**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

**\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\***

**THE PHILOSOPHY OF *SHEMITTA***

**By Rav Binyamin Zimmerman**

For easy printing, go to

[www.vbm-torah.org/archive/shemitta75/02shemitta.htm](http://www.vbm-torah.org/archive/shemitta75/02shemitta.htm)

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

Dedicated in loving memory of Yehuda Nattan Yudkowsky *z”l* whose yahrzeit is 17 Cheshvan

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

**Shiur #02: The Passages of *Shemitta***

**The Culprits**

In our last lesson, we presented an overview of the *mitzvot* associated with *shemitta*. However, even a bird's-eye view of *shemitta* requires a basic introduction to the multifaceted nature of its *mitzvot*. Had the various *mitzvot* of *shemitta* been mentioned in only one *parasha* (weekly portion) of the Torah, we might search for an explanation regarding how the various *mitzvot* are aimed at presenting and introducing one unified theme. However, as we shall see, the Torah discusses the various aspects of *shemitta* in different places and seems to presents its messages in different lights. Although all places where *shemitta* is discussed seem to explicitly relate to the overall significance of *shemitta*, the varied descriptions in separate sections of the Torah would seem to imply that *shemitta* carries with it more than one message, and only adequate study can uncover its various dimensions and unlock the multifaceted educational lessons that it imparts.

In fact, even the term "*shemitta*" in its own right might not be applicable to the year commonly referred to as the *shemitta* year (don't worry, we will explain). This may be one of the two primary culprits implicated in the unpopularity of the *shemitta* year.

The first culprit is the lack of study. *Shemitta* appears explicitly in five different legal contexts in the Torah (according to Rabbi Akiva, there is a sixth reference as well). The Torah's description of *shemitta* and the centrality of the religious experience attached to it are indicative of the fact that, despites its challenges, the *shemitta* year is well worth them for one who is cognizant of its messages. *Shemitta* is not just supposed to be a year on the calendar that happens once every seven years; it is an essential means of imparting fundamental Torah lessons and transforming our overall outlook on what a Jewish economy entails, how we should look at ownership, the proper perspective regarding God's hand in our daily sustenance, as well as many other character building lessons that are readily apparent in *shemitta*.

As long as even the basic messages of *shemitta*, although explicit in the Torah, remain hidden from the eyes of the public, it should not be surprising that *shemitta* remains a burden in the eyes of the public rather than the harbinger of a utopian message.

To a certain degree, the first threat has been recently diminished. Great books have been written regarding the *halakhot* of *shemitta*; however, they usually discuss less of the philosophical underpinnings of the year. Others have focused on what they identify as the real objective of *shemitta* and have placed *shemitta* in the spotlight, identifying the sabbatical year as the educational tool for imparting many of the progressive ideals in modern society. *Shemitta* has been the tool to educate Judaism's approach on everything from social justice to ecology, environmentalism, renewable energy and much more. *Shemitta* for some has become a convenient tool for teaching principles that society embraces, albeit in a somewhat Jewish context.

Yet, while it is true that most of these ideals do in fact overlap with *shemitta* and will be discussed in this series, it is the opinion of this author that any thinking individual will quickly ascertain that many of these ideals, certainly with their contemporary connotations, may contain elements of *shemitta*'s message, but they are certainly not its primary expression. The modern understandings of these terms, which are not limited in time or place like the laws of *shemitta*, and certainly don't call for anything remotely similar to the *shemitta* year and all it entails, only highlight the need to find what makes *shemitta* unique. We must uncover the true nature of *shemitta* by trying to capture the whole picture. Despite the similarity and overlap between *shemitta*'s message and these modern ideals, for *shemitta* to be understood and appreciated, one must identify the entire picture of what the Torah had in mind, and identify how all the various elements; from the challenging restrictions through the empowering mitzvot, contribute to the beauty and purpose of *shemitta*.

The second culprit is the name of *shemitta* itself. As we shall see in a moment, there is reason to believe that the agricultural "*shemitta*" year has nothing to do with "*shemitta*,” and even if "*shemitta*" is a component of the year, it is not its primary purpose.

I hope that previous statement didn't lose you, but if you want to understand, we must go straight to the sources and see how the Torah portrays the *shemitta* year. This will allow us to answer the question we posed: if the seventh year is not really the *shemitta* year, then what is it?

**A Brief Biblical Overview of the *Parashiyot* of *Shemitta***

As mentioned, the concept of a sabbatical year appears a number of times in the Torah. There are two primary *parashiyot*, *Mishpatim* and *Behar*, which deal with the agricultural aspects of *shemitta*, and an additional *parasha*, *Re'eh*, which discusses forgiving loans at the conclusion of the *shemitta* year. Additionally, there is a verse in *Parashat Ki Tissa* which is the subject of a Tannaitic dispute as to whether it refers to the sabbatical year or the weekly Shabbat. If that were not enough, *shemitta* is given noteworthy mention in at least two other places in the Torah, both of which seem to underscore the significance of the mitzva, and actually beg the question: Why is the *shemitta* year of such fundamental importance to the Jewish nation and the land of Israel?

We will begin with the two primary mentions of the agricultural *shemitta* and mention the differences between them. Even from a rudimentary look at the verses of these two *parashiyot*, it will become clear that they seem to present a very different picture of what *shemitta* is. Afterwards we'll take a broader look at the other mentions of *shemitta*, and in ensuing lessons we will be able to analyze each section independently in greater depth.

***Parashat Mishpatim*: The Social Aspects**

The first mention of the *shemitta* year in the Torah is in *Parashat Mishpatim*.

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. Six days you shall do your work, and on the seventh day you shall rest (*tishbot*)… (*Shemot* 23:10-12)

This passage lends itself to a number of interesting observations. The seventh year is not known by any particular appellation other than its ordinal number (*ha-shevi'it*, the seventh). The Torah seems to require two things to be done during this year, but what exactly they are would require deeper knowledge and an adequate translation of the two terms, *tishmetenna u-ntashtah*. Although we translated these terms as "release it and let it lie fallow,” these terms are actually the subject of great dispute. It is clear from the verses that there are unique *halakhot* regarding the produce of one's fields, vineyards, and olive groves during the years, but it is not at all apparent whether there are any restrictions on working one's fields.

Immediately after the description of the sabbatical year is the description of Shabbat, which also has a system of six and seven: six units of work and a seventh of ceasing. It is only the units of time which vary, years versus days. We also have the verb forms of the nominative terms for these periods, from *tishmetenna* we get *shemitta*, and from *tishbot* we get Shabbat.

Moreover, the *shemitta* year, to whatever degree it is discussed here, has one purpose: allowing the poor and even the beasts of the field to eat of the produce of one’s field. The Torah's focus here would seem to be some message of social concern for the poor and helpless.

To decide what the focus of this year based on the description in *Parashat Mishpatim* is, one would have to discern whether it is defined by *tishmetenna* or its juxtaposition to *tishbot*; is it meant to be a year of *shevita* (rest) or *shemitta* (release)?

While we might be left with some lack of clarity after analyzing *Parashat Mishpatim*, a quick glance at *Parashat Behar*, containing the longest passage discussing the *shemitta* year, seems to leave us with less ambiguity regarding the nature of the year, although it is unclear whether the aspects of *shemitta* described in *Parashat Mishpatim* are identical to those described in *Parashat Behar*.

***Parashat Behar*: Shabbat of the Land**

In *Parashat Behar*, the Torah introduces the laws of the *shemitta* year by stating that they were taught on Mount Sinai, an interesting note in that the rest of the Book of *Vayikra* was taught in the Tabernacle. Rashi famously asks, “*Ma inyan shemitta etzel Har Sinai?*” (What does the sabbatical year have to do with Mount Sinai?) This has become a colloquialism for off-the-topic discussions, and many commentators wonder about the connection between Sinai and *shemitta*, but the continuation of the Torah's description is no less startling.

When you come to the land which I shall give you, the land shall rest (*ve-shaveta ha-aretz*) a sabbath to God. Six years you may sow your field and six years you may prune your vineyard and gather in the produce. But in the seventh year the land shall have a sabbath of complete rest (*shabbat shabbaton*), a sabbath to God; you shall not sow your field nor prune your vineyard. 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. But the sabbath of the land (*shabbat ha-aretz*) shall be for you to eat, for you, and for your servant and for your maid, and for your hired servant and for the residents by your side that sojourn with you. And for your cattle, and for the beasts that are in your land, shall all the produce of it be for food. (*Vayikra* 25:2-7)

Here the Torah begins by mentioning the connection of the seventh year to the land of Israel, and while there is again a description of the six years of work and the seventh of some type of rest, here the Torah is both more descriptive concerning the nature of the work, and at the same time more explicit as to the nature of the period. The Torah only mentions explicitly four agricultural labors which may be done during the six years and are prohibited during the seventh. The status of all other labors during this year will have to be debated.

Yet, even a quick perusal of the verses leaves no doubt about the nature of the period. The word *shemitta* does not appear even once, nor does the root word appear in any way, shape or form. The Torah introduces the description of the period as the seventh year, but then defines it in no uncertain terms by a word which is used, you guessed it, none other than seven times — namely, *shabbat.* The seventh year's true identity as *shabbat ha-aretz* is revealed. Just as the world that God created has its Shabbat every seventh days after six days of work, the land that God gives the Jewish people has its rest every seventh year after six years of work.

Beyond the Torah’s repetition of *shabbat*, we should note what is less pronounced: the social aspects discussed in *Parashat Mishpatim*.

***Parashat* *Ki Tissa***

While these are the two primary *parashiyot* that deal with the agricultural *shemitta*, there is a third *parasha* which mentions it; in fact, it is just a lone verse that is subject to a Tannaitic dispute as to whether it is also discussing the *shemitta* year.

Six days you shall work, but on the seventh day you shall rest: in plowing and in harvesting*,* you shall rest. (*Shemot* 34:21)

The Talmud cites a dispute between Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Yishma’el regarding the proper interpretation of this verse. After all, if the entire verse is referring to Shabbat, why after stating a general requirement of rest during Shabbat, seemingly including all thirty-nine categories of forbidden labor, does the Torah repeat "in plowing and in harvesting, you shall rest"? While Rabbi Yishma’el teaches that the verse is coming to define which type of harvesting is forbidden on Shabbat, Rabbi Akiva teaches that it actually comes to instruct us about a different Shabbat, the *shabbat* of the Land.

“In plowing and in harvesting, you shall rest" – Rabbi Akiva says: There is no need to be told to desist from plowing or reaping in the seventh year, for it is already stated: "You shall not sow your field…” [It can be taken] only [to prohibit] plowing in the pre-sabbatical year [which may cause agricultural benefits] extending into the seventh year and [likewise] to the harvesting of the seventh year's crops which mature in the post-sabbatical year.

If Rabbi Akiva is correct that the end of this verse refers to *shemitta*, then there is seemingly another agricultural act which is prohibited during the *shemitta* year, at least by way of a positive commandment, and that is plowing one's field.

While this verse and its possible halakhic implications must be analyzed in greater depth, what is very clear is that if this verse is in fact referring to *shemitta*, the fact that the Torah discusses it in a verse about the weekly Shabbat and using the same term *tishbot* seems to highlight the sabbatical element of the year, the *shevita*, that which is the focus of *Parashat Behar*.

**The Bigger Picture: The Other Mentions of *shemitta***

If the unique *halakhot* of the seventh year were only mentioned in the aforementioned two to three *parashiyot* we could stop here and focus our energies on understanding the agricultural aspects of the *shemitta* year, its goal and messages. True, we would have to deal with the variant descriptions of *shemitta* in the two primary sources, but our efforts would be directed to understanding the rationale for a radically different agricultural year. However, the Torah mentions the seventh year in a number of other contexts, indicating that its message lies far beyond agriculture.

Firstly, the verses discussing the seventh year are followed by a description of the mitzva to count seven such cycles and then arrive at the fiftieth year, *yovel*, the jubilee. The Torah delineates the unique *halakhot* of *yovel*, then addresses the question which might haunt an individual before the *shemitta* year: “What shall we eat?” (This is a particularly pressing issue in the forty-eighth year of the cycle, when *shemitta* is followed by *yovel,* and there are two consecutive years in which there will be no planting.) The Torah guarantees a divine blessing in the sixth year that will supply the needs of the sixth, seventh, and eighth years. This is followed by many *halakhot* regarding the sale of property and the proper care and concern for the unfortunate members of society. The Torah mentions the prohibition of selling one's field in perpetuity, as the land belongs to God.

This continuation makes it clear that alongside *shemitta* are some fundamental lessons regarding the type of economy the Jewish people are supposed to have, at least in the land of Israel, and the recognition of the true Owner of the land.

***Shemittat Kesafim* and *Hakhel***

The radical *halakhot* regarding the economy are furthered by the description of the seventh year in *Parashat Re'eh*. It is there that we are told that at the conclusion of the seventh year one can no longer actively collect outstanding loans in the hands of others, a mitzva referred to in halakhic literature as *shemittat kesafim,* the release of monies (i.e. debts).

At the end of seven years you shall makea release (*shemitta*). And this is the manner of the release; release (*shamot*) the hand of every creditor from what he lent his friend; he shall not exact from his friend or his brother, because the time of release for God has arrived. From a foreigner you may exact, but whatever of yours is by your brotheryour hand shall release (*tashmeit*) (*Devarim* 15:1-3).

The final mention of the *shemitta* year in the Torah appears in *Parashat* *Vayelekh*, adding an explicit spiritual component to this already-fascinating period, as it states:

And Moshe commanded them, saying: At the end of every seven years, at the time of the year of release, on the festival of Sukkot, when all Israel comes to see the presence of the Lord your God in the place that He will choose, read this Torah before all of Israel to their ears. Assemble the entire nation: men, women, and children, and the strangers who dwell within your gates, in order that they hear, and in order that they learn to fear God their God and keep the words of this Torah. And their children, who do not know, will listen and will learn to fear the Lord your God, all the days that you live upon the land which you are crossing the Jordan to inherit. (*Devarim* 31:10-13)

This mitzva known as *Hakhel* is performed at the end of every seven years, "at the time of the year of release,” which is understood by almost all commentaries as meaning immediately following the *shemitta* year. After experiencing a year of agricultural limitation during the seventh year, culminating in the cancelling of loans in the final moments of the year, before the planting season of the eighth year begins after Sukkot, all the Jews gather together for a spiritual experience which includes the reading of the Torah by the king in the presence of every last Jew. The spiritual supplement to the seventh year seems to clearly indicate that this period is not only one with agricultural *halakhot*, the cancelling of loans, and economic refocusing; it is supposed to bring about a grand spiritual reawakening.

When we think about all of this together, two things become clear: the seventh year is a truly fascinating and magical period, and no real explanation can focus its attention on only one of the numerous aspects *shemitta* conveys.

**"And the name is…"**

Near the beginning of our lesson, we pointed out that although the seventh year is usually referred to as *shemitta* in terms of its agricultural laws, that terminology might in fact be one of the prime culprits in the misunderstanding of the nature of the year.

The reason for such a statement can now be more readily understood. The term "*shemitta*” is only found in the last two *parashiyot* mentioned: the release of the rights to collect loans at the conclusion of the seventh year, and the experience of *Hakhel* on Sukkot following the seventh year. In all three of the passages dealing with the agricultural laws of the seventh year, there is no mention of a *shemitta*. The root appears only in the phrase “*tishmetenna u-ntashta”* in *Parashat Mishpatim*. Yet, as noted earlier, these terms are very difficult to translate. Some of the commentators even explain that *tishmetenna* is a reference to *shemittat kesafim,* which occurs at the conclusion of the seventh year*,* as the word *shemitta* refers to the release of loans. Even if one would explain *tishmetenna* as connected to the agricultural component, it would be difficult to name the entire year of agricultural *halakhot* with this term.

But if the seventh year is not the *shemitta* year, then what is it? Based on our analysis, one doesn't have to go too far to see, as the lengthy description of the seventh year in *Parashat Behar* makes clear, that the seventh year is a year of *shabbat*, but not just any *shabbat*, *shabbat ha-aretz*. While the description of *shemitta*t *kesafim* in *Re'eh* uses the root of *shemitta* five times, indicating the term’s centrality in that context, *Behar* refers to the sabbatical year as *shabbat* seven times. People might not want a year of releasing their hold on their land, in which they are limited in what they can do to further the growth of their fields, but if one recognizes that the seventh year is a year of *shabbat ha-aretz*, one might accept the year in a different light. True, during the weekly Shabbat we are limited in what we can do, yet anyone who recognizes the beauty of Shabbat recognizes that the restrictions are nothing more than a prescription for a meaningful experience. A recurring theme in our lessons will be that any understanding of the sabbatical year must embrace its character of *shabbat ha-aretz*.

There is one more explicit mention of the Sabbatical year in the Torah, in which the Torah declares how significant observance of *shabbat ha-aretz* is for the future of the Jewish people. In our next lesson, we will see how and why this is so, and we will set the stage for understanding how these diverse aspects of the seventh year all combine to form a year of *shabbat* in our Holy Land. Together, we will try to uncover a little bit of its magical character.