

Shmita: the Purpose of Sinai

by Rabbi David Seidenberg, neohasid.org

בס"ד

What does *Shmita*, the Sabbatical year, have to do with Mt. Sinai?

מה עניין שמיטה אצל הר סיני?

This question was famously asked by one of the oldest *midrashim*, *Sifra* (*Behar* 1), and it has been pondered over for centuries. The question arises from the way the portion about the Sabbatical year is introduced in the Torah: “**YHVH** spoke to Moshe **in Mount Sinai** saying: Speak to Israel’s children and say unto them: When you come to the land which I give you, the land will rest, a *shabbat* for **YHVH**... In the seventh year, it will be the Sabbath of sabbaths for the land, a Sabbath for **YHVH**.” (Lev. 25:2-4) If all the commandments were given at Sinai, the midrash wonders, why is Mt. Sinai only mentioned here?

And the answer that we can give today is deceptively simple: the whole purpose of the covenant at Sinai is to create a society that observed *Shmita*. It is in a land where *Shmita* is observed that human beings will learn to respect the Earth herself, by remembering that none of us can own her. “For the land is mine,” God declares, “and you are strangers and settlers with me.” (Lev. 25:23)

And if none of us can own the land, cannot sell it and buy it, then what we do own is ultimately not ours, then the difference between rich and poor is not “just the way things are,” then a person cannot be owned and the difference between slave and master is not real and not loved by God. In the Sabbatical year debts are canceled, and the land is ownerless. In the seventh sabbatical year, the Jubilee, all slaves are freed (including those who did not exercise their right to go free after the sixth year of their own service) and every family returns to its *achuzato*, its original landholding, becoming equal to every other family.

Only in such a society, where “property” does not designate the right to use up what one owns, but rather a kind of fleeting relationship to what one cares for, can people learn the true meaning of justice. Only in such a society can people learn to share their wealth, nurture the poor alongside everyone else, relieve debts, end hunger, and respect the fundamental human right to be free. The Sabbatical year was the guarantor and the ultimate fulfillment of the justice that Torah teaches us to practice in everyday life, and it was a justice that embraced not just fellow human beings, but the land and all life. The Sabbatical year was the ultimate meaning of rest, which we practice every week in the observance of *shabbat*. It was the Sabbath of sabbaths, *Shabbat shabbaton*.



After telling us outright that Sinai is about *Shmita*, the Torah also gives us other pointers to *Shmita*'s ultimate significance.

Failure to let the land rest is one of only two *mitzvot* that are described as being the cause of exile from the land (the other being idolatry), while the purpose of exile itself is described as a way to force human beings to let the Earth rest. If we do not observe *Shmita*, still “the land will enjoy her Sabbaths...All the days of her being emptied she will rest what she didn't rest during your Sabbaths, when you were dwelling on her.” (Lev. 26:34) The Torah is clear: It is possible for us to have *shabbat* without giving the land rest, but doing *shabbat* just for ourselves, even just for God, is not enough. Exile happens because the land's right to rest comes before our rest.

There's another clue to the importance of *Shmita*, a more subtle one. During the *Shmita* year, we are commanded to let the wild animals eat freely from our fields. “The *shabbat* of the land (what the land grows while it is resting) will be for you for eating: for you and for your servants and hired-workers and for your settler living as a stranger with you, and for your beast, and for the wild animal which is in your land, all of her produce will be for eating.” (Lev. 25:6-7) The rabbis further expanded the meaning of this law, so that everyone was required to leave any gates to their fields open, so that one could not even eat in one's house food that was not also growing in the fields—so that human beings and wild (and domestic) animals were eating *the same food*.

Think about the only other time when humans and all the animals ate alongside each other in peace according to the Torah. When, and where, did it happen? It was in the Garden of Eden, before so many tragedies befell humanity. Before the flood. Before the relationship between humans and animals was torn asunder; before humans exiled themselves from the Earth. After the flood, the animals live in mortal terror of human beings. After the flood, God makes a covenant—not with the human beings, but with all the animals—a covenant to not destroy the Earth because of humanity.

It is the Sinai covenant which is meant to bring back into harmony a world twisted by human greed and violence. It is the Sinai covenant that is meant to restore the fellowship of human and animal, and to reorder our values, so that the well-being of the land and the community of life takes precedence over our own perceived needs. This is what it means to “choose life so you may live, you and your seed after you.” (Deut. 30:19) This is what it means to “increase your days and your children's days on the ground for as long as the skies are over the land.” (Deut. 11:21)

In modern parlance we call it “sustainability,” but that's just today's buzzword. It's called *Shmita* in the holy tongue, “release”—releasing each other from debts, releasing the land from work, releasing ourselves from our illusions of selfhood into the freedom of living with others and living for the sake of all life.

How is it, then, that our generation is the one that can answer the question, “*Mah inyan Shmita etzel Har Sinai?* How does *Shmita* emanate from Mt. Sinai?” It is because it is only now, when we see that human beings can really “ruin My world” and that there may be “no one who will come after you to repair it,” (*Kohelet Rabbah* 7:13) only now can we understand what *Shmita* means. Only now can we see that the meaning of Mt. Sinai is *Shmita*. May it be *Hashem's* will that we are seeing this in time to fulfill the vision, to “proclaim liberty throughout the land unto all her inhabitants,” (Lev. 25:10) to all those souls traveling together with us on this planet.

Rabbi David Seidenberg, the creator of neohasid.org, has been teaching about Shmita since 1993, and first researched Shmita under a Mellon Grant in 1986. David has ordination from Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) and R. Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, and a doctorate from JTS, and teaches throughout the world and through neohasid.org. His first book, on ecology and Kabbalah, will be coming out in 2013. neohasid.org is a member of the Green Hevra. Go to shmitaproject.com for more resources about Shmita and Shabbat Behar, including text study sheets on “Genesis, Covenant, Jubilee, Shmita and the Land Ethic” related to this Torah teaching.



Lod, 4th c., Israel Antiquities Authority