

The Hidden Message of Shmitah & Yovel Rabbi Maury Grebenau

Structure and parallels can help us understand Mitzvos more deeply and gain insight into the function and purpose of commandments. R' Meir Simcha of Dvinsk (Meshech Chochma Behar) proposes a fascinating parallel which seems to help understand the agricultural structure as well as the structure of the holidays we celebrate yearly. R' Meir Simcha suggests that Shmitah, where every 7th year farmers do not work their fields, parallels Shabbos. While Yovel, the 50th year where slaves are set free and land reverts to its ancestral owners, parallels Yom Tov.

R' Meir Simcha points to one way in which this parallel seems to play out. Shabbos comes each week regardless of what we do. Yom Tov, on the other hand, depends on the actions of the Beis Din in terms of when they bring in each month. This is famously expressed in the Yom Tov Amidah where the bracha ends '*mikadeish Yisrael v'Hazmanim*' meaning that though Hashem infusing us with kedusha the holidays are made holy. This is as opposed to '*mikadeish HaShabbos*' where we just mention Hashem directly making the Shabbos holy without any input from us. Shmitah, just like Shabbos, is something which happens every seven years and it is in effect regardless of if we follow its laws. Yovel, by contrast, seems more like Yom Tov in that it only occurs with a certain trigger¹.

Additionally, we see this parallel in the given reasons for these two Mitzvot. Shmitah is supposed to remind us that the land is owned by Hashem. In this way it is quite parallel to Shabbos where we pull back and cease from creative activity to demonstrate that Hashem is the ultimate Creator. Shmitah as well is the farmer pulling back from working his land in a very unnatural type of crop rotation in order to show that the land is Hashem's and will ultimately do His bidding. Yovel on the other hand seems connected with '*zecher l'Yitzias Mitzrayim*' which is mentioned in this week's parsha at the conclusion of the laws related to Yovel. This is clearly more parallel to the Yomim Tovim which all commemorate a divine intervention in our History. This is really the same as the dichotomy between Hashem as a Borei (Creator) and Manhig (Controller) of the world. Shmitah and Shabbos mainly remind us of Hashem as Original Creator and Owner of the world. Yovel and Yom Tov recall the fact that Hashem remains actively involved in our History and our present.

Indeed if we look carefully at the focus of each of these Mitzvos our fundamental parallel seems to hold true. When we think of Shabbos and Shmitah, cessation is at the forefront. They are both Mitzvos which are defined by their Lo Taaseh, negative commandments. Although there are positive actions as well, they take a back seat. Yovel, on the other hand, has a number of Mitzvot which seem to take center stage. It is true that a farmer may not work his land during

¹ See Gemara (Rosh HaShanah 9b) where there is a dispute if the trigger is sending the slaves free or blowing the shofar

Yovel but freeing the slaves and returning the land to its original owners seem to define the Mitzva. This again parallels Yom Tov well. Yom Tov also has an *issur melacha* but it is muted as compared to Shabbos in that on Yom Tov we may cook and carry. In addition, each Yom Tov has a positive Mitzva which seems to take center stage. Eating Matza, living in a Sukka and shaking the 4 minim define the character of Sukkos and Pesach.

The Ramban (Shemos 20:8) explains that positive mitzvos are connected to Ahavah (love of Hashem) and negative mitzvos are connected to Yirah (awe of Hashem). When we refrain from doing something, we are demonstrating the awe we have for Hashem and when we put effort into a positive mitzvah we are demonstrating the loving element of our relationship with Hashem. This too seems an apt parallel between Shabbos and Shmitah on the one hand and Yovel and Yom Tov on the other hand. Shabbos and shmitah are about stepping back and refraining because of our awe at our Creator. Yom Tov and Yovel are more about moving forward toward Hashem in an act of love and an engagement in mitzvos. This feeling is embodied in the concept of *aliyah l'regel* (the Jewish people surging forward to the Temple to celebrate holidays in Hashem's presence).

The parallel is fascinating and informative but I believe there is also an important takeaway message. When we think of Shabbos and Yom Tov we rarely think of them as being two halves of the same cycle, the way Shmitah and Yovel are. This parallel suggests that they are just that, the dichotomy of our spiritual relationship with Hashem. The cycle of Shabbos and Yom Tov in general is meant at its core to give us time to realign with our priorities which tend to get trampled in our day to day rush. Just as the farmer gets a respite to build up his spirituality, so too we all get time to focus on our spiritual goals and our family relationships every Shabbos and Chag.

Rav Hutner would give a powerful mashal to explain the phenomenon of the chagim. He likened it to a person stumbling around inside in the darkness. They bump into a chair and then step on small piece of plastic, injuring themselves and getting frustrated in the process. Suddenly a flash of lightning completely illuminates the room for a fraction of a second and then all goes black once more. Now, however, they have a mental image of the room; they saw clearly for a moment and it will guide them even though things have returned to darkness. So too, Rav Hutner explained, are the chaggim. When we have these times off with our families and spend more time immersed in spirituality doing what is most important to us our priorities are much clearer. It is that moment of clarity which will help guide us through that next piece of our lives even once we are back in the hustle and bustle of everyday life.