

**SIDRA OF THE WEEK : בהר סיני**

1. Thinking that we were about to take possession of Eretz Yisroel directly after receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai (in the merit of which we are given Eretz Yisroel) Mosheh our Teacher tells us of HaShem's command of the Law of the Sh'mittoh Year: After each six years of working the land, we are commanded to let the land rest for a whole year, not so much that the land shall regain its strength, but more as a Shabbos Year to HaShem. This way we are to demonstrate that HaShem is the true Owner of the land and we are, as it were, His tenant-farmers, allowed to enjoy the fruits and produce but always to be mindful that everything belongs to HaShem. During the Sh'mittoh Year, it is forbidden to work the land or to treat its produce as our exclusive property (though we may freely enjoy the produce like everyone else) nor may we trade in its produce, for it is not ours. Only such minimal work that would, for instance, prevent trees from dying, is permitted. Freed from the toil and labours of the land in particular, and from most business and trade in general, during the Sh'mittoh Year the whole Jewish Nation is thus given the opportunity to devote itself to the study of Torah and to set its sights on higher things than the pressing need of earning a livelihood. As for the obvious question of what we will eat if the land is not worked, HaShem promises that He will command His blessing upon the land that it shall produce enough in the year before Sh'mittoh for the following years, too.
  
2. *The Law of Sh'mittoh is unique among all the 613 Mitzvos of the Torah in that whereas the Mitzvos were repeated later by Mosheh our Teacher in the Plains of Mo'av just before we came into Eretz Yisroel and within sight of the Holy Land (as reported in Chumash Devorrim) these Laws of resting the land were not repeated nor reviewed by Mosheh then. Thus, the Laws of the Sh'mittoh Year were taught — in their entirety and with all their details — only at Mount Sinai, where Mosheh communicated exactly what HaShem commanded for there was no opportunity for Mosheh to later teach us any details or particulars of this Mitzvah. The Mitzvah of the Sh'mittoh Year, therefore, serves as the demonstration-Mitzvah for all the other Mitzvos of the Torah and tells us that just as the details and particulars of the Mitzvah of the Sh'mittoh Year were given by HaShem at Sinai (and nowhere else and no time other than then) so too all the details and particulars of all the Mitzvos of the Torah are from HaShem Himself, Who taught them to Mosheh at Sinai.*
  
3. *Furthermore, the Law of the Sh'mittoh Year, more than any other, provides the clearest demonstration that all the Mitzvos taught to us by Mosheh are indeed from HaShem. For only HaShem, the Creator and Controller of all creation, can command this Mitzvah of Sh'mittoh and fulfil His promise to us that in the year before the Sh'mittoh Year the land will give forth abundant produce which will suffice for the Sh'mittoh Year and beyond. It is just because it demonstrates HaShem's mastery over His world in such a clear way that the Mitzvah of the Sh'mittoh Year is held up for us as the sample-Mitzvah, as it were, to show us that all the Mitzvos, with all their details and particulars, are from HaShem at Sinai. So, even though Mosheh did repeat and did indeed explain the Mitzvos of HaShem in greater detail so as to prepare us better just before we came into Eretz*

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*Yisroel, and even if some of those details were taught to us for the first time only then when we were encamped in the Plains of Mo'av, nevertheless all those details and all those particulars of all the Mitzvos all emanate from HaShem Himself and were originally revealed by HaShem to Mosheh at Sinai, just as was the case with the Mitzvah of Sh'mittoh.*

4. In addition to the Sh'mittoh Year, the Torah commands us concerning the Yovel ("Jubilee") Year: After every seven cycles of six years and its following Sh'mittoh Year (in other words, after every 49 years) the 50th Year is to be sanctified as the Yovel Year. All the Laws of the Sh'mittoh Year apply to the Yovel Year with this addition: with the advent of the Yovel Year, all real estate property (barring some exceptions) which was sold as freehold, reverts back to its original owner. In the Yovel Year, too, all Hebrew servitors, even those who chose to remain in service beyond their six years, are freed to return to their families.
5. The section which treats of these Laws ends with the promise of HaShem's special blessing to us (as mentioned above) that if we faithfully observe these Mitzvos of the Sh'mittoh Year and the Yovel Year, there will be enough produce in the sixth for the following Sh'mittoh Year too, and for the year following that (for the land may not be worked during Sh'mittoh). Indeed, in the seventh cycle (at the end of the seven-times-seven cycle of Sh'mittohs) when the seventh Sh'mittoh was followed by the Yovel Year, the land produced in that sixth year of the last cycle enough for four years — and to spare. Such is the blessing of HaShem upon His faithful People.
6. There follows a list of Laws concerning trade and commerce, and various other seemingly unconnected subjects. But taken together with the Laws of Sh'mittoh and Yovel that start this Sidra, a definite pattern can be seen. For the very order in which the Laws which follow in this Sidra provides a warning not to neglect the proper observance of the Laws of Sh'mittoh and Yovel, as follows: Firstly, the Torah commands that we are to deal fairly and honestly in our business transactions and that we are not to deceive one another in trade or commerce, and not to take advantage of someone who is compelled by straightened circumstances to sell his chattels. *(If a person ignores the Law of Sh'mittoh, he will be forced to sell his moveable possessions.)* Then the Torah teaches how a near relative is authorized to redeem the land, or even the house, that a man — even more impoverished — is forced to sell so as to buy food for himself. *(Impoverished, as punishment by HaShem because he chooses to persist in his disobedience of the Laws of Sh'mittoh and trades in its produce in defiance of the Law of HaShem which forbids such trade, and further impoverished for refusing to mend his ways.)*
7. Following these laws are the laws of moneylending. *(If he refuses to change his ways, to put himself under the authority of HaShem's Law, he will be forced to borrow money, for he will find no success in his business ventures.)* Although the Torah considers nothing wrong with charging a fee for lending or hiring out one's possessions, in the case of lending money, the Torah strictly forbids us to make such a charge (called "interest") in money or in kind, on money loans (or on loans of any consumables) made to our fellow-Jew.

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8. After the laws of lending and borrowing money, there follow the laws of the Hebrew servitor sold to a fellow-Hebrew. *(If the offender against the Laws of Sh'mittoh continues to refuse to comply with the Laws of the Torah in his affairs, he will be forced by hunger to sell himself to his fellow-Jew.)* The Torah exhorts the buyer to treat his servitor with compassion and respect (the Torah refers to him as “your brother”) and to release him from his service when the Yovel Year comes round, or when their contract terminates, whichever is the earlier. (On the other hand, non-Hebrew servitors are considered as members of the household and commanded to be treated always with care and consideration and they are not released at Yovel.)
9. The final section of laws which make up this catalogue of unfortunate consequences which result from disobedience of HaShem's Torah, is the section which teaches of the laws of redeeming a fellow-Jew who is so reduced in his circumstances that he is forced, in his destitution, to sell himself as a servitor to a non-Jew. The Torah exhorts us to arrange for his redemption by buying “our brother” from his master for a fair and honest price at the earliest opportunity so that he should not remain in an alien non-Jewish environment. The Torah forbids us to make any image or monuments to idolworship. *(Even though he has seen such things when he was in the service of his non-Jewish master, the man whose disobedience of HaShem's Torah brought about his downfall is warned not to emulate his non-Jewish master.)* No places of strange or alien worship are allowed in the Holy Land of Israel, which HaShem proclaims as His Own.
10. The Sidra ends with the exhortation to observe the holy Shabbos of HaShem and to revere His holy Sanctuary. (But, intimates the Torah, holy though the Sanctuary is, the holiness of Shabbos is even greater.) The Shabbos, that Sanctuary to HaShem in time, is the weekly lesson that all our activities and success and all human endeavour are by the grace of HaShem Whose world we enjoy. By desisting from exercising our own mastery over the world on this day, we attest to the fact that the world and everything in it is created by HaShem, just as by our observance of the Laws of the Sh'mittoh Year and the Yovel we likewise testify, in a different way, that the land belongs to HaShem. And just as we are to revere the Mikdash as the Sanctuary to HaShem in space, that is, as a place dedicated exclusively to the Service of HaShem and His worship, so too is our observance of Sh'mittoh and Yovel to teach us to be mindful that indeed all of Eretz Yisroel is holy and is to be treated as a place sacred to HaShem, granted by Him to the Jewish People for the purpose of His people living their lives according to the Torah. So does the last verse of this Sidra in effect reiterate the message of the Sh'mittoh Year, and our faithful observance of these Laws shows us to be worthy of being HaShem's holy Nation, living in peace and Divine blessing in HaShem's Holy Land.

**For the explanation of the Haftorah of Sidra בְּהַר סיני please go to HAFTORAHS.**