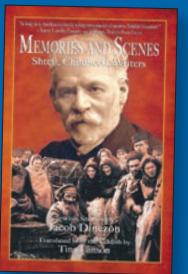


CHILDREN'S PRAYERS *page 10*
GUN CONTROL UNDER FIRE *page 12*
REPUBLISHING A YIDDISH GIANT *page 59*



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Give it a rest

Hazon's Nigel Savage explores the spiritual meaning of this sabbatical year and local experts discuss its halachic aspects

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Page 26

TUV HA'ARETZ
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For thousands of years, Jews have observed every seventh year as a sabbatical, or shmitta. Here, we give you an in-depth look at shmitta, its observance, and its meaning for us, far from the Holy Land.

Jewish time

A new vision of shmitta

JOANNE PALMER

The shmitta year gives us an unusual chance to think about Jewish time, Nigel Savage said.

The nattily dressed, Manchester-accented Mr. Savage is the founder and president of Hazon, whose name means “vision.” Hazon, which is headquartered in Manhattan and based more pastorally and picturesquely in Camp Isabella Friedman Jewish Retreat Center in Falls Village, Conn., is an organization whose mission, according to its website, is to “work to create a healthier and more sustainable Jewish community, and a healthier and

more sustainable world for all.” It sponsors retreats and bike rides in the United States and Israel and works with Adamah, a working Jewish farm, among many other programs.

Before he got to the content of shmitta, Mr. Savage talked about its form – about how it fits into Jewish time. “Jewish life runs on Jewish time,” he said. Each holiday, major and minor, has its own themes, feelings, melodies, and season – Rosh Hashanah cannot be mistaken for Pesach or Shavuot, or, for that matter, for Chanukah or Purim. And every shul across the spectrum, “from ultra-liberal to ultra-Orthodox, will recognize Rosh Hashanah,”

he said. “The only piece of the Jewish calendar we don’t recognize is shmitta.”

Of course, he acknowledged, part of that lack of recognition is that the observance of shmitta is limited to produce coming from the land of Israel, so if we were to look at it only literally, most of us here would be entirely unaffected by it most of the time.

But we are Jews. We do not limit ourselves to the literal. We find meaning, metaphor, wisdom, and depth in unexpected places.

So, Mr. Savage said, let us look at the shmitta year and see what there is in it for us. If we do, we will see great opportunity.

To begin with, “the seven-year cycle that will start a year from now,” once the shmitta year is over, and will end in the next shmitta year, “will form a discreet cycle in Jewish life. It is an open question for any Jewish institution – shul, day school, JCC, private business, federation – how this year is going to be different from the other six years of the cycle, and how you will think of the cycle.

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Cover Story



"The first thing to do is to start to think about Jewish life in terms of Jewish time. A shul might say, OK, we will use the shmitta year to reflect on where we have come in the last six years, what we have learned, and how we have changed. Are our members older or younger? More or less observant? And it might start to vision the next seven-year period, on what should be its focus – on learning, on families, on the relationship with Israel, whatever – but the notion of reconnecting to Jewish time is an incredible gift of shmitta.

"It's really interesting, thinking in terms of a seven-year cycle," he said. "The electoral cycle is four years. The stock market really runs on a one- or two-year cycle.

Seven years is interesting. It's not pie in the sky – it's not 50 years from now, or even 20 – but it is a slightly longer time frame than we're used to.

Undergraduate school and high school are four years. Seven years is interesting. It's not pie in the sky – it's not 50 years from now, or even 20 – but it is a slightly longer time frame than we're used to.

"The thing for organizations to do might be to take staff, some board members, and other key people to a retreat where you think about those questions. That is a gift of the shmitta year."

Then Mr. Savage began to talk about the content – what the shmitta year actually demands, and what that might mean.

"The primary texts about shmittah in the Torah are slightly contradictory," he said. "Some of them are about letting the land lie fallow. It's not totally clear why, but in at least one of the texts, the larger reason seems to be not for sake of the land, but for people who are poor. It really seems to be about reducing the difference

between people who have more and people who have less." (That's from Exodus 23:11, where we are told that "For six years you are to sow your land and to gather in its produce, but in the seventh, you are to let it go and to let it be, so that the needy of your people may eat.")

"So what does it mean for Jews in the 21st century? Could it be about Israel? Could people say 'Davka, this is the year that I will go visit there, learn more about food systems there?' Is it about learning more about how to help people in need in Israel? About maybe giving a little money to an Israeli nonprofit like Leket, which essentially redistributes leftover food from those who have it to those who need it – and which, coincidentally, was started by Joe Gitler, who made aliyah from Teaneck?"

Shmitta rules apply to annual crops – corn and wheat and soy, among others – but they do not apply to perennial crops, including fruits and nuts. "So someone might say, 'OK, the way I'll observe shmitta in New Jersey this year is to become more aware of the difference between annual and perennial crops, and make sure that there are perennials at every one of my Shabbat meals, and to point them out to my guests.'"

Mr. Savage said that Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin of Baltimore points out that although the most vibrant aspects of Jewish life tend to have a lot of ritual associated with them, there is no ritual for shmitta. She suggests creating such a ritual, Mr. Savage said. "What if we created a shmitta seder plate to have on Rosh Hashanah?" A seder plate has seven things – we already have apple and honey and challah and wine, so what should the other three things be? Maybe one is a pomegranate. And then what about the other two? It leaves us a space both to be creative and to think about tradition."

He has some suggestions for a shmitta observance outside Israel. "Shmitta means letting go. We all have to figure out what to let go," he said. It is that act of letting go, of making do, of creatively repurposing, of working with what's there, that is the essence of the concept.

"In my household, that might be buying books," he said. That is a habit to which he is addicted. "Several months ago, I started taking books I haven't read off my shelves and wrapping them in newspaper. We now have a stack of newspaper-wrapped books, at least 60 or 70 of them. They are not labeled.

SEE JEWISH TIME PAGE 30

Pruning Jewish law

Teaneck woman dives deeply into shmitta

LARRY YUDELSON

Peninah Feldman of Teaneck spent the summer toiling in the scholarship of vineyards.

The budding agronomist has graduated from Cornell's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences and is applying for graduate school to study pest control. She recently spent a month studying at the Yeshivat Chovevei Torah in Riverdale.

This year, the Orthodox rabbinical seminary focused its summer program of intense study on the upcoming shmitta year, and opened it to non-rabbinical students. "It was a really wonderful experience," Ms. Feldman said. "I'm really glad I was able to take a month off from my life and just do it."

Ms. Feldman graduated from the Ma'ayanot Yeshiva High School for Girls, and studied in yeshiva in Israel for a year before Cornell. She said that "it was wonderful" to be part of the Chovevei community and the teamwork of the summer program.

The program began with the group studying the Mishnaic tractate of Shevi'it, which deals with the sabbatical year. After that, the students mostly studied on their own, delving into the thickets of topics that interested them particularly.

For Ms. Feldman, that topic was the question of pruning vineyards during the shmitta year. Pruning is one of the agricultural activities that halacha bars during the sabbatical year. "In the modern era, this has become a much bigger issue

than it was, because the grape vines we have now are so vigorous that they have to be pruned every year," she explained.

Grapes grow only on newly sprouted tendrils. The next year, the tendrils turn to wood, which sends out new tendrils that will yield new grapes. If they are not pruned, the vines will produce too many shoots. That means too many grapes, which "turn out small and mushy and mealy and don't get any of the flavors that would make good wine," Ms. Feldman said.

That wouldn't affect only the sabbatical year's harvest, but the following year's as well.

Pruning the vines before the sabbatical year begins on Rosh Hashanah only would make the problem worse. "You get an explosive rate of growth from the vine," she said. "It wants to grow more." That's why pruning takes place, at least in Israel, in February, when the vines are dormant.

In her study of Jewish law about pruning during shmitta, Ms. Feldman discovered that the topic was long dormant. The Mishnah and the Jerusalem Talmud discussed the topic in the first few hundred years of the common era, while Jews still lived in the Land of Israel. After that, commentators on the Talmud discussed that discussion, but with virtually no Jewish agricultural presence in the Land of Israel for 14 centuries, the questions were abstract. That changed with the return to the land in the 19th century.



Peninah Feldman on a tractor at Cornell and holding a giant etrog in Israel.



In the 1880s, after Edmond James de Rothschild helped the Jews of the First Aliya plant their first vineyards near Rishon Letzayon, the topic was no longer moot – and halachic discourse blossomed.

"I was surprised by how the Torah says you can't prune your vines, and every modern posek" – halachic arbiter – "says, here's how you prune your vines. I was surprised by the resourcefulness of the poskim," Ms. Feldman said.

Different authorities dealt with the problem of permitting pruning in different ways.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, who would later become the first chief rabbi of Palestine under British rule, is famous for solving the problem of shmitta through heter mechira – permitting the land to be temporarily sold to non-Jews.

But in addition to the broad, general, and controversial solution, he also addressed the specifics of agriculture in the shmitta year.

In terms of pruning, Ms. Feldman said, "Rav Kook imagines that the Torah is only talking about pruning the very tips of branches, but the modern way, when we prune down to the bottom of the branches, is sort of a lower level of transgression and you're able to do it to preserve the tree."

"The Chazon Ish" – Rabbi Avrohom Yeshaya Karelitz, who led Israeli charedi Judaism until his death in 1953, and rejected Rabbi Kook's approach – "has his own picture. He has a very complicated ruling, where he says only a professional can do a good job, and only that is

SEE PRUNING PAGE 30



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Cover Story

Jewish Time FROM PAGE 28

“One of my ideas is to disable the one-click on Amazon – to take my credit card off. That will make it a lot harder for me to buy books. So every time I have the craving for a new book I will go into my study and pick one of the books and unwrap it. And then I will say, ‘Oh my God, I always wanted to read this.’”

Similarly, he said, an artist friend has decided not to buy new art materials, but instead to use what he has and to

try to work with found objects for the year.

Shlomo Carlebach said that “the Torah is a commentary on the world, and the world is a commentary on the Torah.” True to his idea of recycling, Hazon has taken that saying and applied it to shmitta. “It means that the conversation goes both ways,” Mr. Savage said. “Shmitta is a great time to go between tradition on the one hand and new ideas on the other.”

Hazon has created a sourcebook for shmitta. It’s online; you can find it by googling Shmitta Hazon sourcebook.

Pruning FROM PAGE 29

prohibited by the Torah.” As a result, pruning could be done by amateurs, if they were careful to be indiscriminate about it.

“It was a very cool journey,” she said of her research, which she collated in a paper for the yeshiva’s forthcoming journal on shmitta.

Ms. Feldman came to her study with hands-on experience in shmitta research. She worked as an intern two summers working on projects for the Israel Ministry of Agriculture’s Unit for Agriculture According to the Torah.

“One of the projects was a spray that you spray on flowers of grape vines which stops them from turning into fruit,” she said. Because the flowers are so sensitive, they can be disrupted by the chemical that doesn’t harm the vine’s leaves. As an intern, she helped harvesting and weighing the grapes from the sprayed vines.

The immediate purpose of the spray was for orlah – the produce of a tree or vine’s first three years, which the Torah says cannot be eaten. “Instead of having to produce all this non-usable fruit and send in laborers to remove it, it would be much cheaper to just spray this spray and take down the yield.”

And it would have applications for shmitta: “Destroying the flowers helps the vine produce a moderate number of fruits, even if there are a lot of branches. But the best way to use it would be in conjunction with another form of pruning.”

She compared her interest to the halachic issues of pruning to her professional interest in pesticides.

“I’m interested in giving both growers and poskim as many tools as possible to solve problems,” she said.

“There’s a lot to be said about shmitta on a conceptual level, but on a practical level, just dropping everything and walking away doesn’t work. In the Torah, God says, ‘I’m going to make you miracles and you’ll be able to eat all your stored food from before shmitta.’ I don’t think we live in a world where God is going to give us miracles for our economy to function.”

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What is shmitta?

Local Conservative rabbi explains

JOANNE PALMER

Rabbi Dr. Mayer Rabinowitz of Teaneck, a halachist at the Jewish Theological Seminary, is used to taking the long view on issues.

That is particularly useful for a discussion of shmitta, a biblically mandated but not detailed agricultural practice that affects produce grown in the land of Israel.

There is much that is not clear about the original mandate, found in Leviticus 25, verses 1 through 7, “but what is clear is that it applies only to the land of Israel, so that once the Temple is destroyed and most of the Jews no longer live there, it wasn’t being observed,” Rabbi Rabinowitz said. And it became onerous for the few Jews still farming to take the year off – and actually it was more like two years, because there would have been neither reaping nor sowing during the shmitta year.

“So Judah HaNasi, who died at the beginning of the third century, started limiting the laws of shmitta for those Jews who still lived there, because if they didn’t have the money to pay their taxes to the Romans, they’d be putting themselves in trouble. So already, at the end of the second century, there was a tendency to limit shmitta.” The borders around the area affected by shmitta were tightened, people who were suspected of nonobservance were forgiven, and “there was some

talk of annulling it altogether,” he said.

That lasted for a very long time, and then Jews started coming back.

“Once Jews started to return to the land in significant numbers, and to cultivate it, they had to start dealing with the laws of

Once Jews started to return to the land in significant numbers, and to cultivate it, they had to start dealing with the laws of shmitta.

shmitta,” Rabbi Rabinowitz said. It was a major issue – the first pioneers came to found kibbutzim, “which were agricultural in nature.

“But the economy had changed since pre-exilic times. It would have threatened the economy.” And what was true a century or so ago is even more true today. Even though many of the kibbutzim and moshavim have diversified, or given up agriculture entirely, still “you have all sorts of agricultural companies producing


SEE WHAT IS SHMITTA? PAGE 32



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Cover Story

What is shmitta?

FROM PAGE 31

all sorts of exports and serving the people of Israel.” If the laws of shmitta were followed strictly, “the entire economy would be in trouble.”

There have been a number of ingenious solutions to the problem. The Chazon Ish, a charedi scholar who died in 1953, and whose opinions are highly influential in that world, “said to sow winter crops early, so they are done before the shmitta year begins.” Other solutions include growing

crops hydroponically, so they do not touch the land. People appointed as agents of a rabbinic court could harvest crops, and then sell them to court-held warehouses. “These legal fictions worked because the law was said to apply to individuals, and they weren’t working as individuals,” Rabbi Rabinowitz said.

Some charedi kibbutzim were supported by a shmitta foundation; money raised abroad helped its residents weather the two lean years in the cycle.

The first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Israel, Abraham Isaac Kook, “came up with the idea of a heter mechira,” Rabbi

Rabinowitz said. Just as a heter mechira allows Jews to sell their chametz to non-Jews before Pesach, and then reclaim it for the same nominal sum after the holiday, the legal fiction allows Jews to sell land to non-Jews for a two-year period. There would be five actions – sowing, pruning, reaping, harvesting grapes, and plowing – that would have to be done by non-Jews. Jews could do the rest.

There were ideological problems with these solutions, however. Being supported from outside Israel “contradicted the vision of Zionism, and Kook’s idea means selling the land of Israel to non-Jews,” he said.

Stores that sell produce in Israel during the shmitta year now inform their customers about the methods used. “One will say we have only Arab produce, and another will say heter mechira, and another that it’s been grown hydroponically, or it is from places where the laws do not apply.”

Rabbi Rabinowitz is Conservative; the movement’s counterpart in Israel is called Masorti, and its prime hal-

The idea of using the shmitta year to provide for the poor, as the Torah verse suggests we do, resurfaces often.

achist is Rabbi David Golinkin. “Rabbi Golinkin said that farmers who can’t observe shmitta for either personal or financial reasons may do all the acts necessary to their business during the shmitta year, but they should do it in a different manner than usual.”

For example, “They might say, ‘I won’t turn the light on with my hand, but I will with my elbow.’” (No, it is not forbidden to turn lights on during the shmitta year; it is just hard to come up with an example about farming that speaks to non-farmers.)

“Rabbi Golinkin also said that you should avoid planting and tending to ornamental gardens, although if such gardens are necessary to prevent erosion, or for reasons of that nature, you could do it.

“And he also suggests that all Jewish farmers donate a portion of their shmitta year profits to the poor.”

The idea of using the shmitta year to provide for the poor, as the Torah verse suggests we do, resurfaces often.

Ruth Calderon, a secular Israeli talmudist and a member of the Knesset, “recently came up with a great idea,” Rabbi Rabinowitz said. “Since shmitta is about the forgiving of debt, she is trying to get the banks to lower the interest rate, or to forgive some debt. The forgiving of debt doesn’t apply only to the land of Israel,” he said.

And environmental values also are bound up in the concept of shmitta, he said. “How should we treat the land? We should consider the values that underlie shmitta, even if they are not mentioned specifically.

“There are now a lot of Jews in North America setting up organizations for sustainable agriculture, sustainable meat production, and tying agriculture back into their Jewish culture and identity. They are taking metaphoric ideas that are not part of the legal system as it is written, and using that to expand the idea of shmitta into the modern period, to give it meaning and value today.

“After all,” Rabbi Rabinowitz said, “We don’t live in the same society that people in the biblical period lived in. We mostly don’t grow our own food.”



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Don't fear the shmitta

LARRY YUDELSON

Rabbi Chaim Jachter doesn't want the shmitta year to turn into a boycott of Israeli fruit and produce.

Rabbi Jachter leads Congregation Shaarei Orah, the Sephardic Congregation of Teaneck. He also heads the bible department at the Torah Academy of Bergen County. And as the author of three volumes tracing the halachic discussions of various issues, he may be the area's most published writer on Jewish law.

"My opinion is to rely on the heter mechira" – the process by which the Israeli rabbinate permits agriculture during the shmitta year by selling the land of Israel to a Gentile, much as chametz is sold before Passover.

He has advice for consumers in New Jersey who want to observe the laws of shmitta when they shop. When they buy packaged goods made in Israel, he said, there is no need to worry about eating produce from the shmitta year that might have been grown improperly. Kashrut

agencies such as the Orthodox Union "take care of that for you," he said.

The Orthodox Union, for its part, does not rely on the heter.

"All OU-certified products use either pre-shmitta produce, produce grown outside the halachic boundaries of Israel, or produce grown by non-Jews," according to an article in the organization's Jewish Action magazine.

Rabbi Jachter said that the OU is following the lead of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik – and the charedi world – in rejecting the heter.

But though Rabbi Jachter was ordained at Yeshiva University, where Rabbi Soloveitchik taught, he said he preferred the view of "Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, who ruled that one who wants to can rely on the heter," he said. "I would think you should follow Ovadia Yosef's opinion at a time when you should be supporting Israel.

"I know it's very controversial, but Jews should always be supporting the Israeli economy."

Those who don't rely on the heter



mechira will not be able to eat produce exported from Israel that was grown during the shmitta year.

"If religious Jews are going to boycott Israeli produce, people in Costco are going to see that Israeli produce is not selling," Rabbi Jachter said. "That's terrible. We should go out of our way to buy Israeli produce. If our great-grandparents had had the opportunity to buy Israeli produce in their markets, they would have gone crazy. For the mitzvah of supporting the Israeli economy and our brothers and sisters who are in Israel, and especially after this past

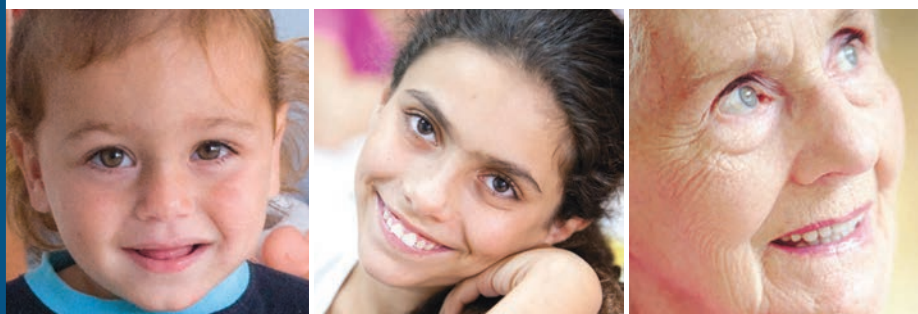
summer, you can rely on the heter."

However, he said, Israeli produce from the shmitta year – which would could include fruit that was harvested after next year, but blossomed this year – has a special sanctity that requires special care.

It must be eaten, not discarded. Which means to eat it all – something our great-grandparents would have understood.

"If there are any leftovers of Israeli produce, put them in a plastic bag and let them rot," he said. Once it spoiled, shmitta produce loses its sanctity and can be thrown away.

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