

Shmita: The Purpose of Sinai

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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 for centuries. The question arises from the way the section 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 explicitly mentioned here?

And the answer that we can give today is deceptively simple: Sinai is mentioned because the whole purpose of the Sinai covenant is to create a society capable of observing *Shmita*.

After telling us that Sinai is about *Shmita*, the Torah gives us further clues to *Shmita*’s ultimate significance. Most importantly, failure to let the land rest is one of the few *mitzvot* (including idolatry) that are described as the cause of exile from the land. If we do not observe *Shmita*, then exile forces human beings to let the Earth rest. As the Torah says, “the land will enjoy her Sabbaths... All the days of her desolation she will rest what she didn’t rest during your Sabbaths, when you were dwelling on her.” (Lev. 26:34) The Torah is clear: celebrating *shabbat* without giving the land rest, 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*. 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) Think about the only other times when humans and all the animals ate alongside each other in peace according to the Torah. When, and where, did it happen?

One time was in the Garden of Eden, before the stories about so many tragedies that befell humanity. The other was in Noah’s ark during the flood, where all the creatures including human beings had to live peacefully with each other. But after the flood, the relationship between humans and the other animals was torn asunder. After the flood, the animals live in mortal terror of human beings, who are now given divine permission to eat them.



After the flood, God makes a covenant—not with the human beings, but with all the animals and with the land—a covenant to not destroy the Earth because of humanity. After the flood, God gives up on humanity.

Abraham tempts God to try again, this time with one family and one land, leading to the Sinai covenant. Ultimately, that covenant was meant to bring harmony to a world twisted by human greed and violence. More than anything else in the Sinai covenant, it is *Shmita* that restores the fellowship of human and animal, that reorders our values, so that the well-being of land and the community of life takes precedence over our own perceived needs. In a land where *Shmita* is observed that human beings will learn to respect the Earth herself.

The rabbis expanded on the laws of *Shmita*: everyone was required to leave the gates to their fields open. One could not even eat in one's house any crop that was not also growing in the fields—all because human beings and wild animals were supposed to be able to eat from *the same food*, as they did in Eden and in the ark. The first half of this lesson, leaving open the gates, also emphasized that no one owned the land, “for the land is mine,” God declares, “and you are strangers and settlers with me.” (Lev. 25:23)

There's more to the Sabbatical year. Debts were also canceled. In the seventh sabbatical year, called *Yovel* or Jubilee, all slaves are freed, including any who did not exercise their automatic right to go free after their sixth year of service. Every family returned to its *achuzato*, its original landholding, becoming equal again with every other family.

In such a society, “property” does not designate the right to use up what one owns, but rather a relationship to what one cares for on behalf of future generations. In such a society, people learn to share their wealth, to nurture the poor alongside everyone, to protect the stranger, to end hunger. In such a society, where we are called to “proclaim liberty throughout the land,” freedom is the true meaning of justice. If the Jubilee is real, then the difference between slave and master is not real and not loved by God, and no one can be permanently made propertyless and alienated from the soil. If the land cannot ultimately be bought and sold, then difference between rich and poor can be undone. The Sabbatical year is the guarantor and ultimate fulfillment of the justice that Torah teaches us to practice in everyday life.

The Sabbatical year is therefore called the ultimate meaning of rest, the Sabbath of sabbaths, *Shabbat shabbaton*. It's so important that we take one day every week to practice for *Shmita* by observing *shabbat*.

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 that “sustainability,” but that's just today's buzzword. It's called *Shmita* in the holy tongue, “release”—releasing us from the curses that followed the expulsion from Eden and the end of the flood.

Why is our generation the one that can finally answer the question, “*Mah inyan Shmita etzel Har Sinai?* How does *Shmita* emanate from Mt. Sinai?” Because it is our generation that knows that human beings really can “ruin My world,” as it says in the *midrash*, and that there will be “no one who will come after you to repair it.” (*Kohélet Rabbah* 7:13) We can finally understand that the meaning of Mt. Sinai is *Shmita* because *we must*. May it be *Hashem's* will that we are realizing this in time to fulfill the vision, and to “proclaim liberty throughout the land unto all her inhabitants,” (Lev. 25:10) to all the souls traveling together with us on this planet.

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Mosaic of animals Lod, 4th c., Israel Antiquities Authority