

Parashat Behar 5779, 2019:

Torah from Sinai

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Chana bat Shmuel, Peretz ben Chaim, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof and Pittsburgh, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yakir Ephraim ben Rachel Devorah, Mordechai ben Miriam Tovah, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* begins with the following famous words: “And the L-rd spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying.” (*Sefer Vayikra* 25:1, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) They are immediately followed by a *pasuk* (verse) focusing on the *mitzvah* of *Shemittah* (the Sabbatical Year of the Land) that has captured the attention of *midrashim* and *meforshim* (commentators) throughout the ages: “Speak to the children of Israel and you shall say to them: When you come to the land that I am giving you, the land shall rest a Sabbath to the L-rd.” In his *Commentary on the Torah*, Rashi (1040-1105) cites the *Midrash Torat Kohanim* on this verse and asks the following famous question: “What [special relevance] does the subject of *Shemittah* have with Mount Sinai? Were not all the commandments stated from Sinai?” His answer, drawn from the same source, teaches us an overarching concept inherent in the transmission of the Torah from Hashem to Moshe: “[This teaches us that] just as with *Shemittah*, wherein its general principles and finer details were stated at Sinai, likewise, all of them [the *mitzvot*] were stated — their general principles [together with] their finer details — at Sinai.”

In his work of Torah exegesis, *Me'ain Beit Hashoavah*, Rabbi Shimon Schwab *zatzal* (1908-1995) takes issue with the *Torat Kohanim*'s answer, and asserts that “it would have been quite possible to have referenced any other *mitzvah* in its connection to Mount Sinai in order to teach this

selfsame idea.” (Parashat Behar, s.v. *behar Sinai*, number one, this and the following translations and brackets my own) In other words, the *Midrash* does not teach us why *Shemittah* was specifically singled out regarding the Revelation, rather than another *mitzvah*. Rav Schwab proceeds to address this problem and, in so doing, provides us with a trenchant *teirutz* (response) to his *kashah* (objection) that illuminates the inherent import of *Shemittah* and the divine nature of the entire Torah:

And it seems that *Shemittah* is different in kind and degree [from other *mitzvot*], since the very essence of the commandment teaches us that it must have been commanded on Mount Sinai — and that it is [incontrovertibly] *Torah min hashamayim* (Torah from Heaven).

Next, Rav Schwab provides us with the conceptual underpinning as to why *Shemittah* definitionally represents *Torah min hashamayim*:

Perhaps one might think that the commandments of the Torah were invented by the Sages of the Jewish people and were based upon their own intellectual efforts — just as those who deny the G-d-given nature of the Torah mistakenly believe. Yet, were that to be true, there would never have been a commandment such as *Shemittah* in the Torah! This is the case, since man’s intellect naturally withdraws from the very idea of this *mitzvah*...for [from a purely logical perspective,] the Sages never would have decreed that all fields and vineyards should simultaneously lay fallow during the same year — as this would naturally cause a famine in the Land, and bring about a financial crisis!

At this juncture, Rav Schwab further explains why *Shemittah*, and *Shemittah* alone, was singled out by the Torah:

Based upon the above, [we have a better insight as to why] the Torah specifically emphasizes *Shemittah* and its connection to Mount Sinai, rather than any other of the *Taryag Mitzvot* (613 Commandments), namely, this particular *mitzvah* has the seal of Mount Sinai imprinted upon it. As such, everyone must admit that it represents the words of Hashem from Heaven itself — since [it is counterintuitive to man’s basic needs, and, therefore,] it is virtually impossible that it was invented as a result of man’s intellect. [Now we can understand why our Sages said,] “Just like *Shemittah* was stated at Mount Sinai with all its general principles and finer details, so, too, were all the other *mitzvot*.”

In Rav Schwab’s estimation, *Shemittah* emerges as the proof case of the divine nature of the Torah. In addition, its pivotal status informs our understanding of all of the *mitzvot*, for each of them were revealed by Hashem to Moshe, in all their glorious “general principles and finer details,” at Mount

Sinai. As a result, each time we perform a *mitzvah*, we recognize that it is *divrei Elokim emet* — the authentic words of the Almighty, and that we, like our ancestors before us, are responding to and communicating with the Voice that ever emanates from Mount Sinai. May this always be so, *v'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org/> using the search criteria Etengoff and the parasha's name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

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*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.