

SINAI AND THE “SHABBAT-CYCLE” LAWS

ALEX MAGED

And the Lord 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 a Sabbath to the Lord. 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 a Sabbath to the Lord; you shall not sow your field, nor shall you prune your vineyard. You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest, and you shall not pick the grapes you had set aside [for yourself], [for] it shall be a year of rest for the land. And [the produce of] the Sabbath of the land shall be yours to eat for you, for your male and female slaves, and for your hired worker and resident who live with you, all of its produce may be eaten [also] by your domestic animals and by the beasts that are in your land. (Lev. 25:1-4).

Our Sages wondered (see Rashi to Lev. 25:1): Why does the Torah go out of its way to tell us that the laws recorded in *Parshat Behar* (Lev. 25:1-26:2) – the laws of *shemittah*, i.e. the *Sabbath of the land*, along with a series of other socioeconomic laws related to the sale of property and redemption of slaves – were given to Moses *on Mount Sinai*? This would seem to be a redundant piece of information, inasmuch as the entire Torah is understood to have been given to Moses at Mount Sinai. Ostensibly, there must be some special connection between the laws recorded in *Parshat Behar* and “Mount Sinai,” which warranted their being singled out in this way.

Indeed, carefully comparing the details of the laws in *Parshat Behar* with the details of the revelation at Sinai yields compelling connections between the two:

1. After outlining the *shemittah* cycle– six years of working the land followed by a year of letting it lie fallow – the Torah tells us that this cycle is itself to function as part of a larger, fifty-year agricultural cycle known as the

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jubilee: *And you shall count for yourself [ve-sapharta lekha] seven sabbatical years [shabbatot shanim], seven years seven times. And the days of these seven sabbatical years shall amount to forty nine years for you (Lev. 25:8).* The command to *count* these seven weeks [of years] parallels the command to *count* the seven weeks that lead from Pesach to Shavuot, which is the day traditionally associated with the revelation at Sinai: *And you shall count for yourselves [u-sephartem lakhem] from the morrow of the rest day [mi-maharat ha-shabbat], from the day you bring the omer as a wave offering seven weeks; they shall be complete (Lev. 23:15).*

2. The Torah tells us that the onset of the jubilee year must be announced by the sounding of the shofar: *You shall proclaim [with] the shofar blasts, in the seventh month, on the tenth of the month; on the Day of Atonement, you shall sound the shofar throughout your land (Lev. 25:9).* The revelation at Sinai was likewise marked by shofar blasts: *It came to pass on the third day when it was morning, that there were thunder claps and lightning flashes, and a thick cloud was upon the mountain, and a very powerful blast of a shofar, and the entire nation that was in the camp shuddered... The sound of the shofar grew increasingly stronger; Moses would speak and God would answer him with a voice (Ex. 19:16-19).*

3. Furthermore, the Hebrew term for “jubilee,” *yovel*, is a term which in origin is connected to the blowing of the *shofar*. Indeed, the term appears with precisely this meaning in the story of the revelation at Sinai: *No hand shall touch [the mountain]... when the ram's horn [yovel] sounds a long, drawn out blast, [then] they may ascend the mountain (Ex. 19:13).*

4. The Torah tells us that we must sanctify the jubilee year as follows: *And you shall sanctify [ve-kidashtem] the fiftieth year, and proclaim freedom [for slaves] throughout the land for all who live on it. It shall be a jubilee for you, and you shall return, each man to his property, and you shall return, each man to his family (Lev. 25:10).* The “sanctification” of the fiftieth year recalls the “sanctification” required of the Israelites in preparation for the fiftieth day of their exodus from Egypt, on which they were to receive the Torah at Sinai: *And the Lord said to Moses, “Go to the people and sanctify them [ve-kidashtam] them today and tomorrow, and they shall wash their garments” (Ex. 19:10; cf. v. 14, 22-23).*

5. Also related to Leviticus 25:10: The laws of the jubilee mandate the freeing of slaves and the return of ancestral lands. There are obvious parallels here with the scene at Sinai, during which a group of newly freed Hebrew slaves were also in the process of returning to their ancestral land.

6. In “justifying” the *shemittah* / *yovel* laws, God declares: *The land shall not be sold permanently, for the land belongs to Me [ki li ha-aretz], for you are strangers and [temporary] residents with Me* (Lev. 25:23). Before the revelation at Sinai, God provides nearly the exact same “justification” for His forging of a covenant with the Israelites: *And now, if you obey Me and keep My covenant, you shall be to Me a treasure out of all peoples, for the entire earth belongs to Me [ki li kol ha-aretz]* (Ex. 19:5).

Taken together, the data assembled here may suggest that in some sense, the laws of *shemittah* / *yovel* are actually patterned after the nation’s experience at Sinai. Inversely, and perhaps more strikingly, we might say that the experience at Sinai was actually structured to anticipate the experience of *shemittah* / *yovel*. Thinking of Sinai in these terms would imply that, though there are certainly many themes to be associated with this mountain and all that it symbolizes, its *central* theme is essentially socioeconomic; that, underneath it all, the message to be associated with Sinai is fundamentally one of *shemittah*, broadly construed. This message, in short, regards the right of rest – of *Shabbat* – for all: God and humans, freemen and servants, animals and land.

In this vein, it is instructive to note the running relationship that one observes throughout the Torah between Sinai and what we might call the “Shabbat-cycle laws” – a term which we will use throughout this essay to encompass:

- (a) The laws of the Shabbat day itself;
- (b) The laws of *shemittah* – the “sabbatical year,” which the Torah explicitly calls a *year of Shabbat* (Lev. 25:2ff) – and the laws of *yovel*, the seventh such sabbatical year, which is also described using the language of *Shabbat* (Lev. 25:8ff);
- (c) The laws granting rest to slaves, which are specifically connected to the Shabbat (Ex. 20:10; 23:12), to *shemittah* (Lev. 25:6; cf. Ex. 21:2ff), and to *yovel* (Lev. 25:10, 15ff).

Indeed, it seems that every time one finds Sinai in the Torah, one finds along with it mention of the day of rest, or the year of rest; or of the resting of slaves, as mandated in that year; or, in at least one case, of another form of the “6/7 cycle,” more broadly. Thus:

1. It is worth remembering that Sinai appears in the Torah long before the revelation of Exodus 20. It first appears in Exodus 3, *before* the exodus from Egypt, as the site where God promises Moses that the Hebrew slaves will be freed. The freeing of slaves is thus the first association we as readers have with Sinai and, in many ways, this sets the spirit for all that will follow in connection with that mountain throughout the Torah.¹

2. It could be argued that the command to observe the Shabbat (Ex. 20:8-11) constitutes the climax of the revelation at Sinai. Its placement at the middle of the Ten Commandments and its distinction as the longest of those commandments certainly underscore its centrality in that context.

3. The very first *mitzvot* listed in the law code that immediately follows the revelation at Sinai concern the freeing of slaves in the seventh year: *Should you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall work [for] six years, and in the seventh [year], he shall go out to freedom without charge...* (Ex. 21:2ff).² Apparently, this is the primary takeaway of the Sinai experience.

4. After the revelation at Sinai, God instructs Moses to ascend Mount Sinai and receive there further laws from Him.³ Yet Moses does not immediately gain an audience with God upon ascending the mountain. Instead: *Moses went up to the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. And the glory of the Lord rested on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days, and He called to Moses on the seventh day from within the cloud* (Ex. 24:15-16). Here, again, is that 6/7 motif – which fits right in given the connections we have traced thus far, and works especially well if we view it as some sort of ritualistic foreshadowing of the laws that Moses was to receive in the days to come.

5. After Moses ascends the mountain, we get a long pause in the Sinai story, during which are recorded the details of the construction of the Tabernacle. We will not attempt to address here the narrative function of that interlude. Of great interest to us, however, is the material that the Torah uses to transition us back to Sinai when the time comes to return to that story. To wit: Moses descends the mountain in Exodus 32. Immediately before that, at

the end of Exodus 31, we find – without any apparent connection to the material that preceded it – a reiteration of the Shabbat laws: *The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: “And you, speak to the children of Israel and say: ‘Only keep My Sabbaths! For it is a sign between Me and you for your generations, to know that I, the Lord, make you holy... Between Me and the children of Israel, it is forever a sign that [in] six days the Lord created the heaven and the earth, and on the seventh day He ceased and rested”* (Ex. 31:13-17). Here again, then, is that juxtaposition between Shabbat and Sinai!

6. And lest one dismiss that juxtaposition as purely coincidental, consider the following: When Moses descends from Sinai, in Exodus 32, he is greeted by the sight of the Golden Calf, and breaks the tablets as a result. Shortly thereafter, he is called back up to Sinai to receive yet another set of tablets. Then he descends again, in Exod. 34. And what laws might we expect Moses to discuss immediately following his return? Sure enough, it is the laws of the Shabbat which booked this “Sinai story” (i.e. Ex. 32:1-34:35) as well: *Moses called the whole community of the children of Israel to assemble, and he said to them: “These are the things that the Lord commanded be done. Six days work may be done, but on the seventh day you shall have sanctity, a day of complete rest to the Lord . . . ”* (Ex. 35:1-2).

We thus observe that the linguistic and thematic connections drawn in *Parshat Behar* between *shemittah* and the other Shabbat-cycle laws, on the one hand, and the site of Mount Sinai, on the other, are consistent with the literary tendency to pair Sinai with the Shabbat-cycle throughout the five books of Moses. The proximate benefit that accrues to us on account of this analysis is that it enables us to answer the question with which we began, namely: Why did the Torah, in Leviticus 25:1, make a point of telling us that the *shemittah*-related laws – specifically *these* laws – were given to Moses at Sinai? Now that we have a better sense of the way these two motifs intersect and interact throughout the Torah, we readily appreciate the literary impetus behind this verse: it makes thematic sense, in light of the longstanding relationship between *shemittah* and Sinai, to draw explicit connections between the two. And if indeed these laws were the subject of special attention at Sinai (see footnotes) then the insight communicated by Leviticus 25:1 is not merely thematic, but historical as well.

It is also theological. Throughout the ancient world, sovereigns operated oppressive labor regimes on the claim of divine authority. Yet the Israelites – a nation of newly emancipated slaves – knew from experience that God could not possibly approve of such exploitation. To them, then, God did not speak the language of profit and power; He spoke, above all, of socioeconomic justice. Workers must be allowed to rest their bodies and their souls. Resources must be given the chance to replenish themselves. Families must not be broken apart due to extreme financial hardship. God, not greed, must drive market forces. Such was the call that issued forth from Sinai millennia ago, and it is this message which continues to reverberate from that mountaintop until the present day.

NOTES

1. Additionally, consider the language used by God in that context: *And the Lord said, "I have surely seen the affliction of My people who are in Egypt, and I have heard their cry because of their slave drivers, for I know their pains. I have descended to rescue them from the hands of the Egyptians and to bring them up from that land . . . And this is the sign for you that it was I who sent you. When you take the people out of Egypt, you will serve [ta'avdun] God on this mountain* (Ex. 3:7-12). The central motifs here – the exodus from Egypt, and the notion of the Israelites as God's *servants* – reappear together as justification for the slave laws in our section: *For they [i.e. the Israelites] are My servants [avadaï], whom I brought out of the land of Egypt – they shall not be sold as a slave is sold* (Lev. 25:42). So, in effect: the promise made regarding the Israelites in Exodus 3, fulfilled in Exodus 20, becomes the moral basis for the laws imposed upon them in *Parshat Behar*. This makes yet one more connection between Sinai and *Parshat Behar* to add to our list above.
2. And it is clear that these laws are central to the meaning of *Parshat Behar*. Hazal certainly thought so, for they assigned as its *haftarah* the text of Jeremiah 34:8-22, which focuses entirely on the Israelites' failure to free their slaves in the seventh year. The thematic and literary parallels between that *haftarah* and *Parshat Behar* / *Parshat Behukotai* are also worth noting in this vein, though that is not our immediate subject here.
3. Specifically, God says: *Come up to Me to the mountain and remain there, and I will give you the "stone tablets," the "Torah" and the "mitzvah" which I have written to instruct them* (Ex. 24:12). It may be useful to think about the meaning of the various terms referenced in this verse. Presumably, the *stone tablets* contained the Ten Commandments (though see next footnote). But what exactly is the nature of *Torah* and the *mitzvah* which God promises to *give* Moses? Hazal interpreted these terms to refer to the Oral Law, in its widest sense. Yet if we want to uncover the narrower, plain sense of this verse, it seems that we should turn to the end of *Parshat Behukotai*, which functions as a sequel to *Parshat Behar* and in non-leap years is read together with it. There, in wrapping-up both the laws of *Parshat Behar* and the rewards/punishments promised to those who obey/disobey them, the Torah tells us: *These are the statutes, the ordinances, and the "Torahs" [torot] that the Lord gave between Himself and the children of Israel on Mount Sinai*,

by the hand of Moses” (Lev. 26:46). Shortly later, in summary of a related series of laws regarding the redemption of consecrated people and fields, the Torah tells us: *These are the “mitzvot” that the Lord commanded Moses to [tell] the children of Israel on Mount Sinai” (Lev. 27:34).* Based on this inner-biblical evidence, it would seem that the *Torah* and the *mitzvah* which God refers to in Exod. 24 are none other than the details of *shemittah* and its associated laws. That other laws were also given at that time can hardly be disputed. Yet here, again, we have what would appear to be further evidence that the laws of *shemittah* and the Shabbat-cycle more broadly were singled out for distinction when God gave the Torah to Moses on Sinai.



עשה תורתך קבע

THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR

DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF CHAIM ABRAMOWITZ

April	Ezekiel	3 – 30
May	Ezekiel	31– 48
	Hosea	1– 10
June	Hosea	11–14
	Joel	1– 4
	Amos	1 – 9
	Obadiah	1
	Jonah	1 – 4
	Micah	1 – 7
July	Nahum	1 – 3
	Habakkuk	1 – 3
	Zephaniah	1 – 3
	Haggai	1– 2
	Zechariah	1–14
	Malachi	1–3
August	Psalms	1–28

