THINKING ABOUT SHMITA
Nigel Savage is President and Founder of Hazon

In Jewish life, we run on Jewish time. Shabbat is different from Tuesday. Chanukah is different from Purim. And so a Shmita year should be different from other years. Yet unlike the rest of Jewish time, it usually passes relatively unnoticed (excluding only septennial arguments in Israel between the Orthodox and the Ultra-Orthodox).

What is Shmita? Think of it as the original “Sabbatical Year.” Every seventh year the land is to be left fallow, debts are to be forgiven, and a host of other agricultural and economic adjustments are made to seek to maintain an equitable, just, and healthy society.

In Israel it has implications for the growing and selling of produce, but outside Israel it is mostly ignored. At the start of the last Shmita year, seven years ago, I said at Hazon’s Food Conference, “Shouldn’t we try to put Shmita back on the calendar?” Thus was Hazon’s Shmita Project born. Its intent: to give Shmita a much more central place in Jewish life.

Here is this remarkable concept which involves our relationships to land, food, money, rest, and time. It raises profound questions about the boundaries of community; about our relationship to those in need; and about the nature of “letting go.” It is rooted in the Torah, and contemporary in its salience.

I encourage you to use the ideas in these pages to help you decide what this coming Shmita year might mean for you, your family, the institutions you’re part of, and the wider community. And I hope that we will use the Shmita year to start to think about the next seven-year cycle in Jewish life, running until 2022. What is our vision? Where could or should we be by then? How can we seek to transform ourselves and our world?
TECHNOLOGY

Amichai Lau-Lavie is the founder of Storahtelling and the spiritual leader of Lab/Shul NYC.

How can those of us who are not farmers, don’t feel obligated by Jewish law, and don’t live in Israel make use of this concept of laying fallow to better balance our lives in a fast-paced world?

Let’s reinterpret ‘land’ as ‘digital landscape’ and ‘fallow’ as ‘unplug’. How about a year of reinterpreting Shmita for our cluttered techie lives?

Here are a few ideas: no screens while eating, no emails in bed – pre/post sleep, no GPS for a month – more face to face, less clicks. Plan ahead, look around and ask directions!

Rest, reset, restore, and join the revival of Judaism’s sacred cycle of seven as a radical tool for sustainable and sacred living in the 21st century.

Visit labshul.org for more information.

ECONOMY

Rabbi Ari Hart is a founder of Uri L’Tzedek, the Orthodox Social Justice Movement.

To whom does our economy belong:

- Wall Street?
- Main Street?
- The worker?
- The business owner?
- The government?

According to the Torah, none of the above. It belongs to God.

That’s the fundamental idea behind the concept of cancelling debts in the Shmita year.

In today’s US, millions of Americans struggle with underwater mortgages, medical debt, and student loans. This coming Shmita year, how can we commit to lifting our brothers and sisters out of debt and bringing God’s economics to bear on our world?

CLIMATE CHANGE

Dr. Mirele B. Goldsmith is an environmental psychologist and activist, and director of the Jewish Greening Fellowship of Hazon.

What is the connection between releasing the land from cultivation and people from their debts? Shmita teaches us that caring for the earth and caring for people are inseparable.

In a world inspired by Shmita there will be no early deaths from filthy air, no oil spills, no devastated mountains and collapsing coal mines, no toxic wastewater from fracking, no contaminated nuclear plants, no oil-fueled wars, and no climate change.

Shmita also teaches us that every 7 years, we can change the rules. The way things are is not the way they have to be. We can have a world in which everyone benefits from the blessing of abundant energy and no one suffers for it. Let’s start to make that world a reality this year.

SHMITA

This year, Israelis will explore the meaning of Shmita through an exciting array of local and national modern initiatives spanning the fields of agriculture, environment, education, and the economy. These include:

- 15 nature reserves will be opened to the public for free
- Volunteer “time banks” in which community members “deposit” hours of their time dedicated for the welfare of the community
- Needy families will have their debts cancelled after they participate in a financial management course
- The Ministry of the Environment is considering a moratorium on open sea fishing to allow fish stocks to regenerate

The conjunction of the Shmita year with a current climate of political and social openness in Israel is an opportune time for transformation!

ISRAEL

Eina Kramer is the director of Teva Ivri, and the coordinator of Israeli Shmita, a broad-based coalition working to promote a social-environmental Shmita year in Israel.

FOOD

Nati Passow directs the Jewish Farm School and Hazon Philadelphia.

The Shmita year reminds us that humans were not always farmers. Our species lived sustainably on the planet for 30 times as long as we have lived as farmers. To be forced to live a year by eating the naturally occurring growth on the land reminds us of the abundance that is produced by the planet, without human intervention, and enables us to see ourselves a part of something much larger.
To mark the start of this Shmita cycle you might try adding a "Shmita plate" to your Rosh Hashanah table.

On the seder plate you might array slices of apples surrounded by six small cups or bowls on the base plate. Have honey, wine, seeds, pomegranate seeds, dates, and figs ready as fillers.

**Sova / Enoughness**

Is the feeling of not wanting; of maximum satisfaction with minimum consumption. Fill the first cup with honey, dip in apples and say:

“In this year of Shmita, may we know no hunger, either spiritual or physical.”

**Hodayah / Gratefulness**

Is the feeling of deep appreciation and satisfaction. Hold up a cup with wine, and say:

“May we notice these unique days of Shmita, and may gratitude fill us as the wine fills this cup.”

**Revaya / Abundance**

Is the awareness of a healthy world’s capacity of self-renewal, and our call to sustainability. This cup is filled with seeds, signifying potential. Pass it around so that everyone may take, and say:

“In this year of Shmita, may we celebrate abundance and work toward sustainability so that our children also experience vast goodness.”

**Hesed / Lovingkindness**

Is a response to give back in appreciation for all that we have been given. As you pass this cup around, each person should fill it with figs or dates, and say:

“In this Shmita year, may we know no greed, and give like the continuous fruiting of the fig tree.”

**Puriyut / Fertility**

Is the creativity of nature that inspires the human gifts of imagination. This cup is filled with pomegranate seeds, symbols of fertility. Pass the cup around, eat, and say:

“In this Shmita year, may we know no emptiness. May this year bring forth acts of discovery.”

**Otzar / Treasury**

Is the earth’s shared resources, owned by none and gifted to all, that we leave behind for others. Fill the last cup with drops of wine from each person’s cup, and say:

“In this Shmita year, may we be joined to one another through our common heritage, the Torah, our shared past and future, throughout the cycles of space and time.”

For a full version, please visit sovaproject.org/2014/06/30/shmita-seder
7 PATHS TOWARD A SHMITA-INSPIRED YEAR

1. HOST A SHMITA BOOK CLUB OR LEARNING EVENT
Rav Kook wrote a century ago that “the old will be made new, and the new made holy.” Hazon recently published the first-ever translation of the introduction to Rav Kook’s book on Shmita, *Shabbat Ha’aretz*. Visit [shmitaproject.org](http://shmitaproject.org) to buy a copy and download a discussion guide.

2. JOIN THE JEWISH CLIMATE CHANGE CAMPAIGN
The Jewish Climate Change Campaign was launched in 2009 by Hazon and other partners as a call to action to mobilize the wisdom of Judaism and the resources of the Jewish community to meet the challenges of climate change. Visit [jewishclimatecampaign.org](http://jewishclimatecampaign.org) or [facebook.com/JewishClimateCampaign](http://facebook.com/JewishClimateCampaign) to learn more.

3. BRING SHMITA TO YOUR WORKPLACE
Ideally, this could be a year to slow things down at work. To take a lunch break. To spend less time on email. You can bring Shmita to your office too, either by arranging a Shmita text study or by bringing to life some of the values from the Shmita paradigm. Visit [hazon.org/shmita](http://hazon.org/shmita) for ideas and join us at [facebook.com/groups/shmitaproject](http://facebook.com/groups/shmitaproject).

4. ORGANIZE A LOCAL FARM TOUR / JOIN A CSA
Shmita is all about food accessibility. Get to know your local farmers and food suppliers. A good way to do this is by joining or starting a CSA. Visit [hazon.org/csa](http://hazon.org/csa). If you are in the Connecticut Berkshires area, be sure to stop by Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center to see the Shmita year in action on the Adamah Farm. Visit [hazon.org/adamah](http://hazon.org/adamah).

5. HOST A SHMITA-INSPIRED SEDER
Seders need not be just for Passover or Tu B’shvat! Host a Shmita food seder for your community that focuses on local, seasonal, preserved, perennial, and wild foods. Check out [hazon.org/shmita](http://hazon.org/shmita) for some ideas.

6. HOST A SWAP-MEET
Almost all of us have perfectly usable items lying around our houses or apartments for which we no longer have any need. Rather than keeping them in storage or throwing them away, host a community exchange market.

7. SUPPORT ETHICAL INVESTING, SPENDING, AND BANKING
Find out how your savings are being reinvested by your banks, so you can make educated choices about where to keep your money. You can also join financial mentoring or investment circles in which members come together to share best practices concerning financial resource management, family/business budgeting, and debt prevention.

You can make a difference this Shmita year. Visit [hazon.org/shmita](http://hazon.org/shmita) to find out how.

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