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Parshat Behar: God as Ger: Finding Alignment Through Alienation

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L'Refuat Moshe Eliezer Ha-Kohen ben Blima

Parshat Behar opens with the following command:

The Lord spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai: 2 Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: When you enter the land that I assign you, the land shall observe a sabbath of the Lord 3 Six years you may sow your field and six years you may prune your vineyard and gather in the yield. 4 But in the seventh year the land shall have a sabbath of complete rest, a sabbath of the lord: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. (Leviticus 25:1-4)

א וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה בְּהַר סִינַי לֵאמֹר: ב דַּבֵּר אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם כִּי תָבֹאוּ אֶל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אָנִי נֹתֵן לָכֶם וְשַׁבְתָּה הָאָרֶץ שִׁבְתָּ לָהּ: ג שֵׁשׁ שָׁנִים תִּזְרַע שְׂדֶךְ וְשֵׁשׁ שָׁנִים תִּזְמַר כַּרְמְךָ וְאָסַפְתָּ אֶת-תְּבוּאָתָהּ: ד וּבַשְּׁנָה הַשְּׁבִיעִית שִׁבְתָּ שַׁבְתּוֹן יְהִי לָאָרֶץ שִׁבְתָּ לָהּ שְׂדֶךְ לֹא תִזְרַע וְכַרְמְךָ לֹא תִזְמַר: (ויקרא כה: א-ד)

The practice of *shemita*, allowing the land of Israel to lay fallow every seventh year, is here introduced and it is notably rooted in a place. This set of instructions pertaining to the ground is itself grounded, located in a specific location, namely, *Har Sinai*. God spoke to Moshe "on Mount Sinai" all of the details of this agricultural practice.

The *midrash* famously asks of this association:

What [special relevance] does the subject of *shemita* have with Mount Sinai? Were not all the commandments stated from Sinai?

מה ענין שמיטה אצל הר סיני? והלא כל המצוות נאמרו מסיני.

Why this particular juxtaposition? Why is *shemita*, of all things, explicitly tied to Sinai, when so much else could also be said to have taken place there? The *midrash* responds:

[This teaches us that] just as with *shemita*, 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. (Sifra Behar 1:1)

אלא מה שמיטה נאמרו כללותיה ודקדוקיה מסיני אף כולם נאמרו כללותיהם ודקדוקיהם מסיני: (ספרא בהר פרשתא א:א)

In other words, *shemita* is not uniquely connected to Sinai. It is, rather, a particular instance of a universal phenomenon. All parts of *halacha*, general or specific, great or small, have their roots in revelation. *Shemita* merely reminds us of this truth.

This answer did not satisfy many. So the question--? מה ענין שמיטה אצל הר סיני, or what is the essential relationship between the Sabbath of the land and Sinai--reverberated throughout the generations, giving rise to much commentary that, contra the *midrash*, did assert a unique relationship. Something about *shemita* must exemplify the very core of the Sinai experience. Let us explore one perspective that supports that claim.

After listing many laws pertaining to *shemita* and after addressing the human anxiety that might arise in its wake, the Torah makes a bold claim about the land:

But the land must not be sold beyond reclaim, for the land is Mine; you are but strangers and residents with Me. (Leviticus 25:23)

וְהָאָרֶץ לֹא תִמְכַר לְצַמְתַּת כִּי־לִי הָאָרֶץ כִּי־גֵרִים וְתוֹשְׁבִים אַתֶּם עִמָּדִי: (ויקרא פרק כה:כג)

Whether you are cultivating the land or letting it lay fallow, whether you are a landowner or temporary dweller, remember that you are but a steward of Someone else's property. The land does not belong to you, or to any person. It is only God's and we are but strangers "*imadi*," relative to Him, the true owner.

The uniqueness of the laws of *shemita*, on this basic read of the verse, might be their ability to remind us of this crucial message that puts human urges in check. The practices of enforced rest and land restitution undermine our drive for ownership and rootedness; humble our hopes for permanence and control; and dislodge our illusions about our own powers. Perhaps this is one of the core missions of revelation and so justifies the *shemita*-Sinai linkage. *Shemita* is "*etzel Har Sinai*" because it instantiates the principles of Har Sinai.

For the *Degel Machane Ephraim*, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Ephraim of Sudlikov (1748-1800), the grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, the core of the message of both Shemita and Sinai lays not at the beginning of the verse, but at the end--

You are but strangers [*gerim*] and residents with Me [*imadi*].

כִּי־גֵרִים וְתוֹשְׁבִים אַתֶּם עִמָּדִי

He writes:

In this there is a hint to a teaching I heard from a wise man on a verse from Psalms (119:19): "I am a *ger* in the land, do not hide Your commands from me." It is a known feature of this world that one who is a *ger* does not have anyone to be close to and to draw near to and to tell about all that happened to him, and what is in his heart, since he does not have a friend, neither in Israel, nor among the nations. But when he sees a fellow *ger*, then each one can tell the other all that has happened.

יש לומר בזה בדרך רמז להבין זה על פי ששמעתי מחכם אחד על פסוק (תהילים קיט:יט) "גר אנוכי בארץ אל תסתר ממני מצותיך." כי ידוע מן איכות טבע העולם כי מי שהוא גר אין לו עם מי לדבק ולקרוב עצמו ולספר לו כל מאורעותיו וכל לבו שאין לו חבר לא ישראל ולא גוים אך כשרואה חבירו הגר אזי מספר כל אחד בפני חבירו כל מאורעותיו.

And it is known that the Holy One Blessed be He is like a *ger* in this world, because He does not have anyone to rest His presence on, since we are limited. This is the meaning of David's prayer, "I am a *ger* in the land" – I too do not want to be a resident in this world, I am also just a *ger* in this world. Therefore, "Do not hide your commands from me," like one *ger* to another who tells him everything in his heart.

וידוע הקב"ה הוא כמו גר בעולם הזה, שאין לו על מי להשרות שכינת כבודו יתברך כי זעירין אינן וכו'. והוא שהתפלל דוד המלך ע"ה "גר אנוכי בארץ" היינו אני גם כן איני רוצה להיות תושב בעולם הזה ואני רק כגר בעולם הזה. ולכן "אל תסתר ממני מצותיך" כמו גר אחד בפני חבירו שמספר לו כל לבו.

This is the meaning of the verse [in Leviticus], "You are but strangers and residents with Me." When you are a *ger* in this world and a resident in the next, then you are with Me, because I too am a *ger* in this world and therefore will not hide from you My commandments. (*Degel Machane Ephraim*, Parshat Behar)

זהו יש לומר הרמז בפסוק "כי גרים ותושבים." כשתהיו בבחינת גר בעולם הזה ותושב בעולם הבא, אז אתם עמדי כי אני גם כן גר בעולם הזה כנ"ל וממילא אל אסתיר מכם מצותי כנ"ל והבן. (דגל מחנה אפריים, פרשת בהר)

In contrast to the above reading of the word "*imadi*," which understood our lot to be strangers *relative to* God, this one renders the phrase to mean *together with* God. We are strangers (*gerim*) and residents together with God, just like God. For God is the ultimate *ger*, the ultimate stranger in this world.

In what sense might this be true? God, as understood by (parts of) the Torah (and augmented by Maimonides), is radically other--transcendent, utterly distinct, incomprehensible. "כִּי לֹא מַחְשְׁבוֹתַי מַחְשְׁבוֹתֵיכֶם" "My thoughts are not your thoughts and My ways are not your ways", says Isaiah 55:8. The gap between God and human beings is vast and seemingly unbridgeable. Our categories of understanding are simply incommensurable, and hence not relatable. God is therefore a stranger who sits on the sidelines of the world, unable to fully enter. God is rootless, unanchored to a place, unbound to the physical world. And so, says the *Degel Machene Ephraim*, God is alienated from the very beings and things that He created--alone, vulnerable, and misunderstood. In an act of subversive irony, God's infinite greatness becomes the source of God's infinite loneliness.

Shemita highlights the ways in which we too are *gerim*, just like God. Just like God, we are ultimately rootless. Just like God, we are alienated from one another and from our environment. Just like God, we often sit on the margins, unable to relate to sources of our own nourishment. Just like God, we are profoundly vulnerable. And just like God, we can be profoundly lonely.

So God comes along--in the face of that unsettling awareness, that awareness of our essential unsettlement--and says:

You are strangers *resident with Me*.

כִּי-גֵרִים וְתוֹשְׁבִים אַתֶּם עִמָּדִי

Together we can commune in our mutual displacement. Precisely through our consciousness of difference, we can join in solidarity. Like a person so very isolated in her unique pain who meets another who shares her story, let us connect in deep empathy. Let us be friends, whispers God, through shared experience. Let us reside together, mindful of our mutual marginality.

מה ענין שמיטה אצל הר סיני? What is so special about *shemita* that it merits mention with Mount Sinai? Everything. For the deep message of *shemita* echoes the deepest calls of Sinai, inviting us into an improbable relationship with God--a God who is so essentially other who asks of us to join Him in and through our own experiences of otherness and alienation. *Gerut*, each of our paths of stranger-ness, has the capacity to lead us to the strangest of them all, God the *ger*.



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