the nation.

He sees this in the placement of the mitzva of *Hakhel* during Sukkot following the *shemitta* year as well. *Hakhel's* purpose is to unify the nation just as was achieved at Mount Sinai, “as one man with one heart” (Rashi, *Shemot* 19:2). The acceptance of the Torah and the spiritual benefits of *shemitta* require the unity that the interpersonal aspects inspire.

The unity enabled by the *shemitta* year exists both in the physical and the spiritual plane (see upcoming lesson on the link between *shemitta* and Sinai).

Similarly, the Lubavitcher Rebbe (*Hitvaaduyot* 5747,vol. III, p. 156) points that for the entire year of *shemitta*, people are not involved in their individual professions, something which separates individuals into various guilds, as all jobs require different strengths and different interests; additionally the division between those who have land to work and those who do not are erased during *shemitta*. Therefore, unity is achieved more easily, as everyone is occupied with the common goal of spirituality.

He points out, based on *Tanya* (chapter 32), that the more people "accentuate their soul's importance and discount the significance of their bodily needs," the easier it is to fulfill the mitzva of loving one's fellow Jew (*Vayikra* 19:18) and achieve unity. Deep inside, the Jews are a united people; it unfortunately often goes unnoticed when the physical differences between people are accentuated; *shemitta* allows for removing the outer shell of the nation to reveal this inner connection.

The Rebbe adds that *shemitta* is the ultimate preparation for the experience of *Hakhel*, which truly achieves the unity of purpose and commitment of the whole nation.

One might have viewed this message in a vacuum and seen *shemitta* only as an interpersonal year of kindness and not one of deepening the relationship with God. However, if the whole purpose were benefiting the needy, a year of planting and working the field might be more effective. Instead, the Torah merges the two ideals in perfect harmony: a year of relinquishing one's hold on the land while also providing for the poor.

In our next lesson, we will see how these *mitzvot* transform the individual's character as well.