**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**THE PHILOSOPHY OF *SHEMITTA***

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*Add dedications*

**Shiur #29: The Economic Message of *Shemitta***

**Fifty to Life   
*Yovel's* Meaning for the Other Years**

Many of the laws associated with *shemitta* have direct financial implications. The most explicit is *shemittat kesafim*, the ban on forcible collection of loans at the end of the sabbatical year. However, numerous elements of agricultural *shemitta* as well impact not only the farmer's ability to work, but the question of whether one may even exercise possession of the land: who in fact does own the produce growing in the fields? *Shemitta* should not be seen as an economic aberration; rather, it inculcates a message about the proper model for a society. Moreover, *yovel*, whose economic implications include the freeing of slaves and returning of all ancestral lands, completely reorders the system.

**“Once in a *Yovel”***

“Once in a *yovel*” is the rabbinical equivalent of “once in a blue moon.” *Yovel* is infrequent, but it influence an entire half-century. In previous lessons, we discussed various themes of *shemitta* and *yovel*. Every seven years, the nation in the land of Israel puts agricultural competition aside and gives equal access to everyone's fields. Society as a whole recognizes the existence of God and the benefits of honesty, faith (*emuna)* and trust (*bitachon).* Adherence to God’s law thus helps, rather than hurts, the individual. Yet *shemitta's* septennial message is prelude to the much larger message of *yovel*, which completely resets the economy. To a certain degree, the Torah makes clear that there should be a constant longing for *yovel*, as its economic and social messages are supposed to be perennially in one's mind.

**Counting *Shemitta* Years**

The Chatam Sofer (*Vayikra* 25:8) notes that the Torah states not only that we must count forty-nine years, but seven cycles of seven. He quotes his teacher, Rabbi Pinechas Horowitz, who explains “and the days of the seven sabbaths of years shall be for you forty-nine years” as an obligation to count each day, much like counting the omer. This connection also underscores the longing for the ultimate sabbatical year. The count from Pesach to Shavuot expresses our desire to reach the goal of Sinai, and the counting of the *shemitta* years recognizes the need for *yovel* and the longing for its message.

For forty-nine years, the Jew is involved in business, but the message of *shemitta* and *yovel* must guide his actions. Although society might take on a deeply-rooted capitalist attitude during these intermediate years, it must maintain its bearings and conduct its commerce with an understanding of *shemitta* and *yovel's* societal and economic messages.

In a similar vein, the Keli Yakar and Abarbanel both note that the semicentennial occurrence of *yovel* relates to the half-century that spans the average working lifetime, demanding that one not be self-centered. *Yovel* is to serve as a constant focus and an urgent reminder of the greater purpose in one's existence. *Shemitta* and *yovel* allow man's dealings throughout the year to be driven towards the goals and messages that *shemitta* and *yovel* lay out.

**The *Ona’a* Message**

Alongside *yovel,* the *halakhot* of *ona'a* (exploitation) are taught, another financial message, relating to the economy and proper business practices. These laws apply at all times, based on the principle that one cannot permanently sell the land in Israel, for two reasons: one, the land is God’s; two, one can never renounce his ancestral plot. One may only rent out the land by "selling" years of field cultivation, as the focus is always on the upcoming *yovel* and the ultimate return of everything sold. The *mitzva* of *ona’a* is much more than a prohibition of overcharging. It is a call to be concerned with the underprivileged members of society always, not only once in a *yovel*.

**The Economic Message and the Blessing**

God’s role in the economy is a necessary element of the economic framework of *shemitta* and *yovel*. In fact, the full socio-economic model the Torah calls for embraces God's role in all aspects of life. One is not limited by the laws of economics, as God's role ensures fairness; one may expect the unexpected based on values and commitment, not only the luck of the draw.

*Shemitta* and *yovel* have no place in economic textbooks. Supply and demand would lead one to ask what will happen in the seventh year. However, that the Torah waits to address such a question until the middle of its discussion of *yovel*, in order to put it in the proper context. Only after introducing *yovel* and the prohibition of *ona’a* does the Torah state:

And if you should say, "What shall we eat in the seventh year? We will not sow, and we will not gather in our produce!" (*Vayikra* 25:20)

Here, in response, the Torah promises a special boon:

I will send you such a blessing in the sixth year that the land will yield enough for three years. While you plant during the eighth year, you will eat from the old crop and will continue to eat from it until the harvest of the ninth year comes in. (*Ibid*. 21-22)

The Netziv (*Hamek Davar* 25:20) points out that the fact that the Torah addresses the questions of an "average individual" regarding how he will support his family during the challenging shemitta years indicates that this mitzva and its message are not only for the most pious individuals who never question. It is a mitzva for all, and God therefore illustrates His blessing. This is an economic move which takes God's role into account.

There are, however, a number of questions regarding these verses. Rashi interprets it as a general promise during every *shemitta* cycle, while the Ramban understands it to be a reference specifically to *yovel*. However, the most profound question is how this question relates to one’s fundamental reliance upon God.

One approach to the verses espoused by Rav Zusha, cited by his brother, the Noam Elimelech, is that God's blessing exists at all times for those who fulfill the word of God. There is no need, therefore, for a special blessing during the sixth year. However, if God is questioned, the blessing would dissipate on its own were it not for God’s commanding the blessing to return. Once one questions God, God must reinstitute the blessing. The verses indicate not only God's concern for the people observing *shemitta* even amidst their questions, but also the need to recognize God's economic blessing throughout the other years as well.

An even more radical understanding is espoused by the Alter of Navahrudak, Rav Yosef Yozel Horowitz, known for his legendary *bitachon*:

And what of the iron laws of economy? Did the Creator, blessed be He, fail to consult with them before commanding such a sabbatical, to which all economic experimentation is opposed?

After questioning the placement and juxtaposition of this verse he wonders:

We ought to be even more surprised by the question itself: when would one ask [this]? Before the sixth year he has [what to eat] and the time to fulfill the *mitzva* has not yet come, so that he is not pressed to ask, "What shall we eat in the seventh year?" Then, when the time to fulfill the *mitzva* comes, in the seventh year, one will already see with his [own] eyes the blessing of the three years, so that he no longer has occasion to ask!

He answers with a radically novel interpretation of the verse. The question is not asked in the sixth or even in the seventh year,

but specifically in the first year, for human nature is to gaze and look far ahead and worry today about several years [hence]. If it occurs to him, then, that a while later he will need some critical thing, he already becomes frightened of arriving at tomorrow empty-handed, and due to his preoccupation with the thought that he may not attain all that he will need tomorrow, he begins hoarding today for tomorrow, even cutting back on the today's needs for tomorrow.

One cannot enjoy today if he is worried about tomorrow. This worry pervades the six years of work and prevents one from inculcating the *shemitta* message.

In effect, there is here a great trap of worries about tomorrow, which is liable to entirely disrupt the objective of the law of *shemitta*, for its purpose is to teach one wisdom, so that one knows that the land belongs to God, and so that even when one occupies himself with his field during the six years, he not say, "My strength and the power of my hand made me this wealth," but knows instead that it is “‘Neither by wealth nor by strength, but by my spirit,’ says God." The Torah forbids even "the after-growth of your harvest," such that he is forbidden to benefit even from past efforts, so that he remember the forty years when Israel ate manna in the wilderness…

One's worries may translate into hoarding, causing one to lose sight of the mitzva of *shemitta,* whose main objective it to teach the trait of faith and expand conviction and trust in the assistance of God. One who fails to inculcate this message of *shemitta* existentially cannot earnestly fulfill its laws physically, both because of missing the point of the mitzva and also because one's lack of faith will not enable him to withstand the *shemitta* challenge.

The Torah therefore writes, "and you will eat to satiety, and live upon it securely," such that one might explain that the idea of the verse is not only to promise, but also to admonish—i.e., I command you to eat to satiety and not to cut back at all, for the Torah anticipates one's thoughts: at the beginning of the first year one might already harbor worries about tomorrow due to the law of *shemitta*, which he would want to fulfill, and he surely would adopt the course of hoarding. The Torah therefore admonished firmly, "and you will eat to satiety"—that one not implement the stratagem of hoarding and not cut back today in anticipation of what is to come—"and live upon it securely"—with no worries about tomorrow due to observance of the law of *shemitta*.

This is the reason for juxtaposition of the question of "And if you should say, ‘What shall we eat in the seventh year?’" and the admonition not to hoard—if it is so, what shall we eat? Are worries about tomorrow not a logical consideration? If we do not hoard today, with what shall we sustain our needs tomorrow? To this the verse responds, "I will send you such a blessing," for the preparatory work is not up to you, but up to Me: I Myself will assign my blessing in the sixth year for the three years. You, meanwhile, will not prepare at all, because your preparations are the curse of hoarding and cutting back and the petty calculations of poverty. Instead, I shall prepare for you through blessing: "the land will yield enough for three years,” i.e. the very growth will be blessed, in that enough for three years will sprout from the planting of one, and you will have no need to resort to the practice of hoarding. Instead have faith in God, and you will witness a blessing.

This radical interpretation has at least two sets of direct implications: firstly, one who trusts in God has no need to hoard throughout other years but should enjoy what he has; secondly, the goal of the *shemitta* year is to impress upon us that the economic laws which so often dictate our mindset and decisions are deficient in that they fail to recognize God's blessing and His defining role in who will succeed.

This raises an interesting question concerning what is known as *keren ha-shevi'it,* a fund which helps support those who observe *shemitta*: is this a contradiction to the divine blessing which should be sufficient to live in prosperity? However, the prevalent opinion is that collecting money is part and parcel of the blessing, as it helps others share in the commitment that those who observe *shemitta* exhibit.

In fact, in our day and age, when *shemitta* observance is only rabbinically mandated, it is not clear that the blessing still applies; some views say the blessing is tied to the biblical distribution of the land by tribes. Nevertheless, stories abound regarding the reliability of this blessing. A number of fascinating anecdotes definitely reveal that many farmers attribute their success during the other years to their *shemitta* observance.

For our purposes, the blessing is another reminder that God's role in the economy is paramount and that the ideal Jewish outlook on economy and society must factor in God's blessing for those who observe His commandments.

Similarly, Rav Yitzchak Breuer (*Nachaliel*) opines that the entire question is not really a question:

*Shemitta* is a festive demonstration against the iron laws of the economy! These laws do not rule; rather, reality is determined by the "to-do" list of the Creator, blessed be He, and the "to-do" list of man. The economy too is purposeful and submits to the supreme value of the entirety of creation: becoming one with the Creator, blessed be He, until His name becomes one just as He is one.

Although an individual might be tempted to ask what there will be to eat when observing *shemitta*, the entire premise of the question is wrong. Economic experience is relative; the only ironclad laws are those of God. One might have what to eat without planting, while another farmer who works hard will have his crop eaten by locusts. Shemitta reminds us to see God's role in the economy.

He advises everyone to keep *shemitta* in mind throughout the other six years of work, just like being cognizant of Shabbat throughout the six-day workweek:

The law of *shemitta* is to be the foundational law of the national economy of the nation of the Torah, perpetually influencing all six years of endeavor, just as Shabbat perpetually influences the six days of endeavor. The entire Jewish economy is to be an economy of *shemitta*, and then, if the physical and intellectual investments have been properly made, accepting the law of *shemitta* as one that is unbreakable, then the Creator, blessed be He, promises to bestow the same blessing that He, blessed be He, bestows on the Shabbat day. You are to sanctify the six years of endeavor with the blessing of *shemitta*! For six years you are to work, but you are neither to work to live nor live to work. Rather, work for six years in order to live the seventh year, the year of *shemitta*…

**Praise for the *Shemitta*-*Yovel* Economic Model**

The social and economic messages of *yovel* and *shemitta* are not lost on some prominent economic thinkers, including non-Jews, who are amazed by the laws and convinced that they present an economic model which could only be devised by God ([see lesson #08](http://etzion.org.il/en/shiur-08-emuna-and-bitachon)).

Even though we know that the Torah is the wisdom of God and does not need any human support, nevertheless it is sometimes interesting to see how some Christian political thinkers are quick to point out its benefits. For instance, political economist and economic philosopher Henry George (1839-1897) points out the Torah's radical deviation from the economic models known in the past, calling for a redeemed, socially concerned and value-based economy. In an essay, "Moses", he notes how *shemitta* marks a strong contrast to the capitalist regimes he was familiar with and presents a moral outlook on the economy which would solve many of the ills of inequality. Interestingly, he focuses on the social messages that emerge from the economy, noting among other elements how *shemitta* and *yovel* play a decisive role. He begins his essay as follows:

It is not the protection of property, but the protection of humanity, that is the aim of the Mosaic code. Its sanctions are not directed to securing the strong in heaping up wealth as much as to preventing the weak from being crowded to the wall.

He notes that the Jewish people begin as a pastoral family surrounded by Egypt, a society built upon slavery, disregard for humanity and wealth-mongering. One would expect a tremendous amount of Egyptian influence on Judaism, and indeed there is; but the influence does not bring the Torah to mimic Egyptian culture but to do the opposite, something completely out of the ordinary:

It is not remarkable, therefore, that the ancient Hebrew institutions show in so many points the influence of Egyptian ideas and customs. What is remarkable is the dissimilarity. To the unreflecting, nothing may seem more natural than that a people, in turning their backs upon a land where they had been long oppressed, should discard its ideas and institutions. But the student of history, the observer of politics, knows that nothing is more unnatural. Habits of thought are even more tyrannous than habits of the body. They make for the masses of people a mental atmosphere out of which they can no more rise than out of the physical atmosphere…

In general, societies which rebel against tyranny end up creating an even more oppressive system, but not Judaism.

The striking differences between Egyptian and Hebrew polity are not of form, but of essence. The tendency of the one is to subordination and oppression; of the other to individual freedom. Strangest of recorded births! From out of the strongest and most splendid despotism of antiquity comes the freest republic.

He notes that the ability of the Jewish people to form a society so dissimilar to that of Egypt is rooted in Moses' great leadership and his ability to see to it that the Jewish economy would be the mirror image of Egypt, the emphasis reversed, recognizing a "God of the market place as well as of the temple; a God whose judgments wait not another world for execution, but whose immutable decrees will, in this life, give happiness to the people that heed them and bring misery upon the people that forget them.”

He praises the Jewish commonwealth and economy by recognizing among others the laws of *Shabbat, shabbat ha-aretz* and *yovel* in preventing unhindered slavery and the rich monopolizing the land:

It was a commonwealth based upon the individual – a commonwealth whose ideal it was that every man should sit under his own vine and fig tree, with none to vex him or make him afraid. It was a commonwealth: in which none should be condemned to ceaseless toil; in which, for even the bond slave, there should be hope; and in which, for even the beast of burden, there should be rest… It is not the protection of property, but the protection of humanity, that is the aim of the Mosaic code. Its sanctions are not directed to securing the strong in heaping up wealth as much as to preventing the weak from being crowded to the wall. At every point it interposes its barriers to the selfish greed that, if left unchecked, will surely differentiate men into landlord and serf, capitalist and working person, millionaire and tramp, ruler and ruled. Its Sabbath day and Sabbath year secure, even to the lowliest, rest and leisure. With the blast of the Jubilee trumpets the slave goes free, the debt that cannot be paid is cancelled, and a re-division of the land secures again to the poorest their fair share in the bounty of the common Creator…

While Henry George is mesmerized about the teachings of Moses and his success in being able to direct a mass of slaves from tyrannical Egypt to build an economically just society, let us shift the focus from Moshe to his God.

**Moshe's Role as an Agent of God**

Moshe Rabbeinu is called “servant of God” in the Torah, as his success is a direct outgrowth of his role in being an agent of God. As great a leader as Moshe is, it is not his statesmanship which creates a just society and economy, as much as his commitment to teaching God’s word to a people prone to wondering why they had left the land of Egypt. This new society is built upon God's teachings, not only Moshe’s statesmanship.

Moshe is a true representative and agent of God, but the laws of *Shabbat, shabbat ha-aretz and yovel,* as well as the society of justice and redeemed economy which they create, are only possible with God at the helm. The goal of these periods is to take a step back, reconnect with God's role of mastery and study the ideal society and economy which can be created by those who recognize God's role. As Rav Breuer concludes:

The sabbath of the land is its return to the Creator, blessed be He, its shedding of the form of nature and donning of the garments of creation, for the land's rest is also the Jew's rest. It is an entire year of freedom from the bonds of physical and of intellectual aspiration, in which the visionary ego gazes upon all of nature and the whole expanse of the broad world—and they are all of creation—and in it he sees himself, with all his smallness. Out of his liberty, the highest level of all of creation, comes self-recognition of all of creation. For an entire year he studies Torah, the Torah of man and the Torah of creation, with a clear mind and loving heart, and for an entire year he occupies himself with commandments and through them performs acts of kindness for all of creation. There is no tragedy in his view of the entire world, because he enjoys the radiance of the Divine Presence…

In the next and final lesson of the series, we will illuminate some of the economic and social teachings which emerge from the laws of *shemitta*, emphasizing God's presence in society at all times.