

# OHRNET

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## PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

### Holy Crop Rotation!

*"For six years you may sow your field" (25:3)*

I still remember learning at school about crop rotation. One year the field would be planted with wheat, the next year with barley or some other crop, and the third it would be left to lie fallow. And then the cycle would begin again.

When reading this week's Torah portion, one could think that the mitzvah of Shemitta, the prohibition of working the fields in the seventh year, is some kind of holy crop rotation. The difference being that in the Torah it says you should work the field for six years and leave it for a seventh.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

First, there is evidence that working a field for six straight years and then leaving it for one year does nothing to improve its yield and may even have a negative effect. Second, the Torah prescribes dire punishments for the non-observance of Shemitta. The seventy years of the Babylonian exile were a punishment for seventy non-observed Shemitta years during the 430 years that the Jewish People dwelled in the Land of Israel. We know that G-d's punishment is always measure for measure. If Shemitta was a matter of crop husbandry, how is exile an appropriate punishment? What does exile have to do with the cessation of agriculture in the seventh year? Furthermore, from an agricultural point of view, seventy years without husbandry can have had no possible benefit for the land. Seventy years of weeds and neglect in no way contribute to the lands rejuvenation, so how is this punishment an appropriate restitution?

To answer these questions we must examine what causes a person to violate Shemitta in the first place.

A great malaise of our own era is the compulsion to overwork. The workaholic defines himself by his job. When you meet someone socially, the question of "What are you?" is usually answered by "I'm a doctor," or "I'm an accountant" or "I'm a rabbi."

There is a fundamental mistake here. What we do is not what we are.

In our society we have confused what we do with who we are. The underlying belief revealed here is that the more I work the more I become myself. Violation of the laws of Shemitta comes from a belief that the more I work, the more money will I make, and the more I make, the more I am the master of my own world.

When a person is sent into exile, all the familiar comforting symbols of his success are taken away from him. He realizes that what he does is not who he is. Both his survival and his identity are G-d given gifts. The insecurity of exile brings a person face to face with his total dependence on G-d.

It is from the perspective of exile that a person can rebuild his worldview so that he can see that what he does is not who he is.

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# TALMUD TIPS

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by Rabbi Moshe Newman

## Shabbat 65-71

### Kiddush in an Oasis

*If a person loses track of the days while wandering in the desert, when should he keep Shabbat?*

This question is posed in the *gemara* and our Sages offer two different answers. Before anyone suggests that this scenario is not realistic in our era of superior technology, it is not difficult to point to at least one non-fictional event in recent years when a person or group was stranded and completely isolated from the rest of the world.

So, if a person loses track of time in the desert, Rav Huna says that he should count six days and then keep Shabbat on the seventh. The Sage Chiya bar Rav, however, says that he should keep the first day as Shabbat and then count six more days.

The *gemara* explains the basis for their divergent opinions. Rav Huna reasons that the lost person should act in accordance with the way Hashem created the world. Just as there were six weekdays followed by Shabbat, a stranded individual should follow the original blueprint and count six weekdays prior to declaring Shabbat. Rabbi Chiya, on the other hand, says that he should first keep Shabbat and then count six other days. This was the order of the week for Adam HaRishon, the first human. He was created on *erev* Shabbat, and his first day of counting was Yom Rishon, Sunday. (Rashi)

The *gemara* cites the following *beraita* as a proof to Rav Huna's view and a rebuttal to Chiya bar Rav's opinion: "One who was travelling on the road or in the desert and lost track of the days, should count six days and then keep the seventh day as Shabbat." Apparently, this authoritative *beraita* was not included in the transmission of the Oral Law to Chiya bar Rav, and had he known this *beraita* he would not have disagreed with Rav Huna.

The *gemara* concludes (perhaps in the name of Rava who is mentioned earlier) that one should not think

that on the first six days a person may do an unlimited amount of *melacha* as on any weekday, and on the seventh day he should refrain from all *melacha* as on a normal Shabbat. Rather, since each day of the week is perhaps really Shabbat, and it is only the person's lack of knowledge that is keeping the truth from him, one might think that he should indeed refrain from all *melacha* on every single day of the week. However, this course of action would not be viable since he would die from lack of sustenance, and therefore he is permitted on each day – including the seventh day, Shabbat – to do that which is necessary for his survival. But no more than is truly necessary. Each day seems the same: there is concern that the day is Shabbat, and no *melacha* should be done, but this is a situation of life threatening *pikuach nefesh*, and therefore the minimum measure of work needed to stay alive may be done on each day of the week.

If this is the halacha, asks the *gemara*, in what way does the day that he designates as Shabbat differ from the other six days of the week? The answer provided by the *gemara* is that only on his Shabbat does he make Kiddush and Havdalah. (Presumably the *beracha* of Kiddush is made over a cup of wine, if he has one, after nightfall, and the *beracha* of Havdalah is made over a cup of wine on the next night, with spices if he has them, but without fire since that day might be Shabbat.)

It is related in the name of the Gaon from Vilna that a careful reading of the Torah provides a hint to the halacha taught in our *sugya*. The Torah states: "Six days you shall work, and you shall do *all* of your work, and on the seventh day you shall rest for Hashem your G-d – you shall not do *any* work." (*Shemot* 20:9-10)

The Gaon points out that the Torah could have simply stated not to work on Shabbat. He asks: Why does the

Torah tell us not only to rest on the seventh day but also to *work* on six days? Why does the Torah stress that during the week we must do *all* of our work? Why does the Torah emphasize that we must not do *any* work on Shabbat?

The Gaon explains that the Torah is teaching more than the mitzvah to keep (*shamor*) Shabbat. The Torah here is also instructing us to remember (*zachor*) which day is Shabbat.

The Torah is directly addressing a “normal” situation when we are at home and know and remember which day is Shabbat. Then, the Torah states, we do all our

work during the week and not any on Shabbat. However, the special wording leads to deducing the halacha when the day of Shabbat is in doubt, although we need to remember and honor the seventh day, Shabbat, in an appropriate way, we may not do all of our work on any day nor rest completely on any day. In this “doubtful” case, every single day is one in which a person may do the minimum work needed in order to sustain himself. (See Tosefot on the *daf*, who discusses the matter of unlimited travel in the desert during the week to reach civilization, as opposed to the lack of extended travel on the seventh day, and why this factor is not mentioned instead of Kiddush and Havdalah.)

- *Shabbat 69b*

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## PARSHA OVERVIEW

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### Behar

The Torah prohibits normal farming of the Land of Israel every seven years. This "Shabbat for the land" is called "Shemitta." After every seventh Shemitta, the fiftieth year, Yovel (“Jubilee”) is announced with the sound of the shofar on Yom Kippur. This was also a year for the land to lie fallow. G-d promises to provide a bumper crop prior to the Shemitta and Yovel years. During Yovel, all land is returned to its original division from the time of Joshua, and all Jewish indentured servants are freed, even if they have not completed their six years of work. A Jewish indentured servant may not be given any demeaning, unnecessary or excessively difficult work, and may not be sold in the public market. The price of his labor must be calculated according to the amount of time remaining until he will automatically become free. The price of land is similarly calculated. Should anyone sell his ancestral land, he has the right to redeem it after two years. If a house in a walled city is sold, the right of redemption is limited to the first year after the sale. The Levites' cities

belong to them forever. The Jewish People are forbidden to take advantage of one another by lending or borrowing with interest. Family members should redeem any relative who was sold as an indentured servant as a result of impoverishment.

### Bechukotai

The Torah promises prosperity for the Jewish People if they follow G-d's commandments. However, if they fail to live up to the responsibility of being the Chosen People, then chilling punishments will result. The Torah details the harsh historical process that will fall upon them when Divine protection is removed. These punishments, whose purpose is to bring the Jewish People to repent, will be in seven stages, each more severe than the last. *Sefer Vayikra*, the book of Leviticus, concludes with the details of *erachin* – the process by which someone vows to give the Beit Hamikdash the equivalent monetary value of a person, an animal or a property.

## Questions - Behar

1. Why does the Torah specify that the laws of Shemitta were taught on Har Sinai?
2. If one possesses Shemitta food after it is no longer available in the field, what must he do with it?
3. The Torah commands, "You shall sanctify the fiftieth year." How is this done?
4. Which two "returns" are announced by the shofar during Yovel?
5. From where does the Yovel year get its name?
6. What prohibitions are derived from the verse "v'lo tonu ish et amito ~ a person shall not afflict his fellow"?
7. What is the punishment for neglecting the laws of Shemitta?
8. If Shemitta is observed properly, how long is the crop of the sixth year guaranteed to last?
9. After selling an ancestral field, when can one redeem it?
10. Under what circumstance may one sell ancestral land?
11. If a home in a walled city is sold, when can it be redeemed?
12. What does the word "days" mean in this week's Parsha?
13. What is considered a walled city?
14. What is the definition of a "ger toshav"?
15. To what is one who leaves Eretz Yisrael compared?
16. Why does Rashi mention the plague of the firstborn in this week's Parsha?
17. List three prohibitions which demonstrate the dignity with which one must treat a Jewish indentured servant.
18. Who supports the family of the Jewish indentured servant during his years of servitude?
19. If a Jew is sold as a servant to a non-Jew, does he go free after six years?
20. Where is it permitted to prostrate oneself on a stone floor?

*All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary, unless otherwise stated.*

## Answers

1. 25:1 - To teach us that just as shemitta was taught in detail on Har Sinai, so too, all the mitzvot were taught in detail on Har Sinai.
2. 25:7 - Remove it from his property and declare it ownerless.
3. 25:10 - At the beginning of the year the Beit Din declares, "This year is kadosh (sanctified)."
4. 25:10 - The return of the land to its original owner, and the "return" (freedom) of the slave from slavery.
5. 25:10 - From the sounding of the shofar. A ram's horn is called a Yovel.
6. 25:17 - One may not intentionally hurt people's feelings, nor give bad advice while secretly intending to reap benefit.
7. 25:18 - Exile.
8. 25:21,22 - From Nissan of the sixth year until Sukkot of the ninth year.
9. 25:24 - After two years following the sale, until Yovel. At the beginning of Yovel it returns to the family automatically.
10. 25:25 - Only if one becomes impoverished.
11. 25:29 - Only within the first year after the sale. Afterwards, even in Yovel, it does not return.
12. 25:29 - The days of an entire year.
13. 25:29 - A city that has been surrounded by a wall since the time of Yehoshua.
14. 25:35 - A non-Jew who lives in Eretz Yisrael and accepts upon himself not to worship idols.
15. 25:38 - To one who worships idols.
16. 25:38 - The prohibition against taking interest is accompanied by the phrase, "I am the L-rd your G-d who took you out of Egypt." Rashi explains that just as G-d discerned in Egypt between those who were firstborn and those who were not, so too will G-d discern and punish those who lend with interest, pretending they are acting on behalf of others.
17. 25:39-43 -
  1. Do not make him perform humiliating tasks
  2. Do not sell him publicly
  3. Do not make him perform unnecessary jobs
18. 25:41 - His master.
19. 25:54 - No. If he is not redeemed with money, he must wait until the Yovel to go free.
20. 26:1 - In the Mikdash.

## Questions - Bechukotai

1. To what do the words "*bechukotai telechu*" (walk in My statutes) refer?
2. When is rain "in its season"?
3. What is the blessing of "*v'achaltem lachmechem l'sova*" (and you shall eat your bread to satisfaction)?
4. What is meant by the verse "and a sword will not pass through your land"?
5. Mathematically, if five Jewish soldiers can defeat 100 enemy soldiers, how many enemy soldiers should 100 Jewish soldiers be able to defeat?
6. How much is "*revava*"?
7. Which "progression" of seven transgressions are taught in Chapter 26, and why in that particular order?
8. What is one benefit which the Jewish People derive from the Land of Israel's state of ruin?
9. What was the duration of the Babylonian exile and why that particular number?
10. How many years did the Jewish People sin in Israel up till the time the northern tribes were exiled?
11. In verse 26:42, the name Yaakov is written with an extra "*vav*." From whom did Yaakov receive this extra letter and why?
12. What positive element is implied by the words "and I will bring them into the land of their enemies"?
13. In verse 26:42, why is the word "remember" not used in connection with the name of Yitzchak?
14. Why does the Torah say in 26:46 "*Torot*" (plural) and not "*Torah*" (singular)?
15. What happens when a poor person dedicates the value of a man to the *Beit Hamikdash* and doesn't have sufficient funds to fulfill his vow?
16. If a person says "The leg of this animal shall be an *olah* offering," the animal is sold and sacrificed as an *olah* offering. What is the status of the money received for the animal?
17. If a person dedicates his ancestral field to the *Beit Hamikdash* and fails to redeem it before *Yovel* what happens to the field?
18. Where must "*ma'aser sheini*" be eaten?
19. When a person redeems "*ma'aser sheini*" what happens to the food? What happens to the redemption money?
20. How does a person tithe his animals?

*All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary, unless otherwise stated.*

## Answers

1. 26:3 - Laboring in Torah learning.
2. 26:4 - At times when people are not outside (e.g. Shabbat nights).
3. 26:5 - You will only require a little bread to be completely satisfied.
4. 26:6 - No foreign army will travel through your land on their way to a different country.
5. 26:4 - Two thousand.
6. 26:4 - Ten thousand.
7. 26:14,15 - Not studying Torah, not observing *mitzvot*, rejecting those who observe *mitzvot*, hating Sages, preventing others from observing *mitzvot*, denying that G-d gave the *mitzvot*, denying the existence of G-d. They are listed in this order because each transgression leads to the next.
8. 26:32 - No enemy nation will be able to settle in the Land of Israel.
9. 26:35 - 70 years. Because the Jewish People violated 70 *shemitta* and *Yovel* years.
10. 26:35 - 390 years.
11. 26:42 - In five places in the Torah, Yaakov's name is written with an extra "*vav*" and in five places the name Eliyahu is missing a "*vav*." Yaakov "took" these *vavs* as a pledge that Eliyahu will one day come and announce the redemption of Yaakov's children.
12. 26:41 - G-d Himself, so to speak, will bring them into their enemies' land. This means that even when the Jews are in exile, G-d will supply them with leaders who inspire them to keep the Torah. This guards the Jews from assimilating into the host culture.
13. 26:42 - Because the image of Yitzchak's ashes (who was prepared to be brought as an offering) upon the altar is always before G-d.
14. 26:46 - To teach that both the Written Torah and the Oral Torah were given to Moshe on Har Sinai.
15. 27:8 - The person whose value was donated goes before the *kohen*, who sets the obligation according to the poor person's ability to pay.
16. 27:9 - The money is "*chullin*," meaning it does not have "holy" status, except for the value of the animal's leg which does have "holy" status.
17. 27:16 - It becomes the property of the *kohanim* who are on rotation at the beginning of *Yovel*.
18. 27:30 - In Jerusalem.
19. 27:31 - The food becomes permissible to him outside of Jerusalem. The redemption money must be brought to Jerusalem and used to purchase food to be eaten there.
20. 27:32 - He passes them through a door individually and every tenth animal he marks with a rod smeared with red dye.

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# WHAT'S IN A WORD?

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*Synonyms in the Hebrew Language*  
by Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein

## Divorce Bills and Other Documents

Two very common words for “document” in Rabbinic Hebrew make absolutely no appearances in the Bible: *gett* and *shtar*. The actual Biblical term “*Sefer HaMiknah*” (“Scroll of Acquisition”) appears five times in Jer. 32, making it the standard – or only – word in Biblical Hebrew for a “document of sale.” In this article we will focus on the words *gett* and *shtar*, seeking to better understand their etymology and how they are used.

The word *gett* (plural: *gittin*) technically refers to any type of document, but is often attached to a modifier to explain what type of document is under discussion: a *gett ishah* (“woman’s *gett*”) refers to a writ of divorce, a *gett shichrur* (“*gett* of freedom”) refers to a freed slave’s writ of emancipation, and a *gett chov* (“obligatory *gett*”) refers to an IOU (*Gittin* 10a, *Bava Kama* 95a, *Bava Basra* 160a). Nonetheless, the default *gett* in colloquial terms refers specifically to a bill of divorce (see Rashi to *Gittin* 65b and Maimonides’ commentary to the Mishna *Gittin* 2:5), as we shall see below. In Biblical Hebrew, by the way, a bill of divorce is called a *Sefer Kritut* (Deut. 24:1-3, Isa. 50:1), literally “Scroll of Cutting.”

The Tosafists (*Gittin* 2a) cite Rabbeinu Tam as explaining that a bill of divorce contains twelve lines of text because it is called a *gett* (GIMMEL-TET), and the *gematria* (numeric value) of the word *gett* equals twelve. Some authorities understand the Tosafists to also be explaining why a bill of divorce is called a *gett* (as opposed to a *shtar*). This assumption is shared by Rabbi Shmuel Eidels (Maharsha, 1555-1631), Rabbi Meir Shiff (Maharam Shiff, 1608-1644), and Rabbi Eliyahu Spira (*Elyah Rabbah*, 1660-1712), even though Rabbi Yom Tov Lipmann Heller (*Tosafos Yom Tov*, 1579-1654) criticizes this assumption for not heeding closely to the Tosafists’ actual words (see Rabbi David Tzvi Fetene’s *Maharsha HaAruch* who resolves this difficulty).

Rabbi Eliyahu HaBachur (1469-1549) in *Sefer HaTishbi* also quotes the Tosafists as saying that a bill of divorce is called a *gett* because it has twelve lines, and questions this explanation on two grounds. Firstly he notes that other documents (like a written loan) are also called a *gett*, yet the legal requirement of twelve lines does not apply to those documents. Secondly he notes that the Tosafists have failed to explain why the bill of divorce must be called “*gett*” as opposed to a word derived from

any other two-letter combination whose *gematria* would equal twelve (like DALET-CHET, HEY-ZAYIN, or TET-GIMMEL).

After citing HaBachur’s questions, Rabbi Yisrael Yaakov Algazi (1680-1757) writes that he heard a different explanation for why a bill of divorce is called a *get*. Since divorce serves to separate a man and woman who were previously married, this schism is best reflected in the word *gett* because it is comprised of a combination of two letters which never appear next to each other in that order anywhere in the Bible! (Interestingly, Rabbi Algazi asserts that every *shtar* can also be called a *gett*, but not every *gett* can be called a *shtar*. Based on this, he rules that communal enactments which were explicitly said to govern a *shtar* do not apply to a *gett*.)

The Vilna Gaon in *Divrei Eliyahu* also says a similar thing about the letters GIMMEL and TET never appearing next to each other in the Bible. The earliest known source for this explanation is in *Sefer HaChaim* by Rabbi Chaim of Friedburg (1520-1588) – the oldest brother of the Maharal of Prague (1525-1609). He writes that because G-d so much dislikes divorce, He made sure that the letters GIMMEL and TET, which spell out the word *gett*, never appear next to each other in that order in the entire Bible.

Rabbi Meir Mazuz writes that even though there are other combinations of two letters that never appear side-by-side in the Bible besides GIMMEL-TET (e.g., GIMMEL-KUF and SAMECH-TZADI), those other combinations are all of letters pronounced through the same parts of the mouth, while the letters GIMMEL and TET are pronounced through different parts of the mouth, yet still never appear in the Bible in that order. Moreover, he notes that the other two-letter combinations are difficult to pronounce, and so they were not in the running for becoming the word for a “bill of divorce.” Finally, Rabbi Mazuz adds, that although there are other pairs of letters that do not go together, GIMMEL and TET are the earliest ones in alphabetical order that are incompatible with one another. Rabbi Chaim Kanievsky in *Taama DeKra* (to Deut. 24:1) also proffers this last point to answer the question. (A computer search of the entire text of the Bible reveals that the letters GIMMEL-TET are never juxtaposed to each other in the same word, but in Ezek. 22:25 they are juxtaposed with a space in between them to separate between words. For further

discussion, see Rabbi Aryeh Leib Tzintz's introduction to his *Seder HaGett*.)

Rabbi Yehoshua Boaz (1518-1557) in his commentary *Shiltei HaGibborim* (*Mordechai*, *Gittin* 1) cites a non-extant Midrash that refers to a type of gem called *getta* in a far-off island that has a special charm of being able to ward off people. Based on this, he explains that a bill of divorce – by which members of a married couple officially “repel” one another – is appropriately called a *gett*.

Rabbi Moshe Sofer (1762-1839) cites another tradition about this gem, which says that its charm is actually to *attract* people, not *repel* them. In order to determine which version of this tradition is most accurate, Rabbi Sofer turns to a different work entitled *Shiltei HaGibborim* (written by Rabbi Avraham the Physician of Portleone) which, *inter alia*, discusses different gems and their charms. That work discusses a stone known as “gagate” – that if rubbed, is said to attract straw. Based on this, Rabbi Sofer concludes that in the former *Shiltei HaGibborim* as well, the *getta* stone refers to something that has the power to *attract*, not *repel*. Accordingly, Rabbi Sofer explains that all legal documents are called a *gett* because they bridge the gap between people (like between a lender and borrower, or a buyer and seller) and bring them together. On the other hand, Rabbi Sofer explains that the term *gett* in the sense of a divorce document is less readily understood, which is why the explanation above (about it having 12 lines) had to be proffered.

*Tosafot Chachmei Anglia* (*Gittin* 2a), *Orchot Chaim* (*Hilchot Gittin*), *Kolbo* (76), the glosses to Rabbi Yaakov Margolis of Regensburg's *Seder HaGett*, and the *Levush* (*Even HaEzer* 125:11) all explain that *gett* is an expression of “breaking” or “cutting,” thus mirroring the Biblical term for a bill of divorce. These sources cite a no longer extant passage from the Yerushalmi that uses the word in such a way. Rabbi Shlomo Aharon Wertheimer (1866-1835) similarly suggests that *gett* is an expression of “erasure” (see Rashi to *Brachos* 56a). Despite all of these explanations, the scholarly consensus is that the Mishnaic Hebrew term *gett* is a loanword borrowed from the Akkadian *gittu*, meaning “a (single-column) document.”

The late Rabbi Eliezer Herstik wrote that some explain that the word *ghetto* (the section of Rome to which the Jews were confined for living) is derived from the word *gett* – “chased away.” Another popular theory about the origins of the word *ghetto* is that it is derived from the Italian word *borghetto* (“small

part of a city”), which is, in turn, derived from the Germanic *burg* (“fortress,” “city,” “town”), the equivalent to the English word *borough* (and the Old English suffix *-bury*). Others explain the etymology of *ghetto* as deriving from the Venetian word *getto* (“metal foundry”), as near the Jewish ghetto in Venice there was such a factory. Finally, others claim that the Italian word *ghetto* is derived from the Latin *Aegyptus* (“Egypt,” where the Jews were first ghettoized when exiled and enslaved there in Biblical times).

As mentioned above, the word *shtar* (plural: *shtarot*) in the sense of a “bill” or “document” does not appear anywhere in the Bible, but is quite common in later rabbinic literature (like in the Bar Kochba Letters and the Mishna). It too is often attached to a modifier to explain what type of *shtar* is under discussion: *shtar chov*, *shtar erusin* (*Kesuvos* 102b, *Kiddushin* 9b), *shtar nisuin* (*Bava Basra* 167b) *shtar amanah* (*Kesuvos* 19a, *Gittin* 19b, *Bava Basra* 49a, 154b), *shtar arisot* (*Bava Basra* 167b), *shtar berurin* (*Moed Katan* 18b), *shtar mivrachat* (*Kesuvos* 79a), and more.

In *Meturgaman*, HaBachur's lexicon of Targumic Aramaic, HaBachur has two separate entries for the root SHIN-TET-REISH. The first entry is an Aramaicization of the Hebrew root SHIN-TET-REISH, which refers to “policing” or “enforcing” the law (*shoter/shotrim*), while the second entry consists of examples of *shtar* in the sense of a “document.” He thus understands the two meanings of this root to be separate. On the other hand, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (to Ex. 5:6) explains that a *shtar* is called so because it is a creditor's best means for presenting his grievances and “enforcing” his dues, thus understanding that both words derived from the SHIN-TET-REISH root are related.

Dr. Chaim Tawil defines the Biblical Hebrew word *shoter* as a “record-keeper” or “organizing officer,” and connects its root to the Akkadian verb *sataru* that means “to write.” Tawil explains the difference between *shoter* and *sofer* in Akkadian by noting that although both words refer to a scribe, the former is specifically a civil servant who is an official scribe, while the latter refers to any type of scribe.

Interestingly, the Old English word *starr* is a corruption of the Hebrew *shtar* and referred to documents or contracts held by Jews. After the Jews were expelled from England in 1290, this word fell into disuse until it was revived by later scholars like the English parliamentarian John Selden (1584-1654).

*For questions, comments, or to propose ideas for a future article, please contact the author at [rcklein@ohr.edu](mailto:rcklein@ohr.edu)*

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# COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

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by Rabbi Reuven Lauffer

## The Morning Blessings: Our Stairway to Heaven

The format of our Daily Prayers is very exact. Most of our formal prayers were composed by the Men of the Great Assembly, many of whom had been blessed with Divine Inspiration. Subsequently, the prayers that they wrote were imbued with holiness and an uncanny insight into the human psyche. Among their beautiful compositions are fifteen blessings that are recited each day as a prelude to the prayers that are recited every morning.

Why fifteen? Every letter in the Hebrew alphabet has a corresponding numerical value. The number ten corresponds to the letter *yud*, and the number five to the letter *heh*. When the letters *yud* and *heh* are combined, they spell one of the central Names of G-d. In Jewish thought, whenever the number fifteen appears it is always associated with the intensely spiritual dimension of G-d's Name – *yud* and *heh*. Therefore, our Rabbis teach us of the fifteen levels of spirituality that we are supposed to scale in our pursuit of spiritual meaning.

This is also the reason why the number fifteen was significant in the Holy Temple. For example, there were fifteen steps that led from the Women's Courtyard to the Israelites' Courtyard, and there are fifteen chapters of Psalms that are called the Songs of Ascent because they were sung on the fifteen steps.

To our great sorrow, the Holy Temple has been destroyed and we are left waiting for the Third and Final Temple to

be built. In the meantime, our Sages granted us the ability to connect to G-d through prayer in place of the Temple service. And, in the place of the fifteen steps leading to the Temple, the Sages composed the fifteen Morning Blessings.

In effect, each blessing serves as an integral stair to the next blessing. Each blessing is essential both for our climb upwards towards the spiritual realms and for our understanding of the blessing that follows it. When these blessings are said with the correct intent and concentration, they bring us to the very gateway of connection to G-d. It is a truly inspirational idea. When we reach the fifteenth blessing, we look back and see that we have ascended a stairway that has brought us to the Heavens.

In the coming weeks we plan to explore the fifteen Morning Blessings, to try to reveal and understand the deeper meanings that lie behind them. And by doing so we will be able to enhance our connection to G-d, which, after all, is the most fundamental reason for prayer to begin with.

*(There is more than one opinion as to the order for reciting these fifteen blessings. In this column the standard Ashkenazic opinion will be followed. That does not mean, however, that what we will learn together is applicable only to those who follow the Ashkenazic custom, but, rather, the depth and beauty of the blessings are equally applicable to all.)*

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# ASK!

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## Zooming to Minyan

Michael A. of Illinois asked:

Dear Rabbi,

Is it acceptable to get a minyan by linking ten Jews on a real-time computer chat line (for example) and praying in a 'virtual community'? In this case, it seems, the issue of "a soulless computer" is not a problem since there are ten living people who are interacting with the aid of technology. How does Judaism regard the creation of new communal spaces that are not physical in nature?

*They are creating electronically the bonds of community and shared devotion that are denied them because of their lack of proximity to other worshippers.*

Dear Michael A.,

This seems to be an interesting and practical subject in current times when there may be a danger in going outside due to worldwide contagion. What would be the halachic status of a minyan formed via computer?

The mishna in Tractate Megillah (23b) says:

*"... the congregation is not led in prayer and the Priestly Blessing is not said, nor do we read from the Torah... in the presence of less than ten..."*

The Talmud teaches that the source for this concept of a minyan and the number of people which comprise it is the verse, "And I will be sanctified amongst the people of Israel." The Talmud derives this information by means of a standard method of exposition.

What we need to know is whether a minyan requires 'physical proximity' or not?

The Shulchan Aruch writes:

*"We require that all ten be in one place and the Shliach Tzibbur [the Chazzan] must be with them. One who stands in the doorway so that if the door were closed he would be outside is considered outside (i.e. not in the place of the minyan)." (Orach Chaim 55:13, 20)*

We took your question a number of years ago to Rabbi Chaim Pinchas Scheinberg, one of the foremost halachic authorities in the world from the precious generation. He told us that even if all of the people were audio-visually connected via their computers they would not constitute a minyan because the people need to be in 'physical proximity' to each other.

We may note that this is not to say that there are not possibilities for a lone worshipper to be 'connected' in some halachic sense to an *already existing minyan* via computer.

The Shulchan Aruch writes:

*"One should try to pray in a Synagogue with the Tzibbur (congregation). If because of extenuating circumstances he cannot, then he should pray at the same time that the Tzibbur prays." (Orach Chaim 90:9)*

Rabbi Scheinberg mentioned that if you were connected to a minyan in such a way that you could hear the congregation praying, that would satisfy this requirement of prayer 'at the same time' as the congregation. You would also have the added merit of responding to 'matters of Kedusha' – e.g., Kaddish, Barchu, Kedusha, which are recited by the congregation. He told us that he had a remote audio hookup to a nearby sunrise minyan. He was quite elderly at that point and could not be at that minyan in person, but at least he was praying 'at the same time' as the congregation, and responding to the 'matters of Kedusha' recited by the congregation.

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# LETTER AND SPIRIT

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*Insights based on the writings of Rav S.R. Hirsch by Rabbi Yosef Herschman*

## Zero Tolerance for Abuse

Parshat Behar deals mostly with the laws of Shemitta and Yovel, but then segues into prohibitions against commercial fraud and verbal abuse. At first glance, these may appear disparate, but upon consideration of the fundamental aims of these commandments, the internal connection is apparent.

The Shemitta year, the “Sabbath of the land,” was an expression of homage to G-d. By ceasing from all agriculture activity and by relinquishing ownership over his land, the Jew remembers that his land belongs to G-d, and that he is merely a stranger and sojourner with G-d. He neither works his land nor gathers in its produce to ensure his livelihood. The entire soil is stamped as ownerless, so that the nation as a whole, and each individual landowner, would come to recognize the true Owner and Master of the land.

The Jubilee (Yovel) year, which occurred at the conclusion of seven Shemitta cycles, effected the return of all landed property to its original owner. This restoration of property had a profound effect on the nation’s internal and external affairs, not least of which was stemming the propagation of social class differences and unequal distribution of property.

After presenting the laws of, the Torah warns of commercial fraud that may Shemitta result from the Shemitta and Yovel cycles, particularly regarding the sale of land. Both buyer and seller must understand the value of the property, which progressively diminishes during the fifty years of the Yovel. Both buyer and seller must understand that sale of land is essentially sale of the right to years of produce from the land, as the land will return to its original owner with the commencement of Yovel.

The Torah’s term for fraud – *ona’ah* – can be defined, based on its phonetic roots, as exploitation of the

weakness of one’s fellow man, in order to cheat him. After the Torah sets forth prohibitions on *ona’ah* in financial dealings, the Torah then extends the prohibition of *ona’ah* to verbal abuses – exploitation of the other party’s weakness, namely, his personal sensitivity. Examples of verbal abuses include reminding someone of his or his fathers’ misdeeds, embarrassing another in public, calling another by a derisive name, giving misleading advice, and raising false hopes, such as by asking the price of an article that one has no intention of buying.

Both forms of *ona’ah* – commercial abuse and verbal abuse – exploit the other’s weakness. But verbal abuse is even more serious than commercial fraud, because it damages his friend’s heart and soul, whereas commercial fraud affects only his money. The latter can be restored, whereas the former cannot.

This section of the Torah concludes with a warning: *You shall fear your G-d, for I, G-d, am your G-d.* This warning addresses all members of society: Do not aggrieve one another; each of you is to fear G-d; each person should keep in mind that G-d’s eye and ear are directed toward each and every person, and that He is equally the G-d of all of his brethren.

This is the fundamental teaching of Shemitta and Yovel: All men live and work together on G-d’s soil, and as tribute He demands that His rule be implemented in every phase of life. He is in the midst of the people and watches over them, blessing their commerce. When G-d is Master, abuses and grievances against others will not be tolerated – blessing will devolve only when the truth of all truths – *I am your G-d* – is realized in every aspect of communal and commercial life.

- Source: Commentary, Vayikra 25:4, 14-17

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