

Dimensions in Chumash

Parshas Behar

Shemittah: Sharing Sinai's Vision

וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה בְּהַר סִינַי לֵאמֹר

Hashem spoke to Moshe on Mount Sinai, saying (Vayikra 25:1)

Background: When Answers Lead to Questions

The first half of Parshas Behar deals with shemittah and yovel, the Sabbatical and Jubilee years. In his opening comment to our verse, Rashi cites the Toras Kohanim¹ which discusses the verse's specific mention of Har Sinai in conjunction with the mitzvah of shemittah:

*What is the [particular] association of shemittah with Har Sinai? Where not all Mitzvos given at Sinai? Rather, [it is to teach us that] just as shemittah was given at Sinai with its general principles along with its details, so too were all the Mitzvos given at Sinai with their general principles together with their details."*²

As later commentators point out, the answer of the Toras Kohanim itself begets a further question, which could actually be phrased a lot like its initial question: What is the special connection between shemittah and Har Sinai? In other words, if the special mention of Sinai in our verse is to present shemittah as the example

¹ The midrashic literature is divided into two sub-categories:

1) **Midrash Aggadah** – containing the non-halachic teachings of the Sages (it is to this category that most people commonly refer when they mention "the midrash"). Examples of this category are Midrash Rabbah and Midrash Tanchuma.

2) **Midrash Halachah** – containing the halachic expositions of the Torah's verses. These are: The Mechilta on Chumash Shemos, the Toras Kohanim (also known as Sifra) on Chumash Vayikra and the Sifrei on Bamidbar and Devarim. [There is no work of midrash halachah on Chumash Bereishis as it contains almost no mitzvos.]

² See Rashi ibid. who proceeds to explain how we now that shemittah was given at Sinai together with all its details. See commentaries on Rashi who further explain how we know that shemittah represents the rule for the other mitzvos and is not an exception.

which sheds light on *all other mitzvos*, i.e. that they were given with their details at Sinai, why was shemitah, of all mitzvos, chosen to be the example?

Apparently, there is something about shemitah which makes it eminently suitable to be highlighted as a mitzvah given at Sinai.

Synergy – A Vision Shared

As we know, the mitzvos of the Torah can be divided into two broad categories:

- *Bein Adam LaMakom* – Between man and God, such as Shabbos and keeping Kosher.
- *Bein Adam Lechaveiro* – Between man and his fellow man, such as charity and acts of kindness.

It is important to ponder the relationship between these two categories of mitzvah, otherwise, they run the risk of remaining distinct and disconnected from each other. In truth, however, not only are mitzvos between man and man *connected* to those between man and Hashem, they are moreover *elevated* by them. This concept is expressed most profoundly in the mitzvah of, which actually comprises two mitzvos:

1. Refraining from working the land during the seventh year.
2. Declaring all produce in the field during that year *hefker* – ownerless.

Clearly, the first of these mitzvos pertains to the category between man and Hashem, as it recognizes Him as the Ultimate Owner of the land, much like the weekly Shabbos does concerning the world. The second mitzvah, of course, is between man and his fellow man allowing all who want to partake of his crop. Yet these two are intimately connected, for the vision contained within the first mitzvah allows for the sublime level of kindness embodied in the second.

When we picture an act of kindness between people, it involves a giver, a receiver and the item that is given from the one to the other. Shemitah takes this concept to a categorically higher level, effectively removing two out of these three components; for if an item is ownerless, there is *neither* a giver *nor* a receiver in the equation – only goodness that is shared equally among all. If someone approaches the owner of a field in any given year and asks to partake of some of

its produce, the correct and praiseworthy answer on the owner's part is: "Of course, with pleasure." During the shemita year, the answer comes from an entirely higher dimension: "Why are you asking me? No one owns that produce. In fact, I was planning to take some myself. After you!"

What enables this incredible and beautiful shemita answer, whereby the owner of the produce is not even "in the equation"? The answer is – the first mitzvah of shemita, to refrain from work, reminding us that ultimately, it is Hashem and not us Who owns the land *and* its produce. With this vision, responding to the second mitzvah, to declare our produce ownerless for all, is both natural and fitting.

Perhaps this is why shemita was chosen as the representative of all mitzvos given at Sinai, for it so poignantly and beautifully expresses the cohesion between the two categories of mitzvah which comprise the Torah's Divine program. Ultimately, our relationships with our fellow man should not be sidelined or diminished by our relationship with Hashem; rather, they should be elevated by it.³

Mayim Acharonim, the Salt of Sodom – and Holiness

The Gemara in Maseches Chullin⁴ discusses the mitzvah of *mayim acharonim* (washing the hands after partaking of a bread meal, before reciting *bircas hamazon*), explaining that it is on account of the salt of Sodom. This salt, which was typically on the table during the meal in Talmudic times, is especially strong and can impair a person's eyesight if it touches his eyes. Therefore, having finished one's meal, there is a requirement to clean one's hands of any traces of this salt.

Interestingly, the Talmud elsewhere also discusses *mayim acharonim*. In Maseches Berachos,⁵ the Gemara adduces the verse "וְהִתְקַדְּשְׁתֶּם וְהָיִיתֶם קְדוֹשִׁים" – You shall sanctify yourselves and you shall be holy,⁶ commenting as follows:

- **You shall sanctify yourselves** – this refers to washing the hands before eating.

³ See also Malbim, Bereishis 20:11 and Meshech Chochmah, Vayikra 23:22.

⁴ 105b.

⁵ 53b.

⁶ Vayikra 20:7.

- **And you shall be holy** – this refers to washing the hands after eating (*mayim acharonim*).

One cannot help but notice that the background offered in the second Gemara differs drastically from the first. After all, attaining holiness and removing dangerous salt from one's hands are both worthwhile endeavors, but they are not the same thing! How are we to relate to two such differing approaches to this mitzvah? Indeed, it seems as if one's approach to *mayim acharonim* will primarily be based on when he joined the Daf Yomi cycle!

Rav Kook⁷ explains that, in reality, these two Gemara's are talking about the same idea; with one addressing the cause and the other the result. The idea of salt represents added taste or enjoyment to the staples of life. Indeed, even the austere menu in Pirkei Avos⁸ for the one toiling Torah is consists of bread with salt. In reasonable measure, enjoying one's material assets is a good and positive thing. However, it is possible for this idea to exceed its healthy boundaries, with enjoying one's resources becoming one's primary focus in life. At this point, one's relationship with can undergo a drastic deterioration, for they may be perceived as those who might interfere with or detract from his enjoyment of life.

This pathological course is reflected in the story of the inhabitants of Sodom, who were infamous for their acts of cruelty towards strangers. From where did this abhorrent policy originate? The midrash informs us that the plains of Sodom, which were extremely fertile, led its inhabitants to become obsessively protective of their city's bounty, ultimately resulting in their institutionalized cruelty toward anyone who would seek to diminish those assets.

Indeed, says Rav Kook, everyone needs some "salt" in life, representing added taste and enjoyment to one's activities; however, the "Salt of Sodom," which represents a view to enjoying one's material assets to the point of fixation, is not healthy at all. In fact, it is so harmful it can "blind the eyes," leaving one unable to see anyone else and be cognizant of or sensitive to their needs. This is something that is of ongoing concern, expressing itself especially as a person finishes a meal. Having just partaken of one's material assets, a person needs to assure himself that he will not retain traces of Sodom Salt on his hands, blocking out the needs

⁷ Commentary *Ein Aya* to Berachos.

⁸ 6:4.

of others. Yet, how does one do this? With the first Gemara having identified the problem, what is the solution?

The answer is in the second Gemara – “And you will be holy.”

As long as a person has a mundane and limited vision of life, material pleasures may fill his horizon, and his compulsive desire to protect and enjoy his assets may blind him to other people and any needs they may have. Achieving holiness involves attaining a higher vision of life, including a higher vision of his own possessions. With this worldview, enjoying one’s assets is not the highest value, but rather, it takes a healthy and subordinate role within a more elevated vision of those assets – being able to use them to help others. Therefore, says the Gemara, having finished one’s meal, one should wash his hands, removing from them any traces of food. This signifies his insistence that his actions not be hampered or controlled by his involvement in physical matters, but will rather partake of a higher view of those very involvements. In this instance, as the Gemara informs us, the key to maintaining this perspective is at our very fingertips.

This is a truly illuminating idea, whereby, one of the primary markers of holiness is developing a worldview which enables one to see other people and their needs – and to respond with kindness and graciousness. Here, too, we see how a man and God relationship should ultimately elevate a person’s relationship between himself and his fellow man. And indeed, as we know, the ones who give in life are not always the ones with the most to give, but the ones with the most giving ingrained into their outlook.

In other words, the extent to which one will be inclined to share what he has with others will ultimately be determined, not by the size of the premises *in* which he lives, but by the quality of the premises *upon* which he lives.

This is a very beautiful encapsulation of the legacy of shemitah, as transmitted by Hashem to Moshe at Har Sinai.

חזק חזק ונתחזק