# What Relevance Does *Shemitah* have to Covid19?

*Parashat Behar-Bechukotai*
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| Sifra Behar 1:1 | ספרא בהר א:א |
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| "On Mount Sinai": What [special relevance] does the subject of Shemitah [the "release" of fields in the seventh year] have with Mount Sinai? Were not all the commandments stated from Sinai? However, [this teaches us that] just as with Shemitah, its general principles and its finer details were all stated from Sinai, likewise, all of them were stated-their general principles [together with] their finer details-from Sinai. | בהר סיני: מה ענין שמיטה אצל הר סיני, והלא כל המצות נאמרו מסיני, אלא מה שמיטה נאמרו כללותיה ופרטותיה ודקדוקיה מסיני, אף כולן נאמרו כללותיהן ודקדוקיהן מסיני |

Though the Israelites were no longer standing at Sinai, our Torah portion begins by stating that the Mitzvah of Shemtiah, the requirement to release the land, was already given at Sinai.  The rabbis explain that Shemitah is being used by the Torah as paradigmatic – just as this commandment was already fully explained to Moses in Sinai, so too all of Torah's commandments were fully given and explicated to Moses at Sinai.

This answer seems slightly incomplete.  After all, the Torah could have made this very point with ANY commandment. Why was it important for the Torah to specifically draw our attention to the fact that Shemitah, in all its finer details, was already given at Sinai?

Perhaps we can draw some insight from the opening of Psalm 126.

| Psalm 126:1 | תהלים פרק קכו |
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| 1 A song of ascents. When the Lord returns the returnees to Zion, we were like dreamers. | (א) שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת בְּשׁוּב יְקֹוָק אֶת שִׁיבַת צִיּוֹן הָיִינוּ כְּחֹלְמִים: |

In this Psalm, the returnees to Zion speak of their return in the present tense but of their dreams in past tense – "When the Lord returns" – present! – "we were" past! – like dreamers.

The simple explanation is that when we return to Zion we will be like dreamers, meaning: our return will feel like a dream. However this closer reading of the interplay of the present and past tense suggest that while the return is happening now, the dreams began long ago.  In other words, the returnees are making a powerful claim: We are returning now, only because we dreamed of this moment previously.  It is our very dreams, from the past, that are now bringing us home.

We can think of Shemitah being taught at Sinai in a similar vein.

The people standing at Mt. Sinai were recently freed slaves.  They still had to cross a desert. They still had to conquer the land. Countless obstacles laid before them.  I would bet that none of them believed that the day will ever come when they would own their own land or that they would ever benefit from its produce and fruit.

Needless to say, none of them could have imagined a time when they would relinquish the land and allow for a Sabbatical year.

Already at Mt. Sinai, the Torah planted these seeds.
Already at Sinai, the Torah forced the Israelites to see what eventually would be and begin to envision a more idealized society.
Shemitah belongs at Sinai because Sinai – with a desert still before us – is where we need to begin to dream.

This teaching is also hinted by Lecha Dodi's description of God's creation of the world.

| **Lecha Dodi**<br><br>Last in deed, first in thought. | **לכה דודי**<br><br>סוֹף מַעֲשֶׂה בְּמַחֲשָׁבָה תְּחִלָּה |
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Though the world began in chaos, already at that moment, God envisioned the order and rest brought by Shabbat.  Indeed, Shabbat was created last ("last in deed") but it was the very first thing God had envisioned for this world ("first in thought").

During these dark times, we too stand at Mt. Sinai, with a desert before us.
Like refugees, we are struggling to find our way home.
Like the Creator, we see a world in utter chaos.

Our tradition teaches us: Now is the time to discuss Shemitah in all its finer details. Now is the time to begin to dream.  Now is the time to envision our very last deed.

What home or community or world do we envision returning to after Covid19?
What have we done to start planning and planting for that world?