**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**THE PHILOSOPHY OF *SHEMITTA***

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Dedicated in memory of Gertrude and Samuel Spiegel z”l
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**Shiur #11: *Shemitta's* Powerful Effect on Personality**

***Bein Adam Le-atzmo***

The various *mitzvot* of the *shemitta* year present numerous tools for deepening one's relationship with one's neighbor and with God, as explained in the previous lessons. What is even more fascinating is that the *shemitta* year's impact on one's relationships to the One Above and to one's neighbor's below is supposed to be internalized as well and affect one's own character. In truth, those *mitzvot* which build character are best referred to as *mitzvot bein adam le-atzmo*, and their part in the philosophy of *shemitta* is nothing short of astounding.

Many think of *mitzvot* as fitting into one of two categories: either ritual *bein adam la-Makom* obligations, which fulfill Divine commandments and deepen one's connection with God; or interpersonal *bein adam le-chavero* obligations*,* which express one’s responsibility to one’s neighbor. However, in truth, there is a third category of *mitzvot* which regards one's responsibility to oneself. This third element is defined as *bein adam le-atzmo,* between man and himself. Man is not only asked to develop his relationship with God and to achieve positive results for his friend, but to transform himself as well.

One source for the obligation for the positive development of one's character is the biblical mandate of “And you will follow His ways” (*Devarim* 28:9), which is essentially an obligation to develop an ethos of kindness. Following God’s ways is neither about one’s fellow, nor even God Himself (directly), but rather about oneself and developing a Godly persona.

The nature of these *mitzvot bein adam le-atzmo* is expressed by a number of commentators, who note a whole group of *mitzvot* whose primary purpose is to transform one's personality and the Talmudic statements about them.

Rav Yaakov Ettlinger (*Arukh La-ner, Makkot* 24a) refers to these *mitzvot* as "reflexive *mitzvot*… [which bear] the requirement of justice, weighing one’s actions to ensure that one is wholesome." He explains that the prophet Mikha taught the Jews of his generation that the three fundamental requirements of religious life are acting kindly towards one’s brethren, forging a humble relationship with God and developing a virtuous personality of weighing carefully one’s behavior, what he terms *bein adam le-atzmo*.

The Vilna Gaon and the Maharsha also invoke the concept of *bein adam le-atzmo* in other contexts where the Talmud stresses three fundamental elements of religious observance. They also observe that the focus of tractate *Avot* is this category of *mitzvot* *bein adam le-atzmo*, which call for weighing one’s actions objectively (doing justice) and serve as a major focus of living in accordance with the Torah.

In a broader sense, *mitzvot bein adam la-atzmo* focus on one’s thought process — the command center of a person’s body, the mind — allowing one to build a thoughtful and balanced personality.

The *bein adam le-atzmo* element is aimed at ensuring that we do not limit our focus to actions; instead, we may look at the inner source and evaluate ourselves.

This also extends our obligation above and beyond the performance of specific *mitzvot*; we are bound to develop the personality of one who is capable of walking in the ways of God consistently and constantly. What character serves as the source of these actions? We must learn not only what the Torah wants us to do, but who it wants us to be.

In the area of ethics, the *bein adam le-atzmo* element teaches us that even if we excel in bringing happiness and pleasure to others, we are still spiritually lacking if we fail to develop a personality to which these actions comes naturally. In order to do so, we must look deeper in the Torah, weigh our actions and identify those character traits (*middot*) which must be developed in order to nurture this divinely inclined ethos.

The Rambam, although he is known for his focus on the intellect in the religious realm, speaks repeatedly about the importance of developing a Godly character. The Rambam views developing *middot* as both a fulfillment of the mitzva of walking in the ways of God and an aspect of the mitzva of knowing God. In *Moreh Ha-nvukhim*, he explains that while God is unchanging and His *middot* are merely the ways in which we perceive His actions, the importance of knowing them lies in our being able to model our characters after them.

… For the chief aim of man should be to make himself, as far as possible, similar to God: that is to say, to make his acts similar to the acts of God, or as our Sages expressed it in explaining the verse, "You shall be holy" (*Vayikra*19:2); they said (Sifrei, *Devarim* 11:22): “Just as He is called ‘merciful,’ so should you be merciful; just as He is called ‘gracious,’ so should you be gracious.”

The Rambam's stress on knowledge is of utmost importance, but only so long as it moves its possessor toward a state of Godly conduct in this world.

The elements of *bein adam le-atzmo* exist independently but also accompany other aspects of *mitzvot*. Therefore, when analyzing the *bein adam la-Makom* or *bein adam le-chavero* aspects of other *mitzvot*, one must also identify the elements of *mitzvot* that serve to transform a person's personality. One must not only act with mercy, but become merciful.

***Shemitta’s* Self-Improvement**

Self-improvement, viewed by many as a relatively modern fad, is in fact a perennial Jewish calling, reflecting a longstanding tradition of ethical discipline and moral improvement. The stress on character development, explicitly mentioned by the Sages, pervades the works of many Jewish thinkers, particularly the Rambam, who clearly expresses the notion that perfection of character is not only a means to an end but a religious ideal in its own right.

While self-improvement is a constant goal, day-to-day commitments often push aside character development in the face of deadlines and responsibilities. Shabbat affords one the opportunity for mindfulness and time to be able to focus on and identify who he has become — both the sabbatical day and the sabbatical year. As man is filled with a new perspective on his relationship with God, infused with the *emuna* and knowledge that God provides; as one lives with a newfound *bitachon* and trust in God being the One to provide his needs; and as one has the opportunity to put down his shovel and pick up his book and return to the study hall, one's overall character should change in the process as well.

In a year in which one shares his field's produce with anyone who wants, even wild animals, as social castes break down, if one only gives without becoming a giver, then the *shemitta* year has not done its job.

A year of a radical departure from "the real world" is supposed to transform "the real world" that one comes back to, in the process altering one's personality and inner universe, as every individual is a world unto himself. Although almost all (if not all) *mitzvot* contain a *bein adam le-atzmo* element, *shemitta's* whole structure rests upon it.

*Shemitta* calls for actions and a societal setup very different from the six other years; it is essentially a rest from the endless pursuit of wealth and control in order to take stock of what those six years have done to one's personality and to ensure the continuous improvement of one's character and outlook.

Working on one's character is of utmost importance, but utmost difficulty as well. Rav Yisrael Salanter, the founder of the Mussar movement, declared: "It is easier to learn the entire Talmud than to change one character trait.” It is easier to spend the year of *shemitta* learning than to transform one's character, yet the challenge is also a big part of what *shemitta* is about. If one doesn't hesitate to leave his field fallow, then one must not refrain from taking stock of his personality, using *shemitta* as a means to re-educate himself about his and society’s potential.

*Shemitta* represents both an obligation to improve one's character and an opportunity to do so as well. In fact, in the Rambam's perspective on *emuna*, which involves actual knowledge of God and unwavering commitment to Him, character building is the only sign of true knowledge, as it expresses successful inculcation of God's value system.

**Two Levels of Self-Improvement**

The Rambam considers knowing God so important that he begins and ends his halakhic compendium, *Mishneh Torah,* with the concept.  However, it is specifically his conclusion to *Moreh* *Ha-nvukhim*, the book directed to the confused intellectual, which reveals how much the knowledge of God is connected to the personality of man.

In the final chapter of *Moreh* *Ha-nvukhim*, the Rambam discusses four main areas of perfection that people attempt to achieve. The Rambam delineates these types of perfection, the first three of which are perfection of property, perfection of money, and perfection of moral behavior. Afterwards, the Rambam goes on to explain why the first three cannot be man’s aim: their sublimity is not inherent, but rather ancillary to their unique identity.

What is most interesting is that in the Rambam's discussion of the third type of perfection, that of perfection of moral behavior, the Rambam writes that this cannot be man’s true aim because it only reflects actions when in the presence of others; it is not inherent to man’s being.

For all moral principles concern the relation of man to his neighbor; the perfection of man's moral principles is, as it were, given to man for the benefit of mankind. Imagine a person being alone and having no connection whatsoever with any other person: all his good moral principles are at rest; they are not required, so they give man no perfection whatsoever. These principles are only necessary and useful when man comes in contact with others.

Self-improvement in knowing how to act with others and act with kindness is not a sign of one's character, and therefore, as important as it is, it is not true perfection. However, in the following paragraph, the Rambam says something startling. He defines the fourth type of perfection as the only true form: perfection in one's knowledge of God. After explaining this thesis, he states that if this knowledge of God does not express itself in one’s character, then it is not true perfection. He cites the verse (*Yirmeyahu* 9:23) declaring that the only thing man can truly glorify himself in is "that he understands and knows Me,” as knowledge of God is the only true perfection.

It is here that the Rambam adds a twist. The verse itself continues: “That I am God, who exercises mercy, justice and righteousness on earth." The Rambam explains that if one's knowledge of God doesn't express itself in these refined Godly characteristics, then he does not truly know Him:

The object of the above passage is therefore to declare that the perfection in which man may truly glory is attained by him when he has acquired — as far as this is possible for man — the knowledge of God, the knowledge of His Providence and of the manner in which it influences His creatures in their production and continued existence. Having acquired this knowledge, he will then be determined always to seek mercy, justice and righteousness, and thus to imitate the ways of God. We have explained this many times in this treatise.

Viewing this statement in light of the third perfection, it becomes clear. Knowing how to act towards others when it doesn't actually improve oneself is not self-improvement, and therefore it is not perfection. Only intellectual knowledge of God, fostering a unique personality and a deep inner life, in which one's mindset is transformed by the intellect, can be actual perfection. This fourth perfection, that of knowing God and expressing that knowledge in one’s character, is wholly unique: one’s character is a reflection of one’s inherently holy being, not an expression of how well one has learned to deal with others, making friends and influencing them.

*Shemitta*, thus, is more than just a year of learning how to give and to reconnect with God and *emuna*; the *shemitta* year calls upon man to "become" and to express knowledge of God in his actions.

Based on this introduction, one might wonder what type of impact on one's character and personality is supposed to result from the *shemitta* year. A whole lot!!! One's personality, outlook and emotional connection to those in distress are supposed to be affected, as well as society as a whole.

**The Practice of *Gevura***

The first attribute worth mentioning is one we have discussed in the past (see lesson 9). The Midrash attributes to those who observe *shemitta* the distinction of *gibborei khoach,* the angelic disposition of being able to overcome their desires and watch their fields lay ownerless for a year. This is true heroism, suspending "logical judgment" to adhere to God's call even amid uncertainty about one’s food supply; but this attribute of *gevura* must be engrained in one's personality as well.

During the *shemitta* year, man must actively surrender ownership of his produce, relinquishing his hold on that which he normally assumes is completely his. The Rambam explains the mitzva thusly (Positive 134):

We are commanded to disown everything which the land produces during the *shemitta* year, to release everything which grows on our property for the use of any living creature.

The Chinnukh (Mitzva 84) identifies the character traits of generosity and abnegation as essential elements of *shemitta*:

Once every seven years, a person must declare his field ownerless, not only in order to assist the poor, but also to learn how to relinquish his property, so that he may protect himself from greed and avarice.

The Chinnukh adds that doing so allows man to learn the art of generosity, as the planter of the produce doesn't even have the rights to the feeling of beneficence for providing for others from his own, as the Torah gives equal access to all. The farmer, rather than focusing on the notion that the poor will receive sustenance from one's fields and produce, is supposed to focus on the qualities necessary to do this in other situations as well. In fact, this is far more beneficial for the poor in the long run, by developing a society with generous character traits and a desire to give abound.

The Keli Yakar (*Devarim* 31:12) explains why the post-*shemitta* *Hakhel* is performed on Sukkot. *Shemitta* enables one to lose the perspective of "What is mine is mine," identified by the Mishna (*Avot* 5:10) as the primary character trait of Sodom. This outlook makes one very possessive, and *shemitta* comes to eradicate it:

… that similarly is the reason for this assembly, for in addition to taking up these four species on the first day of the holiday, God commands us to perform another such redolent act at the end of every seven years, for the *shemitta* year similarly is a cause of assembly and peace, for one neither plants nor cultivates during it, and the impoverished of one's nation have what to eat, as one is not permitted to take possession of the crop of the seventh year as if he were the owner. This, then, indubitably is the reason for this peace, for all matters of conflict stem from the attitude of "What is mine is mine," "This one says, ‘It is all mine,'" et cetera. This is less the case in the seventh year, because though not all are equal in what they must do, all are equal in what they must not, and this truly is conducive to peace. Thus it is that on Sukkot, when everyone emerges from a permanent home to a temporary home and dwells under the *sukka* of His peace, the king is commanded on the first intermediate day of the festival to perform an act redolent of peace, and this is the principle of *Hakhel*.

**Controlling Desire for Wealth and Acquisition**

Beyond the specific messages regarding one's attitude and personality, *shemitta* provides a broader lesson regarding the proper place of physical work in our existence. Many enter into an endless pursuit of wealth, and all their money robs them of the time and headspace to focus on purpose. *Shemitta* is a year in which the difference between the haves and have-nots is defined by one's personality and interests rather than one's ability to write a check, allowing one to inculcate other concerns.

The three negative character traits that the Mishna (*Avot* 4:21) states remove man from the world are connected to wealth:

Rabbi Elazar Ha-kappar says: “Jealousy, desire, and [the pursuit of] honor remove man from the world.”

*Shemitta* allows man to put wealth into perspective, and as R. Yitzchak Arama and others ([Lesson 7](http://etzion.org.il/en/shiur-07-four-reasons)) point out, *shemitta* is supposed to provide the rest which allows returning to one’s business afterward with a conception of wealth as a means not an end. The desire for riches, the jealousy of those who have more, and the attempt to use wealth as a status symbol should be much less pronounced after the *shemitta* year.

Although *shemitta* is primarily for the farmer, *shemitta's* call is really for all of society to be able to gain this perspective. When people hear the word "wall," do they immediately think of Wall Street or the Western Wall?

**Humility**

Another trait attributed to those who keep *shemitta* is humility. When Moshe Rabbeinu speaks to the Jewish people in the desert prior to their entering into the Land of Israel (*Devarim* 8:17), an idea which he repeats is that the people should not interpret their physical success in the Land of Israel as the result of their own activity; they must recognize God's providence instead of attributing their achievements to the strength of their own hands. This humble approach lies at the heart of *shemitta*.

The Ketav Sofer (*Vayikra* 25:1) describes how the mitzva of *shemitta* allows one to develop an outlook of humility, both financially and spiritually.

Due to *shemitta,* one humbles his heart, so that he does not say, "My strength and the power of my hand made me this wealth," for he sees distinctly that all is from heaven and in His hand. One thus finds himself obligated to show humility before Him (may His name be blessed) and to observe His commandments, laws, and ordinances. This is [the meaning of] his comment, "Just as *shemitta* was proclaimed from Sinai, thus the entire Torah was proclaimed from Sinai," for *shemitta* is the foundation of faith and trust, and this rouses him to make himself meritorious, for all depends on God's will. One might add that when the Torah was given upon the small mountain Sinai, it was given there to teach that one ought not to be proud, for God dwells with the lowly. This is a great principle of the Torah — that one not be proud — and through *shemitta* one humbles his heart. This, then, is the meaning of “Just as *shemitta* was proclaimed from Sinai, thus the entire Torah was proclaimed from Sinai.”

The Ketav Sofer adds that the humility factor is so significant that it explains the connection between *shemitta* and Sinai, as the laws of *shemitta* are taught in *Parashat Behar*, on Mount Sinai.

**Experiencing and Enabling Empathy**

In last week's lesson, we marveled at the fascinating form of *tzedaka* that is embodied in *shemitta*. Yet the purpose of this form of *tzedaka* is not only to give but to enable the one who at least bears the illusion of ownership to gain a keen understanding of the feelings of the recipient.

Without *shemitta*, great individuals had to find alternate means of giving with true generosity and empathizing with the recipient. Stories abound regarding various rabbis who, when collecting on behalf of their communities during the frigid winters, would try and enable the wealthy benefactors to feel the harsh conditions. Rather than going inside the wealthy individual’s home as he sat by the warmth of the fire, they would speak to the benefactor while he was standing at the doorway, lengthening the conversation so the homeowner could feel the plight of the poor. Rav Eliyahu Chayim Meisel, chief rabbi of Lodz, did so, and when asked for an explanation he responded:

The satisfied people can never feel the pangs of the hungry people. I came to ask for your help in supplying wood for the poor people of our town. If we were seated comfortably in this warm house discussing this matter, you would never have realized the intense cold which these people are suffering from. But now that you have had a taste of the cold, your entire attitude has changed and you are willing to give a sufficient amount to alleviate the suffering.

Rav Yitzchak Magriso in his *Me-am Lo'ez* (*The Torah Anthology, Behar*) explains *shemitta*'s *tzedaka* elements similarly:

Furthermore, this commandment comes to teach the wealthy person how much grief the poor man has. His life hangs in the balance at all times, and he is constantly begging God for food. "In the evening he asks for the morning, and in the morning he wishes it were evening" (*Devarim* 28:67). He is constantly on the go, worrying about whether he will have food for himself and his family. A moment does not pass without worry.

The wealthy person, on the other hand, is always happy and in good spirits. He walks through his fields and vineyards and sees the grain and enjoys watching his crop grow. He does not even think about the poor man and is not concerned about his grief.

God therefore commanded that in the seventh year one make a “release.” One may not plow, plant, or harvest in this year, and one may not gather his crops. Rather, one must leave it as public property. The wealthy man is then also concerned: "Since I have not planted… how will I eat…" (*Vayikra* 25:20)

This will allow the wealthy individual to realize that he only suffers with this uncertainty for one year: "What about the poor man who grieves at all times… and is always worried about how he will earn a living and from where he will get food?" By feeling the pain of the poor and supporting him in other years, God will make sure he will not become poor.

**The Societal and Personal Effect**

Beyond what has been described here, every aspect of *shemitta* provides guidance towards a more virtuous character and inculcates throughout the six years of work the awareness of the impending *shemitta*, leading people to be less cutthroat. They are encourage not only to give, but to be humble givers, willing to relinquish what they might otherwise feel rightfully entitled to. This allows them to express their knowledge of God and refine their character.