

BACK TO SINAI

by Rabbi Label Lam

Hashem spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying: Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them: 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... (Vayikra 25:1-4)

What is the relationship between the "Sabbatical Year" and "Mount Sinai"? Just as the details of the Sabbatical were given on Mount Sinai so all the other Mitzvos and their particulars were given on Mount Sinai. (Rashi)

You shall perform My decrees and observe My ordinances and perform them; then you shall dwell securely in the land. The land will give its fruit and you will eat your fill; you will dwell securely upon it. If you will say: "What will we eat in the seventh year? Behold we will not sow and gather in our crops!" I will ordain My blessing for you in the sixth year and it will yield a crop sufficient for a three-year period. (Vayikra 25: 18-22)

Two questions are dominant here and they may occupy a bigger place in our minds than many of us are ready to admit. 1) What's the relevance of Mount Sinai to the observance of the Sabbatical Year or anything else for that matter? 2) What are we going to eat? It could be these two questions have a close relationship as well.

The idea of a Sabbatical is very appealing. Why wait fifty years for retirement. Take a full paid vacation every seventh year. The logistical question arises. "How do we pay for such a thing? How does the economy continue to function, especially in an agricultural society?" The answer is simple. Only 1/7th of the fields are to cease, in much the same way universities operate. Not every faculty member is off in a given year. Yet, surprisingly, the Torah prescribes that the Sabbatical is to be observed simultaneously. We are all meant to leave the fields fallow in the very same year.

The question persists: "What are we going to eat?" How are we to feed our families?" Here's a practical approach that you don't have to be Allen Greenspan to think of. Each of should put away a percentage of our crops every year in anticipation of the coming crunch. It may require foresight and self-discipline but it solves the pressing problem.

"No!" says the Torah. The solution is, "I will ordain My blessing for you in the sixth year and it will yield a crop sufficient for a three year period." Since we are not planting in the 7th the 8th year is also a problem but the 6th year will miraculously provide for the needs of the nation on the 6th, the 7th,

and the 8th year. Wow!

How can anyone feel comfortable making such a mad request of an entire nation? If the promise is not delivered, how long would it take for the Torah to be discredited? That's right! Six years! No sooner than we would begin the honeymoon of our history in a new land then it would all be over. This is a program for economic and spiritual suicide. How could the Torah take such a massive risk in an area where there are such simple solutions, and why?

There was a biker going around a mountain curve when the road gave way and he found himself falling down to the ravine thousands of feet below. In the last moment, he managed to grab hold of a branch jutting from the side of the mountain. Barely holding on for his life he screamed for help but to no avail. Suddenly and miraculously a thunderous sound was heard echoing from the heavens. "Is that You, Lord?" inquired the man in desperation. "Yes!" boomed the voice. "Help me!" cried the man. "I can't hold on much longer! What should I do?" The heavenly reply, "Just let go of the branch!" Asks the man again: "Is there anybody else up there?"

Who would let go of that branch? Only an insane person or one who was certain that it was in fact The Almighty delivering the directive. To have the nerve to observe the Sabbatical Year requires being plugged into the historical reality of "Mount Sinai" in a sober way. Similarly, living the Sabbatical Year has the potential to reawaken and reaffirm the veracity of that national event. The Vilna Gaon writes, "The main function of the giving of the Torah is to inspire trust in Hashem." Therefore, every courageous little Mitzvah step we take, though thousands of miles and years from that place emanates from and beckons us back to Sinai.

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