

WHY SHEMITTAH

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Why Shemittah¹

It is one of the most famous questions posed by Rashi in all of Chumash: What does *shemittah* have to do with *Har Sinai*? The oft-repeated answer - that the Torah wished to underscore that the specific details and minutiae of each mitzvah are as sourced in Divine revelation as the general shape of the mitzvah - leaves a nagging question in its wake. Why did the Torah chose *shemittah* to teach a lesson as important and fundamental as the scope of Sinaitic revelation? Certainly we could think of any number of suitable mitzvos to which this lesson could have been linked. While we struggle to comprehend the depths of the Torah's intention in this, we may as well ask the more general question about *shemittah*. Just what makes it so central and pivotal that the dire threat of next week's *tochechah* places shemittah front and center as the cause of all that has gone wrong: "Then the land will be appeased for its *shabbosos*... then the land will rest and it will appease for its *shabbosos*."² The *tochechah* speaks in general terms about our projected spiritual meltdown. It deals with only one specific transgression - the desecration of *shemittah*. Why? Why, for that matter, does *shemittah* join with the three cardinal sins of *Yiddishkeit* in the passage in *Avos*, "*Galus* comes about because of idolatry, forbidden relations, murder, and *shemittah*."³ Why does *shemittah* figure so prominently in the etiology of *galus*?

The solution will come by way of unraveling a mystery associated with the first Mishnah in *Avos*, which describes Moshe as receiving the Torah from Sinai. Why Sinai? Isn't the real point of that Mishnah that Moshe received the entirety of Torah from HKB"H? Can a mountain give the Torah?

We can suggest that Sinai does not mean the mountain *per se*, but what we colloquially call *ma'amad Har Sinai*, the experience of standing before Hashem, in the most overwhelming display of His Presence ever. That experience, like no other moment in human history, impressed clear *emunah* upon our souls. His reality became so clear and immediate that our souls fled our bodies. *Emunah* at that moment suffused our beings. We apprehended Him not only with mind and heart, but *emunah* in Him penetrated the appendages of our bodies. The sense of *ayn od milvado*, there is nothing besides Him, permeated every last nook and cranny of our bodies.

Such was our experience even before He began speaking to us. Our preparation for receiving the Torah hit its stride only with this unique and absolute clarification of *emunah*. Quite possibly, the Mishnah in *Avos* means this magic moment when it refers to Moshe receiving the Torah from Sinai. It

means that Moshe was coming from a place of utter and complete *emunah*, and, as our teacher, drew a straight line for us from that moment to all the times we would spend studying Torah. When a Jew studies Torah - or performs any mitzvah, for that matter - he must hail back to that moment as much as possible, approaching his learning (as the Mishnah there says) with fear and trembling, revisiting and drawing upon an *emunah* so deep that it seizes his body and causes it to tremble.

We might explain Rashi's "general" and "specific" along these lines. The "general" refers to the overarching sense of *emunah* that accompanies the entire mitzvah system. Every individual mitzvah - every "specific" instantiation of the mitzvah system - brings along a specific insight and deepening of *emunah*. The source of all of this is Sinai. We draw from it, and recreate in our own lives the clarity of *emunah* that was made available to us on that day.

One mitzvah in particular has special potency in reliving that *emunah*. Each *shemittah* a Jew turns his back on the source of his livelihood and survival. With no apparent source of sustenance, he prevails upon himself to desist from the activity that ordinarily puts bread on his table. Living through *shemittah* is living with an *emunah* that suffuses his body. It represents the epitome of *emunah*. (Arguably, Shabbos is a key component of living with *emunah*, representing as it does our conviction in Hashem as Creator. Shabbos, however, is about awareness of the facts of Creation. It pertains to *emunah* of the mind and heart. *Shemittah* demands an *emunah* that occupies our bodies. The Torah hints at this in speaking of *Shabbos ha-aretz*, with *aretz* implying the lower, coarser, more earthy part of us. *Shemittah*