

Parshiot Behar - Bechuchotai 5780, 2020:

## *Shemittah, Shabbat and the Jewish People*

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 Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The beginning of Parashat Behar focuses on the *mitzvah* of *Shemittah*:

And the L-rd spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying, “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 *Shabbat l’Hashem* — a Sabbath to the L-rd. You may sow your field for six years, and for six years you may prune your vineyard, and gather in its produce, but in the seventh year, the land shall have a complete rest *Shabbat l’Hashem* — a Sabbath to the L-rd; you shall not sow your field, nor shall you prune your vineyard...’” (*Sefer Vayikra* 25:1-4, this, and all Rashi and Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The phrase “*Shabbat l’Hashem*” appears twice in these *pasukim*, suggesting that it is a constitutive element of the *Shemittah* experience. Rashi (1040-1105) interprets our term as: “*L’shame Hashem* — For the sake of the L-rd, just as is stated regarding the Sabbath of Creation.” In some ways, this very terse explanation conceals far more than it reveals, as we are left to ponder how it advances our understanding of the original expression “*Shabbat l’Hashem*.”

Many of the supercommentators on Rashi’s *Torah Commentary* spent a great deal of time wrestling with Rashi’s interpretation. In my estimation, the Mizrachi (Rabbi Eliyahu Mizrachi, 1455-1525) offers the most compelling analysis. He suggests that Rashi never meant that we fulfill the laws of *Shemittah* “in honor of Hashem’s name and glory.” In

addition, he notes that *Shemittah* is not for the farmer's benefit to enable "the land to rest for a year in order to increase the power of its fertility in the coming years — a practice that was prevalent among the farmers of the time." Instead, the Mizrachi maintains that Rashi held that the prohibition of working the Land of Israel during the *Shemittah* year is "*sh'yiyeh sh'vitatah l'shame HaShabbat* — so that the cessation of all agricultural work will be in recognition of Shabbat... [For, as we know,] Hashem rested on it [that is, Shabbat] at the time of the Creation of the world." He reinforces his understanding of Rashi's gloss in the following manner:

Therefore [Rashi writes], "just as is stated regarding the Sabbath of Creation," for [in the *Aseret HaDibrot*] the Torah explicitly states: "But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the L-rd, your G-d... For [in] six days the L-rd made the heaven and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day. Therefore, the L-rd blessed the Sabbath day and sanctified it." (*Sefer Shemot* 20:10-11, all Mizrachi translations my own)

The Mizrachi concludes this portion of his commentary on Rashi's statement by noting that, while it is true that *Shemittah* clearly refers to resting in the seventh year and Hashem's refraining from further creative activity at the time Creation took place "on the seventh day," nonetheless, we can rely on the Ramban's (1194-1270) famous position that "all instances of the word 'seven' in the Torah are a *zacher* —a reference to the seventh day [Shabbat]." In sum, for the Mizrachi, the correct formula for understanding Rashi's comment is: "*Shabbat l'Hashem = l'shame Hashem = l'shame HaShabbat*."

As we have seen, the Mizrachi focused his exegetical skills on analyzing the phrase, "*Shabbat l'Hashem*," in order to comprehend the inner meaning of the *Shemittah* experience. Closer to our own time, my *rebbe* and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as "the Rav" by his students and followers, followed a

different, but complementary approach in this quest, noting the singular import of the word “land” that appears three times in our passage:

And the L-rd spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying, “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 *Shabbat l’Hashem* — a Sabbath to the L-rd. You may sow your field for six years, and for six years you may prune your vineyard, and gather in its produce, but in the seventh year, the land shall have a complete rest *Shabbat l’Hashem*...

This emphasis generates the following incisive observation of the Rav:

The Torah speaks of a land “defiled” and of a land “resting” and observing its “sabbatical years.” The Land of Israel possesses a distinct personality. It is likened to a human being who can be defiled, can be sanctified, can rest and can be appeased. Just as a Jew observes the Sabbath once a week, the Land of Israel observes the Sabbath once every seven years. In this way the Land of Israel takes on human dimensions. (*Darosh Darash Yosef*: Discourses of Rav Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik on the Weekly Parashah, Rabbi Avishai C. David editor, page 267)

As for the Mizrachi and the Ramban, *Shemittah* for the Rav is ultimately a code word for Shabbat. In this case, the Land of Israel — in all its metaphorical human dimensions — observes the Shabbat once every seven years, just as we, the Jewish people, do each and every week.

Shabbat Shalom and may Hashem in His great mercy remove the *magafah* from *klal Yisrael* and the entire world.

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>  
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>.

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

\*\*\* 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.