

What's *Shmita* have to do with Mount Sinai?

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“And the Lord spoke to Moshe at Har Sinai,” Parshat Behar begins, enumerating the laws of *shmita*, the release of the land every seven years. That sounds quite simple, but Rashi here makes perhaps the most famous of all his comments on the Torah - *Mah inyan shmitah etsel Har Sinai?* “What is the connection of the laws of *shmita* to Mount Sinai?” Rashi's comment has become a coin of Hebrew parlance for a non-sequitur, “what does this have to do with that?” But Rashi did not mean it in a casual fashion, and he answers himself - just as the laws and rules about *Shmita* came from *Har Sinai*, so did all the mitzvot come from Har Sinai (i.e. from God).

At the risk of sounding presumptuous, I suggest that Rashi's question might be better than his answer. The book *Vayikra* (Leviticus), which we finish this Shabbat, begins 9 months after the revelation at Mount Sinai. *Vayikra* opens with God speaking to Moshe *me'ohel mo'ed*, at the Tent of Meeting (the Tabernacle) which the children of Israel built at the end of the book of *Shmot* (Exodus). So Rashi is calling attention to a discrepancy of time/place in the text - why does the Torah note that the *shmita* laws were given at a location the people had left almost a year earlier? But he himself does not address this chronological issue.

Ibn Ezra (12th Spain) does. He says *shmita* was actually told before what's told in *Vayikra*, and that this verse shows that events in the Torah are not told in chronological order (*ein mukdam u'me'uchar b'torah*), a matter about which the commentators have heated debates. Rashbam (12th C, Ashkenaz, Rashi's grandson) agrees, it was given “before the Tent of Meeting was erected”. These commentators focus on the literal meaning of the text in the verses which mention locations when God speaks.

Rashi, who said (in his comment on Gen 3:8) that he was just explaining “the simple meaning of the text” (*v'ani lo bati eleh l'pshuto shel mikra* - sounds like “I'm just a country lawyer...”), is commenting here on the level of *authority* - the Torah was given at Sinai *complet*, and *shmita* is the classical example of this. Ramban (Spain 13th century), citing other cases where a law was given expressly at Sinai and then expanded on later, takes sharp issue with Rashi on this. After quoting Rashi's comment in full, he says *v'eino nachon b'einai clal* - “I think this is all wrong”.

I'll suggest two possible reasons for Rashi's focus on the ideological importance. Historically, since Rabbinic times, the rabbis have had to deal with factions which denied the Divine authority of *Torah sh'bichtav*, the Oral Torah. The Pharisees, our rabbinic ancestors, were challenged by the Sadducees on this issue, and the Karaites claimed that only the Written Torah was authoritative, with significant success in the Middle Ages, so Rashi comment here could be related to that.

Yehuda Nachshoni, a Torah commentator in the 20th Century (Studies in the *Weekly Parashah*) says Rashi's choice of *shmita* as the classic example of the essential character of the Divine Revelation to Moses at Sinai is conceptual and tied to the special character of *Shmita*. *Shmita*, he says, was revolutionary - it introduces to the world the concepts of *tikun olam*, social equality, and faith and confidence in God. In Nachshoni's view, there is no other mitsva as "value packed" as *shmita*, and this is why Rashi chose it.

Nothing better represents the Sinai legacy.