

# THE SANCTITY OF SHMITTA

*by Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky*

## 1. The Hidden Meaning of Mitzvos

Regarding the mitzvah of Lulav, the four species taken on Sukkos, the Torah states, "U'lecachtem L'chem - you shall take them for yourself." The Midrash Tanchuma cites a verse from Mishlei (Proverbs) "Listen my son and take for yourself My statements (mitzvos)..." The Midrash explains that when Hashem says, "take for yourself" it means, "I (Hashem) have commanded you in many instances to bring you merit."

The Midrash continues that when the Torah commands the Jew to "take for himself" it is something that is for his own benefit. As it is stated, "You shall take for yourself the Red Heifer." One may think that G-d wants the Jew to take the Red Heifer for His sake. To this Hashem commands the Jew to take the Red Heifer only so that through it he can be purified from the contamination of the dead. It is only in the best interest of the Jew that he is to "take the Red Heifer." Also regarding the building of the Mishkan the Torah states, "Take for Me Terumah...Make for me a Sanctuary so that I may dwell in your midst." Hashem commanded the Jewish people to build the Mikdash not for His own sake but rather so that He may be close to them- which is in their best interest.

The Torah states regarding the mitzvah of lighting the Menorah (candelabra), "And you shall take for yourself pure olive oil to kindle a continuous light." It is not that Hashem needs your light but it is only to protect your neshama (soul). The soul is compared to the light- as it is stated, "The light of Hashem is the soul of man."

The Torah states regarding the four species, "And you shall take for yourself ..." Meaning, "It is not that I (Hashem) need your species but rather to bring merit to the Jewish people." On the festival of Sukkos, the Jew is commanded to take four species (Esrog, Lulav, Hadas (myrtle), Aravah (willow)); only some of these produce fruit.

The "Esrog" (citron) symbolizes tzaddikim (righteous) who possess good deeds. The willow represents Jews who are in the middle of the road vis-à-vis their good deeds and Torah. Hashem says, "All of you together should bind yourself into one bond so that there should not be impurity (something of no value) among you. If you shall do this, I shall be elevated upon you." When is Hashem elevated? When the Jews are united.

Holding the four species in one bond represents the unity of the Jewish People. When the Jewish

people are united as one, there will be no individual who will be singled out as "non-essential or unworthy." Thus, even those who are individually failing vis-à-vis their spirituality will not be distinguished as such because they are part of the Jewish people as a whole. Thus, Hashem's people, being so special will cause Him to be elevated and exalted.

The mitzvos of the Torah are intended to enhance, protect, and develop the spirituality of the Jew. Taking the pure olive oil for the kindling of the Menorah, taking the many materials that were needed for the building of the Mishkan (taking Terumah), and taking the Red Heifer are only examples given by the Midrash of mitzvos that are beneficial and have positive consequences to the Jew. One may ask, "What is the significance of binding together four species of vegetation and fruit? What benefit could such an act have?" To this, the Midrash explains that the purpose of Creation is to give praise to Hashem - as it is stated, "I have created it (existence) for My Glory." The symbolism of taking the lulav in its appropriate time represents the unification of the Jewish people, which elevates Hashem. Thus the taking the four species is in effect fulfilling the objective of creation, which is bringing Honor to Hashem. It is through this honor that a Jew develops and advances his own spirituality.

## **2. Appreciating the Value of the Sabbatical Year**

When the Jews were about to enter the Land of Israel, Moshe communicated the mitzvah of Shmitta (Sabbatical year- seventh year) to them. The Torah states, "When you come into the land that I give you, the land shall observe a Sabbath rest for Hashem. For six years you may sow your field and for six years you may prune your vineyard; and you may gather in its crop. But the seventh year shall be a complete rest for the land, a Sabbath for Hashem; your field you shall not sow..." Sforno explains that Moshe told them about Shmitta because he thought they were about to enter the land. However, because of the sin of the spies (who slandered the Land) they wandered the desert and were delayed for forty years. Why did Moshe communicate the laws of the Sabbatical Year (Shmitta) before they entered the land? The Sabbatical year was not meant to occur until the seventh year - which would have given Moshe six years to communicate the laws.

Sforno explains that Moshe communicated the mitzvah of Shmitta at this time because the Jews' right to remain in the Land was contingent upon the adherence to its laws. If they were to transgress this mitzvah it would cause them to be exiled from the Land. Chazal tell us that the reason the Jewish people experienced a 70-year exile in Babylon was because they had violated 70 Sabbatical years. Thus, in order secure the Land, Moshe needed to communicate the laws of Shmitta at this particular moment.

The Torah tells us that the Jew is obligated to redeem the first male offspring of the donkey (pidyon chamor). The donkey is to be redeemed with a sheep that is given to the Kohen; however, if the owner chooses not to redeem it, then its neck is broken. It is interesting to note that the special status of the first-born is limited to Kosher species - with the exception of the donkey. Chazal explain

that the donkey, although it is a non-Kosher species, has a special status regarding sanctity - thus requiring redemption. When the Jewish people left Egypt, the donkey was used as the pack animal (beast of burden) to transport all of the wealth that the Jews had borrowed out of Egypt. Hashem had promised Avraham our Patriarch, at the time of the Covenant Between the Parts, that when the Jewish people would complete their exile they would leave with great wealth. Had it not been for the donkey, the Jewish people would not have been able to transport the wealth that had been promised to them. Thus, the donkey was integral for the fulfillment of G-d's Promise. The donkey itself was a factor in bringing about this Kiddush Hashem (Sanctification of G-d's Name). Therefore, the first-born donkey, although being a non-Kosher species, assumed a status of kiddusha (holiness).

The Midrash tells us that even the most ordinary Jew left Egypt with 40 pack animals laden with wealth. After the Jewish people left Egypt, they spent 40 years wandering the desert. Other than the material that was needed to build the Mishkan their material wealth had no value in the desert.

During the forty-year trek in the desert, Hashem provided the Jewish people with all their physical needs (Manna, the wellspring, and the Clouds of Glory for protection). Although the Jewish people possessed enormous wealth, they understood that their belongings had no relevance or value vis-à-vis their existence in the desert. They had been conditioned over this period with the fundamental principle of "it is not on bread alone that man lives, but it is rather through the Word of Hashem that man lives." Material wealth is only the physical means and conduit through which beracha (blessing) is manifested. It is not in itself the source of blessing. Success only comes to an individual because it is the Will of G-d. This was the lesson that the Jews had learned in the desert.

Upon entering the Promised Land, each individual received his own tract of land. It was possible that over time one could forget the fundamental lesson learned during the desert period. One could come to believe (especially through his own successes) that he is the master of his own destiny. Thus, there would be no beholdeness to Hashem. Therefore, before entering into the Land, Moshe communicated to the Jewish people the mitzvah of Shmitta to establish the proper perspective regarding one's rights vis-à-vis occupying the land. In essence, the Jewish people were the equivalent of tenant farmers. They had to adhere to the bylaws of the agreement, which was to leave the land fallow in the seventh year.

The Gemara in Tractate Rosh Hashanah cites a verse, "The Eyes of Hashem oversee the Land of Israel from the beginning of the year until the end of the year." The Gemara explains that the Land of Israel is unlike any other land in that it does not give forth its bounty without the direct intervention of G-d. Hashem placed the Jewish people in a physical environment that makes the need of His Presence and involvement obvious. He provides the Jew all of the indicators to understand and appreciate that if he follows the path of Torah, he will then be blessed with bounty.

Ramban explains that from the time the Jews entered the land of Israel, only non-idolaters have

been able to remain in the Land and draw from its bounty. As we see, only at the beginning of the 20th Century when the Jews returned to the Land did it again begin to give forth its blessing. Every other location on Earth produces bounty regardless of who occupies it. Why is it the case that the blessing in the Land of Israel is dependent on the worthiness of its occupants?

The Gemara tells us that Hashem provides the Jew with the solution before He brings the problem. Since the beracha (blessing) of the Land of Israel is dependent on the deservingness of the Jewish people, thus the success or failing of the Jew will indicate whether he is meeting the Torah standard that was prescribed to him. This reality will enable the Jew to make the necessary corrections.

Hashem gave the mitzvah of Shmitta in order to allow even the simple farmer to take the time to address and reflect upon his spirituality. As Sforno explains, for six years the farmer works his land but on the seventh (Shmitta) he is to devote his time to spirituality and the study of Torah. He is to contemplate the fact that Hashem is the Creator. It is only by observing the Shmitta in the seventh year that the preceding six years of labor will be blessed with bounty.

### **3. The Difficulty of Dealing with One's Ego**

The Torah tells us regarding the mitzvah of Shmitta that the land is to be worked for six years, but must be left fallow on the seventh year (Sabbatical year). In the Sabbatical year, one is not permitted to engage in agricultural activities and must leave all the produce of the field ownerless. During the Shmitta year, any individual Jew and non-Jew alike are permitted to enter into the fields and vineyards and partake of their produce.

The Midrash Tanchuma cites a verse from Tehillim (Psalms), "Bless Hashem His angels mighty in strength (geborei koach) who do His bidding to obey the voice of His word." The Midrash explains that the geborei koach (those of enormous strength) is referring to the Jewish people who had declared at Sinai "Naaseh V'nishma - we will do and we will listen." Another opinion cited by the Midrash is that the geborei koach are those who observe the mitzvah of Shmitta (Sabbatical year). The Midrash asks, "Why are they identified as geborei koach?" The one who remains silent as he sees his fields being treated as if they were ownerless, with their fences being breached and the fruits being eaten by anyone who wishes to do so is a gebore koach. The individual who remains silent under these circumstances is identified as one with enormous strength because it requires unusual strength to hold back the inclination to demonstrate one's ownership rights - and thus preventing others from partaking of his field. As it is stated in Pirkei Avos, "Who is the strong one? The one who subdues his inclination."

The Torah states regarding the Sabbatical year, "If you will say: What will we eat in the seventh year? - Behold! We will not sow and not gather in our crops! I (Hashem) will ordain My blessing for you in the sixth year and it will yield a crop sufficient for the three-year period. You will sow in the eighth year, but you will eat from the old crop; until the ninth year, until the arrival of its crop..." Hashem assured the Jewish people that if they observed the Sabbatical year, He would provide their needs

for the upcoming years.

Chazal tell us that since the Jewish people did not observe seventy Sabbatical years, they were forcibly exiled to Babylon for a period of seventy years. Why did the Jew not observe the Shmitta year if G-d provided at the end of the sixth year a crop that yielded three years worth of produce? If in fact the Jewish people were not given the produce prior to the Sabbatical year, it would be understandable why they succumbed and violated the Shmitta year. However, if G-d had already provided them the necessary produce to compensate them for all that would be taken in the Shmitta year, then why would anyone transgress the Sabbatical year?

The internal conflict in observing the Sabbatical year was not one of financial consideration but rather of relinquishing one's ownership rights. Since a person quantifies himself through what he created and established through his efforts, it is difficult to watch and observe what is his to be taken by another. During the Sabbatical year, one's prior ownership or investment is totally irrelevant. Any individual is permitted to enter into the field and partake of its produce without asking permission. There is no beholdenness whatsoever to the owner of the field. The feeling of irrelevancy is difficult for anyone to accept. It is only the geborei koach (the one with enormous strength) who is able to suppress his inclination and properly observe the Sabbatical year. Those who violated the Shmitta year did so because they could not negate themselves.

The Gemara states, "A person would prefer to his own measure over receiving nine measures of his fellow's." A person would prefer to benefit from his own accomplishments (although they be minimal) than benefiting from another's (although they may be substantially more). Regarding the Land of Israel, Hashem says, "To Me is all the Land (I am the sole owner)." Regarding the six years which one devotes himself to his field, he should consider himself as no more than a tenant farmer.

One must aspire to acquire the characteristic of humility - and thus will have less difficulty in negating himself. The reason Moshe had no obstacles regarding his service of Hashem was because he had totally negated himself. The Torah tells us that Moshe was the most humble man who ever walked the face of the Earth. The Gemara tells us that Moshe did not consider yiras shamayim (fear of heaven) a great achievement (vis-à-vis himself). The only obstacle, which interferes with fear of heaven, and doing the Will of Hashem, is the "me" and the "I."

#### **4. What is the Basis for the Sanctity of the Shabbos?**

The Torah states regarding Shmitta (Sabbatical year) that it should be, "Shabbos L'Shem (Shabbos for G-d)." Ramban cites Rashi who explains that this expression means that the seventh year of the Sabbatical cycle should be observed for the sake of Hashem just as "Shabbos Bereishis (the first Shabbos of Creation)" - the seventh day of the week which commemorates G-d as the Creator - is for the sake of Hashem. Ramban finds Rashi's explanation of "Shabbos L'Shem" difficult. He points out that the yomim tovim (holidays/festivals) are also to be observed for the sake of Hashem although the Torah does not state "Shabbos L'Shem" regarding them. Thus Ramban concludes, the

expression means that the Shmitta year has the same significance as Shabbos Bereishis - that G-d is the Creator.

How are we to understand Rashi? The Gemara in Tractate Beitzah tells us "the day of Shabbos (Shabbos Bereishis) is established and permanent." Meaning, unlike the festivals which are determined through the proclamation and the sanctification of the new month by the Sanhedrin (High Court of Israel), Shabbos was established by Hashem at the beginning of time and remains fixed in its place as that. The sanctity of Shabbos emanates from G-d Himself, whereas the sanctity of the festivals emanates from the sanctity of the Jewish people. The Jewish people were endowed with sanctity and in turn were able to sanctify time by establishing the new month. This difference is reflected in the blessings that are recited on the Shabbos and on the festivals. On Shabbos the blessing concludes, "Blessed are you Hashem who Sanctifies the Shabbos" and regarding Yom Tov, we say "Hashem Sanctified the Jewish people who sanctify time."

Although it seems that the process of sanctifying the Shabbos and the festivals are identical, many sources indicate that for Shabbos it comes about differently. The Midrash indicates that the sanctity of the Shabbos emanates from G-d entering into existence on the seventh day of the week. The basis for sanctity is Hashem's close association with whatever it may be. For example, Mt. Sinai assumed a sanctified state when Hashem descended upon the mountain. However, after His Presence ascended, it reverted to its ordinary state.

The Midrash tells us that the Mishkan (Temple) was a microcosm of creation and it contained every aspect of creation. For example, the kindling of the Menorah corresponds to the seventh day of creation. Just as Hashem on that day entered into existence and thus caused it radiate with His Holiness, so too does the kindling of the Menorah represent that radiance.

Thus, we can understand "Shabbos L'Shem" to mean that just as on "Shabbos Bereishis (the first Shabbos,)" and every subsequent Shabbos ever since, G-d's Presence enters into existence, so too during the Sabbatical year G-d's Presence is associated with the Land of Israel. G-d commands the Jewish people to refrain from agricultural activities during Shmitta and invest the year reflecting on their spirituality. The produce of the Seventh Year is holy. The sanctity of the produce is of such a nature that it cannot be removed because the basis for it is G-d's Presence. Just as Shabbos Bereishis was a time when Hashem entered into existence and thereby brought sanctity to the day, so too Hashem's Presence is associated with the Sabbatical year - thus sanctifying it. This is the meaning according to Rashi of "Shabbos L'Shem." Just as one must acknowledge Hashem's Presence on Shabbos, one must acknowledge Him during the Sabbatical year.

It is a custom among Ashkanazic Jews to recite the prayer of Yekum Purkan (on Shabbos and not on the festivals) which enumerates many requests (such as health, children, eyesight, etc). Reb Yehudah HaChasid explains the basis for this custom and why this prayer is only said on the Shabbos and not on the festivals. He explains that since the basis for the sanctity of the Shabbos is

G-d's Presence in every Jewish home (and in existence), how could one not be ecstatic and completely focused on this special moment? Yet people are distracted and preoccupied with their mundane and insignificant concerns. This lack of enthusiasm, appreciation, and acknowledgement for Hashem's Presence is considered a breach of proper conduct and reverence for G-d, thus causing a serious level of prosecution against the Jewish people. Therefore to counter the prosecution, we beseech Hashem with the prayer Yekum Purkan.

## **5. The Ramifications of Man's Conscience**

The Torah tells us that one is not permitted to engage in commercial activities with the produce of the Sabbatical year (Shmitta). One is only permitted to consume the produce. The Gemara in Tractate Kiddushin explains the serious consequences to one who engages commercially with the produce of Shmitta. The Gemara tells us that if an individual sold the produce of Shmitta and is not sensitive to the fact that he incurred a financial loss due to his transgression (of the laws of Shmitta) his situation will deteriorate. Initially he will sell his movable assets, and then he will begin selling his fixed assets, such as his fields. Eventually, he will be forced, because of his financial situation, to sell his home.

The Gemara points out that initially the terminology used in the passage is "he is insensitive to the gravity of the transgression." However, after transgressing (when his personal situation worsens) the terminology used is, "He is not aware..." The Gemara explains that when one initially transgresses, he has a sense of the wrong which he had violated. However, after repeating the offense the transgressor views his behavior as permitted.

Rabbeinu Yonah writes in his work Shaare Teshuvah (Gates of Repentance) that the first time one fails in any particular area, he has limited culpability because he only failed due to not realizing his vulnerability to sin. However, if one had already failed and subsequently places himself in a similar situation, his level of culpability is much greater. The repeated transgression is more serious than the first because the transgressor was aware of his vulnerability to that particular situation and did not take the proper precautions. The Gemara is pointing out an additional aspect - when one repeats the wrong that he has previously done, the transgression is viewed as permitted.

Chazal tell us that one of the inherent characteristics of a Jew is shame/conscience. When one initially transgresses and realizes that he had done wrong, he has a sense of guilt. However if he chooses to become a repeated offender, then he must justify the repeated action. Since the Jew has conscience, the only way he is able to live with it is to justify the wrong. Thus, he views the act as something that is permitted.

The cycle of justification and minimization of "wrong" is disrupted when Hashem brings unusual difficulties upon the person. After having trouble (such as being forced to sell his fields or home), the transgressor asks himself, "If I am so righteous, why is Hashem bringing upon me such hardship?" If the person is moved to reflect and introspect regarding his previous behavior he will realize that his

justification was baseless.

The Gemara tells us that when difficulties come upon an individual, he must introspect and reflect upon his actions. Man was created with a mechanism that enables him to rationalize his behavior to the point that he can convince himself that his actions are proper. Since this is the case, G-d intercedes and creates an opportunity and setting for the person to do teshuvah (repentance) - by bringing difficulty into his life. In essence, this is a chesed (kindness) of Hashem.

The Mishna in Tractate Berachos tells us, "Just as one blesses for the good, one must bless for the bad (Dayan Ha'emes) (gamzu l'tova)." This principle addresses only the innate value of a situation. For example, one must understand that the difficulties brought upon him by Hashem are only for the sake of atonement (kapara). However, the chesed of Hashem goes beyond this. The initial difficulties, which Hashem provides, are to alert one to the fact that he is not living his life in accordance with the Torah. These warning signs are true blessings because if one were not made aware that there is a problem, one would continue to intensify his level of transgression. This is the beracha (blessing) in the tzara (difficulty).

It is interesting to note that the word tzara (difficulty) comes from the word tzar ("narrow"). By bringing difficulty upon a person, Hashem is narrowing his field of vision - thus allowing him to focus on the cause of his problems.

The Gemara in Tractate Menachos tells us that the world was created with the spirituality of the letter "hey." It tells us that the shape of the letter "hey" connotes the reality of our existence. The space between the two legs of the letter is wide open to indicate that the world is wide open for one to fail - if he chooses to do so. When Hashem brings tzara upon an individual, He narrows that wide gap - assisting the person to realize that in actuality he has fallen. Thus, this motivates the individual to do teshuvah.

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Rabbi Kalatsky is the founder of the [Yad Avraham Institute](#), a New York-based learning center whose mission is to disseminate Torah to Jews of all backgrounds and walks of life.