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A Sabbath of the Land for You: Shemita, Ethics, and Jewish Philosophy

Class Session: Freedom

The Tension: Freedom and Servitude

Leviticus 25: 8-10.

<p>You shall count off seven weeks of years—seven times seven years—so that the period of seven weeks of years gives you a total of forty-nine years. Then you shall sound the horn loud; in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month—the Day of Atonement—you shall have the horn sounded throughout your land and you shall hallow the fiftieth year. You shall proclaim release throughout the land for all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: each of you shall return to his holding and each of you shall return to his family.</p>	<p>וּסְפַרְתָּ לְךָ שָׁבַע שָׁבֻעוֹת שָׁנִים שָׁבַע שָׁנִים שִׁבְעִים שָׁנָה וְהָעִבְרִית שׁוֹפָר תְּרוּעָה בַּחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי בְּעָשׂוֹר לַחֹדֶשׁ בְּיוֹם הַכִּפּוּרִים תִּעְבְּרוּ וְשׁוֹפָר בְּכָל־אַרְצְכֶם: וְקִדַּשְׁתֶּם אֶת שְׁנַת הַחֲמִישִׁים שָׁנָה וּקְרַאתֶם דְּרוֹר בְּאַרְצְךָ לְכָל־יִשְׂרָאֵל יוֹבֵל הוּא תְהִיָּה לְכֶם וּשְׁבַתְּם אִישׁ אֶל־אֲחֻזְתּוֹ וְאִישׁ אֶל־מִשְׁפַּחְתּוֹ תָּשָׁבוּ:</p>
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Psalms 116:16

אָנָּה יְהוָה כִּי אֲנִי עַבְדְּךָ, אֲנִי עַבְדְּךָ בֶן אֲמָתָיָה, פָּתַחְתָּ לִּי מוֹסְרֵי:

Please Lord, since I am Your servant, the son of Your maidservant; You have opened my chains.

Mara Benjamin, *The Obligated Self: Maternal Subjectivity in Jewish Thought* (p. 16)

To live with and be responsible for a newborn, a baby, a toddler, is to suddenly wake up to one’s un-freedom. It means having the concrete experience, dozens of times each day, of being beholden to another. This un-freedom feels at times like slavery (‘avdut) and at times like service (‘avodah). But this condition, so acutely, viscerally, and materially experienced in caring for a young child, reveals a basic, but easily occluded, fact of existence. Maternity lifts, sometimes rips, the veil from our eyes, opening us to recognizing our conditionality. And yet... we cannot simply submit, if the act of compliance is to retain its ethical force. If we are threatened into submission to this world of obligation, the system is morally and psychologically unsustainable; gravity becomes domination. Agency is crucial to human flourishing, even if it consists only in affirming the conditionality of our existence and thus upholding what we were forced to accept.

Torah as a Form of Freedom, Shemitah as Prerequisite of Torah:

<p>Deuteronomy 31:12</p>	<p>דברים לא:יב</p>
<p>Gather the people—men, women, children, and the strangers in your communities—that they may hear and so learn to revere the LORD your God and to observe faithfully every word of this Teaching.</p>	<p>הקהל את העם האנשים והנשים והטף וגרך אשר בשעריך למען ישמעו ולמען ילמדו ויראו את יקנך אלהיכם ושמןו לעשות את כל דברי התורה הזאת:</p>

<p>S'fat Emet (R. Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter, 1847-1905)</p>	<p>שפת אמת דברים פרשת וילך</p>
<p>It seems that it was through the <i>mitzvah</i> of <i>Shemitah</i> that they merited <i>Hitkolleut</i>. This is the language that is written about receiving the Torah: “Gather the people...that they may hear ...every word of this Teaching.” And it seems that this was the reward for observing <i>shevi'it</i> that our Rabbis interpreted: “mighty creatures who do His bidding.”</p> <p>Leviticus Rabbah 1:1 About what does the verse speak?</p> <p>Psalms 103:20 Bless the LORD, O His angels, mighty creatures who do His bidding, ever obedient to His bidding;</p> <p>Rabbi Yitzchak says, about those who keep shmitah [sabbatical] year the verse is speaking. In the normal custom of the world, a person performs a mitzvah [commandment] for a one day, one week, one month - but not for the whole rest of the year! And here, they guard their field [בְּיָרֵה] and their vineyard [בְּיִרְהָה], and pay their taxes and are silent - is there a greater</p>	<p>נראה שע"י מצות השמיטה זכו אח"כ לבחי' התכללות. והוא הלשון שכ' בקבלת התורה הקהל לי א"ה ואשמיעם את דברי. ונראה שזה הי' שכר על שמירת שביעית שדרשו חז"ל גבורי כח בשומרי שביעית הכ' מדבר.</p> <p>יקרא רבה א:א גברי כח עשי דברו, במה הכתוב מדבר?</p> <p>תהלים קג:כ ברכו יהוה מלאכי גברי כח עשי דברו לשמע בקול דברו:</p> <p>אמר רבי יצחק בשומרי שביעית הכתוב מדבר, בנהג שבעולם אדם עושה מצוה ליום אחד, לשבת אחת, לחודש אחד, שפא לשאר ימות השנה, ודין חמי חקליה בירה פרמיה בירה ויהב ארנונא ושתיק, יש לה גבור גדול מזה. ואם תאמר אינו מדבר בשומרי שביעית, נאמר פאן: עשי דברו, ונאמר להלן (דברים טו, ב): וזה דבר השמטה, מה דבר שנאמר להלן בשומרי שביעית הכתוב מדבר, אף דבר האמור פאן בשומרי שביעית הכתוב מדבר.</p>

<p>hero than this? And if you say it's not speaking about those who keep shmitah, it's said here: "performers of Their word [דבר]" (ibid.) and it's said there (Devarim 15:2), "and this is the matter [דבר] of shmita" - just as the דבר [matter/word] above is about those who keep shmitah, so too here דבר indicates those who keep shmitah. "Performers of Their word"</p>	
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<p>Sefat Emet, Parashat Behukotai</p>	<p>שפת אמת ויקרא פרשת בחקותי</p>
<p>It is through these mitzvot [Shemita and Yovel] that the blessings of the land of Israel are rooted in the heavens. And it says,</p> <p>Ecclesiasties 10:17 “Happy are you, O land whose king is a master and whose ministers dine at the proper time—with restraint, not with guzzling!”</p> <p>and refers to when the children of Israel ruled over the land, when they held fast to freedom. And a person is called free because of the power of Torah, as our Sages of Blessed Memory wrote: “There is no one who is free except someone who is busy with Torah.” “Whose ministers dine at the proper time,” and it is written, at the correct time. “With restraint [<i>gevurah</i>]”—with the restraint of Torah, and it is written “Mighty creatures [<i>gibborei koach</i>] who do his bidding,” and our sages interpreted this as referring to those who observe the <i>shemita</i>... And we interpret the verse “But they who trust in the LORD shall renew their strength [<i>koach</i>]” (Isaiah 40:31), as referring to those who keep <i>shemita</i> and <i>yovel</i>, who are called “those who trust in the Lord” because they do not sew or</p>	<p>ע"י אלו המצות היה הברכה בארץ ישראל משורש העליון וכתוב:</p> <p>קוהלת י"ז אֲשֶׁרִידָה אֶרֶץ שְׂמֵלֶכָה בְּנֵי-חֹרְגִים וְשָׂרִידָה בְּעֵת יֹאכְלוּ בְּגִבּוֹרָה וְלֹא בְשָׂתִי:</p> <p>והוא כשהיו בני"י שולטין על הארץ שהם דביקות בחירות ונק' בן חורין מכח התורה כדכ' חז"ל אין לך ב"ה אלא העוסק בתורה. ושריד בעת יאכלו הוא כמ"ש בעתם. בגבורה ולא בשתי—בגבורה של תורה כדכ' גבורי כח כו' דרשו חז"ל בשומרי שביעית... ואיתא בזו"ה ע"פ וקוי ה' יחליפו כח שהוא בשמיטין ויובלות. פי' ששומרי שביעית נק' קוי ה' שבוטחין בו ית' בלבד ואין זורעין וחורשין. ולכן מקבלין כח חדש ונשמה חדשה מלמעלה.</p>

thresh, and because of this they receive renewed strength and a new soul from above.	
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(How) Does Freedom Change the Way We Think?

Moses Mendelssohn, Letter, In response to a request to review a textbook on Enlightenment political thought for potential use in Jewish schools, 1768

You have educated reasonable people to respect the rights of mankind, love truth and reasonable freedom, and to have the will and capacity to serve the state in which they live. Precisely this the Jew ought not, indeed cannot do, if his mode of thought is to agree with his condition. He should learn to uphold the rights of mankind? If he is not to be thoroughly miserable in his condition of civic oppression, then he should not know of these rights at all. Should he love truth and reasonable freedom so he can despair that all civic institutions in many places are aimed to keep him from both? Should he be trained to serve the state? The sole service that the state accepts from him is money. To remit large sums from circumscribed forms of business is the only vocation for which my brothers need training. If your textbook teaches this discipline, then it will be welcome to my nation, since it needs no other. Enough of this, as these considerations are too depressing for me to be able to pursue them willingly.

Moses Mendelssohn, Letter In response to a request by Isaak Iselin to join a discussion group about political theory (1762)

Birth, education, and mode of life reveal their influence on people's way of thinking the most when the issue is the nobler part of philosophy [politics]. The fortunate republican surveys human society from a much higher point of view than the subject of a monarchy, and the subject of a monarchy is far above the position accorded me in civic life. To be sure, the freedom to think in almost republican fashion blossoms under the rule of a Frederick [the Great, the current Emperor of Prussia]; but you well know how little my fellow believers are allowed to partake in all the country's freedoms. The civic oppression which we are condemned by a far too prevalent prejudice rests like a dead weight on the intellect's wings, making it incapable of ever attempting the high flight of the freeborn.