**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**THE PHILOSOPHY OF *SHEMITTA***

**By Rav Binyamin Zimmerman**

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**IN LOVING MEMORY OF**

**Jeffrey Paul Friedman**

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**לע"נ**

**יהודה פנחס בן הרב שרגא פייוועל**

**כ"ב אב תשכ"ח – י' אב תשע"ב**

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**Shiur #30: The Challenge of Statehood**

In our [last lesson](http://etzion.org.il/en/shiur-29-economic-message-shemitta), we saw some of the economic and social lessons that emerge from *shemitta* and *yovel*. In this final lesson, we hope to put some of the various *shemitta* ideas we have discussed throughout the series into perspective.

*Shemitta*, or as it is more properly referred to, *shabbat ha-aretz*, appears in several contexts throughout the Torah. It is introduced to us in *Parashat Mishpatim* where the focus seems to be its social message, and it is portrayed rather differently in *Parashat Behar*, where it is referred to as *shabbat ha-aretz* and seems to focus on the religious aspects of a year of Shabbat for the land.

When the Jewish people enter the Land of Israel, they return to a country where their forefathers were shepherds and set out to build an agricultural society in the Promised Land. The challenges involved seem insurmountable. As Henry George notes (last lesson), the Jewish nation face this challenge after living as slaves in Egypt. Egypt, the economic superpower of the day, was also the most morally deficient country. History teaches us that the oppressed often learn from their oppressors and model their behavior, often in a manner far worse than their mentors. How could the Jewish people be capable of forging a society that would exemplify a new attitude and approach to wealth? How could they found an economic system which prevents the haves from abusing the have-nots?

**Avraham and Egypt**

These questions illustrate one side of the challenge that the new settlement in the Land of Israel faces. The first encounter with the Egyptian economy begins long before the Exodus. From the time of Avraham, the nation's founder, Egypt is its antithesis. We have explained in the past (See Ethics of Interpersonal Conduct, [Lesson 16](http://etzion.org.il/en/shiur-16-israel-and-egypt-%D6%A0-need-interpersonal-economy)) how Avraham's foray into Egypt during a famine sets the stage for the challenges that his descendants later face. Avraham's protégé, Lot, mesmerized by the wealth of Egypt, is willing to abandon Avraham in order to make his own fortune. It is striking that Lot goes unmentioned in this narrative; evidently he feels very much at home in Egypt, and he only reappears as Avraham returns to Israel, holding up the rear (*Bereishit* 13:1). His shepherds now fight with those of Avraham, which the Sages explain as due to their desire to make use of others’ land without permission. Avraham no longer sees a shared future for him and his nephew, suggesting they part ways. It is not surprising that Lot chooses Sodom, a place the Torah describes as "like God’s garden, like the land of Egypt” (*Bereishit* 13:1). Sodom is a piece of Egypt within Israel.

This heartbreaking story is a template: Lot is not the last of the house of Avraham to wrestle with the temptations of Egypt, but it always ends in catastrophe, much like with Sodom itself. Egyptian morality is completely incompatible with the Land of Israel, and any society which espouses it is doomed to destruction. The economy and society built in Israel must be very different in order to gain God's favor and to thrive or even survive.

Avraham's offspring overcome the challenge by becoming shepherds rather than farmers (see [Ethics of Interpersonal Conduct](http://etzion.org.il/en/topics/bein-adam-le-chavero-ethics-interpersonal-conduct), Lessons 13-14). Farmers take hold of the land and often feel an inflated sense of ownership. The first brothers exhibit the different characteristics of the farmer and the shepherd, as the only quality the Torah tells us about Kayin and Hevel is their choice of occupation. Rav Hirsch explains that the life of a farmer presents challenges that the fledgling Jewish nation was not yet ready for. Only upon the return to the land after the Egyptian exile does the time come for such a lifestyle. Lot’s men have premature delusions of grandeur and proprietorship. Yosef’s first dream, sowing enmity between him and his brothers, involves gathering sheaves in the field, a far-off vision beyond their experience (*Bereishit* 37:7). When Yosef confronts the decadence of Egypt, he exhorts his brothers to present themselves as shepherds, “for the abomination of Egypt are shepherds” (*Bereishit* 46:34). This enables the Jewish people to live in Goshen, at a somewhat safe distance from their Egyptian counterparts. However, slavery and servitude brings the nation face-to-face with the Egyptian culture. They witness it as the oppressed, but when the pendulum of history swings back, what do they do?

**The Egyptian Challenge Revisited**

The Jewish people are liberated from Egypt, but the mindset of their taskmasters lingers, by which the wealthy exploit the underprivileged and might makes right. As the most licentious society, it is also a terrible role model for a nation of modesty and values.

Although Henry George credits Moshe's statesmanship for creating a values-based economy and society, the truth is he does so as a trusted agent of God, as part of a larger plan of "re-educating" the Jewish people in the desert. Eating the manna, they learn that the source of sustenance is God. We noted (see Lesson 26) that the word *le-okhla*, for eating, appears only seven times in the Torah in very specific locations, as it indicates being directly sustained by God. It is used at the beginning of mankind and again in the lifetime of Noach, and it is then repeated in the context of the manna in the desert and the Jewish people's return to the Land of Israel.

This lesson teaches the people how to strike the balance between physical toil and recognition of the true Provider. After forty years of wandering, the oldest have only vague childhood memories of Egypt. Over this time, the idea of returning to Egypt constantly recurs. Therefore, prior to entering the land, the differences between Israel and Egypt are made abundantly clear: success in the former requires a completely different attitude and outlook.

This is a particular challenge because the Israelites are not returning to a pastoral life; they are to take hold of the land. Their ancestral holdings will be "their land" forever, as they will not be able to sell it permanently. The challenge of wealth and land control will befall the Jewish people as they cease to eat "bread from the havens” and begin to eat "bread from the land.” Thus, Moshe, God's trusted agent, explicitly distinguishes between Israel and Egypt, indicating that even the topography is distinct, so they may recognize their dependence on God while working the land (*Devarim* 11:10-12):

For the land to which you are coming to take possession of it is not like the land of Egypt, from which you came out, where you sowed your seeds and watered with your foot, like a vegetable garden. The land to which you are passing over to inherit it is a land of mountains and valleys; it drinks water from the rain of heaven. It is a land for which the Lord, your God, cares: the eyes of the Lord, your God, are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year.

The explicit contrast between life in Israel and life in Egypt is seen in the moral realm as well:

Speak to the Israelites, and say to them: I am the Lord, your God. Like the practice of the land of Egypt, in which you dwelled, you shall not do, and like the practice of the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you, you shall not do, and you shall not follow their statutes: You shall fulfill my ordinances and observe my statutes, to follow them. I am the Lord, your God. (*Vayikra* 18:2-4)

Against this backdrop, *shemitta* ensures that Egyptian culture will not be recreated on holy soil. As the Jewish people enter the land, they are told not only about the precipitation dependent upon God, but the challenges that lie ahead and the opportunities for growth as well.

In the Garden of Eden, Adam eats without toil while engaging in spiritual pursuits; the *shemitta* year affords the same opportunity of eating directly from God's blessings and spending a year engrossed in spiritual growth. It culminates the following Sukkot in *Hakhel,* a recreation of the Sinai experience of collectively receiving the Torah as a nation, concretizing the values of the *shemitta* year before returning to working the fields and other forms of progress. The *shemitta* values must be sustained and even longed for over the six years of work in order to ensure that its messages remain loud and clear as prosperity and progress challenge one's resolve.

Specifically because the settling of the Land of Israel will involve the transformation of a nation of shepherds into an agricultural nation, Moshe Rabbeinu is very explicit about the challenges that lie ahead and the need to recognize God's hand in their success even when bread no longer falls from heaven but grows from the ground.

You shall remember all the way that the Lord, your God, led you these forty years in the desert.... He afflicted you and made you hungry, and fed you manna, which you had never known and your fathers had never known ... in order to make you know that it is not by bread alone that man lives ...(*Devarim* 8:2)

These verses serve as both an introduction and a contrast to life in the Land, whose praises Moshe proceeds to enumerate (*Devarim* 8:7-10):

For the Lord, your God, is bringing you to a good land, a land with streams of water, [with] fountains and depths that flow from the valleys and the hills, a land of wheat and barley and vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of oil-bearing olives and honey, a land in which you will eat bread without scarceness, in which you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and from whose mountains you will mine brass. You will eat, you will be satisfied, and you will bless the Lord, your God, for the good land that He has given you.

These praises of the Land reiterate its superior physical properties, but the physical beauty of the land does not come without spiritual challenges. The next verses therefore warn the Jews of the dangers of involvement in physical bounty and excessive pride in physical wealth and possessions.

Beware lest you forget the Lord, your God … lest when you eat and be satisfied, and you build good houses and dwell in them, and your herds and flocks multiply, and your silver and gold multiply, and all that you have multiply, so that your heart becomes haughty and you forget the Lord, your God ... (*Devarim* 8:11-14)

The message of these verses is clear: the land's physical beauty is liable to lead man astray. The fear is expressed clearly. Success will lead to denying God's role in human prosperity as people will declare: “My power and the strength of my hand made me this wealth” (*Devarim* 8:17(.

The system of agricultural *mitzvot* allows one to benefit from what God showers upon him, physically and spiritually. They are limited to God's land and allow for continued realization of divine blessing as the source of economic success. Rav Hillel Zeitlin notes that they allow one to overcome the mindset of acquisition that so often accompanies working the land.

Agricultural working of the land is connected to the concept of individual acquisition of the worker, and Scripture does not entitle one to an individual license of ownership of the land, without known limitations and certain pre-conditions… Numerous times the Torah reminds man that the land belongs solely to God, and that every individual, even if he acquires the produce of the land through the sweat of his brow, nevertheless he is require to relinquish his ownership and leave it ownerless during the seventh year; to return it to its owners during *yovel*; to separate *terumot* and tithes and gifts to the poor every year; and to remember constantly that he is not master over the land — as it is only rented for him, as he eats from it as a result of his working the land.

This system of agricultural laws not only provides a basis for social concern for the weaker classes but reminds man that the land belongs to God. This outlook is most explicitly indicated by the laws of *shemitta* and *yovel* which help one not to fall prey to the state of mind that leaves man without recognition of God and with an inflated view of himself — as epitomized by Sodom and by Egypt.

In fact, any analysis of the redemptive Jewish society cannot forgo the economic and social novelties of the *shemitta* and *yovel* years. They are the warp and woof of the beautiful tapestry that creates a model for any economy.

**A Godly Economic System**

The Jewish economy has a system of laws which are enforceable in the courts, as well as laws that are punishable by heaven. God is aware of all business practices. Indirect causation of damages may not be actionable in human court, but one who reneges on a gentlemen's agreement or the like, whose business associate has no legal recourse, is nevertheless cursed:

The one who exacted from the generation of the Deluge and from the people of Sodom and Gomorrah and from the Egyptians at Sea, He will exact justice from one who does not stand by his word. (*Bava Metzia* 48b)

These examples are all societies with corrupt economies, which lead to moral decadence. The specific examples of Sodom and Egypt are very understandable. We attribute the same punishment to a Jew who doesn't display honesty in business, as there is a slippery slope to fraud.

In the realm of *shemitta* as well, a special curse lies upon to those who do commercial business with *shemitta* produce while attempting to conceal their practices. Although it is not always clear to the human eye whether one is really doing commerce with *shemitta* produce, Resh Lakish states:

The heart knows if one intends to follow or subvert the law.(*Sanhedrin* 28a)

**Shabbat and *Shabbat Ha-aretz***

In other contexts, we have spoken of some of the Torah's messages regarding a redemptive economy, many of which emerge from Shabbat and its link to *shabbat ha-aretz* (see Ethics of Interpersonal Conduct, [Lesson 17](http://etzion.org.il/en/shiur-17-jewish-ethic-redeemed-economy-land-israel-part-1)). The final verse of *Parashat Behar,* after illuminating the economic concerns of *shemitta* and *yovel,* states (*Vayikra* 26:2): "Observe my sabbaths and fear my sanctuary.” This is the exact same verse as what appears in *Parashat* *Kedoshim* in the context of the laws of interpersonal holiness (*Vayikra* 19:30).

This verse might also be interpreted as an overarching message for all Jews, not only those who fall into economic difficulties mentioned in the previous verses. The observance of Shabbat and reverence of the Temple also serve a role in preserving psychological unity. Rav Yitzchak Nissenbaum (1868-1942), in *Kinyanei Kedem*, notes:

Shabbat serves as a basis for *shemitta* and *yovel*. Shabbat, like *shemitta*, is "a repose for God." Man rests, the land rests, and all know that one Master rules the world — its Creator and Maker — and before this Master all are equal*.* The influence of Shabbat is more routine, coming weekly, and therefore also more powerful. Its rest, which has its effect on all workers, reminds even the downtrodden among them that they were free people*. "…*so that your servant and maid rest like you*"* (*Devarim* 5:14), a thought which preserves the spiritual freedom of the servant and maid. The master and his sons and daughters feel similarly: each of them feels that "your servant and maid" are *"*like you*":* the servant does not perceive himself as servant and he, the master, does not consider himself the servant's master. Shabbat calls out to him, "You shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord, your God, took you out of there with a strong hand and with an outstretched arm" (*Devarim* 5:15)—the same message called out by *yovel (Vayikra* 25:55):“For the Israelites are my servants; they are my servants, whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt.” “They are my servants” — not servants of servants! And the hand is yet strong and the arm is yet outstretched to take my servants out of the bondage of others …

Just as Shabbat treats all of the Israelites equally, He who sanctifies them treats them equally. In our Temple, no noble was given precedence over a poor person. The sacrifice of the wealthy person and that of the poor rose up on a single altar, and every Jew felt in his sanctuary that he was a son of his Father in heaven just as was his fellow. Fear of the sanctuary, fear of its greatness, strongly influenced the Israelite soul to recognize its worth, so that it did not become depressed even when its body was under the authority of others, when a Jew came on the holidays for an audience with his God and brought happiness to his son and his daughter and concurrently to his servant and maid, as we are again reminded, "for you were a slave in Egypt" (*Devarim* 16:11–14). Thus this passage, all of whose *mitzvot* serve to preserve the economic and psychological equality of the Hebrew nation, concludes with a verse that invokes observance of Shabbat and fear of the sanctuary, although the same diction already appeared in the Book of *Vayikra* 19:30.

While Shabbat has always been a part of our national consciousness, *shemitta* and *yovel* as biblical obligations were lost upon exile from the land, and even the rabbinical counterpart of *shemitta* (not *yovel*) which seeks to reawaken us to these *mitzvot* and their ideals, was practically inaccessible while the nation was in exile. The lessons of *shemitta* were often forgotten by a people who were players in another nation's economy and another nation's land. That all changed, however, in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

**The Return to the Land**

Jews once again returned to the land, not only to bask in its spiritual powers but to build it agriculturally. They faced numerous practical hardships coupled with the challenge of developing a redeemed economy and society after years of "servitude" under foreign governments. As the industrial revolution had given rise to the division between capitalists and socialists, the Jewish nation sought to fulfill the vision of the Torah.

The most obvious expression of building a society based on the recognition of God’s providence was *shemitta*, yet there was no greater natural threat to the lack of success in settling the land than putting one's tools away for a year and refraining from working the land.

The *heter mekhira* controversy can be better understood against this backdrop. There are those who saw *shemitta* observance as the only insurance policy that life in the Land of Israel would succeed, and that its values would permeate the economy and society. Others feared that the Yishuv, with its nascent agriculture, was not yet ready for the observance of these *halakhot*, as they truly threatened its livelihood. The debate over the possibility of circumventing *shemitta* presented both legal and philosophical challenges: could one imagine re-implementing the values of *shemitta* without its practice?

 Time has passed since *shemitta's* return to the national consciousness, but the halakhic disputes regarding its practice still remain. Our hope is that the outlook of *shemitta* and its values system re-emerge on the national scene, helping to develop a redeemed economy and value-based society.

The agricultural economy of the new Yishuvhas given way to a technological powerhouse as the modern state of Israel ranks first in per-capita patents, and divisions of major technological giants, from Google to Intel, are centered in Israel. Though the agricultural laws of *shemitta* affect most Israelis only as consumers of produce (with only three percent of the work force in agriculture), its lessons should be embraced by all.

**A Parting Message**

Rav A.Y. Kook, a firm believer in the power of *shemitta* and *yovel* to cure society of many of its ills by providing a year of lessons to break out of everyday occupations and focus on spiritual needs, also recognizes that we have not yet reached the period where *shemitta* observance is biblical. That day must wait until the return of the Jewish people to the land, settled in tribal formation, a reality perhaps achievable only in the Messianic Age.

Nevertheless, in a powerful letter (dated 24 Sivan 5675), Rav Kook writes that we must anxiously await that moment when *shemitta* will be transformed, while at the same time recognizing the inner spiritual calling that *shemitta* exhibits even in our day:

Let my master believe me that all these great and lofty things that were stated regarding the holiness of the seventh [year] in the present era were not stated specifically regarding fulfillment of particular deeds, for this holiness pertained even at such time as [the people of] Israel were not in the Land of Israel and the mitzva of the seventh [year] was not fulfilled at all. Principally, it is a function of the gradual spread of holiness through the ages, with the light of the Messiah drawn from potential into reality as they come and go, so that the name of God, may His name be blessed, will be sanctified from one end of the earth to the other and all will form a single group to fulfill His will wholeheartedly. As for [the people of] Israel's preparing themselves with faith and anticipation of the salvation of the light of the Messiah and the full return of the holiness of the Land of Israel, at which point *shemitta* and *yovel* will return in full force, all of the spiritual reparations that are performed in the higher realms, at all levels, draw sustenance from this light. Thus whoever performs an action to broaden the borders of Israel so as to expedite the ingathering of Israel to the Land of Israel, which hastens the redemption — for the ingathering of exiles… precedes the coming of the Messiah, and the light of Israel becomes brighter little by little, as they of blessed memory said of the comparison to "the break of dawn" — he indeed rehabilitates the holiness of the supreme oneness of the principle of the seventh [year], and there is no end to the holy, supreme delights that are thus multiplied, and they are influenced by the root of his soul and the soul of all Israel… One who fears God ought to pursue both avenues, by endeavoring practically to bring to life all the aspects of the holiness of the seventh [year] — even in the present era, as much as is possible — and by endeavoring as well to expedite, with his deeds and influences, the rise of the horn of salvation and the revelation of the light of our righteous Messiah, so that these occur sooner, as the lights are operative in their plentiful holiness even if, God forbid, one's deeds are not effective in practice, because the spiritual power of a good intention regarding these holy and lofty things has no limit and no measure. …

We too feel especially privileged to partake of some of the *shemitta* realities that impact the lives of those who dwell in Israel, yet we long for the return of *yovel* and the day when all *shemitta* observance will be complete, with the arrival of the Messiah. Until that day, may it speedily come, we hope that these lessons about *shemitta* lessons, alongside the opportunities for practice, continue to grow, illuminating our perspective on *shemitta* and beyond.