

**Shmita and Sinai: CAA Climate Awareness & Action Series Finale [S1E4]**  
 The CAA Climate Awareness Action Committee:  
 Merriessa Anton, Brooke Hersh-Thompson, Joe Oliveri, David Reifler, and Bob Rosenzweig

<b>Leviticus 25:1–2</b>	<b>ויקרא כ"ה, א – ז [פרשת בהר]</b>
1. HaShem spoke to Moses <b>on Mount Sinai</b> :	<b>וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה בְּהַר סִינַי לֵאמֹר:</b>
2. Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: When you enter the land that I assign to you, the land shall observe a sabbath of the HaShem.	<b>דַּבֵּר אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם כִּי תָבֹאוּ אֶל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי נֹתֵן לָכֶם וְשָׁבַתָה הָאָרֶץ שְׁבַת לַה':</b>

<b>Rashi: [HaShem spoke to Moses] on Mount Sinai.</b>	<b>רש"י: בהר סיני.</b>
<b>What has the matter of the Sabbatical year to do with Mount Sinai?</b> Were not all commandments given on Sinai? But this statement is intended to suggest the following comparison: How is it in the case of the law of Shmita? Its general rules, [its specific prescriptions] and minute details were ordained on Mount Sinai! So, also, were all commandments with their general rules and their minute details ordained on Mount Sinai. Thus, is taught in Torat Kohanim (Sifra, Behar, Section 1 1). It seems to me that the following is the explanation of this: Since we do not find in Deuteronomy that the law concerning "the rest of the soil in the Sabbatical year" was repeated in "the fields of Moab" (cf. Deuteronomy 34:1; the place where Moses repeated many of the commandments contained in the other books of the Pentateuch), we may infer that all its general rules and specific prescriptions must have been promulgated on Sinai. The express mention of <b>בהר סיני</b> here appears therefore to be unnecessary but Scripture by mentioning it intends to teach regarding every Divine command (lit., Divine utterance) that was spoken to Moses that in every case they, their general rules and minute details originated at Sinai and that they were only repeated again in "the fields of Moab".	<b>מה ענין שמטה אצל הר סיני? והלא כל המצוות נאמרו מסיני? אלא מה שמטה נאמרו קללותיה ופרטותיה ודקדוקיה מסיני אף כלן נאמרו קללותיה ודקדוקיה מסיני, כך שנויה בת"כ; ונראה לי שקך פרושה: לפי שלא מצינו שמטת קרקעות שנושנית בערבות מואב במשנה תורה, למדנו שכללותיה ופרטותיה כלן נאמרו מסיני, ובא הכתוב ללמד כאן על כל דבור שנדבר למשה, שמסיני היו כלם, קללותיה ודקדוקיה, וחרו ונשנו בערבות מואב:</b>

The opening of *parshat Behar* (Lev 25:1) sounds simple enough: "And HaShem spoke Moses on Mount Sinai." Following Sifra, Rashi makes one of his most famous, comments – ***Mah inyan shmitah etsel Har Sinai?*** Why does the Torah bother to mention that the laws of land ownership in Eretz Yisrael were given at Mount Sinai? Rashi's comment has become a coin of modern Hebrew parlance for a *non-sequitur*, "what does that have to do with anything?" But, just as the laws of *shmita* in their detail were given to Moses at Sinai, so *all* the commandments, in detail, are to be considered as given at Sinai. They all carry the highest degree of Divine authority. **STUDY QUESTION: Is Rashi's choice of *Shmita* as the example that teaches this *klal* (general principle) a mere coincidence.**

**Three passages concerning shmita in the Torah.** The term, *shmita*, in the Torah generally indicates some type of release, “letting go,” after an extended period.

Exodus 23:10–11	שמות כ"ג, י - יא [פרשת משפטים]
10. Six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield;	וְשֵׁשׁ שָׁנִים תִּזְרַע אֶת-אֲרָצְךָ וְאָסַפְתָּ אֶת- תְּבוּאָתָהּ:
11. but in the seventh you shall let it rest and lie fallow. Let the needy among your people eat of it, and what they leave let the wild beasts eat. You shall do the same with your vineyards and your olive groves.	וְהִשְׁבִּיעַת תִּשְׁמַטְנָהּ וְנִטְשָׁתָהּ וְאָכְלוּ אֲבִיבֵי עַמָּךְ וְיִתְּרָם תֹּאכַל חַיַּת הַשָּׂדֶה כֹּן- תַּעֲשֶׂה לְכַרְמְךָ לְזִיתֶךָ:

This is the first of three places where *shmita* is discussed in the Torah. Here “we are told to cultivate the land, vineyards and olive groves for six years, but **תִּשְׁמַטְנָהּ וְנִטְשָׁתָהּ** – “to let go and withdraw” in the seventh... The needy will eat just as you do, and wild animals will eat what’s left. The purpose of *shmita* here is to limit our work activity and the ownership of our work product – we are not meant to be workaholics or to make the accumulation of wealth the highest priority.”

Leviticus 25:1–7	ויקרא כ"ה, א - ז [פרשת בהר]
1. HaShem spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai:	וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה בְּהַר סִינַי לֵאמֹר:
2. Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: When you enter the land that I assign to you, the land shall observe a sabbath of HaShem.	דַּבֵּר אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם כִּי תְּבֹאוּ אֶל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי נֹתֵן לָכֶם וְשָׁבְתָה הָאָרֶץ שְׁבֹת לֵה':
3. Six years you may sow your field and six years you may prune your vineyard and gather in the yield.	שֵׁשׁ שָׁנִים תִּזְרַע שְׂדֶךָ וְשֵׁשׁ שָׁנִים תִּזְמַר כַּרְמְךָ וְאָסַפְתָּ אֶת-תְּבוּאָתָהּ:
4. But in the seventh year <b>the land</b> shall have a sabbath of complete rest, a sabbath of HaShem; you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard.	וּבִשְׁנֵה הַשְּׁבִיעִית שְׁבֹת שְׁבֹתוֹן יִהְיֶה לְאָרֶץ שְׁבֹת לֵה' שְׂדֶךָ לֹא תִזְרַע וְכַרְמְךָ לֹא תִזְמַר:
5. You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your untrimmed vines; it shall be a year of complete rest for the land.	אֶת סְפִיחַ קְצִירְךָ לֹא תִקְצֹר וְאֶת-עַנְבֵי נְזִירְךָ לֹא תִבְצֹר שְׁנַת שְׁבֹתוֹן יִהְיֶה לְאָרֶץ:
6. But you may eat whatever the land during its sabbath will produce—you, your male and female slaves, the hired and bound laborers who live with you,	יִהְיֶה לָכֶם לְאֹכְלָה לָךְ וּלְעַבְדְּךָ וּלְאִמְתְּךָ וּלְשִׁכְיֶרְךָ וּלְתוֹשְׁבֹךָ הַגֵּרִים עִמָּךְ:
7. and your cattle and the beasts in your land may eat all its yield.	וּלְבְהֵמָתְךָ וּלְחַיַּת הָאָרֶץ תִּהְיֶה כָל- תְּבוּאָתָהּ לְאֹכֹל:

In *Vayikra* 25:4, the command to desist from agricultural work in the seventh year takes a different focus — *וּבַשָּׁנָה הַשְּׁבִיעִית שַׁבַּת שַׁבְּתוֹן יְהִי לְאָרֶץ, שַׁבַּת לַה'* — But in the seventh year **the land** shall have a year of sabbath of complete rest, a sabbath of HaShem. This time the produce of the seventh year is to be shared with a specific group of the less fortunate – one’s employees, indentured servants and workers, plus, once again, the animals. But the prime “beneficiary” is, oddly, the land, God’s land. We must not think the we are its ultimate owners. Chapter 25 also provides for the release of Hebrew slaves who had become indentured servants for debts they could not repay in the Jubilee (50<sup>th</sup>) year, even if less than six years have been served (cf. Ex 21:2), and indeed also for the return of land to its original owners (25:10).

Deuteronomy 15:1–3	דברים ט"ו, א – ג [פרשת ראה]
1. Every seventh year you shall practice remission of debts.	מִקֵּץ שִׁבְע־שָׁנִים תַּעֲשֶׂה שְׁמִטָּה:
2. This shall be the nature of the remission: every creditor shall remit the due that he claims from his fellow; he shall not dun his fellow or kinsman, for the remission proclaimed is of HaShem.	זֶה דְבַר הַשְּׁמִטָּה שְׁמוֹט כָּל־בֵּעַל מַשָּׂה יְדוֹ אֲשֶׁר יִשֶׂה בְרֵעֵהוּ לֹא־יִגֹּשׁ אֶת־רֵעֵהוּ וְאֶת־אֲחִיו כִּי־קָרָא שְׁמִטָּה לַיהוָה:
3. You may dun the foreigner; but you must remit whatever is due you from your kinsman.	אֶת־הַנִּזְכָּרִי תִגָּשׁ וְאֲשֶׁר יְהִי לְךָ אֶת־אֲחִיךָ תִּשְׁמַט יָדְךָ:

Deuteronomy 15:1-2 offers a very different sort of *shmita* after seven years, of **monetary debts**. The Torah explains *dvar ha'shmita* “how it’s done” - debts owed by one’s neighbor or brother are “let go”, not to be collected, “because HaShem’s release has been proclaimed (‘כִּי קָרָא שְׁמִטָּה לַה’).”

***The expressed revelation at Mount Sinai in Shmot 20 is basically a list of “Don’ts” – don’t kill, steal, commit adultery, bear false witness, etc. The Ten Commandments come to protect society from bad behavior. They do not require us to be pro-active, whether letaken olam – to improve the world, or letaken et atsmenu - to improve ourselves. The three sections of shmita laws require more. The “haves” must show concern for the poor by giving equal access to food supplies, cancelling debts that drag people down into indentured servitude and putting a time limit on such servitude. We show concern for the environment by letting the overworked land rest and restore its vitality, and by helping the wild animals survive. And shmita reminds us that we are not all-powerful; there is a God above us who makes our material success possible and we must limit its pursuit.***

**ONE POSSIBLE CONCLUSION:** “Shmita has a great deal to do with Mt Sinai. It “upgrades” the revelation from there – by making us “let go” from time to time - for the sake of God and the world, and for our sakes. Social goals are as relevant today as they were 3500 years ago.”

**Additional Sources:**

Sifra on Behar – Section 1	פּרָא
<p>(Vayikra 25:1) <b>And HaShem spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying.</b> Why is shmita juxtaposed with Mount Sinai? Were not all the mitzvot given at Sinai? [The purpose of the juxtaposition is to indicate that] just as the general rules and specific ordinances of shmita were enunciated at Sinai, so, with all the mitzvot.</p>	<p><b>וידבר ה' אל משה בהר סיני לאמר.</b>                  מה ענין שמיטה אצל הר סיני? והלא כל המצות נאמרו מסיני?! אלא מה שמיטה נאמרו כללותיה ודקדוקיה מסיני אף כולם נאמרו כללותיהם ודקדוקיהם מסיני.</p>

Nahmanides on Leviticus 25:1
<p>“In my view Rashi’s comment is completely wrong. There are many commandments that, like that of the sabbatical year are not repeated on the steppes of Moab. So we know that the details of such commandments were given either at Sinai or in the Tent of Meeting. Moreover, from where does Rashi get that the sabbatical year, which was not repeated on the steppes of Moab, can be compared to the divine utterances that were repeated there. And makes him think that they did not have just their general outlines given at Sinai, and their full details on the steppes?...”</p>

Ibn Ezra on Leviticus 25:1
<p>“The Torah is not written in chronological order. Chronologically, this section precedes the beginning of the book of Leviticus, where HaShem “called to Moses and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting (1:1). This passage was spoken on Mount Sinai, after which the covenant was made; this is the covenant described in chapter 26. It is recorded in this point in the Torah to unite it with other commandments of Leviticus on which their continued occupation of the land was conditioned. Just as failure to observe the regulations about sex would result in their being “spewed out” of the land, so too chapter 26 says that failure to observe the sabbatical year would result in their being expelled from it. The rules about the sabbatical year are given here.”</p>

Etz Hayim on Leviticus 25:1 [RA/USCJ, 2000/5760] p 738:
<p>“Why does the Torah emphasize that these agricultural laws were promulgated at Mount Sinai? Perhaps because at Sinai no one owned any land yet, and no one could object that the law deprived people of what they had worked to acquire. It is easier to propose a visionary system of equality when all start out equal. Another interpretation: Just as Sinai was the smallest of the mountains but the words spoken there changed the world, so the people Israel, among the smallest of the nations, presents a vision of social justice that has the power to change the world.”</p>

**STUDY QUESTION REVISITED:**

***Mah inyan shmitah etsel Har Sinai?* What has the matter of the Sabbatical year to do with Mount Sinai? Do you have a different opinion from Rashi, Nahmanides, Ibn Ezra, and others, or do you have something to add?!**