

## **Scratching the Seven Year Itch**

This week in Jerusalem a brief but remarkable ceremony will take place. The Chief Rabbi of Israel will sign a contract selling the land of Israel to an Arab. The end of the Arab-Israeli conflict perhaps? No, in fact it's a legal loophole designed to get round a 3000 year-old-law.

Under biblical law, every seventh year the land of Israel is to lie fallow; the fields cannot be worked, and farmers are given a year's respite. In the early years of the State, faced with a fragile economy and the prospect of blockades by hostile neighbours, then Chief Rabbi, Abraham Isaac Kook, ruled that the biblical prohibition, which might have jeopardized the survival of the fledgling state, could be avoided. His solution: to sell the land to a gentile for the duration of the sabbatical year to allow cultivation to continue. And so, every seventh year since then, the bizarre sale of the Jewish homeland has taken place.

Not everyone was happy with this talmudic evasion. The right wing orthodox objected to the fiction, an objection which has only grown stronger over the years as Israel's economy and security have developed and the justifications for the loophole have faded.

But recently objections have emerged from a new and surprising corner. Now it is not just the passionately religious, but also a secular coalition of psychologists and sociologists, artists and thinkers, which is questioning the loophole and suggesting that, in a world is growing ever faster, ever smaller and ever more pressured, the value of a universal sabbatical should not be so quickly dismissed.

By strange coincidence, I will be spending the sabbatical year... on sabbatical. And some weeks into to my fallow year, I find myself joining the ranks of the Sabbateans. Sure, it was a mammoth task to clear my desk, tough to leave the shelter of my routine, and even harder to come to terms with the fact that I was not as indispensable as I liked to think. But all this only serves to convince me more of the universal need for time out; time to see ourselves not in terms of what we do, but what we are, and even, what we might become.

As I write, on the far side of the table my daughter is chewing her pencil over her homework. She looks up and sees me hunched over mine. My son monitors my grades as eagerly – and as critically – as I monitor his. For our family, learning has become an adventure we have in common.

But the sabbatical concept need not be limited to academic pursuits. It could be a year for a high-street optician to open a clinic in an African village, for a computer programmer to cycle across China. For any of us, to learn that instrument, to write that book, to try the path we never took.

The cost – decommissioning a seventh of the productive work force – might sound steep. But it is an investment with potentially exponential rewards. For the work place: a continuous stream of invigorated employees, brimming with insights and experiences; for families: a time for reacquaintance and renewal; for society: an opportunity for caring individuals to devote not just the margins of their weeks but the very kernels of their days to the underprivileged; for culture: a invitation to untapped masses to learn to appreciate, to explore and to create; for our youth: a promise that passion and opportunity will not be buried for ever with their first paycheck; and perhaps most of all for our seniors: a chance to prepare for the increasingly traumatic transition to retirement and to preempt the dread “if only” that threatens to haunt our final years.

Run our lives according to ancient tenets? It wouldn't be the first time. In a society in which, as recently as the last century, it was the norm for slaves to work from Christmas to Christmas, it was the notion of a universal weekly day of rest – the biblical edict of the Sabbath – that had more impact than any other single institution on preserving the dignity of the individual and improving their quality of life. If the weekly Sabbath could have such an impact, why not the sabbatical year?

It may just be that the universal sabbatical is a 3000 year old idea whose time has come.



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