**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/*shemitta*75/07*shemitta*.htm](http://www.vbm-torah.org/archive/shemitta75/07shemitta.htm)

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This week’s *shiurim* are dedicated in memory of Israel Koschitzky *zt"l*, whose yahrzeit falls on the 19th of Kislev. May the worldwide dissemination of Torah through the VBM be a fitting tribute to a man whose lifetime achievements exemplified the love of *Eretz Yisrael* and *Torat Yisrael*.

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Dedicated to Maya Bernstein & Noam Silverman -   
In honor of the Birth of their daughter, Niva Hallel

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**Shiur #07: The Four Reasons**

**The Contradictions**

We have seen that the various aspects of *shemitta* appear in a number of portions in the Torah, and the portions even present *shemitta* with different names and in different lights. *Parashat Mishpatim* presents *shevi'it* primarily in a social light, as a year where there is equal access to the produce of the fields for the poor and the owners. There, the verbs “*tishmetenna u-ntashtah*” are used. Although we translate these terms as "release it and let it lie fallow,” and the first shares its root with the word *shemitta*,their exact definition is unclear.

In *Parashat Behar*, the other primary portiondealing with the agricultural *shemitta*, the year is referred to seven times by the term *Shabbat*, and is called *Shabbat ha-aretz.* The focus is on this sabbatical period for the land itself, and *shemitta* suggests a ritual obligation rather than the expression of a social message.

Besides these two divergent passages, *shemitta* appears in the Torah in a number of other contexts. In the continuation of *Parashat Behar,* the laws of *yovel* are taught: beyond the agricultural obligations which are identical to those of *shemitta*, servants are freed and all lands returns to their ancestral owners. This is an extreme social message coupled with a completely new outlook upon the economy and the balance of wealth in society. Alongside *yovel,* the *halakhot* of *ona'a* (exploitation) are taught, another financial message, relating to the economy and proper business practices.

The financial angle of *shemitta* appears again in *Parashat Re'eh,* which deals with *shemittat kesafim*, the economic release as all rights to debt collection are uprooted in the final moment of the *shemitta* year. Again, this indicates that *shemitta* bears a financial message, guiding the nation to the formation of a redeemed economy.

Then, in *Parashat Vayelekh,* the Torah's presents the once-every-seven-years mitzva of *Hakhel*, performed in the wake of *shemitta;* this unified public acceptance of the Torah is natural for the *shemitta* year. Evidently, *shemitta* is supposed to allow for a spiritual reawakening, among its other messages.

Additionally, as we have seen in the past lessons discussing *Parashat Bechukkotai*, *Shabbat ha-aretz* is integrally connected to the land itself, as it is the terminology used by the Torah to describe the exile that will be the lot of the nation if it fails to observe the *mitzvot*. *Shemitta* is the ultimate sign of the intertwined destinies of the nation and the land.

After seeing *shemitta* presented in these various ways, one may want to ask the following question: Will the real *shemitta* please stand up!!! Is *shemitta* a year with an interpersonal social agenda, a year of an economic utopia, or a year of spiritual solitude? One is hard-pressed to put one's finger on which one of these diverse messages is meant to be the guiding principle of the year.

There is another option, however. As we will see, a deeper look at *shemitta* indicates that there is no need to choose: *shemitta* itself carries a multifaceted message, with each facet significant in its own right; yet, all the aspects of *shemitta* combine to form a bigger picture.

**The Multifaceted Nature of *Shevi'it***

In fact, the multidimensional messages of *shemitta* are a tribute to its importance and are indicative of its significance. Rav Shaul Yisraeli notes, ad do others, that viewing the entire system of *shemitta* makes it clear that it encompasses not only a social purpose built on improving man's interpersonal associations (*bein adam le-chavero*), and not only a religious message for improving one's relationship with God (*bein adam la-Makom*), but a *bein adam le-atzmo* (character-building) element as well (see <http://vbm-torah.org/archive/chavero/08chavero.htm>). Furthermore, as we have seen, *shemitta* also illustrates the relationship between the Jew and his land (*bein adam le-artzo*).

Therefore, as we present an array of comments regarding the nature of *shemitta* and the ideas behind it; we will divide up the different opinions in order to analyze the various aspects of *shemitta's* significance independently. After doing so, we will be able to notice how these various aspects combine for a much broader interconnected message.

Understanding the various facets independently will allow us to try and connect these ideas back to the various portions. Throughout the rest of our series, we will also repeatedly see many of these themes brought to life through the various halakhot of the *shemitta* year.

In order to better appreciate these four primary messages of the *shemitta* year, let's take a look at an illustrative historical dispute which begins with a statement of the Rambam in *Moreh Ha-nvukhim* (Guide of the Perplexed), which aroused controversy and led to the presentation of various perspectives regarding *shemitta*. Those who initially took issue with the Rambam were later questioned by other commentators, but following their trains of thought reveals the various dimensions of the seventh year.

***Ta’amei* *Ha-mitzvot* in General**

Broadly speaking, rationalizing *mitzvot* may be inadvisable, as doing so implies a certain level of presumptuousness, tantamount to a human claiming the capability to determine the divine reason behind a mitzva instituted by the omniscient Creator. As human beings, we recognize that with all our scientific knowledge, we understand only a small portion of what there is to know about the physical world. How, then, could we hope to master understanding the world of the spirit? Yet, nevertheless, throughout the generations there have always been commentators who sought to explicate *ta'amei ha-mitzvot,* offering reasoning behind the commandments. However, the goal in looking for a reason behind a mitzva is not to discover **why** it should be observed: firstly, we can never fully grasp each mitzva's purpose; secondly, we fulfill *mitzvot* because God commanded us to do so, period. Rather, our goal in searching for a *ta'am* is to better appreciate a mitzva and understand the message the mitzva conveys to us.

In fact, *ta’am* literally means taste; we thus may say that *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* are taste enhancers, as they enable one to savor and appreciate the commandments. The various flavorings of the *ta’amei ha-mitzvot* presented should in no way be viewed as exclusive, especially in the context of *shemitta*. After all, the Torah itself provides such a broad, multifaceted outlook on *shemitta* that we cannot doubt that there are many “flavors” to relish here.

**The Rambam's Rationales**

To illustrate some of the various flavors involved in the mitzva of *shemitta,* we will begin with the Rambam's explanations, found in the third section of his *Moreh Ha-nvukhim* (39), discussing *ta'amei ha-mitzvot.* There the Rambam offers two reasons for the *mitzvot* of *shemitta*:

With regard to all the commandments that we have enumerated in *Hilkhot Shemitta Ve-yovel*, some of them are meant to lead to compassion and promoting the well-being of all men, as the Torah states: “That the poor of your people may eat” (*Shemot* 23:11)… and are meant to make the earth more fertile and stronger through letting it lie fallow. Some are inspired by compassion for the slaves and the poor, that is to say the release of money and the release of slaves. Others are designed to redress the inequities of income and the economy. Since the land cannot be estranged from its owners, it is impossible to sell it for eternity… a man's property remains for him and his heirs.

The Rambam identifies two aspects of *shemitta*: one social, for the benefit of the poor, and the other agronomical, for the benefit of the farmland. Since ancient times, there has been recognition that excessive planting of the same crops year after year is detrimental to the land. It was common practice for many to plant in certain fields only every other year, to ensure that the land would not be depleted of its nutrients. Although the exact parameters of the agricultural benefits involved is subject to dispute, the Rambam's second reason would be that allowing the land to "rest” for a year will enable it to produce greater yields in the future.

As we will see, the commentators take issue with this second reason. Why would an agriculturally beneficial mitzva carry such dire consequences for non-fulfillment? Why would specifically the crops of the sixth year, which should be from the period when the land is weakest, increase three-fold? There are more basic questions as well, which underscore the uniqueness of the difficulty involved in the mitzva of *shemitta*. If the Torah wants to ensure that one's agricultural land be fertile, at least in the Land of Israel where there is a mitzva of beautifying the land, why would the Torah require that it all be left fallow during the same year? This would obviously cause a period of tremendous deprivation, if not for relying on a divine blessing! Additionally, the practical benefits of selective cultivation could be achieved without any extreme difficulty if the Torah had commanded that one must not plant any of one's fields for seven years straight, but must leave it fallow for at least one out of every seven years. This would ensure that the land would continue to be fertile with little impact on overall production (especially if one has many fields).

From the fact that the Torah does not require crop rotation, it is clear that even if there are agricultural benefits to *shemitta*, its message is clearly much broader. As the commentators take issue with the Rambam, we will see that they focus on other elements which make the *shemitta* year so unique and so significant.

**The View of Rav Yitzchak Arama: Spiritual Focus**

Rav Yitzchak Arama (in his *Akeidat Yitzchak, Behar* 69) is adamantly opposed to explaining utilitarian crop rotation as the underlying theme of such an important set of *mitzvot*. He focuses on the fact that disregard of *shemitta* brings with it a host of punishments, including national exile, and therefore states that it is impossible to believe that the purpose of such a mitzva is for the agricultural aim of crop rotation which will ensure the fertility of the land; if so, nonobservance would result in poor crops rather than such a harsh punishment. After arguing with the Rambam, he presents an alternative reason:

It seems therefore, that the *shemitta* legislation is designed to alert us to the important truth that ownership of the land is an asset for our development towards our national and individual spiritual goals only, when such ownership is used in the way the Torah wishes it to be used.

Just as the week, with six working days plus one Shabbat, testifies to the fact that there is one Creator… *shemitta* reminds us that ownership rests with God and that we have to fulfill His commandments. Once one accepts the creation ex nihilo, it follows that the Creator is entitled to be the lawgiver. The Torah spells out that the purpose of *shemitta* is "for God" and that our function in taking advantage of the land is basically “to eat it,” to fulfill our physical needs, not… our greed…

The requirement in that year to release all monetary debts is a further clear indication that material wealth must never be allowed to become an end in and of itself. The *yovel*… is a reminder to man that just as he has to return to the earth at the end of his life, so the idea of rejuvenation of the land, restoring it to its original ownership, keeps alive the idea that we ourselves are not on this earth permanently.

Rav Arama not only challenges the Rambam but provides an explanation which unifies the theme behind the agricultural *shemitta* of the land, the financial *shemitta* of cancelled loans, and the elements of *yovel* which are mentioned immediately after *shemitta* and apply after the conclusion of seven *shemitta* cycles. In his view, they all come to make sure man does not become overly involved in the material world, but views the material world as a means to a spiritual end.

**Abarbanel: The Land's Expression**

However, this understanding as well is not without its critics. The Abarbanel, in his commentary on *Avot* (*Nachalat Avot* 5:11), takes issue with Rav Arama's understanding. The Mishna states that nonobservance of *shemitta* leads to exile, and the ideas presented in *Akeidat Yitzchak* are generally correct, in that one must not become overly entrenched in the physicality of the world, and a period of Shabbat, both of the week and the years, allows people to remove themselves from their connection to the work of the field. Nevertheless, the Abarbanel claims that this cannot be the reasoning behind *shemitta*.

He argues that *mitzvot* themselves do not merely present a framework for secondary lessons, but they serve a primary purpose. Shabbat might allow for a greater realization of the purpose of existence, but its purpose must be original and must explain why specifically for the violation of *shemitta* (not Shabbat or *yovel*) Jews are sent into exile from the Land of Israel. Therefore, the Abarbanel provides a fascinating alternative understanding, rooted in the deeper appreciation of the broad connection between the principles of faith expressed through the *mitzvot ha-teluyot ba-aretz* and those that are expressed through observing the Shabbat.

The truth of the matter, though, is that the Land of Israel has within it a wonderful uniqueness and a great capacity for receiving the divine spark, and the supreme supervision of Divine Providence is focused in that land, unparalleled in any other land. The Sages, teaching of the greatness of the land itself, noted that God created Adam specifically from a holy place, the site of the Temple. Similarly, when He chooses Avraham, He commands him, "Go from your land…to the land that I shall show you," indicating that by virtue of being a servant of God … he must relocate himself to the place of perfection. It thus follows that this land is, by nature and by its relationship to the transcendent, chosen from among all other lands… indicating that the land itself is sacred independently of the nation dwelling in it, for which reason most of the *mitzvot* are linked to the land, as they are part of its cultivation…

Hence He (may He be blessed) chose and desired the Land of Israel from among all other lands, just as the Israelite nation was chosen from among all other nations... The Holy one, blessed is He, therefore desires that just as the entire nation commemorates His act of creation by resting on the seventh day, affirming… the creation and inception of the world, the chosen land [also] attests to this by being left uncultivated in the seventh year. He thus gives the reason for the *mitzvah* of *shemitta* as, "the land shall have a complete rest: a rest for God," meaning that the *shemitta* of the land is to be similar to the sacred Shabbat of Israel and that this rest alludes and attests to the Shabbat of Creation as a Shabbat for God, as He rested on it from all His labor. It is as if this land, by virtue of its holiness and despite being unable to speak, corroborates fundamentally that which the Israelite nation confirms with its *Shabbatot*, with the land's testimony given in the unit of time most discernible with regard to it, i.e. a year, due to the new produce that comes forth from it.

He continues by explaining the punishment for nonobservance of *shemitta* in this vein:

He thus concludes the passage describing this matter, "And the land shall not be sold permanently, for the land is Mine, for you are sojourners and settlers with me, and throughout the land of your heritage, you shall give the land redemption," thus explaining that the land is not given to them on an absolute basis, because in any event the land and that which is in it belong to God. They thus will be unable to sell it permanently or oppress others in its cultivation, because they are sojourners and settlers within it, and God is the master of the land. It therefore is appropriate that they act within it as He desires and give it redemption, for if they fail to do so, exile will come upon them, for the owner (may He be blessed) will expel them from His land. This, then, is the meaning of, "Then the land shall enjoy its *Shabbatot*": for the chosen land had been abused by the Children of Israel, when they withheld its *shemitta* from it … and due to all this, it is stated in the Mishna that [violation of] the land's *shemitta* is among those things that bring about exile.

The novelty in the Abarbanel is in the emphasis he lays upon the land as an independent force in the *shemitta* process. Future lessons will explore the halakhic manifestations of this idea.

The Keli Yekar (*Vayikra* 25:2), like those before him, quotes the earlier discussion and explains why he can't agree with the Abarbanel. If *shemitta's* message is identical to that of Shabbat, what can *shemitta* teach us septennially that Shabbat cannot weekly? Therefore, he states:

The purpose of this *mitzva* is to imbue Israel with the quality of faith and trust in God, for the Holy one, blessed is He, was concerned that when they came to the land, they would occupy themselves with agriculture, as is the natural order of things, and when their hands produced much, they would forget God and abandon their trust in Him, thinking that their strength and the power of their hand had made them this wealth, that the world progresses according to its natural order; they would think that it were their land and they its exclusive owners. God therefore wholly removes them from the natural order of things, for it is the way of the nations in six years to have two years of planting and one year fallow, so as not to deplete its resources. Yet the Holy one, blessed is He, says, "Six years shall you plant your field"—every year—and I promise you to augment its energy so that it is not depleted. Further, there is a miracle within this miracle. Normally, when one plants for six years, even if in the sixth year its strength is not depleted, at the very least it will not increase its strength. Yet God said that in the sixth year, on the contrary, he would give it so much more strength… so much that the same crop will suffice for three years, which certainly is the greatest and most manifest miracle of all. Through all these proofs that I have demonstrated to you, know that the earth is mine. Let your eyes thus be raised to God...

He continues by explaining why the lack of fulfillment of *shemitta*, representing a fundamental absence of faith, incurs expulsion from the land.

**Identifying Four Themes**

If we think about these opinions, what emerges clearly are at least four themes to the mitzva of *shemitta* beyond the practical benefit mentioned by the Rambam. The Rambam's first understanding focuses on the *bein adam le-chavero* aspect by noting the charitable aspects of *shemitta*, described in *Parashat Mishpatim*; he includes the *bein adam le-atzmo* focus as well, by explicating the character traits this mitzva seeks to develop: “compassion and promoting the well-being of all men.”

Rav Arama, explaining why nonobservance of *shemitta* demands exile, characterizes *shemitta* as a break from the endless pursuit of material gain, with a sabbatical opportunity to refocus on that which is truly important. His emphasis on the spiritual perspective one can gain is further noted by the Keli Yekar, who also offers a *bein adam la-Makom* rationale, noting how *shemitta* observance is the height of faith*.*

The Abarbanel's explanation displays a dual focus; he accentuates the shared message of Shabbat and *shemitta* but also speaks of the unique nature of the Land of Israel as displayed through *shemitta*. He characterizes the land's holiness as independent of the Jewish people; their failure to utilize the land to express its message results in expulsion. His focus is clearly *bein adam le-artzo*.

In future lessons, we will elaborate on these various messages of the *shemitta* year: just as the Torah does not choose only one message but presents *shemitta* in a broad light; the various explanations provided are not necessarily mutually exclusive. *Shemitta* contains numerous messages, and guides us in all four areas of our existence. Elaborating upon these reasonswill enhance the flavors of this tasty mitzva.