

A Revolution at Revelation: The Connection between Shavuot and Shabbat in Sefer Devarim

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The holiday of Shavuot and the mitzvah to keep Shabbat share a common peculiarity in Sefer Devarim. In a rather strange manner the Torah connects both of these commandments to our slavery in Egypt. To demonstrate this, let's begin our study with the Torah's presentation of Shavuot in Parshat Re'ay. As you read this section, pay careful attention to its final pasuk (16:12):

Count seven weeks; from the time the sickle is first put to the standing corn, you shall begin to count seven weeks. And you shall keep the 'feast of weeks' unto Hashem... And you shall rejoice before Hashem... you, your son and daughter, your man & maid servants, the Levite, the stranger, the orphan & widow that are in your midst - in the place which Hashem shall choose to cause His name to dwell there. And you shall remember that you were once a slave in Egypt...
Devarim 16:9-12

(ט) שבעה שבעת תספר לך מהחל הרמש בקמה תחל לספר שבעה שבעות: (י) ועשית חג שבעות לה' אלהיך מסת נדבת ידך אשר תתן כאשר יברכך ה' אלהיך: (יא) ושמחת לפני ה' אלהיך אתה ובנך ובתך ועבדך ואמתך והלוי אשר בשעריך והגר והיתום והאלמנה אשר בקרבך במקום אשר יבחר ה' אלהיך לשכן שמו שם: (יב) וזכרת כי עבד היית במצרים ושמרת ועשית את החקים האלה:
דברים טז:ט-יב

The purpose of this final pasuk (16:12) is unclear. Should this injunction to "remember that you were once a slave in Egypt" be interpreted as an additional commandment? Probably not, for not a single commentator counts this pasuk as one of the 613 mitzvot. If so, what is the connection between this harvest holiday and slavery?

Surely, the need to remember that we were slaves cannot be the reason for our celebration of Shavuot, for even if we had not endured slavery, there would still be a need to thank God for our grain harvest. So what role does the memory of slavery play in the celebration of Shavuot?

The description of Shabbat in Parshat Ve'etchanan follows a very similar format, as its concluding verse also demands that we remember our slavery in Egypt.

Keep the Sabbath Day to make it holy... Work for six days – the seventh day shall be a day of rest... Do no work, you,

(יא) שמור את יום השבת לקדשו... (יב) ששת ימים תעבד ועשית כל מלאכתך: (יג) ויום השביעי שבת לה'

your son and daughter, your servant and maidservant, for ox and donkey and all your animals, and the stranger in your midst, in order that your servant and maidservant shall rest like you. And remember that you were once a slave in Egypt, but God took you out with an outstretched arm...
Devarim 5:11-14

אלהיך לא תעשה כל מלאכה אתה ובנך
 ובתך ועבדך ואמתך ושורך וחמרך וכל
 בהמתך וגרך אשר בשעריך למען ינוח
 עבדך ואמתך כמוך: (יד) וזכרת כי עבד
 היית בארץ מצרים ויצאך ה' אלהיך
 משם ביד חזקה ובזרע נטויה ...
 דברים ה: יא - יד

This commandment could have concluded with 5:13, for allowing our servants a day of rest provides ample reason to keep the Sabbath day (as well the reason to remember Creation, as explained in Parshat Yitro). So why does the Torah 'tack on' an additional reason (or commandment) – to remember our slavery in Egypt on this day as well?

If this was the only instance in Sefer Devarim where the experience of slavery was connected to a seemingly unrelated commandment, one could suggest that by giving our workers a day of rest, we would remember how no one gave us a day of rest when we were slaves in Egypt; and hence Shabbat also becomes a day where we thank God for taking us out of Egypt.

However, this very same phrase: "remember you were once a slave in Egypt" appears numerous times in Sefer Devarim, and each time in this same format, i.e. as a 'tack on' to another commandment. Therefore, we must first consider the meaning of this phrase in the context of those commandments to appreciate its meaning in relation to Shabbat. Let's take a look at these other examples.

Eved Ivri

The first example is found earlier in Parshat Re'ay, in relation to the law of freeing a Hebrew servant. As you study these psukim note how their format is very similar to the format we found in the laws of Shavuot and Shabbat:

If your brother, a Hebrew man, or a Hebrew woman, be sold to you, he shall serve you six years; and in the seventh year thou shall let him go free. And when you let him go free – don't let him go empty; You shall furnish him liberally out of thy flock, and out of thy threshing-floor, and out of thy winepress...
Remember that you were once a bondman in the land of Egypt, and Hashem redeemed you...
Devarim 15:12-15

(יב) כי ימכר לך אחיך העברי או העבריה ועבדך
 שש שנים ובשנה השביעית תשלחנו חפשי מעמך:
 (יג) וכי תשלחנו חפשי מעמך לא תשלחנו ריקם:
 (יד) העניק תעניק לו מצאנך ומגרנדך ומיקבך
 אשר ברכך ה' אלהיך תתן לו: (טו) וזכרת כי
 עבד היית בארץ מצרים ויפדך ה' אלהיך על כן
 אנכי מצוך את הדבר הזה היום:
 דברים טו: יב-טו

In this example, it's rather clear that the final instruction – to remember you were a slave in Egypt - serves as a 'motivator' (and not as an independent commandment), encouraging the slave owner to be extra kind when freeing his slave. The owner will be motivated to keep this

commandment by remembering how God saved Am Yisrael from slavery; by causing the Egyptians to shower them with silver and gold.²⁷

How God Cares For The Stranger

Earlier in Sefer Devarim we find a very similar concept in regard to how we must emulate God in our own treatment of the 'stranger in our midst'.

For your God is God & Lord supreme, the great, the mighty, and awesome God, who shows no favor and takes no bribe; [rather] He upholds the cause of the orphan and widow, and loves the stranger, providing him food and clothing. [Therefore] you too must love the stranger, for you were once strangers in Egypt.

Devarim 10:17-19

(יז) כי ה' אלהיכם הוא אלהי האלהים
ואדני האדנים האל הגדל הגבר והנורא
אשר לא ישא פנים ולא יקח שחד: (יח)
עשה משפט יתום ואלמנה ואהב גר לתת לו
לחם ושמלה: (יט) ואהבתם את הגר כי
גרים הייתם בארץ מצרים:
דברים יז-יט

In Parshat Ekev, when Moshe Rabeinu explains to the nation how they must serve and cling to God (see 10:12 -20), he describes how God shows kindness to strangers, and hence we must act in a similar manner – i.e. emulating God by showing kindness to the strangers and to the downtrodden people in our society. This commandment is followed by a very similar 'motivator' phrase, reminding us that we too were once strangers in someone else's land.

To verify that this is the Torah's intention when tacking on this style of a 'motivator' pasuk – we need only quote from this identical phrase in Parshat Mishpatim:

You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger – having yourselves been strangers in the Land of Egypt

Shmot 23:9

וגר לא תלחץ ואתם ידעתם את נפש
הגר כי גרים הייתם בארץ מצרים:
שמות כג:ט

Here, the Torah defines the underlying logic of this style of a 'motivator' pasuk. Remembering our experience in Egypt should sensitize our own feelings to make sure that we don't do to others what the Egyptians did to us.

Two More Examples In Parshat Ki-Teze

In Parshat Ki-teze we find two more examples where the phrase "remember you were a slave in Egypt" is used in this same format.

*Do not pervert the justice due to the stranger or to the orphan; nor take the widow's raiment to pledge.
Remember that you were once a bondman in Egypt...*

Devarim 24:17-18

(יז) לא תטה משפט גר יתום ולא תחבל בגד
אלמנה: (יח) וזכרת כי עבד היית במצרים
ויפדך ה' אלהיך משם על כן אנכי מצוך
לעשות את הדבר הזה:
דברים כד:יז-יח

²⁷ See Shmot 3:20-21, 11:2-3 & 12:35-36

Clearly, 24:18 is not an independent commandment; rather it serves as a motivator, to ensure that we keep the commandment of 24:17. Only a few psukim later, when the Torah discusses the laws of "leket" & "shikcha", we find this same phrase (and format) once again:

*When you reap thy harvest in your field, and forgotten a sheaf, thou shall not go back to fetch it; it shall be for the stranger, for the orphan, and for the widow... When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean it, it shall be for the stranger, for the orphan and widow. **Remember that you were once a bondman in Egypt...***
24:19-22

(יט) כי תקצר קצירך בשדך ושכחת עמר
 בשדה לא תשוב לקחתו לגר ליתום ולאמנה
 יהיה ... (כא) כי תבצר כרמך לא תעולל
 אחריו לגר ליתום ולאמנה יהיה: (כב)
 וזכרת כי עבד היית בארץ מצרים על כן
 אנכי מצוך לעשות את הדבר הזה:
דברים כד:יט-כב

These psukim provide us with conclusive proof that this concluding phrase 'to remember we were slaves in Egypt' - serves as a 'motivator' to ensure that we keep these laws that relate to social justice.

Simchat Yom Tov

If Sefer Devarim is consistent when employing this 'motivator' phrase, we must assume that the Torah's commandment 'to rejoice' on Shavuot must also be connected in some manner to social justice, for it too follows this same format; and concludes with the commandment '**to remember that we were slaves in Egypt**'.

To understand why, we simply need to take another look at those psukim (in Parshat Re'ay), paying careful attention to the lengthy list of people who are commanded to 'be happy':

*And you shall **rejoice** before **Hashem**... you and your son and your daughter and your man-servant, and your maid-servant, and **the Levite that is within your gates, and the stranger, and the orphan and the widow, that are in your midst - in the place which Hashem shall choose to cause His name to dwell there. And you shall remember that you were once a slave in Egypt...***
Devarim 16:11-12

(יא) ושמחת לפני ה' אלהיך אתה
 ובנך ובתך ועבדך ואמתך והלוי
 אשר בשעריך והגר והיתום
 והאלמנה אשר בקרבך במקום אשר
 יבחר ה' אלהיך לשכון שמו שם:
 (יב) וזכרת כי עבד היית במצרים
 ושמרת ועשית את החקים האלה:
דברים טז:יא-יב

What's the purpose of this lengthy list? Couldn't the Torah simply command that everyone must be happy?

Take a look once again at the list of the people who the Torah commands to rejoice, noting how just about all of them **do not own land**. The **Levite** by the Torah's decree (see 18:1), the **stranger** due to his social predicament, and the **orphan** and **widow** due to a family tragedy. In fact, this list looks more like a roster of those who are not happy at this time of the year – as everyone around them are gathering their wealth, while they have nothing. In contrast to these unfortunate people, the land owner will be very happy during this time of year - even if the

Torah did not command him to be happy! Instead, the Torah makes a very different demand upon the land owner.

Unlike our original assumption, the Torah does not command everyone in this list to **be** happy; rather it encourages the land owner to make others happy- i.e. to **share** his natural happiness with these 'have-nots'. Surely he must rejoice by thanking God for his harvest, but he accomplishes this by sharing his produce with the downtrodden, helping them rejoice at this special time of the year.

This interpretation neatly explains why the Torah reminds us to "remember that we were once slaves in Egypt", specifically after this commandment to rejoice with the downtrodden on Shavuot; as once again, it serves as a 'motivator'.

The Rambam, in his discussion of the laws of "simchat Yom Tov, reaches a very daring conclusion which supports this interpretation:

*When one eats and drinks [on Yom Tov], he must also feed the strangers, orphans and widows; as well as others who are distraught and poor. However, he who closes the doors of his courtyard; and rejoices alone with his wife and children – and doesn't feed and give drink to the poor and to those with bitter souls ['social misfits'] – this is not the rejoicing of a mitzvah – rather it is making his 'tummy' happy... And in this regard the Navi [Hoshea 9:4] said: Their offerings shall be for them like the food of mourners, all that participate in that meal become defiled..."; and this 'rejoicing' is their **embarrassment** – as it is written: "I will strew 'dung' upon your faces, the dung of your festival sacrifices..." (Malachi 2:3)*

Rambam Hilchot Yom Tov 6:18

וכשהוא אוכל ושותה, חייב להאכיל לגר ליתום ולאלמנה עם שאר העניים האמיללים. אבל מי שנועל דלתות חצרו ואוכל ושותה הוא ובניו ואשתו, ואינו מאכיל ומשקה לעניים ולמרי נפש - אין זו שמחת מצוה, אלא שמחת כרסו. ועל אלו נאמר "זבחיהם כלחם אונים להם, כל אוכליו ייטמאו: כי לחמם לנפשם" (הושע ט,ד); ושמחה כזו קלון היא להם, שנאמר "וזיריתי פרש על פניכם, פרש חגיכם" (מלאכי ב,ג). רמב"ם הלכות יום טוב ו,י"ח

These harsh words of the Rambam are clearly based on these psukim in Parshat Re'ay. They also reflect the underlying message behind the Torah's consistent repetition of this 'motivator' phrase: "remember you were a slave in Egypt" - which surfaces over and over again in Sefer Devarim.²⁸

In a similar manner, Rashi's commentary in Parshat Re'ay also reflects this same understanding, that the owner is commanded to make others happy:

The Levite, stranger, orphan, and widow: - My four; corresponding to your four: your son, daughter, servant, and maidservant. If you make My four happy, I [God] will make your four happy.

Rashi on Devarim 16:11

והלוי והגר והיתום והאלמנה - ארבעה שלי כנגד ארבעה שלך, בנך ובתך ועבדך ואמתך, אם אתה משמח את שלי, אני משמח את שלך: רש"י דברים טז:יא

²⁸ See also Rambam Hilchot Hagiga 2:14.

Back To Har Sinai

Based on these examples, we can now return to the special manner by which Sefer Devarim explains the reason for keeping Shabbat in Parshat Ve'etchanan.

Recall how the commandment to keep Shabbat is worded differently in Sefer Devarim than in Sefer Shmot. Not only is the opening word "shamor" instead of "zachor", but the very reason for keeping Shabbat is different. According to the commandment in Shmot, the reason for resting on Shabbat is to remember that God created the Heavens & Earth in seven days; while the reason for Shabbat in Sefer Devarim is to allow your workers a day of rest! As you study those psukim in Parshat Ve'etchanan, take a careful look at this commandment, noting how they follow this same format:

*Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy... You shall not do any work, you, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, nor thy **man-servant**, nor thy **maid-servant**...nor the **stranger** that is within thy gates; **in order that** your man-servant and thy maid-servant may rest as well as you! **Remember that you were once a bondman in Egypt** and the LORD thy God brought you out...*
Devarim 5:11-14

(יא) שמור את יום השבת לקדשו ...
(ג) ...לא תעשה כל מלאכה אתה
ובנך ובתך ועבדך ואמתך ושורך
וחמרך וכל בהמתך וגרך אשר
בשעריך למען ינוח עבדך ואמתך
כמוך: (יד) וזכרת כי עבד היית
בארץ מצרים ויצאך ה' אלהיך משם
דברים ה:יא-יד

God commands that we rest on Shabbat, **in order** that our workers can rest – followed by the 'motivator' phrase: "remember you were once a slave in Egypt" – and there, your bosses never gave **you** a day of rest! Therefore – be sure to give you workers the rest they deserve (and not – be sure to remember that God took you out of Egypt). But if this theme is so important, why is it not mentioned in the Ten Commandments in Parshat Yitro?

One could suggest that this contradiction in regard to the reason for Shabbat between Yitro (to remember Creation) and Ve'etchanan (to be kind to your workers) is intentional. By recording the Commandment to keep Shabbat in two different formats, the Torah expects the reader to notice this contradiction and contemplate its reason.

In other words, why would the Torah first provide a reason for Shabbat in the realm of one's personal relationship with God ("bein adam la'makom"), and then in a different version - provide a totally different reason in the realm of man's relationship with his fellow man ("bein adam le'chaveiro").

This duality is precisely the point, for it carries a revolutionary message in regard to the very concept of religion.

Man's intellectual recognition of God as the Creator of the heavens and earth is important, but remains meaningless if he cannot translate his intellectual understanding into the realm of his

daily behavior. His belief in God must manifest itself in the manner by which he treats his fellow man. To be a 'servant of God', man must understand how to emulate God.²⁹

In regard to religion, this very concept - that man serves God in the manner by which he treats his fellow man - is revolutionary. In ancient times, religion was all about 'man and god(s)'. To serve a god that you believed in, and to seek his favor, one would offer sacrifices, perform ritual, and possibly even offer a prayer. But there was no connection between the service of a god and one's ethical behavior.

At Har Sinai, Am Yisrael enters a covenant to become a nation representing God (Shmot 19:5-8). Upon accepting that covenant, God announces His famous Ten Commandments that define the basic principals of our eternal relationship with Him. Surely, this covenant must be anchored by belief and commitment to follow ritual. However, it is also anchored in the understanding that man's service of God must manifest itself in his care for his fellow man, for in that manner, man emulates God Himself. [Note the centrality of that theme in the last five commandments as well.]

Shabbat becomes a prime example of this very concept, where we stop all creativity; first and foremost to remember the existence of the one God who gave us our creative ability [our "tzelem Elokim"]. But it also becomes a time to reflect on how we must channel our creativity in the service of God, by re-sensitizing our feelings and showing our care for the less fortunate in our society.

It is not by chance that the laws of Shavuot in Parshat Re'ay reflect this very same theme that we find in regard to Shabbat. The land-owner must not only thank God for his harvest; he must formalize that intellectual understanding when rejoicing by sharing his harvest with those who would otherwise be depressed during this critical time of the agricultural year.³⁰

In this manner, both Shavuot and Shabbat serve as times of the year (and of the week) where our belief in God must manifest itself in our actions, especially in regard to how we relate to our fellow man.

From this perspective, it makes perfect sense that Shabbat becomes an "ot" – our eternal reminder - of our covenant with God at Sinai (see Shmot 31:12-17); and why the special laws of "simchat yom-tov" in Parshat Re'ey become a most appropriate way to celebrate Shavuot – "zman matan Torateinu".

²⁹ See again Devarim 10:17-19!

³⁰ Note as well how this very same theme emerges in the laws of Shavuot in Vayikra 23:15-21, as they conclude with the commandment to care for poor in 23:22. Note this same theme in Vayikra 19:33-36; 20:26 and 25:55!

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