

SHEMITAH IS FOR ANGELS

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Hashem spoke to Moshe on Har Sinai, saying: Speak to the Bnei Yisrael and say to them, "When you come into the Land...the Land shall rest a Shabbos for Hashem..."

Be'er Yosef: It might be one of the most famous questions raised by Chazal- what does shemitah have to do with Har Sinai? Their answer is equally prominent: our parshah fills in all the details of a mitzvah that was previously mentioned in only outline form. By linking these details to Har Sinai, the Torah brings home to us the realization that all other mitzvos were taught in the same way, i.e. however succinct their presentation in the text, all their details were given to Moshe at Sinai.

Pondering this answer, we still come up short. Firstly, it is only R. Akiva² who held that the details of mitzvos were given at Sinai. His disputant, R. Yishmael, maintained that the details were not given at Sinai at all, but transmitted to Moshe over the space of time in the Ohel Moed! How will R. Yishmael understand our pesukim? Moreover, even R. Akiva has some explaining to do. Of all the Torah's mitzvos, why was shemitah chosen to convey the lesson of the Sinaitic origin of halachic detail of the rest of the Torah?

"Bless Hashem, His angels, warriors of strength, who act according to His word, who obey the sound of His word."³ A midrash⁴ insists that this pasuk cannot apply to the heavenly angels. They are addressed separately in the next verse: "Bless Hashem, all His legions." Rather, the first verse speaks of angels of this world, who seem to surpass ordinary human capacity for following Hashem's instructions. (Thus, while the reference to heavenly angels spoke of all His legions, the other pasuk does not. Only some humans are capable of mimicking the angels.) The midrash offers two opinions. The first sees the earlier pasuk as referring specifically to those who observe shemitah. Most mitzvos are observed for a limited prescribed time. Not so, shemitah. During the shemitah year, a person each day watches his field, his vineyard abandoned to public consumption. Each day, he restrains himself, and allows others to take all that he would ordinarily regard as his. Those who are able to act this way over the space of an entire year are certainly angels of unusual strength!

A second opinion maintains that the human angels were the Bnei Yisrael who said naaseh v'nishma when offered the Torah. The pasuk alludes to this by speaking of those who "act" before mentioning those who "listen." Given that G-d never asks the impossible of Man, how can it be that He gave us the mitzvah of shemitah? If only those whose endurance borders on the angelic can fulfill its requirements, how can Hashem make its observance mandatory to all Jews?

Another midrash⁵ provides one answer - and in the process, unifies the two opinions above. "HKBH measured all nations, and found none that could accept the Torah other than Yisrael. He measured all generations, and found only the generation of the Wilderness suitable to receive the Torah. He measured all mountains, and found only Sinai appropriate for the giving of the Torah." We readily understand that He acted similarly in regard to specific mitzvos. He evaluated the capacity of the Jewish people, and found them singularly capable of the challenge of shemitah, by dint of their national character.

We can point to another important factor. The gemara⁶ teaches that the primordial serpent of Gan Eden mated with Chavah, and introduced into her zuhamah/ essential corruption. This corruption remained part of the human condition - except for Klal Yisrael, who stood at Sinai. This elevated, purified and cured them of this disability.⁷ The days they spent at the base of the mountain prior to Revelation bathed them in the kedushah of the Shechinah made manifest that rested upon Har Sinai. The experience conveyed such clarity about Hashem's absolute Oneness, that it banished the corruption which in effect is identical with uncertainty about His nature.⁸ (When we say dayeinu at the Pesach seder to the gift of standing at Sinai, even without the giving of the Torah, we mean the same. The time we spent around the Shechinah itself was an extraordinary experience, for which we give thanks.)

The naaseh v'nishmah response also owes to the days before Matan Torah.⁹ The gemara¹⁰ terms this phrase as well as the province of the angels. From where did the Bnei Yisrael draw the capacity to act as the angels? We can surmise that the days of elevation prior to the sixth of Sivan propelled them to the level of angels. Those days positioned the Bnei Yisrael to respond to the offer of the Torah with words from the lexicon of the angels - and strengthened them to be able to fulfill the demands of the shemitah year. When the pasuk lauds the human angels "who act according to His word"/ osei devaro, it alludes to the devar ha-shemitah, literally, the word of the shemitah.

The elevation of the Sinai experience did not evaporate. "Whoever lacks shame is not one whose ancestors stood at Sinai."¹¹ We see in this that Chazal held that some of that elevation remains, and is sufficient to vouchsafe refinement to our character. Similarly, it remains and empowers our shemitah observance.

It is easy to lose touch with that elevation with the passage of time and the coarseness of life's demands. For this reason the Torah commands that we count the years towards shemitah. (Although the mitzvah technically devolves upon beis din, certainly the counting was publicized and became a matter of public attention.) By counting towards it, we remind ourselves during the other six years about the pure emunah in His existence and His providence that underlies the observance of shemitah.

We discover, therefore, that Har Sinai and shemitah are inextricably linked. The experience of the former allows our successful observance of the latter. They belong to each other - exactly as they appear in our pasuk.

1. Based on Be'er Yosef, Vayikra 25:1-3
 2. Zevachim 115B
 3. Tehillim 103:20
 4. Vayikra Rabbah, beginning
 5. Vayikra Rabbah 13
 6. Shabbos 146A
 7. Rashi, ibid.
 8. Kol Bo
 9. For a very different approach, see the new Shevivei Daas (R. Yeruchem Levovitz) pg. 83
 10. Shabbos 88A
 11. Nedarim 20
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