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The Hazon שמיטה SHMITA SOURCEBOOK

By Yigal Deutscher, Anna Hanau, and Nigel Savage

First Edition, August 2013



JEWISH INSPIRATION. SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES.

The Hazon
שמיטה SHMITA
SOURCEBOOK

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August 2013 / Elul 5773
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Hazon means vision.

We create healthier and more sustainable communities in the Jewish world and beyond.

We effect change in the world in three ways.

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Learning leads to doing. If these texts and questions help you to learn more deeply, to eat more consciously, and to act more ethically, then renewing our relationship with Shmita will indeed lead to nourishment in the widest sense – for our families, our communities, and the physical world upon which all life depends.

“The Torah is a commentary on the world, and the world is a commentary on the Torah.”

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Preface

CYCLES OF TIME are central to Jewish life, and they are among the most significant of our contributions to the world around us. The modern weekend of western tradition is simply the extension of the Sabbath from one day to two; without the Sabbath there would be no weekend. And without the Torah, and the Shabbat of Jewish tradition, there would be no Sabbath. That indeed is why the word for “Saturday” in Italian is *sabato* – because the Sabbath, introduced into Italy in Roman days by the Jews, began on the Jewish Sabbath and not on the Christian Sunday that subsequently evolved from it. In practice, today, Shabbat remains central to Jewish life, though Jewish people observe Shabbat differently from each other – it’s different in a reform synagogue than an orthodox one, and it’s observed differently by a *hiloni* (secular) Israeli than by someone who’s observant. But it’s literally impossible to imagine Jewish life without Shabbat.

And just as Shabbat punctuates the week, so too the chagim – the holidays – punctuate the year. Tu b’Shvat and Purim and Pesach herald the spring. Shavuot marks early summer. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur provoke self-reflection as a new Jewish year begins. Sukkot celebrates the harvest and the end of summer. Chanukah offers light in the darkness and the knowledge that a new natural cycle will shortly begin.

In recent years there’s been a flowering of interest and awareness in the rhythms of the calendar. The every-28-years blessing of the sun was a big deal when it happened in 2009; I hope I’ll be around to celebrate the next one in 2037. I’m excited this year to celebrate Chanukah and Thanksgiving together – the last time that that will occur for about 75,000 years. More prosaically: more people probably count the omer, today, than did so a dozen years ago. New books have come out looking at the entire period from Rosh Chodesh Elul through to Simchat Torah as a single period of time, focused on teshuvah. More people each cycle seem to be learning daf yomi – a seven-and-a-half year cycle of Jewish life that is an early twentieth-century innovation, but one which shows signs of lasting for a long time to come.

The one long cycle of Jewish life that remains relatively unexplored is the cycle of Shmita. The sabbatical year is no less central in the Torah than is Shabbat itself. Six days you should work, and on the seventh you should rest; six years you should work the land, and engage in commerce; in the seventh year (somehow) the land should rest, you should rest, and debts should be annulled. After 49 days, seven cycles of seven, the 50th day is Shavuot. And after 49 years, seven cycles of seven, the 50th is Yovel – the Jubilee year.

In a formal halachic sense – in terms of Jewish law – Shmita only applies in Israel. In practical terms, therefore, Shmita becomes headline news once every seven years when, invariably, there are arguments about how it should be observed in practice in the modern land and state of Israel. There is a good deal of work in Hebrew about Shmita, what it means, how it can and should be observed, and so on.

Even so, inside Israel Shmita is mostly the intellectual property of the orthodox and ultra-orthodox. Until very recently, few non-orthodox Israeli Jews have engaged much with Shmita,

either as an idea or as a potential range of practices. Outside Israel, Shmita remains obscure. In the last two Shmita Years – in 2000-2001, and in 2007-2008 – I’m aware of a number of synagogues, mostly orthodox, which held study sessions on Shmita. Beyond a few one-off learning sessions: not much.

It was in response to this, in December 2007, following a keynote given by Nati Passow of Jewish Farm School at Hazon’s second Food Conference at Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center, that I said that we would launch a Shmita Project. Its goal would be – and remains – simply to put Shmita back on the agenda of the Jewish people; and in due course, through us, to start to seed it as an idea in wider public awareness, beyond the bounds of Jewish life.

There are, I think, two broad – and somewhat distinct, albeit overlapping – ways for us to engage with Shmita. One is, in a sense, instrumental; the second has a deeper kind of intellectual integrity, but may also be vaguer.

The instrumental use is simply about putting Shmita literally back on the calendar. Even in non-halachic Jewish communities, Shabbat is still different from other days of the week. Jews go to a Seder, or eat matzah on Pesach, even if they don’t keep all of the halachot of Pesach. So Shmita ought, in the first instance, to come back into active Jewish life as a distinct time-frame – regardless of the content with which we actually mark it. I mean by this, things like:

- Using the time from now until the next Shmita Year (which starts at Rosh Hashanah 5775, that is, on September 24th, 2014) as a distinct time-period in relation to Shmita: learning about it, getting people excited about it, thinking about how the Shmita Year could be different; and doing this in advance of the year itself. This involves publicly framing the Shmita Year as a year distinct in the life of a particular Jewish institution. How could or should we be different, during this year, than during the other six years of the cycle?
- Then using the Shmita Year itself not merely to be different, in some way, than in the previous years; but also – for the first time in modern Jewish history; perhaps for the first time since Second Temple times – using the Shmita Year itself partly to start a public conversation *about the entire next seven-year Shmita Cycle*;
- And then entering into a full seven-year cycle, from September 13th, 2015 to September 25th, 2022, with Shmita firmly on the calendar of Jewish life – with a sense of seven-year goals for institutions, being worked on through the full seven-year period, and with the seventh year itself being both a celebration, a culmination, and a period of rest and reflection, following the preceding six years.

The second way for us to engage Shmita is indeed to engage intellectually (and indeed emotionally, creatively and spiritually) with the texts themselves: the primary, secondary and tertiary texts that introduce, explicate, and comment on the various ideas encompassed by the idea of “Shmita.”

Most of the rest of this sourcebook is devoted to these texts. I've been learning them steadily for the last five and a half years. The longer I have learned them the more fascinated I have become by Shmita. The primary texts are models not only of brevity but also of *unclarity* and contradiction. What exactly were you meant to eat in the Shmita Year? How do the different aspects of Shmita stand in relation to each other? If the Jewish people bequeathed to human history only these primary texts, what theory of Jewish tradition – of our values and aspirations – might we derive from them? The prozbol and the heter mechira: are these in some sense regretful compromises, which dilute the pureness of the original biblical texts? Or are they vital innovations in Jewish life which should be celebrated because they are grounded in the reality of human behavior and the necessity to place central human needs (in the economies both of land and of money) above abstract aspiration?

This collection is very much a first draft. Shmita is the public property of the Jewish people – and a gift from us to the whole world. So we hope that you will read them – learn them – and share them. Most of all we hope that you'll get back to us with comments, emendations, suggestions and questions. We fully intend to publish a revised and expanded edition in a few months time.

I want to express my own thanks to many people who have helped shape my thinking on Shmita: Yeshiva Chovevei Torah and Lincoln Square Synagogue did a superb day-long yom iyyun on Shmita, in December 2007, which was absolutely outstanding, which I still remember clearly, and which helped give me a sense of the range and complexity of rabbinic sources on Shmita. Adam Berman, Zelig Golden, Nati Passow, Dr Shamu Sadeh and Nili Simhai have been the key influences on me amongst my organizational friends and peers in thinking about Jewish education and relationship to land. Shuli Passow shared with me a superb essay she wrote on Hakhel. Jakir Manela put together an absolutely phenomenal beit midrash retreat on Shmita at Pearlstone Center in early 2012. It had a huge impact on those present, and provided a model of what's possible going forwards. Dr Jeremy Benstein has been a significant influence in helping me think freshly about relationships between Jewish tradition and ecology. In May 2012 he and I taught a beit midrash on Shmita at our Siach retreat, in Israel, which was significant for me and I think influential for many of the people who were there. I'm grateful to Rabbi Ari Hart (and Kevah) for a superb multi-week learning series on Shmita that he has been teaching – and which we are continuing – for Hazon's staff and some of our friends and colleagues in New York. I'm grateful to all of Hazon's staff members and board members for indulging my wild enthusiasm for Shmita, even when they didn't necessarily share it or fully understand it. And special thanks to Anna Hanau, who continues to play a unique role at Hazon – helping to marshal unwieldy forces (like Yigal and me) in ways practical and kind, and thus helping good ideas to get out into the world.

I want to thank four funders who are supporting Hazon's work on Shmita: UJA-Federation of New York; San Francisco Jewish Community Federation; Lisa & Douglas Goldman Fund; and the Opaline Fund. It has been exciting and rewarding to see these funders begin to share our sense of excitement and possibility in relation to Shmita, and we hope that others will follow in their paths. A special thanks is due to the Peoplehood Commission of UJA-Federation of New York, together with our lead partners in developing Siach: B'Maglei Tzedek and the Heschel Center in Israel, and the Jewish Social Action Forum in London. Siach has become an important platform both to think about Shmita and to start to disseminate ideas in lots of

different ways. Dyonna Ginsburg –key instigator of Siach - continues to inspire and motivate people all over the Jewish world, and she is a key thought-partner to me in this work.

Finally, a few words about Yigal Deutscher. Yigal is, variously, an employee, a colleague, a friend, a teacher, and someone I look up to enormously. We first met in 2003, when he was still in undergrad. My recollection is that he wanted us to hire him to create bicycle lanes in New York, which I thought a worthy goal, but not something that Hazon was likely to employ him to do. Instead, he became an intern with us in preparation for Hazon's second annual NY bike ride. After the ride, I suggested he go and see Adam Berman, and in due course he became the first Adamahnik. I've seen him grow and thrive in subsequent years. He did the Agroecology course and farm apprenticeship at the University of California, Santa Cruz. He played an absolutely key role in founding and developing the Shorashim apprenticeship, which is now the Eco-Israel program, at Chava v'Adam, in Israel. He's taught on multiple occasions at Hazon events. And he and I have had many conversations about Shmita. I love Yigal's thoughtfulness, his passion, and his determination in very good ways to try to slow certain things down – to connect notions of permaculture to Jewish tradition, and to apply permaculture ideas metaphorically as well as literally. He is leading Hazon's work not only on the creation of this sourcebook but also, much more widely, on our work on Shmita overall. If you're interested in developing the conversation on Shmita in your community, I hope you'll think about reaching out to Yigal directly.

Organizationally, the Shmita ranks are growing. The Jewish Farm School and 7Seeds have been founding partners with Hazon in the Shmita Project. The Green Hevra, of which Hazon is a member, is working steadily to put the awareness of Shmita on the Jewish communal agenda. And precisely because Shmita is the shared intellectual property of the Jewish people, we fully expect and intend that many, many people and institutions will start to develop work around Shmita, and we're happy and excited variously to partner with them, learn from them, or cheer them on from the sidelines. Already in this category I would add Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin, at BJEN, and Rabbi Or Rose at Hebrew College, plus Einat Kramer at Teva Ivri in Israel. All three – together with Jeremy Benstein and the Heschel Center – are doing their own work on Shmita. We're excited to partner with BJEN, Hebrew College and Heschel in their new Sova Project blog. Rabbis Jay Rosenstein, Jeremy Gerber and Eytan Hammerman, amongst others, have given me a platform and a warm reception to talk about Shmita in their communities.

Finally: we've been working on these texts for a long while. But we're finishing this first draft during the counting of the omer. Jewish tradition is wise, and though I can't prove this, I think it makes me a better person. The annual rhythm of counting the omer has enriched my life significantly. In sharing these texts with you, Yigal and Anna and I, and everyone at Hazon, hopes that they will enrich your life also; and in due course play some role in creating a healthier and more sustainable Jewish community, and a healthier and more sustainable world for all.

Nigel Savage

Berkeley, CA

27th day of the omer 5773

22nd April 2013

Introduction

The Wider Context: Introducing the Shmita Project



THE HAZON SHMITA SOURCEBOOK offers an in-depth overview of Shmita, the Sabbatical practice introduced in the Torah. Similar to Shabbat, Shmita is something that exists within a cycle of seven, although this particular cycle is in terms of years, not days. As it was first intended, on every seventh year, the people of Israel, following the same collective rhythm, would practice a cultural ‘release’ (the English meaning of the Hebrew word Shmita). This particular release was particularly rooted in agricultural and economic systems: during this period of time, debts would be forgiven, agricultural lands would lie fallow, private land holdings would become open to the commons, and staples such as food storage and perennial harvests would be freely redistributed and accessible to all. There’s a lot more to it, as you’ll see throughout this booklet.

Yet, many of us, even if we are Jewishly knowledgeable, know less about Shmita than we do about other Jewish traditions. Today, it does not define Jewishness like other popular rituals or time-based traditions, such as Shabbat, Yom Kippur, or Passover. This is a learning journey for many of us; not just

individually, but collectively. Shmita traditionally applied in the land of Israel alone. So for over 2,000 years, when the Jewish people were separated from *Ha'aretz* – “The land” – Jewish faith and culture developed separately from the necessity, and thus awareness, of Shmita.

However, there are a few things stirring about right now that are changing our relationship to, and perception of, Shmita:

1. Since the resumption of Jewish agricultural life in Israel, which has developed enormously since 1948, Shmita is no longer an abstract ideal or a romantic notion. It is a very real part of the religious, agricultural, and economic reality in Israel today, and one that is simultaneously both very exciting and very challenging. Each time the Shmita Year arrives on the Israeli calendar, the debate of what to do with this tradition is something that is becoming increasingly harder to ignore.
2. The Jewish world is now more linked than ever – and more diverse; and there is both a need, and an incredible opportunity, for new areas of shared conversation across boundaries and difference. Shmita provides a positive, Jewishly rich, socially engaged vision that connects personal identity and activist energies with Jewish identity and community, and the values of Jewish peoplehood. In particular, Shmita engages both a sense of shared tradition (it is, literally, a shared intellectual inheritance of the Jewish people) and a sense of current and future responsibility: Shmita challenges all who learn about it to think about what our obligations are to land and people in general, and to land and people within the Jewish world and in Israel, in particular.
3. The Jewish social justice and environmental movement has grown and matured over the last twenty years, and now offers a powerful voice in the way Jewish community comes together socially, religiously, and educationally, both in the context of Jewish tradition and the wider non-Jewish world. As this movement deepens, there is a new context in which to turn to the Torah for guidance, to learn timeless values for the real issues we face today.
4. The environmental degradation and economic instability we are globally experiencing make it important to reevaluate our cultural practices and norms, to really strive for sustainability and resiliency for the sake of future generations. The values inherent in the Shmita tradition challenge a contemporary world striving for continual growth, development, and individual gains. Perhaps there is a message embedded within Shmita that we can use right now to strengthen the movement for creating a healthier, more holistic and sustainable culture.

So the time has come to really enter into this conversation, for the first time in a very long time: What is this Shmita tradition? What might it mean for us today? In Israel and beyond? And not just for farmers, but for businesses, for families, for communities, for each of us individually?

Hazon, in partnership with 7Seeds and Jewish Farm School, has created the Shmita Project to support this conversation. We truly believe that Shmita holds some of the greatest gifts for us, as a way to reconnect to our own ancient traditions and as a way to set healthy patterns for those generations who come after us.

Specifically, the aims of the Shmita Project are to:

- Create an entryway into exploring the primary sources, rich commentary, and history surrounding this integrative and holistic cultural tradition.
- Establish the understanding that Shmita exists within a cycle. It is not an isolated calendar year but a cycle that can be viewed as a vision for holistic cultural design, with guiding values that can enrich society as a whole, in all years.
- Translate Shmita into a modern context, by providing resources and tools to use in your own community leading up to and during the Shmita Year.
- Connect a worldwide network of individuals and organizations who are interested in exploring the possibility of infusing all aspects of the Jewish community with the values and ideals found in the Shmita Year.

It is an honor to engage in this work and it is something we are very excited about. One of our first projects has been this sourcebook. Our intention for the sourcebook is to offer an educational background so we can all be having this conversation together. This is just a beginning. There is much more to explore. However, we do hope this will serve in establishing a shared, common ground. From this place, we can continue the work, expanding upon our own curiosities and understanding of Shmita, and creatively apply the values of this tradition to our own lives in all the diverse ways that are possible. We hope you enjoy the sourcebook, and it finds good use in your hands, and in your community.

Shmita Sourcebook: A Look Inside

Before we begin to imagine contemporary Sabbatical applications, this is an opportunity to lay the foundation: to become familiar with what our spiritual, historic and cultural tradition has to say about Shmita.

Since Shmita has not been observed formally for many centuries, we do not have that much to rely on (in comparison with the layers and layers of text and rulings that come along with other parts of our tradition). But there are vibrant roots deep in the soil of our tradition that are ready to give forth sweet fruits if we can nurture them and tend them with respect, curiosity, and creativity.

So here's what's inside this sourcebook: We begin with Biblical sources. What does the Torah say about Shmita? What is the language that is used in laying the foundation for this paradigm? We then move forward in history. Between the time of first entering Israel and our forced departure in Roman times, there is not that much in our written tradition that directly speaks of Shmita, which, of course, leads to many questions regarding what it actually looked like in antiquity. But we provide a few key historical points of reference.

Then we move on to Rabbinic codifications. In the areas where Shmita is mentioned in the Bible, there are some clear points offered but much is left open to the imagination. Through Rabbinic conversations recorded in the Mishna and Talmud, much more is clarified. Seder Zeraim, the section pertaining to agricultural laws of Israel and where all Shmita laws are

found, was actually not included in the more standard, widely-studied Talmud Bavli, as this was written outside of Israel, where such laws were not practiced. It is the Talmud Yerushalmi, written in the land of Israel, that records such Rabbinic conversations.

When, in the Middle Ages, the Rambam created the Mishna Torah, a compilation of laws from the Mishna and Talmud, he included the section on Zeraim. It is his teachings and codifications that we are using in the sections that deal with Rabbinic clarifications of Shmita practices.

As we see from the Rabbinic writings from Diaspora Jewish communities, the spark of Shmita was kept alive within Rabbinic and spiritual circles. Rabbis wrote about Shmita as a vision or utopian ideal, romantically celebrating the beauty that Shmita inspires. We share a survey of these voices, as well.

Next, closer to our present era, we present the very real dilemma that arose as more and more Jews were returning to Israel, culminating with the First Aliyah in the 1880's, the subsequent pioneers, and then the creation of the state in 1948. Significant portions of the Jewish people were back in Israel and Shmita was as real to us as Shabbat or any other Jewish practice. This created some big hurdles and questions for those early communities in Israel, trying on the one hand, to keep true to the ancient law of the land, and, on the other hand, to meet the conditions necessary for comforts they had grown accustomed to in modern European agricultural and economic systems.

Finally, we close with the question of what to do with Shmita today. With the emerging interest and excitement around Shmita, we hope the next Shmita Year will be the first in a long span of Jewish history (thousands of years!) in which large numbers of Jewish people, communities, and organizations reconnect to this powerful tradition, and use it as an inspirational guide to live more ethically and sustainably, in the land of Israel and outside of it. We also hope that following the conclusion of this Shmita Year, the wider Jewish community can consciously begin preparing for Shmita from Year 1 of the seven-year cycle. So we return to powerful and wide-open questions. What do the values of Shmita mean for us now, in a society so vastly different than the early agrarian societies of our early Israelite ancestors? How can we design for Shmita to ensure the possibility of bringing this vision to life in our own day? We present a few voices to open this rich conversation, which we hope will continue in many diverse ways over the years ahead.

Shmita, as a cultural platform, exists within, and stands upon, the broader context of the Torah, as well as Jewish history, laws, tradition and thought. Yes, there are particular laws specific to the Shmita Year, and there may be very clear ways to prepare for this time. However, as students of Shmita, we invite you to explore the many ways Shmita is an extension of the rest of the Torah, both narrowly and broadly defined. As you study the specific agricultural laws of Shmita, consider: What is the larger, broader context of Jewish agricultural laws and how might this have played a part in supporting a Sabbatical release? As you study the economics of Shmita, consider: What is the larger, broader context of Jewish economic values and how might this have laid the initial framework for a Sabbatical release? What do these ideas say about Jewish tradition as a whole, beyond Shmita itself? In this way, Shmita can be seen as a culmination of all Torah values in holistic practice, and it can also be seen as a portal through which to view the entire Torah.

The Art of Questioning

This booklet is organized with a series of sources, each followed by a set of questions. Here are some suggestions for using these texts:

1. First, take time to understand the text. The questions under each source are designed to help you understand the main ideas first. The next step is to bring them to life, and we've also asked questions that we hope will be seeds for rich conversation.
2. Since Shmita has been out of practice for many generations, our relationship with this tradition is still somewhat abstract. There are few "right answers" around how Shmita was observed historically and how we might observe it today. These are texts to prompt curiosity, debate and fresh ideas.
3. Try to make this your own. If the questions we have posed do not speak to you or stir up deep curiosity, then pass on them. But please don't pass on the source. Read it again with your own eyes and allow your own questions to emerge. Make this your own process. And please feel free to be in touch and let us know what your own questions were. We'd love to hear them.

Cultivating a Learning Community

When we learn, we acquire both facts and frameworks: new things that we didn't know before, and new ways to understand the world by interpreting things we already knew. With both, your world gets bigger.

But there is also the less tangible, but very real, simple joy of learning itself. The setting. The people. The evening spent in discussion and the ah ha! moments of discovery. It is one thing to read a book—but it's another thing to learn with others, to use conversation and questions to get from one place to another. We build relationships, not only with what we learn, but also with the person we are learning with. It's the difference between eating alone and sharing a meal with others.

Hazon works to create a healthier and more sustainable Jewish community, as a step towards creating a healthier and more sustainable world for all. The materials in this book are an important step towards this goal, not just in terms of the subject matter, but also in relationship to the process of learning together, which we feel is an essential component of a strong and healthy community.

You can use the sections in this book to host a multi-week group study circle (which we call a Beit Midrash), a one-day seminar, an evening lecture, or an informal group conversation around a dinner table or anywhere you'd like (for more ideas about how to host a Shmita-related event in your community, visit Hazon.org/shmitaproject). However the study group comes together, a strong part of Jewish learning, in line with the intention of cultivating a learning community, is the practice of Chavruta and this is something we like to recommend as a creative method of exploring these Torah based texts.

Chavruta means “fellowship,” and refers to a traditional form of Torah or Talmud study done in pairs. Two people sit together and read a text out loud, discussing words, sentences and paragraphs as they go. Chavruta is an intense and provocative way to learn a text because you can engage deeply with a small section of what is presented, and your partner’s questions may be substantially different from your own. The combined exploration of the text can make for a very rich discussion. The two partners do not have to have the same amount of knowledge, although they should be interested in each other’s questions, and in encouraging the other to ask their questions.

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We’ve chosen this license for a few reasons:

- We believe this information is so valuable we want it to be widely shared, so that more and more people can come to realize the value and priceless gifts of the Shmita tradition. Many people who might deeply appreciate this content may not be able to afford it if we put a price on it. If you do greatly enjoy this work and you feel so moved, be in touch and we would gladly accept a financial donation or some other contribution.

- Many of these sources come from the Torah and from Rabbis who are no longer living. Does anyone own the Torah? Can the Torah be copyrighted? We recognize the Torah as a collective commons of humanity, and as a free gift for all Jewish people.
- We hope that the content, as we have organized it, will work very well for you...but we also realize it may not actually work for you, for whatever reason. You might not want to use the entire booklet as it is. Perhaps you would like to do a teaching and use a few sources from each section? The invitation is to take the core material (the sources) and make it work for you, to best suit you and your community's needs. No reason to recreate the wheel each time we want to begin teaching about Shmita.

In general, we'd like you to know that in creating the Shmita Project our most clear intention has been to support the general process of reimagining Shmita across the wider Jewish community. In that way, we are here to be of service and support. And we hope this sourcebook will do just that.

Credits & Gratitude

We are incredibly grateful to UJA-Federation of New York, Lisa & Douglas Goldman Fund, the San Francisco Jewish Community Federation, the Opaline Fund of the Jewish Community Federation and Endowment Fund, and Pears Foundation for their generous support of this project.

Additionally, we wish to thank the following individuals for their helpful insights, comments and contributions to this sourcebook.

Einat Kramer, Teva Ivri
 Elisheva Urbas, Hazon
 Jonathan Schorsch, Professor, Columbia University
 Judith Belasco, Hazon
 Mirele Goldsmith, Jewish Greening Fellowship
 Nati Passow, Jewish Farm School
 Rabbi Ari Hart, Hebrew Institute of Riverdale / Uri L'Tzedek
 Rabbi Arthur Waskow, Shalom Center
 Rabbi David Ingber, Romemu
 Rabbi David Seidenberg, Neohasid.org
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Much thanks, as well, to the Green Hevra, Siach Network, Sova Project, and 7Seeds for the ongoing dialogue, partnership, and collaboration in helping to expand the Shmita conversation nationally.

Section 1

Biblical Foundations: Shmita in the Torah



THE ENTIRE TORAH can be viewed as a collection of teachings and stories for a wandering people, a diverse collection of tribes, about to enter a land they will call home, where they will settle and build societal structures for generations to come. Within the vast collection of laws, a pattern emerges around the cycle of seven, beginning with the seven days of creation. This is a personal rhythm, as well as a collective one, for the entire nation to share in together. Today, while the weekly seven day cycle of Shabbat is widely celebrated, the yearly cycle of seven is less known. In this section are the core Biblical texts which elucidate the cultural tradition known as Shmita. Have you heard of this before? Is this something that has personal meaning for you? If so, perhaps these texts will enable you to think more deeply about this tradition. And if not, perhaps these texts will introduce a whole new way of considering time, community, property, land, and food.

1. Vision for a Just Society

This is the first introduction to Shmita in the Torah, and it comes in Parshat Mishpatim, which presents a set of moral codes to live by, received directly after the revelation at Sinai.

What is the overarching concern that links these laws together? Is there a common, shared theme?

Why do you think this list would transition into a law describing a societal period for leaving agricultural land fallow? What is the connection between this and all the previous verses?

According to this text, what is the main intention and purpose of this time period? Who benefits most from Shmita?

¹ You are not to take up an empty rumor. Do not put your hand in with a guilty person, to become a witness for wrongdoing.

² You are not to go after many people to do evil. And you are not to testify in a quarrel so as to turn aside toward many- and thus turn away.

³ Even a poor-man you are not to respect as regards his quarrel.

⁴ Now when you encounter your enemy's ox or his donkey straying, return it, return it to him.

⁵ And when you see the donkey of one who hates you crouching under its burden, restrain from abandoning it to him- unbind, yes, unbind it together with him.

⁶ You are not to turn aside the rights of your needy as regards his quarrel.

⁷ From a false matter, you are to keep far! And one clear and innocent, do not kill, for I do not acquit a guilty-person.

⁸ A bribe you are not to take, for a bribe blinds the open-eyed, and twists the words of the righteous.

⁹ A sojourner, you are not to oppress: you yourselves know well the feelings of the sojourner, for sojourners were you in the land of Egypt.

¹⁰ For six years you are to sow your land and to gather in its produce,

¹¹ but in the seventh, you are to let it go [*tishm'tenah*] and to let it be [*u'nitashtha*], that the needy of your people may eat, and what remains, the wildlife of the field shall eat. Do thus with your vineyard, with your olive-grove.

– Exodus 23.1-11

א לא תשא, שמע שוא; אל
תשת ירך עם רשע, להיות עד
חמס. ב לא תהיה אחרי רבים,
לרעת; ולא תענה על רב,
לנשת אחרי רבים להטת. ג ודל,
לא תהדר בריבו. ד כי תפגע
שור איבך, או חמורו תעה: השב
תשיבנו, לו. ה כי תראה חמור
שנאך, רבץ תחת משאו, וחדלת,
מעזב לו עזב תעזב, עמו. ו לא
תטה משפט אבינך, בריבו.
ז מדבר שקר, תרחק; ונקי וצדיק
אל תהרג, כי לא אצדיק רשע.
ח ושחד, לא תקח: כי השחד יעור
פקחים, ויסלף דברי צדיקים.
ט וגר, לא תלחץ; ואתם, ידעתם
את נפש הגר כי גרים הייתם,
בארץ מצרים. י וישש שנים,
תזרע את ארצך; ואספת, את
תבואתה. יא והשביעת
תשמטנה ונטשתה, ואכלו אביני
עמד, ויתרם, תאכל חית השדה;
בן תעשה לכרמך, לזיתך.

2. Shabbat of the Land

¹ The Lord spoke to Moshe at Mount Sinai, saying: ² Speak to the Children of Israel, and say to them: When you enter the land that I am giving you, the land is to cease, a Sabbath-ceasing to the Lord.

³ For six years you are to sow your field, for six years you are to prune your vineyard, then you are to gather in its produce, ⁴ but in the seventh year there shall be a Sabbath of Sabbath-ceasing for the land, a Sabbath to the Lord: your field you are not to sow, your vineyard you are not to prune, ⁵ the aftergrowth of your harvest you are not to harvest, the grapes of your consecrated-vines you are not to amass; a Sabbath of Sabbath-ceasing shall there be for the land!

⁶ Now the Sabbath-yield of the land is for you, for eating: for you, for your servant and for your handmaid, for your hired-hand and for your resident-settler who sojourn with you; ⁷ and for your domestic-animal and the wild-beast that are in your land shall be all its produce, to eat.

– *Leviticus 25.1-7*

א וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל מֹשֶׁה, בְּהַר
סִינַי לֵאמֹר. ב דַּבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי
יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם, כִּי תֵבְאוּ
אֶל הָאָרֶץ, אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי נֹתֵן לָכֶם
וְשָׁבַתָה הָאָרֶץ, שְׁבַת לַיהוָה.
ג שֵׁשׁ שָׁנִים תִּזְרַע שָׂדֶךְ, וְשֵׁשׁ
שָׁנִים תִּזְמַר כַּרְמְךָ; וְאַסְפַּתָּ, אֶת
תְּבוּאָתָהּ. ד וּבַשְּׁנָה הַשְּׁבִיעִית,
שְׁבַת שְׁבַתוֹן יִהְיֶה לְאָרֶץ שְׁבַת,
לַיהוָה: שָׂדֶךְ לֹא תִזְרַע, וְכַרְמְךָ
לֹא תִזְמַר. ה אֶת סְפִיחַ קִצְיֹרֶךָ לֹא
תִקְצֹר, וְאֶת עֲנְבֵי נְזִירֶךָ לֹא
תִבְצֹר: שְׁנַת שְׁבַתוֹן, יִהְיֶה לְאָרֶץ.
ו וְהִיְתָה שְׁבַת הָאָרֶץ לָכֶם,
לֶאֱכֹלָה לָךְ, וּלְעַבְדְּךָ וְלְאִמְתְּךָ;
וּלְשִׁכְיֶיךָ, וּלְתוֹשְׁבֵיךָ, הַגֵּרִים,
עִמְךָ. ז וּלְבַהֲמֹתֶיךָ וּלְחַיִּיהָ, אֲשֶׁר
בְּאֶרְצְךָ: תִּהְיֶה כָּל תְּבוּאָתָהּ,
לְאֵכֹל.

How does this text add to our understanding of Shmita from the previous source? According to this text, what is the main intention and purpose of this time period? Who benefits most from Shmita?

What are the agricultural activities that are not practiced in the seventh year? What types of food can be harvested and what cannot be harvested? What questions does the text leave unanswered about this?

What is the significance of allowing a land to 'rest'? Why would such a period also be considered a 'Shabbat of the Lord'?

3. Shabbat of the Week

In what ways is Shmita an extension of the weekly Shabbat: How are they similar? In what ways are they different?

In Leviticus , 25.4, as quoted on the previous page, the Shmita Year is also referred to as “Shabbat Shabbaton”, translated as the ‘Sabbath of Sabbaths’; a term meant to imply a level of depth beyond the weekly Shabbat.

This term is also used in the Torah to describe Yom Kippur (Leviticus 16.31). How might Shmita be connected to the day of Yom Kippur, and why might these times be considered a ‘Shabbat Shabbaton’?

¹⁶ The Children of Israel are to keep the Sabbath, to make the Sabbath-observance throughout their generations as a covenant for the ages; ¹⁷ between me and the Children of Israel a sign it is, for the ages, for in six days G!d made the heavens and the earth, but on the seventh day he ceased and paused-for-breath.

– *Exodus 31.16-17*

טז ושמרו בני ישראל, את השבת, לעשות את השבת לדרתם, ברית עולם. יז ביני ובין בני ישראל אות הוא, לעולם: כי ששת ימים, עשה יהוה את השמים ואת הארץ, וביום השביעי, שבת וינפש.

4. Release of Debt

¹ At the end of seven years, you are to make a Release [*shmita*].

² Now this is the matter of the Release: he shall release, every possessor of a loan of his hand, what he has lent to his neighbor. He is not to oppress his neighbor or his brother, for the Release of the Lord has been proclaimed!...

⁷ When there is among you a needy-person from any-one of your brothers, within one of your gates in the land that the Lord your G!d is giving you, you are not to toughen your heart, you are not to shut your hand to your brother, the needy-one.

⁸ Rather, you are to open, yes, open your hand to him, and are to give-pledge, yes, pledge to him, sufficient for his lack that is lacking to him.

⁹ Take-you-care, lest there be a word in your heart, a base-one, saying: the seventh year, the Year of Release, is nearing- and your eye be set-on-ill toward your brother, the needy-one, and you not give to him, so that he calls out because of you to the Lord, and sin be incurred by you.

¹⁰ You are to give, yes, give freely to him, your heart is not to be ill-disposed in your giving to him, for on account of this matter the Lord your G!d will bless you in all your doings and in all the enterprises of your hand!

¹¹ For the needy will never be-gone from amid the land; therefore I command you, saying: You are to open, yes, open your hand to your brother, to your afflicted-one, and to your needy-one in your land!

– Deuteronomy 15.1-2, 7-11

א מקץ שבע שנים, תעשה
שְׁמִטָּה. ב וְזוֹה, דְּבַר הַשְּׁמִטָּה
שְׁמוּט כָּל בַּעַל מְשֵׁה יָדוֹ, אֲשֶׁר
יִשֶׁה בְּרַעְיוֹ: לֹא יִגַּשׁ אֶת רַעְיוֹ
וְאֶת אָחִיו, כִּי קָרָא שְׁמִטָּה
לִיהוָה... ז כִּי יִהְיֶה בְּךָ אֲבִיּוֹן,
מֵאֶחָד אֲחֵיךָ, בְּאַחַד שְׁעָרֶיךָ,
בְּאַרְצֶךָ, אֲשֶׁר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן
לְךָ לֹא תֵאמֵץ אֶת לְבָבְךָ, וְלֹא
תִקְפֹּץ אֶת יָדְךָ, מֵאֲחֵיךָ, הָאֲבִיּוֹן.
ח כִּי פִתַּח תִּפְתַּח אֶת יָדְךָ, לוֹ;
וְהֵעַבְט, תַּעֲבִיטְנוּ, דֵּי מַחְסְרוֹ,
אֲשֶׁר יַחְסֹר לוֹ. ט הַשְּׁמֵר לְךָ פֶּן
יִהְיֶה דְבַר עִם לְבָבְךָ בְּלִיעַל
לֵאמֹר, קָרַבָּה שְׁנַת הַשְּׁבַע שְׁנַת
הַשְּׁמִטָּה, וְרַעַה עֵינֶיךָ בְּאַחֵיךָ
הָאֲבִיּוֹן, וְלֹא תִתֵּן לוֹ; וְקָרָא עֲלֶיךָ
אֵל יְהוָה, וְהָיָה בְּךָ חַטָּא. י נִתְּוֹן
תִּתֵּן לוֹ, וְלֹא יֵרַע לְבָבְךָ בְּתִתֵּךָ
לוֹ: כִּי בְּגַלְל הַדְּבַר הַזֶּה, יִבְרַכְךָ
יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ, בְּכֹל מַעֲשֶׂיךָ, וּבְכֹל
מִשְׁלַח יָדְךָ. יא כִּי לֹא יִחַדֵּל
אֲבִיּוֹן, מִקְרֹב הָאָרֶץ; עַל כֵּן אֲנִכִּי
מִצְוֶיךָ, לֵאמֹר, פִּתַּח תִּפְתַּח אֶת
יָדְךָ לְאֲחֵיךָ לְעֹנִיךָ וְלְאֲבִינֶךָ,
בְּאַרְצֶךָ.

Why do you think forgiving debt and extending credit is linked with agricultural release in the full observance of the Shmita Year? How do you think economy and agriculture are directly related to one another?

Why do you think the text uses language like 'brother', and 'neighbor' as it references the relationship between the lender and the person in debt? How might this be connected to the role of generously giving to the needy, as described by the text?

This text seems to understand that canceling debt is both an ideal and a challenge. What do you think about this tension? How can you understand this from the perspective of the giver? Of the receiver?

5. Shmita & Faith

The text relates to the agricultural cycle of annual crops, such as grains, which take about 8 months to mature. Taking one year off from seeding directly affects three year's worth of food supply: Year 6 needs an abundant harvest to also cover the next year; Year 7 is a fallow period; and Year 8 (or Year 1 in the Shmita Cycle) begins without a replenished harvest from the 7th Year...in which case, there will not be available fresh food until the first planting of the 8th Year is harvested.

¹⁸ You are to observe my laws, my regulations you are to keep, and observe them, that you may be settled on the land in security, ¹⁹ that the land may give forth its fruit and that you may eat to being-satisfied, and be settled in security upon it.

²⁰ Now if you should say to yourselves: What are we to eat in the seventh year, for we may not sow, we may not gather our produce?

²¹ Then I will dispatch my blessing for you during the sixth year so that it yields produce for three years; ²² as you sow the eighth year's seeds, you shall eat of the old produce until the ninth year; until its produce comes in, you shall be able to eat what-is-old.

– *Leviticus 25.18-22*

יח וְעִשִּׂיתֶם, אֶת חֻקֹּתַי, וְאֶת
מִשְׁפָּטַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ, וְעִשִּׂיתֶם אִתָּם
וְיִשְׁבַּתֶּם עַל הָאָרֶץ, לְבִטָּח.
יט וְנָתַנָּה הָאָרֶץ פְּרִיָּהּ, וְאָכַלְתֶּם
לְשָׁבַע; וְיִשְׁבַּתֶּם לְבִטָּח, עָלֶיהָ.
כ וְכִי תֹאמְרוּ, מִה נֹאכַל בַּשָּׁנָה
הַשְּׁבִיעִת: הֵן לֹא נִזְרַע, וְלֹא נֶאֱסַף
אֶת תְּבוּאָתֵינוּ. כֹּא וְצִוִּיתִי אֶת
בְּרַכְתִּי לָכֶם, בַּשָּׁנָה הַשְּׁשִׁית;
וְעָשִׂיתִי, אֶת הַתְּבוּאָה, לְשִׁלְשׁ,
הַשָּׁנִים. כִּב וְזָרַעְתֶּם, אֶת הַשָּׁנָה
הַשְּׁמִינִית, וְאָכַלְתֶּם, מִן הַתְּבוּאָה
יָשָׁן; עַד הַשָּׁנָה הַתְּשִׁיעִת, עַד
בּוֹא תְּבוּאָתָהּ תֹאכְלוּ, יָשָׁן.

What does this text tell us about how the people might have felt about the rules of Shmita?

If you were preparing for the arrival of Shmita, what types of emotions do you think would arise for you? Would you be concerned that your most basic needs might not be met? Or might you have faith these needs would indeed be met?

What, if any, meaning do you find in connecting the bounty or scarcity of natural resources to God's will?

6. Hakhel: Community Gathering

¹⁰ And Moses commanded them, “At the end of every seven years, at the set time in the year of Shmita, at the Festival of Sukkot, ¹¹ when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your G!d at the place that he will choose, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing.

¹² Assemble [hakhel] the people, men, women, and children, and the travelers within your towns, that they may hear and that they may learn; and they will have awe before the Lord your G!d, and guard all the words of this Torah, and to act upon it, ¹³ and that their children, who have not yet known it, may hear and learn and have awe before the Lord your G!d, as long as you live in the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess.

– Deuteronomy 31.10–13

י וַיִּצַו מֹשֶׁה, אוֹתָם לֵאמֹר: מִקֵּץ
שִׁבְעַת שָׁנִים, בְּמַעַד שָׁנָה
הַשְּׁמִטָּה בְּחַג הַסֻּכּוֹת. יֵאָבֵד
כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל, לִרְאוֹת אֶת פְּנֵי
יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ, בַּמָּקוֹם, אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר:
תִּקְרָא אֶת הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת, נֹגֵד
כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאַזְנוֹתֵיהֶם. יִבְרַח
אֶת הָעָם, הָאֲנָשִׁים וְהַנְּשִׂים
וְהַטָּר, וְגֵרְךָ, אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ לְמַעַן
יִשְׁמְעוּ וְלִמְעַן יִלְמְדוּ, וַיִּרְאוּ אֶת
יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם, וְשָׁמְרוּ לְעִשׂוֹת,
אֶת כָּל דְּבַר יְהוָה הַזֶּה.
יִגְוּ בְנֵיהֶם אֲשֶׁר לֹא יָדְעוּ, וְיִשְׁמְעוּ
וְלִמְדוּ לִירְאֵהוּ, אֶת יְהוָה
אֱלֹהֵיכֶם: כָּל הַיָּמִים, אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם
חַיִּים עַל הָאָדָמָה, אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם
עֹבְרִים אֶת הַיַּרְדֵּן שָׁמָּה,
לְרִשְׁתָּהּ.

Hakhel literally means 'assemble' and is connected to the word, Kehila, which means 'community.' During the times of the Temple, the Hakhel would happen during the Sukkot holiday after the Shmita Year, at which point the people would gather together and the king would read aloud selections from the Torah.

What role do you think public Torah readings serve? What might be the connection between a public reading of the Torah, leaving land fallow, and debt release?

Why do think the culmination of the Shmita Year is marked by such a wide-spread community gathering? What is the role of community relationships within the Shmita Year itself?

Why do you think the text insists on the children being in attendance?

7. Cycles of Shmita: The Jubilee

After counting 49 years through 7 individual Shmita Cycles, the 50th, and final year, of the complete Sabbatical cycle is known as the Jubilee. Jubilee in Hebrew is Yovel, literally translated as a ram horn. Because of the nature of return that is activated this year, biblical scholar Everett Fox translates this period as the 'Year of Homebringing' (When the tribes of Israel first entered into the land of Israel, after traveling in the wilderness for forty years, the land was divided among 12 tribes, with each tribe receiving a certain region. It is this land which the biblical text is referring to when it mentions in v. 10: "You are to return, each-man to his holding, each-man to his clan you are to return"). After the Jubilee year, the 50 year cycle begins again, from year 1.

⁸ And you are to number yourselves seven Sabbath-cycles of years- seven years, seven times- so the time of the seven Sabbath-cycles of years will be for you a total of nine and forty years.

⁹ Then you are to give forth on the shofar a blast, in the seventh New-Moon, on the tenth after the New-Moon, on the Day of Atonement, you are to give blast on the shofar throughout all your land.

¹⁰ You are to hallow the year, the fiftieth year, proclaiming freedom [*dror*] throughout the land and to all its inhabitants; it shall be a Jubilee for you, you are to return, each-man to his holding, each-man to his clan you are to return.

– *Leviticus 25.8-10*

ח וּסְפַרְתָּ לְךָ, שִׁבְעַת שָׁבָתוֹת
שָׁנִים שִׁבְעַת שָׁנִים, שִׁבְעַת פְּעָמִים;
וְהָיוּ לְךָ, יָמֵי שִׁבְעַת שָׁבָתוֹת הַשָּׁנִים,
תִּשְׁעַת וָאַרְבָּעִים, שָׁנָה. ט וְהֶעֱבַרְתָּ
שׁוֹפָר תְּרוּעָה, בַּחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי,
בְּעָשׂוֹר, לַחֹדֶשׁ; בְּיוֹם הַכִּפּוּרִים,
תִּעֲבִירוּ שׁוֹפָר, בְּכֹל אֶרֶצְכֶם.
י וְקִדְשְׁתֶּם, אֶת שְׁנַת הַחֲמִשִּׁים
שָׁנָה, וְקִרְאתֶם דְּרוֹר בְּאֶרֶץ,
לְכֹל יֹשְׁבֵיהָ; יוֹבֵל הוּא, תְּהִיָּה
לְכֶם, וְשָׁבַתֶם אִישׁ אֶל אַחֲזָתוֹ,
וְאִישׁ אֶל מְשֻׁפְחָתוֹ תִּשְׁבוּ.

What might be the significance of marking the culmination of seven complete Shmita Cycles with one extra, celebratory year? How might this cycle of 50 years resemble the custom of counting 50 days between Pesach and Shavuot?

Why do you think the Jubilee Year begins on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement? What is the significance of the shofar as marking the start of the Jubilee year?

If land had been kept through the generations with one tribe or culture, what connections do you think would develop over the years? How might this affect modern societal land use and planning?

Is there one place that you might consider your own true home, the place you would hope to which you and your children would always be able to return?

8. Jubilee & Personal Freedom

³⁹ And when your brother sinks down in poverty beside you, and sells himself to you, you are not to make him serve the servitude of a serf; ⁴⁰ as a hired-hand, as a resident-settler is he to be beside you, only until the Year of Jubilee is he to serve beside you.

⁴¹ Then he is to go-free from beside you, he and his children beside him; he may return to his clan, to the holding of his fathers he may return.

– *Leviticus 25.39-41*

לֹט וְכִי יִמְוָךְ אֶחֱיךָ עֲמֶךָ, וְנִמְכַר
 לְךָ לֹא תַעֲבֹד בּוֹ, עֲבָדֶת עֲבָד.
 מִכְשָׁכִיר כְּתוֹשֵׁב, יִהְיֶה עֲמֶךָ;
 עַד שְׁנַת הַיְבֻל, יַעֲבֹד עֲמֶךָ.
 מֵא וְיָצָא, מֵעֲמֶךָ הוּא, וּבְנָיו עִמּוֹ;
 וְשָׁב, אֶל מְשֻׁפְחָתוֹ, וְאֶל אֲחֵזת
 אֲבֹתָיו, יָשׁוּב.

Did you know the verse on the US Liberty Bell is from the section of the Torah that speaks of the Jubilee: “And you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land... (v.10)?” Liberty is the English translation used for the Hebrew word, Dror, which also means freedom. What is the connection between the ideals of liberty and freedom with the Shmita? In what ways does Shmita make us free? Why do you think the entire Shmita Cycle culminates with this specific manifestation?

What is the connection between the release of slaves and the return to ancestral lands?

In most instances, slavery in the Bible referred to individuals who sold themselves or were sold into servitude based on financial poverty or debt burdens. Slaves were to be considered as part of the Master’s household, and there were strict codes of conduct regarding physical treatment, work, and rest. Slaveholders were given a clear reminder to guide such relationships: “Bear in mind that you were slaves in the land of Egypt and the Lord your G!d redeemed you; therefore I enjoin this commandment upon you today.” (Deuteronomy 15.15)

Hebrew slaves would not have to wait until the Jubilee for their release, as they had their own personal seven year period to count: “If a fellow Hebrew, man or woman, is sold to you, he shall serve you six years, and in the seventh year you shall set him free. When you set him free, do not let him go empty-handed: Furnish him out of the flock, threshing floor, and vat, with which the Lord your G!d has blessed you.” (Deuteronomy 15.12-14) After six year’s period, if the servant chose to remain within the Master’s household rather than go free, the master would pierce his ear with an awl to mark this agreement, which would override the Jubilee. (Deuteronomy 15.16-17)

9. Land Value

How might such a land-market, based on a 50-year cycle, been integral to the possibility of keeping Shmita every seventh Year?

How does this relate to our modern day real estate market? What is your sense of 'land worth' and 'land value'? How might you personally measure this?

Do you agree, as verse 23 states, that we are "temporary settlers" upon the earth? How might this change the relationship you have with the land you live on now? How would such an awareness of transience also fit into a societal system founded on long-term tribal land relationships?

¹⁴ Now when you sell property-for-sale to your fellow or purchase it from the hand of your fellow, do not maltreat any-man his brother!

¹⁵ By the number of years after the Jubilee you are to purchase it from your fellow, by the number of years of produce left he is to sell it to you:

¹⁶ According to the many years left, you may charge-him-much for his purchase; according to the few years left, you may charge-him-little for his purchase, since a certain number of harvests is only what he is selling to you.

¹⁷ So you are not to maltreat any-man his fellow, rather, you are to hold your G!d in awe, for I the Lord am your G!d!

²³ The land is not to be sold permanently, for the land is mine; for you are sojourners and resident-settlers with me, ²⁴ throughout all the land of your holdings, you are to allow for redemption of the land.

²⁵ When your brother sinks down in poverty and has to sell some of his holding, his redeemer nearest-in-kin to him is to come and redeem the sold-property of his brother.

²⁶ Now a man- if he has no redeemer, but his hand reaches means and finds enough to redeem with, ²⁷ he is to reckon the years since its sale, returning the surplus to the man to whom he sold it, and it is to return to his holding.

²⁸ But if his hand does not find enough means for returning it, what he sold is to remain in the hand of the one purchasing it, until the Year of Jubilee, it is to go-free in the Jubilee, and it is to return to his holding.

– *Leviticus 25.14-17, 23-28*

ד וְכִי תִמְכְּרוּ מִמְכָּר לְעַמִּיתְךָ, אִם קָנָה מִיַּד עַמִּיתְךָ אֶל תּוֹנוּ, אִישׁ אֶת אָחִיו. טו בְּמִסְפַּר שָׁנִים אַחֵר הַיּוֹבֵל, תִּקְנֶה מֵאֵת עַמִּיתְךָ; בְּמִסְפַּר שָׁנֵי תְבוּאָתָה, יִמְכָּר לָךְ. טז לְפִי רֹב הַשָּׁנִים, תִּרְבֶּה מִקְנָתוֹ, וּלְפִי מְעַט הַשָּׁנִים, תִּמְעִיט מִקְנָתוֹ: כִּי מִסְפַּר תְּבוּאָתָה, הוּא מִכָּר לָךְ. יז וְלֹא תוֹנוּ אִישׁ אֶת עַמִּיתוֹ, וַיִּרְאֶת מֵאֲלֹהֶיךָ: כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה, אֱלֹהֵיכֶם...

כג וְהָאָרֶץ, לֹא תִמְכָּר לְעַמְתָּת כִּי לִי הָאָרֶץ: כִּי גֵרִים וְתוֹשָׁבִים אַתֶּם, עַמְדֵי כֹד וּבְכַל, אָרֶץ אֲחֻזְתְּכֶם, גְּאֹלָה, תִּתְּנוּ לְאָרֶץ. כד כִּי יִמוּךְ אָחִיךָ, וּמְכָר מֵאֲחֻזְתּוֹ וּבָא גְאֹלוֹ, הִקְרַב אֵלָיו, וּגְאָל, אֶת מִמְכָּר אָחִיו. כו וְאִישׁ, כִּי לֹא יִהְיֶה לוֹ גְאֹל, וְהִשְׁיִגָה יָדוֹ, וּמִצָּא כֹדֵי גְאֻלָּתוֹ. כז וְחָשַׁב, אֶת שְׁנֵי מִמְכָּרוֹ, וְהָשִׁיב אֶת הָעֶדְף, לְאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר מְכָר לוֹ; וְשָׁב, לְאֲחֻזְתּוֹ. כח וְאִם לֹא מִצָּאָה יָדוֹ, דֵּי הָשִׁיב לוֹ וְהָיָה מִמְכָּרוֹ בְּיַד הַקָּנָה אֹתוֹ, עַד שְׁנַת הַיּוֹבֵל; וַיִּצָּא, בַּיּוֹבֵל, וְשָׁב, לְאֲחֻזְתּוֹ.

10. The Prophetic Blessings of Shabbat/Shmita/Yovel

² My Sabbaths you are to keep, my Holy-Shrine you are to hold-in-awe, I am the Lord!

³ If by my laws you walk, and my commandments you keep, and observe them, ⁴ then I will give-forth your rains in their set-time, so that the earth gives-forth its yield and the trees of the field give-forth their fruit.

⁵ Threshing will overtake vintage for you, and vintage will overtake sowing; you shall eat your food to being-satisfied, and be settled in security in your land.

⁶ I will give peace throughout the land, so that you will lie down with none to make you tremble...

¹² I will walk about in your midst, I will be for you as a G!d, and you yourselves will be for me as a people.

¹³ I the Lord am your G!d who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from your being serfs to them; I broke the bars of your yoke, enabling you to walk upright!

– *Leviticus 26.2-6, 12-13*

ב אֶת שַׁבְּתוֹתַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ, וּמִקְדָּשִׁי
תִּירְאוּ: אֲנִי, יְהוָה. ג אִם
בְּחֻקוֹתַי תֵּלְכוּ; וְאֶת מִצְוֹתַי
תִּשְׁמְרוּ, וְעִשִּׂיתֶם אֹתָם. ד וְנָתַתִּי
גְּשָׁמִיכֶם, בְּעֵתָם; וְנָתַנָּה הָאָרֶץ
יְבוּלָהּ, וְעֵץ הַשָּׂדֶה יִתֵּן פְּרִיּוֹ.
ה וְהִשִּׁיג לָכֶם דְּישׁ אֶת בְּצִיר,
וּבְצִיר יִשִּׁיג אֶת זֵרַע; וְאָכַלְתֶּם
לֶחֶמְכֶם לְשֹׂבַע, וְיִשְׂבַּתֶּם לְבִטָּח
בְּאֶרְצְכֶם. ו וְנָתַתִּי שְׁלוֹם בְּאֶרֶץ,
וְיִשְׁכַּבְתֶּם וְאֵין מַחְרִיד; וְהִשְׁבַּתִּי
חַיָּה רְעָה, מִן הָאָרֶץ, וְחָרַב, לֹא
תֵעָבֵר בְּאֶרְצְכֶם... יב וְהִתְהַלַּכְתִּי,
בְּתוֹכְכֶם, וְהִיִּיתִי לָכֶם, לֵאלֹהִים;
וְאַתֶּם, תִּהְיוּ לִי לְעָם. יג אֲנִי
יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם, אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִי
אֶתְכֶם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם, מִהֵיֵת לָהֶם,
עֲבָדִים; וְאֲשַׁבֵּר מַטְת עַלְכֶם,
וְאוֹלַךְ אֶתְכֶם קוֹמְמִיִּית.

What are the specific points of the blessing that comes with observing the Shabbat moments in time?

What connections might this text imply by juxtaposing our history as slaves in Egypt and our tradition of a Sabbatical practice in the land we called home? How might this connection affect our perspective and understanding of Shmita?

Why do you think the text mentions Shabbat in the plural? Can the full 'impact' and potential of Shabbat only be felt if the Shabbat, Shmita, and Yovel cycles are celebrated together?

Do you understand the nature of this blessing as a 'reward' or a 'consequence'? What is the difference?

11. The Prophetic Warning Against Neglecting Shabbat/Shmita/Yovel

Why do you think the text uses 'fierce pride' as the characteristic that might cause people to neglect the Shmita Cycle?

According to this text, is the punishment described a punishment for the land or the people?

We might read this text in terms of contemporary agricultural challenges: soil erosion, overgrazing, pollution, acid rain, etc. Do you think the environmental movement could find strength in a text like this? Why or why not?

¹⁸ Now if, after all that, you do not hearken to me, I will continue to discipline you, sevenfold, for your sins-

¹⁹ I will break your fierce pride! I will give your heavens to be like iron, and your earth like bronze,²⁰ so that your power will be spent for naught; your land will not give-forth its yield, the trees of the land will not give-forth their fruit...

³⁴ Then the land will find-acceptance regarding its Sabbaths, all the days of desolation- when you are in the land of your enemies- then the land will enjoy-cessation, and find-acceptance regarding its Sabbaths.

³⁵ All the days of desolation it will enjoy-cessation, since it did not enjoy-cessation during its Sabbaths when you were settled on it.

– *Leviticus 26.18-20, 34-35*

יח וְאִם עַד אֱלֹהִים לֹא תִשְׁמָעוּ,
לִי: וְיִסְפַּתִּי לְיִסְרָה אֶתְכֶם, שִׁבְעַ
עַל חַטָּאתֵיכֶם. יִטּוּ שְׁבַרְתִּי,
אֶת גְּאוֹן עֵינֵיכֶם; וְנָתַתִּי אֶת
שָׁמַיִם כְּבַרְזֶל, וְאֶת אֲרָצְכֶם
כְּנֹחֶשֶׁת. כִּי תִתֶּם לְרִיק, כְּחֶכֶם;
וְלֹא תִתֶּן אֲרָצְכֶם, אֶת יְבוּלָהּ,
וְעֵץ הָאָרֶץ, לֹא יִתֵּן פְּרִי...
לֹד אֲזוּ תִרְצָה הָאָרֶץ אֶת
שַׁבְּתוֹתֶיהָ, כָּל יְמֵי הַשָּׁמָה, וְאַתֶּם,
בְּאֶרֶץ אֲיִבֵיכֶם; אֲזוּ תִשְׁבַּת הָאָרֶץ,
וְהִרְצָת אֶת שַׁבְּתוֹתֶיהָ. לֹה כָּל
יְמֵי הַשָּׁמָה, תִּשְׁבַּת, אֶת אֲשֶׁר
לֹא שָׁבַתָה בְּשַׁבְּתוֹתֵיכֶם,
בְּשַׁבְּתוֹתֵיכֶם עָלֶיהָ.

12. Etymology of the Seventh Year

Title of Seventh Year Period		Translation	Location (In Order of Use)
Hebrew	Transliteration		
שְׁבִיעֵת	<i>Shvi'it</i>	Seventh	Exodus 23.11, Leviticus 25.4
תִּשְׁמַטְנָה וְנִטְשָׁתָה	<i>Tishm'tena U'nitashta</i>	Release, Lie Fallow	Exodus 23.11
שַׁבַּת לַיהוָה	<i>Shabbat Lado'nay</i>	Shabbat for God	Leviticus 25.1
שַׁבַּת שַׁבָּתוֹן	<i>Shabbat Shabbaton</i>	Shabbat of Shabbats	Leviticus 25.4
שַׁבַּת הָאָרֶץ	<i>Shabbat Ha'aretz</i>	Shabbat of the Land	Leviticus 25.6
שְׁמִטָּה	<i>Shmita</i>	Release, Remission	Deuteronomy 15.1

Closing Questions:

The word Shmita literally means 'release'. What is the 'release', on a personal and societal level, that we are being asked to participate in, physically, emotionally, and spiritually? How easy or challenging might it be to release objects or patterns we are accustomed to?

The early Israelites lived in a largely rural, agrarian society, vastly different than our modern culture. What do you think the Shmita Year would look like if we observed it now? Agriculturally? Economically? Comunal? Personally? For more on this conversation, both in relation to Shmita in Israel and the international Jewish community, see sections 5 and 6.

Have you felt the hectic rush before Shabbat begins, of cooking, cleaning, wrapping up the work week? Or the rush before leaving to college, planning a wedding, going on vacation... anything that is a drastic shift from your day-to-day activities? Just as you would have a hard time suddenly deciding to step into these moments minutes before it starts, how (if at all) would you (and the collective culture) begin to prepare for a year-long Shabbat?

In what ways is Shmita a restful experience, and in what ways might it be the opposite? How do you think life would be different if there was a recurring, multi-year cycle of collective rest embedded in our culture?

Section 2

Recalling Ancient Memory: Shmita in Early Israel & Temple Periods



PERHAPS one of the first questions that might come to mind after learning about Shmita, is: Was it ever entirely observed? What historical knowledge do we have of Shmita? In truth, the evidence is sparse, which leads us to think that perhaps the tribes of Israel were not able to meet the high expectations of the Sabbatical Cycle. Below are a collection of sources (most are dating from roughly 1200BCE to 200CE, while the Rambam is writing later, but looking back towards that time) which recall the Temple periods of early Israelite culture when Shmita was and was not practiced, as well as the challenges and benefits it brought to communities trying to follow such a societal structure. Looking back at the lives of our ancestors, can you empathize with their struggles? Or do you wish they had done better in establishing a Hebrew culture rooted in the Sabbatical Cycle? Do you think Shmita, at its core, is primarily intended to be a symbolic spiritual metaphor and value system? Or do you think Shmita is a cultural system that was intended to be followed strictly and literally?

1. The First Countings

Based on the Rambam's source, we can calculate these following years of historical Sabbatical origins:

Year 2490 / 1272 B.C.E.
Enter into Eretz Yisrael

Year 2497 / 1265 B.C.E.
Begin dividing land with tribal boundaries

Year 2504 / 1258 B.C.E.
Year one of counting

Year 2510 / 1252 B.C.E.
Start of first Shmita Year

Year 2543 / 1219 B.C.E.
First Jubilee Year

Why do you think the counting towards Shmita only began once we, as a nation, were fully settled, and each person had 'recognized his portion of land'? What is the connection between Shmita and our relationship to the land we live on?

Why do you think the countings ceased temporarily once the First Temple was destroyed?

² When did the counting begin? After the fourteen years following the entry into Eretz Yisrael. [This is derived from Leviticus 25:3]: "Six years shall you sow your field and six years shall you trim your vineyard." Implied is that each person must recognize his portion of the land. The people took seven years to conquer the land and seven years to divide it. Thus the counting began after the 2503rd year after the creation... And they declared the 2510th year after the creation, which was the 21st year [14 years to conquer and settle, 7 years of counting] after the entry into Eretz Yisrael, as the Sabbatical year. They counted seven Sabbatical years and then sanctified the fiftieth year which was the 64th year after they entered Eretz Yisrael.

³ The Jewish people counted 17 Jubilee years from the time they entered Eretz Yisrael until they departed. The year they departed, when the Temple was destroyed the first time, was the year following the Sabbatical year and the 36th year in the Jubilee cycle. For the First Temple stood for 410 years. When it was destroyed, this reckoning ceased. After it ceased, the land remained desolate for seventy years. Then the Second Temple was built and it stood for 420 years. In the seventh year after it was built, Ezra ascended to Eretz Yisrael. This is referred to as the second entry. From this year, they began another reckoning. They designated the thirteenth year of the Second Temple as the Sabbatical year and counted seven Sabbatical years and sanctified the fiftieth year.

– Rambam, *Hilchot Shmita v'Yovel*, 10.2–3

ב נמצאת אומר בשנת שלוש וחמש מאות ואלפים מראש השנה שאחר מולד אדם הראשון, שהיא שנה שניה ליצירה התחילו למנות. ועשו שנת עשר וחמש מאות ואלפים ליצירה, שהיא שנת אחת ועשרים משנכנסו לארץ שמטה; ומנו שבע שמתות וקדשו שנת חמשים, שהיא שנת ארבע ושלשים משנכנסו לארץ.

ג שבעה עשר יובלים מנו ישראל, משנכנסו לארץ ועד שיצאו; ושנה שיצאו בה, שחרב הבית בראשונה, מוצאי שביעית היתה, ושנת שש ושלשים ביובל היתה שארבע מאות שנה ועשר שנים, עמד בית ראשון. בין שחרב הבית, בטל מנין זה, משבטלה הארץ. ונשארה הארץ חרבה, שבעים שנה; ונבנה בית שני, וארבע מאות ועשרים עמד. ובשנה השביעית מבנינו, עלה עזרא והיא הביאה השנה; ומשנה זו התחילו למנות מנין אחר. ועשו שנת שלוש עשרה לבנין בית שני שמטה, ומנו שבע שמתות וקדשו שנת חמשים.

2. Shmita as a Marker of Time

When the judges would examine the witnesses, they would approach them with seven inquiries: In what Jubilee Cycle [did this event occur]? In what year [of the specific Shmita Cycle]? In what month? On which day of the month? On which day of the week? At what hour? And at what place?

– *Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 40a*

What might have been the effect of living in the Shmita Cycle and always knowing when the next one would start?

How might your perspective of time be different if you were considering each day as it related to being within the context of a larger cycle?

What other cycles do you use to mark time (kids ages, periods of education, physical development, etc.)? What periods of counting time do you experience in your own life?

3. Shmita, Exile & Return

If this text is read as a historical account of Shmita observance, it seems that the tribes of Israel eventually began to neglect the Shmita practice and did not celebrate 70 consecutive Shmita Years (which would accumulate to almost 500 calendar years). Does this change your perspective of Shmita at all?

Compare this text to sources #10-11 in section 1.

How do you understand the relationship between Shmita and exile? What is your take on this text, which implies that exile is a direct consequence of Sabbatical neglect?

This passage refers to the re-commitments that the Israelites took upon themselves, after returning to Israel from Babylonian exile. It was under the guidance of the community leaders, Ezra and Nehemiah, that the covenant of the “Law of Moses” was renewed, and the culture of post-first-exile Judaism began to take shape in Israel. Do you think these returnees had a new sense of relationship to the land, after going through a forced exile? How might this have affected their understanding of Shmita?

²⁰ And those (of Judah) who had escaped from the sword were taken by King Nebuchadnezzar into exile to Babylon, and they became servants to him and his sons until the kingdom of Persia came to power.

²¹ The land of Israel finally enjoyed its Shabbat rests. All the days it lay desolate, it kept Shabbat/Shmita, to fulfill seventy years [of Sabbatical neglect], in fulfillment of the word of the Lord.

– *Chronicles II 36:20-21*

²⁹ The remainder of the people—the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the musicians, the temple servants, and all who separated themselves from the neighboring peoples of the Land for the sake of the Teaching of G!d, together with their wives and all their sons and daughters who are able to understand, ³⁰ now join with their noble brothers of Israel, and take an oath with sanctions to follow the Teaching of G!d, given through Moses the servant of G!d, and to observe carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the Lord our G!d...

³² When the neighboring peoples of the Land bring their merchandise or food to sell on the Sabbath, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on any holy day. Every seventh year we will forgo working the land and every outstanding debt.

– *Nehemiah 10.29-30, 32*

כ וַיִּגַּל הַשְּׂאֲרִית מִן הַחֶרֶב, אֶל
בְּבָל; וַיְהִי לֹו וּלְבָנָיו לְעֲבָדִים, עַד
מֶלֶךְ מַלְכוּת פָּרַס. כֹּא לְמִלְאוֹת
דְּבַר יְהוָה בְּפִי יְרֵמְיָהוּ, עַד רְצַתָּה
הָאָרֶץ אֶת שַׁבְּתוֹתֶיהָ: כָּל יְמֵי
הַשְּׂמִיטָה שַׁבְּתָהּ, לְמִלְאוֹת שְׁבַעִים
שָׁנָה.

כט וְשָׂאֵר הָעָם הַכֹּהֲנִים הַלְוִיִּם
הַשְּׂוֹעֲרִים הַמְשָׁרְרִים הַנְּתִינִים,
וְכָל הַנִּבְדָּל מֵעַמֵּי הָאָרְצוֹת אֶל
תּוֹרַת הָאֱלֹהִים, נִשְׁיָהֶם, בְּנִיָּהֶם
וּבְנֵתֵיהֶם: כָּל, יוֹדַע מִבֵּין.
ל מַחְזִיקִים עַל אֲחֵיהֶם,
אֲדִירֵיהֶם, וּבָאִים בְּאֵלֶּה וּבְשִׁבְעָה
לְלַכֵּת בְּתוֹרַת הָאֱלֹהִים, אֲשֶׁר
נִתְּנָה בְיַד מֹשֶׁה עֶבֶד הָאֱלֹהִים;
וְלִשְׁמֹר וּלְעֲשׂוֹת, אֶת כָּל מִצְוֹת
יְהוָה אֲדֹנָיֵנוּ, וּמִשְׁפָּטָיו, וְחֻקָּיו...
לב וְעַמֵּי הָאָרֶץ הַמְּבִיאִים אֶת
הַמִּקְחוֹת וְכָל שֶׁבֶר בְּיוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת,
לִמְכֹּר לֹא נִקַּח מֵהֶם בַּשַּׁבָּת,
וּבְיוֹם קֹדֶשׁ; וְנִטַּשׂ אֶת הַשָּׂנֵה
הַשְּׁבִיעִית, וּמִשָּׂא כָּל יָד.

4. Creating a Shmita-Free Haven

Rabbi Shimon Ben Eliakim stated, in the names of Rabbi Elazar Ben Pedath and Rabbi Elazar Ben Shama'u: Many cities which were [originally] conquered by those Israelites who came up from Egypt were not re-conquered by those who came up from Babylon [after the return from the first exile], for he held the view that the consecration of the Holy Land on the first occasion consecrated it for the time being, but not necessarily for the future. They therefore did not annex specific cities in order that the poor might have sustenance from them during the Sabbatical Year.

– *Talmud Bavli, Chullin 7a*

Shmita, as a law, was specifically practiced within the designated land of Israel. According to this text, when the borders of Israel were being re-defined, upon return from the first exile period, certain cities were intentionally left out of the land of Israel so that the Shmita laws would have no effect there. In these locations, farming practices would continue without interruption during the Shmita Year, so that there would not be a concern of food scarcity.

From the original sources in the Torah (see section 1, sources #1-2), it seems a core intention of the Shmita Year is to allow for the poor of the land to have food. From this text, what can we learn about the way Shmita was being implemented, in actuality?

Do you consider this re-structuring of borders as an avoidance strategy or as a resourceful strategy?

5. Between Shmita & the State

These sources offer a glimpse into the practice of Shmita during the Second Temple period, specifically under Roman rule. At one point, the Jewish communities were exempt from taxes on the Seventh year. When this decree was annulled, the Rabbis allowed the land to be tilled and planted, so as to provide resources to support the paying of taxes.

Unlike many mitzvot, which are based on individual personal practice, Shmita relies on both personal and communal participation. How does this affect the possibility of a successful Shmita Year? Based on these texts, do you think Shmita is only possible when the entire culture is following this tradition together?

In the context of separation of Church and State, how does Shmita provide a unique challenge to this division?

Julius Caesar, imperator the second time, has ordained, “That all the country of the Jews, do pay tribute yearly for the city Jerusalem, excepting the Seventh, which they call the Sabbatical Year, because thereon they neither receive the fruits of the trees, nor do they sow their land; and that they pay their tribute in Sidon on the second year [of that sabbatical period], the fourth part of what was sown: besides this, they are to pay the same tithes to Hyrcanus and his sons which they paid to their forefathers. And that no one, neither president, nor lieutenant, nor ambassador, raise auxiliaries within the bounds of Judea; nor may soldiers exact money of them for winter quarters, or under any other pretense; but that they be free from all sorts of injuries; and that whatsoever they shall hereafter have, and are in possession of, or have bought, they shall retain them all.

– *Antiquities of the Jews, Book XIV, Chapter 10, Section 6 (Flavius Josephus 90CE)*

When the oppressors grew in number: these are the collectors of Arnona (tax). Rav Jannai proclaimed: “Go and sow your seed even in the Sabbatical year, because of the collectors of the taxes.”

– *Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 26a*

6. Shmita as a Period of Challenge...

But Judas, seeing the strength of the enemy, retired to Jerusalem, and prepared to endure a siege. As for Antiochus, he sent part of his army to Bethsura, to besiege it, and with the rest of his army he came against Jerusalem; but the inhabitants of Bethsura were terrified at his strength; and seeing that their provisions grew scarce, they delivered themselves up on the security of oaths that they should suffer no hard treatment from the king. . . . But then their provisions failed them; what fruits of the ground they had laid up were spent and the land being not ploughed that year, continued unsowed, *because it was the seventh year, on which, by our laws, we are obliged to let it lay uncultivated.* And withal, so many of the besieged ran away for want of necessaries, that but a few only were left in the Temple.

– *Antiquities of the Jews, Book XII, Chapter 9, Section 5*
(See 1 Maccabees 6:48–49...Second Temple Period, 165 BCE)

R. Abbahu opened his discourse with the text, They that sit in the gate talk of me (Ps. 69.13): This refers to the nations of the world who sit in theatres and circuses. 'And I am the song of the drunkards': after they have sat eating and drinking and become intoxicated, they sit and talk of me, scoffing at me and saying, 'We have no need to eat carobs like the Jews!' They ask one another, 'How long do you wish to live?' To which they reply, 'As long as the shirt of a Jew which is worn on the Sabbath!' They then take a camel into their theatres, put their shirts upon it, and ask one another, 'Why is it in mourning?' To which they reply, 'The Jews observe the law of the Sabbatical year and they have no vegetables, so they eat this camel's thorns, and that is why it is in mourning!'

– *Eicha Rabba Prologue 17 (200 CE)*

This historical text, about the struggles the community faced leading up to the victory of the Maccabees over King Antiochus (which is celebrated every Chanukah), clearly offers a recollection of Shmita as a period of drastic challenge.

When you imagine Shmita, is this a period of abundance or scarcity? What is the main challenge these people faced within this period of battle?

What conditions are necessary so that the observance of Shmita does not become a societal burden, for peaceful times as well as during drastic periods of challenge?

Harvesting and eating the fruits of trees are permissible during the Shmita Year. Carob is a Mediterranean tree that produces seed pods which are edible and sweet, yet which are hard to process and have not become a traditionally mainstream food. 'Camel's Thorn' is a type of acacia tree that produces excellent animal fodder, yet is less traditionally recognized as food for human consumption.

Based on this text, and your own imagination, how do you think those who were going about their regular farming/economic activity would regard the act of observing Shmita? How would you feel as the one being observed?

What contemporary equivalent examples can you think of, where such 'religious' or culturally 'different' behavior becomes the prompt for ridicule?

7. ...And Shmita as a Period of Abundance

Biur refers to an aspect of the Shmita Year which adheres to eating a seasonal diet. When foods are in season, they can be freely harvested and stored. When they are no longer found naturally in season, in the wild, all harvests (fresh, dried and preserved) must be shared with the public.

For more on Biur, see section 3.1, source #5.

Why do you think there was a necessity for such a system of community storehouses during the Shmita Year?

How would you feel being dependent upon a centralized community storehouse that distributed foods to the public? Would you feel comfortable donating your harvests to this system, or would you rather keep your harvests private? What are some key practices of this storehouse that ensured a fair distribution system?

The person who shares his/her produce with the public, announces "...anyone who needs may come and take."

How might this be similar to the opening line of the Passover Seder, "All who are hungry may come and eat"?

Initially, agents of the court would sit at the gates of the city. Everyone who brought fruits in his hand would have the fruits removed and be given enough food for three meals in exchange. The rest would be entered into the storehouse.

When it came time for dates, the agents of the court would hire workers to gather them together, make them into pressed cakes and enter them into the storehouse of the city. When it came time for grapes, agents of the court would hire workers, squeeze the grapes, press them, enter them into jugs and place them in the city storehouse. When it came time for olives, agents of the court would hire workers to prepare and press them in the oil press and enter the oil into jugs and place them in the city storehouses. These products would be distributed on the eve of Shabbat, every person according to the needs of his household.

Someone who has fruit from *shevi'it* (Shmita) when the hour for *biur* arrived distributes the fruits to neighbors and relatives and people he knows. He then goes out and places the fruits on his doorstep and says, "My brothers from the house of Israel, anyone who needs may come and take." He then returns and enters back into his house and eats until they are gone.

– *Tosefta Shevi'it 8.1*

(Written in 220 CE Mishna Period, recollecting times from the temple period)

Closing Questions:

Shmita seems to be rooted in a series of ideals, which in practice had a wide range of consequences. What do you see as the greatest value of Shmita? The greatest challenge?

Do you consider the Shmita tradition more of a 'religious' observance or a 'cultural' observance? Is there a difference? If so, what? How might such a perspective shifted through history?

Does the historical observance of Shmita (or lack of it) affect or frame your own personal link to Shmita today? What can we learn from these historical accounts for the way Shmita re-emerges today, for ourselves, our families, our communities?

Section 3

Codifying The Sabbatical: An Overview of Rabbinic Laws & Clarifications



IN THE 11TH CENTURY, Maimonides (Rambam) sought to codify and explain Jewish laws on a range of topics, and his master work is known as the *Mishna Torah*. Within this collection, the *Sefer Zera'im* (Book of Seeds) deals specifically with all agricultural laws and practices, and it is here where much attention is dedicated to Shmita, both from an agrarian and economic perspective. The sources Maimonides uses in this compilation primarily comes from the biblical Shmita texts, as well as rulings within the Mishna and Talmud. Beyond being a practical list of laws, his clarifications help us to understand the ways in which the Shmita Year might affect a society that observed it.

You can read the texts in the next two sections in two ways:

1. Since the Torah isn't always thorough or clear, what are the actual rules to observe while keeping Shmita?
2. How might we use Shmita as a lens to examine our contemporary food and economic systems?

Feel free to tackle these texts at either level, or both!

PART 1: SABBATICAL FOOD SYSTEMS

Agriculture is at the root of our wider cultural systems. For all our production, consumption, creativity, and growth, it is agriculture that provides the nourishment and the energy for our own physical development. Agriculture is an intimate relationship of delicate giving and receiving. It is the collective process of working with land for production and consumption, using the life of the soil and plant communities to collect for our own needs. While we are not all farmers, we are all consumers of food that has been farmed. The way we develop our food system—the practices, ethics, and values of the way we plant, harvest, and consume foods—has a direct parallel on our own culture. A healthy agricultural system will likely manifest in a healthy societal system, and vice versa. In this section, we explore the food system of the Sabbatical year. How did agriculture change during this year? What foods were eaten at this time? How were foods distributed? And how would these Sabbatical food ethics affect the relationships and practices within the wider society?

1. Agricultural Practices of the Shmita Year

How does this text build on the first two Torah sources from Exodus and Leviticus? (section 1, sources # 1-2)

Why might further restrictions have been added to Shmita agricultural laws?

Why do you think these specific actions have been highlighted as work that should not be done on the Shmita Year? Do you think this is to benefit the land? To give farmers a rest? Another reason?

Are these the types of activities you are personally involved with? If so, how often? Do such Shmita prohibitions feel like they would directly affect you?

² According to Scriptural Law, a person does not incur guilt except for the following labors: sowing, trimming, harvesting grain or fruit - both from vineyards and from other trees.

⁴ When a person digs or plows for the sake of the land, removes stones, fertilizes the land, or performs another similar type of work on the land or grafts, plants, or performs other similar types of work with trees, he incurs guilt [according to Rabbinic decree].

– Rambam, *Mishne Torah, Hilchot Shmita v'Yovel* 1.2 § 4

ב אינו לוקה מן התורה אלא על הזריעה או על הזמירה, ועל הקצירה או על הבציר; ואחד בדם, ואחד שאר האילנות.

ד החורש או החופר לצורך הקרקע, או המסקל, או המזבל, וכיוצא בהן משאר עבודת הארץ, וכן המבריך, או המרביב, או הנוטע, וכיוצא בהן מעבודת האילנות מבין אותו מפת מרדות מדבריהם.

2. Hefker: Communal Access

And the after-growth of your harvest you shall not reap: With the intention of taking possession and ownership of it, like other harvests. Rather it shall be *hefker* [ownerless] for all to take freely.

And the produce of the Shabbat of the land shall be yours to eat: Although I have prohibited the produce of the Shmita Year to you, I did not prohibit you from eating it or deriving benefit from it- only that you should not treat it as its owner. Rather all should have equal rights to the produce of the seventh year, you, your hired worker, and those who reside with you.

– Rashi, *Leviticus 25.5-6*

Rashi is attempting to clarify the Biblical text (*Leviticus 25.5-6*) which, on the one hand, mentions “You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest,” and, on the other hand, offers that “Whatever the land yields, will be food for you.” According to Rashi, harvesting is fine as long as it is without the intention of sole personal ownership. This understanding of the Shmita harvests and property ownership can be better understood in the wider context of other Jewish agricultural laws, such as Peah and Leket. Peah literally means ‘corner’ and was a space of a farmer’s field that was planted specifically to be harvested by those who were landless peasants. Leket is the practice of allowing gleaners onto your field during harvest periods to collect what drops or is unharvested. The source for these laws come from *Leviticus 19.9-10*: “When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner.”

It is a commandment to divest one’s self from everything that the land produces in the seventh year, as *Exodus 23.11* states: “In the seventh year, you shall leave it untended and unharvested.” Anyone who locks his vineyard or fences off his agricultural field in the Sabbatical year has nullified a positive commandment. This also holds true if he gathered all of his produce into his home. Instead, he should leave everything ownerless [*hefker*]. Thus everyone, [rich and poor], have equal rights in every place, as *Exodus 23.11* states: “And the poor of your people shall partake of it.” One may only bring a small amount of produce into one’s home, just as one brings from ownerless property.

– Rambam, *Mishne Torah, Hilchot Shmita v’Yovel*, 4.24

כד מצות עשה להשמיט כל מה
שתוציא הארץ בשביעית,
שנאמר “והשביעת תשמטנה
ונטשתה” (שמות כג, יא). וכל
הנועל ברמו, או סג שדהו
בשביעית בטל מצות עשה; וכן
אם אסף כל פרותיו לתוך
ביתו. אלא יפקיר הכל, ויד הכל
שווין בכל מקום שנאמר “ואכלו
אביני עמך” (שמות כג, יא). ויש
לו להביא מעט לתוך ביתו,
בדרך שמביאין מן ההפקר.

How does the Maimonides text build on Rashi’s idea?

Do you agree that a normal ‘harvest’ implies the intention of ownership and possession? Do you consider your garden produce, or even the produce you buy in the market, your own property? Similarly, if we removed fences around our property lines, how might this affect the way we recognize land ownership?

For more on ‘private ownership’ in agricultural systems, see the Kli Yakar in section 4, source #5.

Today, our agricultural landscapes are quite different than during biblical times, as farms have been consolidated on rural lands, and most populations reside in cities. Beyond the intention of open field access and shared harvests, what are some other ways you might consider expanding fair and healthy food access for all peoples, inspired by Shmita-values? How might we look at Shmita values in relation to urban ‘food-deserts’?

How would you feel if you could only harvest enough for a few meals at a time, and not stock your pantry with cases of food? How might this affect the way you prepare and consume food at home?

3. Wild & Perennial: Harvests of the Shmita Year

What do you think the benefits may have been—for the body and the land—in consuming such foods for a year?

Do you think you would be able to sustain yourself for a full year on a diet of perennial, wild or uncultivated foods? What would your diet look like?

Think about what you ate recently. Can you identify which foods were perennials and which were annuals? Are such foods balanced in your own eating preferences and habits? Note that five of the seven Shivat Minim were perennials. (This a list of seven species mentioned in the Torah, celebrating the abundance of the land of Israel. The perennials in this list include: figs, grapes, dates, olives, and pomegranates. The grasses/grains in this list are wheat and barley.)

Consider how the primary fruit and vegetable varieties we eat today have been domesticated from their original, wild form. How do you see the difference between a wild strawberry or apple and a cultivated one? Have you ever harvested foods from the wild? What was this experience like for you?

Do you think the rabbis made a fair call by prohibiting all Sfichim from public consumption?

¹ All that grows [unsown and uncultivated] from the earth in the Sabbatical year, whether it grew from seeds that fell into the earth before the Sabbatical year, or it grew from roots whose plants were harvested previously, but nevertheless grew again – in both instances such produce is referred to with the term *Safiach*, grasses and vegetables that grew on their own accord in the Sabbatical year. These are permitted to be eaten according to Scriptural Law.

² According to Rabbinic decree, all the *sfichim* are forbidden to be eaten. Why was a decree established concerning them? Because of the transgressors, so that they could not go and sow grain, beans, and garden vegetables in one's field discreetly and when they grow, partake of them, saying that they are actually *sfichim*.

³ Thus we have learned that the only produce of the Shmita Year of which one may partake are the harvest of fruit trees and vines, as well as wild plants that are not typically sown in a garden, such as rue, amaranth, and the like [since the restriction of leaving the land fallow does not apply to perennial/wild produce]. With regards to vegetables that most people sow in their gardens and species of grains and beans, by contrast, anything that grows from these species is forbidden according to Rabbinic decree.

– *Rambam, Mishne Torah, Hilchot Shmita v'Yovel*
4.1-3

א כל שתוציא הארץ בשנה שביעית בין מן הזרע שנפל בה מקדם שביעית, בין מן העיקרים שנקצרו מקדם וחזרו ועשו, שניהם נקראו ספיח, בין מן העשבים והירקות שעלו מאליהן ואין להן זרע הכל מתר לאכלו מן התורה, שנאמר "והיתה שבת הארץ לכם, לאכלה" (ויקרא כה,ו).

ב ומדברי סופרים, שיהיו כל הספיחים אסורין באכילה. ולמה גזרו עליהם: מפני עוברי עברה שלא ילך וזרע תבואה וקטניות וזרעוני גנה בתוך שדהו בסתר, ובשיעמחו יאכל מהם ויאמר ספיחים הן.

ג הא למדת, שאין אוכלין מפרות שביעית אלא פרות האילנות, והעשבים שאין זרעין אותם רב האדם, כגון הפיגם והירבוזין השוטטים וכל פיוצא בהן; אבל הירקות שדרך רב האדם לזרע אותן בגנות, ומיני תבואה וקטניות כל הצומח מהן אסור מדבריהם.

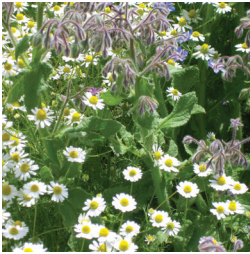
Plant Life Cycles & Shmita



The laws of the Shmita Year apply specifically to plants which need their seeds to be sown, and the soil they'll be planted in to be tilled. These are generally plants that are considered 'Annuals.' They are called **Annuals** because they complete their life cycle in one season (once they produce the next generation of seeds, the plant dies). Hence, they must begin their life cycle anew each season, which generally requires soil preparation (tilling) and sowing. Most vegetables are annuals.



Perennials, on the other hand, live for many years (while they may produce seed each season, the plant body still lives). Trees, and most vines and herbs are perennial plants. These plants do not need their seed to be sown each season (as their new annual growth comes from their long-living wood and root structure), nor do they need the soil to be continually tilled (the soil is tilled once, for planting...and then that plant settles in for the years ahead).



Wild plants are also not affected by Shmita laws, as these plants (whether they are annual or perennial) are not 'farmed' and grow naturally without human intervention.



Lastly, there is a plant category for the Shmita Year known as **Sfichim**. These are common garden annuals that may become wild from seeds which dropped in the previous season and grew again, or from roots which continue to produce a stem/leaf body after an initial harvest (**Biennials** may also fall into this category. These are annuals plants which do not produce their seed until the second season of growth). *Sfichim* is the area of contention the Rambam is discussing.

See Appendix A for 'Shmita Food' ideas.

4. Eat Fresh & Ripe

The 'tithes' mentioned by the Rambam is the portion of the harvest that is called 'ma'aser,' literally, 'a tenth.' This portion was a percentage of the harvest, dedicated towards the Levites (a landless tribe, whose members served in the Temple and in spiritual leadership for the larger society) and the poor. The separating of ma'aser would not happen until the crop was ripe enough to be eaten.

We do not harvest the produce of the Sabbatical year when it is not yet ripe, as it says (Vayikra 25.12) "And you shall partake of its produce," implying that the fruits may not be eaten until they are considered as produce...One should not bring the produce into one's home until it reaches the stage when the obligation to separate tithes takes effect [marking its ripeness].

– Rambam, *Mishne Torah, Hilchot Shmita v'Yovel 5.15*

טו אין אוספין פרות שביעית
 בשנה בסדר שנאמר "תאכלו,
 את תבואתה" (ויקרא כה, יב),
 אינה נאכלת עד שתעשה
 תבואה...ולא יכנס לאכל בתוך
 ביתו, עד שיגיעו לעונת
 המעשרות.

Do you agree with the Rambam's classification that until a fruit is fully ripe, it is not actually considered as produce? Compare the sensory impression and flavor of biting into a fresh, ripe peach versus an unripe, greenish peach. Consider the nutrient richness of a ripe food, as well. How might this be different than the nutrients before ripeness?

What are the challenges of allowing fruit to ripen on the plant? In our modern industrial agricultural system, why do you think there might be a preference to harvest produce before full ripeness?

5. Biur: Seasonal Diet

¹ We may only partake of the produce of the Sabbatical year as long as that species is still found growing in the field. This is derived from Leviticus 25:7: “For the animal and the beast in your land will be all the produce to eat.” This implies that as long as a beast [*chaya*] can be eating from this species in the field, one may eat from what he has collected at home. When there is no longer any of that species for the beast to eat in the field, one is obligated to remove that species from his home [and make it available to the public]. This is the obligation of Biur which applies to the produce of the Sabbatical year.

² What is implied? If a person has dried figs at home, he may partake of them as long as there are figs on the trees in the field. When there are no longer figs in the field, it is forbidden for him to partake of the figs he has at home and he must instead remove them.

⁶ When a person pickles three types of produce in one barrel, if one of these types of produce is no longer available in the field, that type of produce should be removed from the barrel.

– Rambam, *Mishne Torah, Hilchot Shmita v'Yovel*
7.1-2, 6

א פרות שביעית אין אוכלין מהן
אלא כל זמן שאותו המין מצוי
בשדה, שנאמר "ולבהמתך
ולחיה, אשר בארצך: תהיה...".
(ויקרא כה, ז): כל זמן שחיה
אוכלת ממין זה מן השדה, אתה
אוכל ממה שבבית; כלה לחיה
מן השדה חייב לבער אותו המין
מן הבית, וזה הוא בעור שלפרות
שביעית.

ב ביצד: הרי שהיו לו גרגרות
שלשביעית בתוך ביתו אוכל
מהן, כל זמן שהתאנים באילנות
בשדה; בלו התאנים מן השדה
אסור לאכול מן הגרגרות שבבית,
אלא מבער אותן.

ו הכובש שלושה כבשים בבית
אחת כל שבלה מינו מן השדה,
יבער מינו מן החבית.

Note that the Hebrew word for animal that the Rambam chooses is very specific: “chay’a,” translated as “beast.” This is not a domesticated animal, such as a cow, goat or sheep. This is in reference to wild animals. What do you think of this comparison the Rambam is making, from the Torah verse, between the eating patterns of humans and wild animals, in regards to seasonality?

Is seasonal eating something that is a priority for you? How challenging or easy would this be in the climate you live in?

If you are not growing your own food, how do you generally find out if food is in season? What foods do you associate with a specific season, if any?

How much of your diet is based on food preservation?

Besides for the focus on seasonal eating, Biur adds another dimension to the Sabbatical food system, in regards to food security. Once the time of Biur has passed (meaning a specific food is no longer found in the wild), this specific food could not be held in private storage. Instead, this food must be made available to the public until it was fully consumed. If you happened to have a large amount of this food in storage, you would be guided to ‘distribute a quantity sufficient for three meals’ to as many people as you can (Rambam 7.3). How would your sense of food security shift if this was dependent upon community sharing rather than personal storage?

6. Eat Local

“Even to Syria” suggests that exports between Israel and Syria were common enough to be taken for granted and potentially not seen as ‘transporting’. How do you define ‘local’ as it relates to food production and consumption? How close should a food be grown for you to consider it ‘local’?

What is the most local food you’ve ever eaten? The least local? In either case, was there an appreciation of how far or short that food traveled to get to your mouth?

In the United States, a frequently cited statistic is that food travels 1,500 miles on average from farm to consumer. What type of agricultural and economic systems would need to be in place to ensure a vibrant local ‘foodshed’ (total geographic area where your food is grown)? What would be the benefits and challenges in relying on local food production?

What is your own most local food source? If you were creating a local diet for the Shmita Year, what would you have to sacrifice? Where would you be willing to make a compromise? How would you seek creative alternatives for the foods you would be missing out on?

The produce of the Sabbatical year may not be transported from Eretz Yisrael to the Diaspora, not even to Syria.

– Rambam, *Mishne Torah, Hilchot Shmita v’Yovel*, 5.13

ג פרות שביעית אין מוציאין
אותן מהארץ לחוצה לארץ,
ואפלו לסוריה.

7. Kedushat Shvi'it

A great principle was stated with regard to the produce of the Sabbatical year: Whatever is distinguished as being for human consumption, e.g., wheat, figs, grapes, and the like, should not be used as a compress or a bandage, even for a person, as implied by the phrase in Leviticus 25.6: “It shall be a Shabbat of the Land for you, so that you may eat of it,” i.e., whatever is distinguished as being for you [your consumption], should be used as food.

– *Rambam, Mishne Torah, Hilchot Shmita v'Yovel, 5.11*

יֵא כָּלֵל גְּדוֹל אָמְרוּ בְּפִרוֹת
שְׁבִיעִית: כֹּל שֶׁהוּא מִיַּחַד
לְמֵאֲכָל אָדָם, כְּגוֹן חֲטִיִּם וְתַאֲנִים
וְעִנְבִים וְכִיּוֹצֵא בָהֶן אֵין עוֹשִׂין
מִמֶּנּוּ מְלַגְמָה אוֹ רְטִיָּה וְכִיּוֹצֵא בָהֶן
וְאִפְלוּ לְאָדָם, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר “וְהִיְתָה
שַׁבַּת הָאָרֶץ לָכֶם, לְאֲכֹלָה”
(וַיִּקְרָא כַהֲוֹ), כֹּל שֶׁהוּא מִיַּחַד
לָכֶם, יִהְיֶה לְאֲכֹלָה.

Building upon the essence of this law, that food on the Shmita Year should be both fully utilized and treated as it is naturally intended, the Rabbis also stipulated that foods cannot be wasted on this year. Since foods are harvested for nourishment, such food must be eaten and enjoyed in all their potential. They should not turn into garbage or a wasted product. This general intention is called Kedushat Shvi'it, literally 'The Sanctity of the Seventh [Year Harvest].'

Have you considered how much food is wasted by the agricultural industry, restaurants and the marketplace? Have you ever attempted to measure how much food is wasted in your own kitchen?

What might you or your family do on a Shmita Year (or in your daily practice) to help minimize your own food waste?

The contemporary world involves many instances of food substances being turned into non-food substances: products as different as ethanol, cars running on used vegetable oil, and compostable utensils and dishes are three obvious examples. The text, on the face of it, would seem to suggest rabbinic disapprobation of such products, for the Shmita Year. What is your view? Do you think transforming food into useful non-edible substances would be considered a waste of food?

8. Shmita & Animals

Just as we have learned that the produce of the Shmita Year can be harvested when it is treated as ownerless (and fences blocking such open access is removed), how can we expand this towards animals? How would removing all fences and cages around our domesticated animals, allowing them free access to wild pasture and food, affect our systems of animal husbandry and crop farming?

What does the second source imply about the relationship between domesticated animals and wild animals, based on their food needs and Biur?

How do you think our relationships with animals are directly connected to the wider paradigm of Shmita values and ideals?

See section 4, source #4 for a further reading on this.

⁵ Produce that is set aside for human consumption should not be fed to domesticated animals, beasts, and fowl. If an animal went under a fig tree under its own initiative and began eating the fruit, we do not require [the owner] to bring it back, for [Leviticus 25:7] states: “And for the animal and the beast in your land shall be all the produce to eat.”

⁶ Just as one is obligated to remove food stored for human consumption [at the time of Biur], so too, must he remove animal feed from his home and he may no longer feed it to a domesticated animal, if that type of produce is no longer available in the field [for a wild animal to eat of it].

– *Rambam, Mishne Torah, Hilchot Shmita v'Yovel, 5.5 & 7.6*

ה פרות המיחדין למאכל אדם, אין מאכילין אותן לבהמה לחיה ולעופות; הלכה הבהמה מאליה לתחת התאנה, ואכלה אין מחיבין אותו להחזירה, שנאמר “ולבהמתך ולחיה . . .” (ויקרא כה, ז).

ו וכשם שמבער אכלי אדם, כך מבער אכלי בהמה מן הבית; ואינו מאכילן לבהמה, אם כלה אותו המין מן השדה.

Closing Questions:

What do you think the significance was for all farmers to create a fallow, non-agricultural year all at once, rather than ensure individual fallow periods for each farm's own particular schedule and need?

What is your relationship to your local foodshed: growing, harvesting, distributing, processing, consuming? How directly would you be affected by such a year as Shmita?

How might anticipation of the Shmita Year affect the design of our food systems during the first six years of the cycle so that we can ensure local food systems based in perennial and wild plants, and shared diets based on seasonal and ripe foods?

If eating perennial, local, seasonal, and fresh food is already something that's important to you, how does knowing that these are key components of the Shmita ideal affect your relationship to your food choices? To Jewish tradition? If these aren't food habits you've taken on in your life, how does reading about them in the context of Shmita change their value to you? Take a moment to fully consider the benefits and challenges of eating in such a way.

PART 2: SABBATICAL ECONOMIC SYSTEMS

The Shmita Year was directly linked to economic systems, as much as it was to agricultural systems. Similar to agriculture, our economic systems are a clear reflection on society's wider values and priorities, especially in terms of how we determine wealth and its measurements. At its core, an economy is a collection of societal agreements based upon on how people come together to produce, consume, and exchange products, commodities, and services. So in this section, we explore Sabbatical economics and its systems of exchange. How was the marketplace affected during this Shmita Year? How did business transactions and monetary use change during this time period? What was the nature of the debt release? How were relationships between rich and poor affected? And perhaps most important, what were the interpersonal dynamics between giver and receiver, between producer and consumer, on this year, and during the other six years, in anticipation of the Shmita Year?

1. Sale of Produce

What are the distinctions between selling food in a Shmita Year and the traditional market sale of produce during all other years?

The opening line of this source states that we cannot use the produce of Shmita for 'commercial activity.' Beyond the further references in the source, what other actions or intentions would you consider to fall under the category of 'commercial activity'?

Once food is no longer marked with a price tag, and is no longer bought in a marketplace, how might your perspective of food change? How much of your relationship to food is determined by its price?

If you would not be able to purchase your produce at the market, what are other ways you might consider to ensure you can access produce?

We may not use the produce of the Sabbatical year for commercial activity. If one desires to sell a small amount of the produce of the Sabbatical year, he may. However, the money he receives [in return] has the same holy status as the produce of the Sabbatical year. He should use it only to purchase food and eat that food according to the restrictions of the holiness of the Sabbatical year. The produce that was sold retains the holiness it possessed previously.

[In the Sabbatical year,] one should not reap vegetables from a field and sell them... because this is using the produce of the Sabbatical year for commercial activity. If one reaped vegetables to partake of them and some were left over, he may sell the remainder (since the harvest was clearly for personal use).

– Rambam, *Mishne Torah, Hilchot Shmita v'Yovel* 6.1–2

א אין עושין סחורה בפרות שביעית; ואם רצה למכור מעט מפרות שביעית, מוכר. ואותן הדמים, הרי הן כפרות שביעית: ילקח בהן מאכל, ויאכל בקדשת שביעית. ואותו הפרי הנמכר, הרי הוא בקדשתו כשהיה.

ב לא יהיה לוקח ירקות שדה ומוכר... מפני שזה עושה סחורה בפרות שביעית. לקח ירקות לאכל, והותר מתר למכר המותר.

2. The Value of Money

Just as one must remove the produce of the Sabbatical year, so too, one must remove the money [that was received in exchange for it]. What is implied? One sold pomegranates of the Sabbatical year and used the money received in return for them [to purchase] food. When there are no longer any pomegranates on the trees in the field, but he remains in possession of the money he received for selling them, he is obligated to remove it from his possession.

– Rambam, *Mishne Torah, Hilchot Shmita v'Yovel 7.7*

ז וּכְשֶׁם שֶׁמִּבְעָרִין אֶת הַפְּרוֹת, כִּד
מִבְעָרִין אֶת הַדָּמִים. כִּי־עַד: הָרִי
שֶׁמִּכַּר רְמוּנִים שְׁלֵשְׁבִיעִית, וְהָרִי
הוּא אוֹכֵל בְּדַמְיָהּ, וְכֵלֹ הַרְמוּנִים
מִן הָאֵלֶן שְׁבַשְׁדָּה, וְנִשְׂאָר אֲצֵלוֹ
מִן הַדָּמִים שֶׁמִּכַּר בָּהֶן חַיֵּב לְבַעַר.

How is this passage's treatment of seasonality similar to the text about Biur (section 3.1, source #5)?

How does the use of money shift during the Shmita Year, specifically in regards to selling or buying foods? What does it mean for money to have a 'holy status,' as stated in the previous source?

What happens to money when its value is not determined by banks or governments, but is instead directly connected to the sanctity and availability of food?

3. The Casual Marketplace

Elsewhere the Torah does indeed stress the importance of adding weights and measures: “Do not falsify measurements of length, weight or volume. You must have an honest balance, honest weights, an honest dry measure, and an honest liquid measure” (Leviticus 19.35-36). How does such a radical departure from this practice affect the overall marketplace? How might you feel selling or buying food in this manner?

Why would ‘estimation’ be preferred? Where else might you trade or sell casually? How might this shift your perspective of an economic transaction?

How can something that is ‘ownerless’ be sold? How does this shift your perspective on economic transactions and property?

When the produce of the Sabbatical year is sold, it should not be sold by measure, nor by weight, nor by number, so that it will not appear that one is selling produce in the Sabbatical year. Instead, one should sell a small amount by estimation to make it known that [the produce] is ownerless. And the proceeds of the sale should only be used to purchase other food.

– Rambam, *Mishne Torah, Hilchot Shmita v'Yovel* 6.3

ג כְּשֶׁמוֹכְרִין פְּרוֹת שְׁבִיעִית אֵין מוֹכְרִין אוֹתָן לֹא בְּמִדָּה, וְלֹא בְּמִשְׁקָל, וְלֹא בְּמִנְיָן: כִּדִּי שֶׁלֹּא יִהְיֶה כְּסוּחֵר בְּפִירוֹת שְׁבִיעִית. אֲלֵא מוֹכֵר הַמַּעֵט שְׁמוֹכֵר אֶכְסָרָהּ, לְהוֹדִיעַ שֶׁהוּא הַפְּקָר; וְלוֹקֵחַ הַדָּמִים, לְקִנּוֹת בָּהֶן אֶכֶל אַחֵר.

4. Regulated Sales

These are the utensils which a craftsman is not permitted to sell in the Sabbatical year to someone who is suspected of violating the Sabbatical laws: a plow and all of its accessories, a yoke for a team of oxen, a winnowing fork, and a mattock (hand-tool similar to pick-axe). This is the general principle: Any [utensil] that is exclusively used for a type of work that is forbidden in the Sabbatical year is forbidden to be sold to a person suspect [to violate the laws of] the Sabbatical year.

– Rambam, *Mishne Torah, Hilchot Shmita v'Yovel* 8.2

ב ואלו כליים שאין האמן רשאי
למכרו בשביעית, למי שהוא
חשוד על השביעית מחרשה וכל
כליה, העל והמורה והדקר. זה
הכלל כל שכלאכתו מיחדת
למלאכה שאסורה בשביעית,
אסור למכרו לחשוד.

Do you agree with the rabbis' implication that it should be our personal responsibility to not support those who are not observing the Shmita Year?

What else would you consider taking off the market during the Shmita Year? What wider implications would Shmita have beyond agricultural production?

5. Debt Release

In Jewish economic law, interest is not allowed to be charged on a loan, as stated in Exodus 22.25: "If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not act toward him as a demanding creditor. Do not charge any interest upon him." Do you think a debt release is more feasible if the debts did not come with the added expenses of interest?

For more on Jewish lending, see section 4, source #7 and Appendix B.

What is significant about the debt being canceled at the end of the Shmita Year as opposed to its beginning?

¹ It is a positive commandment to nullify a loan in the Sabbatical year, as [Deuteronomy 15:2] states: "All of those who bear debt must release their hold."

⁴ The Sabbatical year does not nullify debts until its conclusion. [This is derived as follows: Deuteronomy 15:1-2] states: "At the end of seven years, you shall effect a remission." Therefore if one lent money to a colleague in the Sabbatical year itself, he may demand payment of his debt for the entire year. When the sun sets on the night of Rosh HaShanah of the eighth year, the debt is nullified.

– Rambam, *Mishne Torah, Hilchot Shmita v'Yovel* 9.1 ע"ד 4

א מצות עשה להשמיט המלוה בשביעית, שנאמר "שמוט כל בעל משה ידו" (דברים טו, ב).

ד אין שביעית משמטת כספים אלא בסופה שנאמר "מקץ שבע שנים, תעשה שמיטה. וזה, דבר השמיטה" (דברים טו, א ב), לפיכך המלוה את חברו בשביעית עצמה, גובה חובו כל השנה; וכשתשקע חמה בלילי ראש השנה שלמוצאי שביעית, אבד החוב.

6. Returning Debt

²⁸ Whenever anyone returns a debt, despite the fact that the Sabbatical year has passed, the spirits of our Sages are gratified because of him... When returning a loan, the debtor should not tell the creditor: "I am giving this to you as payment of my debt." Instead, he should tell him: "This money is mine, and I am giving it to you as a present."

²⁹ If a debtor returned a debt, but did not make the above statement, the lender should turn the conversation to the point where the debtor says: "This money is mine, and I am giving it to you as a present." If the debtor does not make such statements, the creditor should not accept it from him.

– Rambam, *Mishne Torah, Hilchot Shmita v'Yovel* 9.28–29

כח כל המחזיר חוב שעברה עליו
שביעית, רוח חכמים נוחה המנו.
ולא יאמר לו בחובי, אני נותן
לך; אלא יאמר לו שלי הם,
ובמתנה אני נותן לך.

כט החזיר לו חובו, ולא אמר לו
בן מסבב עמו בדברים, עד
שיאמר לו שלי הם ובמתנה
נתתם לך; ואם לא אמר, לא
יקבל ממנו אלא יטל מעותיו,
וילך לו.

Although debts were in fact released on the Shmita Year, the hope would be that those who borrowed would eventually find a way to return the loan, when enough funds were available. Do you think this intention of returning payment was critical in supporting a successful debt release every seven years?

Why do you think the verbal statement clarifying the payment as a gift was such an important part of this interaction? What changes when a re-payment of a debt is offered as a gift? For the lender? For the borrower? How might gift giving/receiving fit into your own economic exchanges?

What are some ways we might facilitate and support such interpersonal relationships between lender and borrower today, especially in such a fast-paced, global economy?

7. Pruzbol

How do you feel about this rabbinic decree? Do you think Hillel was justified in his decision?

Hillel is famous for the story of standing on one foot and teaching that the 'entire' Torah can be distilled into the command to 'that which is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor.' How do you think the Pruzbol fits in with this teaching?

Why do you think it was so important in Hillel's time to clarify that a Pruzbol could only be composed if the person in debt had access to a piece of land?

See section 1, source #9 for a glimpse into biblical land markets.

If someone approached you for a loan, would you offer it knowing that when the Shmita year arrived, it might be canceled?

¹⁶ When Hillel the Elder saw that the people would refrain from lending to each other and thus violated the words of the Torah [Deuteronomy 15:9]: “Lest there be a wicked thought in your heart,” [to cease from lending because of fear that the debts would be released], he ordained a *pruzbol* [literally, a legal amendment] so that debts would not be nullified and people would still lend to each other.

¹⁸ This represents the body of a *pruzbol*: “I am notifying you, so-and-so and so-and-so, (the two judges of the court), that I reserve the right to collect all the debts [owed] to me at any time I desire.” The judges or the witnesses should sign below.

¹⁹ A *pruzbol* may be composed only when [the borrower possesses] land. If the borrower does not possess land, the lender should grant the borrower even the slightest amount of land—even enough to grow a cabbage stalk—in his field. [Even if] he lent him place for an oven or a range, a *pruzbol* may be composed.

– Rambam, *Mishne Torah, Hilchot Shmita v'Yovel* 9.16 & 8–19

טז בְּשֵׂרָאָה הִלֵּל הִזְקֵן שְׁנַמְנָעוּ
הָעָם מִלְּהִלוּת זֶה אֶת זֶה, וְעוֹבְרִין
עַל הַפְּתוּב בַּתּוֹרָה “הַשְּׁמֵר לְךָ
פֶּן יִהְיֶה דְבַר . . .” (דְּבָרִים טו, ט),
הִתְקִין פְּרֻזְבוֹל, כְּדֵי שְׁלֵא יִשְׁמַט
הַחֹב עַד שְׁגִלוּ זֶה אֶת זֶה. וְאִין
הַפְּרֻזְבוֹל מוֹעִיל אֱלֵא בְּשִׁמְשֵׁת
כְּסָפִים בְּזִמְן הַזֶּה, שְׂהִיא מְדַבְּרִי
סוֹפְרִים; אֲבָל שְׁמִטָּה שְׁלַתּוֹרָה,
אִין הַפְּרֻזְבוֹל מוֹעִיל בָּהּ.

יח זֶה הוּא גּוֹפוֹ שְׁלַפְרֻזְבוֹל
מוֹסֵר אֲנִי לְכֶם פְּלוֹנִי וּפְלוֹנִי
הַדְּיָנִין שְׁבִמְקוֹם פְּלוֹנִי, שְׁכָּל חוֹב
שֵׁישׁ לִי, שְׂאֲגַבְנוּ כָּל זְמַן שְׂאֲרָצָה;
וְהַדְּיָנִין חוֹתְמִין מִלְּמַטָּן, אוֹ
הָעֵדִים.

יט אִין כּוֹתְבִין פְּרֻזְבוֹל, אֱלֵא
עַל הַקְּרָקַע; אִם אִין קְרָקַע
לְלוֹנָה מְזוֹכָה לוֹ הַמְּלוֹה כָּל שְׂהוּא
בַּתּוֹךְ שְׂדֵהוּ, אֲפִלוּ קָלַח
שְׁלִכְרוּב. הַשְּׂאִילוּ מְקוֹם לְתַנּוֹר
אוֹ לְכִירָה, כּוֹתְבִין עֲלָיו פְּרֻזְבוֹל;
הִיתָה לוֹ שְׂדֵה מְמֻשְׁכֶּנֶת, כּוֹתְבִין
עֲלֶיהָ פְּרֻזְבוֹל.

A Pruzbol simply means a 'legal amendment.' The debt cancellation during the Shmita Year was specific to peer-to-peer loans. However, loans that were issued by the courts would not be canceled. So a Pruzbol allows a lender to transfer his or her 'loan' to the courts for the Shmita Year and reclaim it after the Shmita Year has passed. In this way, the debt is not canceled. As you consider the Pruzbol, also think of the forewarning we received through the Torah (Deuteronomy 15.9/ section 1, source #4): “Be careful not to harbor this wicked thought: ‘The seventh year, the year for canceling debts, is near,’ so that you do not show ill will toward the needy among your fellow Israelites and give them nothing... [rather] give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart.”

Closing Questions:

What is true wealth in a Shmita Year? How is this measured?

Do you think the release of debts commanded for the Shmita Year is realistic? Why or why not? What systems would need to be in place to make it possible?

What is your own relationship to money and the marketplace? What do you think would need to change in today's economy to support the values and ideals of the Shmita tradition? Are these changes ones you would want to support?

Section 4

Rabbinic Voices & Visioning of Shmita: From Exile to Return



TRADITIONALLY, Shmita applied only in the land of Israel. It is not considered a *halacha* (law) to observe Shmita outside of Israel. In the more than 2,000 years since being exiled from the land of Israel, Jewish tradition continued to evolve and develop, forming a strong identity that did not include the practice of Shmita. Yet, throughout this time, Jewish sages and leaders carried the spark of this tradition, writing romantically and powerfully about this practice. In this section, we offer a few of these voices, ranging in time from the immediate post-exile period to the early settlements in pre-state Israel.

As you read these texts, consider how the Rabbis had the opportunity to explore Shmita and embrace its spiritual and moral values without also having to face the challenges it came with. How do you think this may have changed their relationship with this law? What do you think the intention of the Rabbis were, in teaching about Shmita, and keeping its memory alive, in a period when it was not being observed? And for those of us still living outside of Israel, how might these voices influence our own thinking about Shmita today?

1. Shmita as the Heart of Torah

In what way do you think the commitment to enter into relationship with the Shmita Cycle would 'prepare' the tribes to be able to fully receive the Torah?

Why do you think Rabbi Yishmael chose Shmita as the archetypal commandment to agree to, which would symbolize and represent all laws to follow? Which commandment would you choose?

This midrash below adds imagery and texture to a powerful moment in Jewish tradition: Following the revelation on the mountain, where the tribes of Israel received the 10 Commandments, Moses offered further guidance, while reading from the Book of the Covenant. Upon his conclusion, the tribes of Israel famously responded, "Na'ase V'nishma" "We will do and we will listen."

"And Moses took the book of the covenant, and read so the people could hear, and they said: 'All that God has spoken we will do, we will obey.'" (Leviticus 24.7) Rabbi Yishmael asked: From where did Moshe begin to read? "When you settle the land, the land shall observe a Sabbath of the Lord. Six years you shall sow your field...but in the Seventh Year the land shall have a complete rest." Shmita, Yovel, blessings, and curses. And how did he conclude? "These are the laws, statutes and teachings." They said, "We accept!" When he saw that they had received it upon themselves, he said: "Behold, you are prepared. Tomorrow come and receive all the laws upon yourselves."

– Mechilta of Rabbi Yishmael, Parashat Yitro, 3 (300 CE)

2. Shmita & Personal Strength

“The mighty in strength that fulfill His word” (Psalms 103:20). To whom does the Scripture refer? R. Isaac said, “To those who are willing to observe the Sabbatical Year. In the way of the world, a man may be willing to observe a commandment for a day, a week, a month, but is he likely to continue to do so through the remaining days of the year? But throughout that year this mighty man sees his field declared ownerless, his fences broken down, and his produce consumed by others, yet he continues to give up his produce without saying a word. Can you conceive a person mightier than such as he?”

– *Midrash Rabbah, Leviticus 1.1 (400 CE)*

The Rabbis are designating respect and honor to those who are able to keep the Shmita Year. Do you think the challenges of the Shmita Year would be ones you would be willing to deal with?

Many of the mitzvot are challenging in their own ways. Why do you think Rabbi Isaac chose Shmita beyond all the other mitzvot to personify ‘the mighty in strength’?

3. Shmita & Our Relationship to Land

How might your relationship to land and other personal resources/property change when you release your own sense of control? If such a 'release' became a continual practice, how would this shape your sense of ownership?

What is the potential consequence of thinking property and resources belong to you? How might this consciousness be affecting our global environmental and social health today?

How does the practice of Shmita imply receiving 'a legacy' or a heritage?

Is there any piece of land that you have been in relationship with in such a way? What are some ways to 'merit' the opportunity to call a land home for generations?

Why do you think the Rabbis chose these particular actions as a trigger for exile? What is the connecting link between them?

What is exile to you? How do you experience this in your own life and how might you sense it in the society you live in?

How is exile connected to our relationship with food and economy? How might these values of Shmita offer us a redemption from this sense of exile, and a return 'home'?

A disciple came and asked R. Abbahu: 'What is the reason for the Sabbatical year?' 'Now,' said R. Abbahu, 'Sow for six years and let go of the land in the seventh year: in order that you know that the land is Mine'

– *Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 39a*

"When you come into the land" (Leviticus 25.2) implies no conquest but the acquisition of a legacy. This may foster the illusion that the Land belongs to Israel permanently and unconditionally, to be inherited by their children to be tilled and cultivated, and to reap the fruits of their sweat and toil. To counter any such notion, God says, the Land which I give to you, i.e. it is not a Land given as an irreversible inheritance, but a pledge renewed on condition that you merit it. However, if you turn away from Me, I shall take it away from you and give it to others."

– *Rabbi Moshe Alshich (16th Century)*

For the full text referenced here, from Leviticus 25.2, as well as its direct connection to Shmita, see section 1, source #2. And for a reference to the way land was valued in relation to the Jubilee Cycle, see section 1, sources #8-9.

Exile comes upon the world on account of idolatry, sexual immorality, murder, and the failure to observe the Shmita.

– *Pirkei Avot (Ethics of our Fathers), 5.11 (3rd Century)*

4. A Return to Eden

'And the wolf shall lie down with the lamb' (Isaiah 11.16)—this was how it was in the time of Adam and at the beginning of the creation, and we also know very clearly that the Earth is now cursed with thorns and thistles whereas it never used to be, and animals never used to tear each other up for food, etc. So as a reminder of the past and to serve as inspiration for the future, the Almighty has commanded the *mitzvah* of the Shmita Year which draws our attention to the time of the creation and the time of the coming of the Messiah... 'And for your cattle and for the beast which is in the your land shall all the produce be to eat, etc.' (Leviticus 25.7), it is in fact a kind of promise, that is to say, if you do all of this, the time will come when cattle and beasts will eat together etc. For their abandoning everything in the year of the Shmita to the cattle and the beasts is a sign of what was and will again be, for no longer will they eat bread by the sweat of their brow, and the wild animals will not harm the cattle. So therefore, whoever observes the mitzvot which signify this, will be privileged to experience all of these things."

– Rabbi Saul Mortera, *Sefer Giv'at Shaul* (17th Century)

Do you see a correlation between the reality of Shmita and the utopia that is depicted in the Garden of Eden? Is this the ultimate 'home' Shmita will bring us back to?

What are the characteristics of this reality that Rabbi Mortera is highlighting?

Why do you think Rabbi Mortera is referencing 'by the sweat of their brow', as in the curse Adam and Eve were given upon being sent out of Eden? Is Shmita a rectification for this curse?

5. What's Mine is Yours

If private acquisition and ownership creates a sense of 'what's mine is mine,' how does Shmita promote a sense of 'what's mine is yours'?

See source #2 in section 3.1 for more background on these topics.

What are some moments in your life where you would rather say 'what's mine is mine'? And in what ways do you practice sharing of resources and property, rooted in the value of 'what's mine is yours'?

Do you think those who were keeping Shmita and being sieged by the army of Antiochus would have agreed with the Kli Yakar? (section 2, source #6)

Or how about those who were donating their harvests to the collective storehouses? (section 2, source #7)

The year of Shmita...promotes a sense of fellowship and peace...for one is not allowed to exercise over any of the seventh year produce the right of private ownership. And this is undoubtedly a primary factor in promoting peace since most dissension originates from the attitudes of 'mine is mine,' one person claiming 'it is all mine' and the other also claiming 'it is all mine.' But in the seventh year all are equal, and this is the real essence of peace.

– *Kli Yakar, on Devarim 31.12 (16th Century)*

6. A Temple in Time

The Shmita Year teaches us further that the rich should not lord it over the poor. Accordingly, the Torah ordained that all should be equal during the seventh year, both the rich and the needy having access to the gardens and fields to eat their fill... Yet another reason [for Shmita]: in order that they should not always be preoccupied with working the soil to provide for their material needs. For in this one year, they would be completely free. The liberation from the yoke of work would give them the opportunity for studying Torah and wisdom. Those who are not students will be occupied with crafts and building and supplying these needs in Eretz Yisrael. Those endowed with special skills will invent new methods in this free time for the benefit of the world.

– Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Kalischer, *Sefer Habrit, Behar* (19th Century)

What is the link between Rabbi Kalischer's two reasons for Shmita? Is the ideal of a Sabbatical only a luxury the rich can afford? How could we create societal systems which would support the possibility of a Sabbatical for all societal classes?

Have you ever taken a personal Sabbatical? What was that experience like? If not, how would you fill your time if you had one year of rest from work? What goals would you have for this year?

From what you know of Shmita, do you think this period of time would create a sense of personal freedom?

Imagine if our society functioned in such a way that every career included one year off, every seven years. How do you think this might change the way our society functions?

7. The Balancing of the Seventh Year

Do you see Shmita as a societal re-set, setting straight 'societal ills' and inequalities, as Rav Kook describes?

Do you agree with Rav Kook's statement that debt has become 'a major source of power for the elite'? If so, who are the elite? Do you feel empowered/disempowered in your role as lender/borrower? How might this relate to a teaching from the Rambam that lending is the highest form of charity, because, if done correctly, it truly empowers the borrower (Mishne Torah, Seder Zera'im, Gifts to the Poor, 10.7)?

How could and should we develop healthier models of giving? Healthier models of entering into debt?

For more on Jewish practices of giving, see Appendix B.

What do you think Shabbat achieves for the individual, and how does Shmita transfer this to the nation, as a whole?

On a personal level, how might the practice of Shmita stir one's own spiritual practice?

What changes about food when it is simply food, and not a part of commerce? How does the economy of food play in to the 'coveting of wealth'?

See section 3.1, source #2 and section 3.2, source #1 for more discussion about food and commerce.

Rav Kook (1865 – 1935) was the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of British Palestine. He was a teacher, writer, and poet. His works were filled with the love of the land of Israel as a home for the spiritual maturation of Jewish tradition. He was known for his universalistic appreciation for humanity and creation, as well as his efforts to build relationships between the religious and secular communities in the development of Israel. He authored Shabbat Ha'aretz, which was partly a poetic, spiritual celebration of the importance of Shmita, as well as a detailed account of the laws relating to the usage of Heter Mechira (see section 5, source #2).

The seventh year serves to rectify the social ills and inequalities that accumulate in society over the years. When poorer segments of society borrow from the wealthy, they feel beholden to the affluent elite. "The debtor is a servant of the lender" (Proverbs 22:7). This form of subservience can corrupt even honest individuals in their dealings with the rich and powerful. The Sabbatical year comes to correct this situation of inequality and societal rifts, by removing a major source of power of the elite: debts owed to them.

– *Rav Kook (early 20th century), adapted by Rabbi Chanan Morrison*

What the Sabbath achieves regarding the individual, the Shmita achieves with regard to the nation as a whole. A year of solemn rest is essential for both the nation and the land, a year of peace and quiet without oppressor and tyrant...It is a year of equality and rest, in which the soul reaches out towards divine justice, towards God who sustains the living creatures with loving kindness. There is no private property and no punctilious privilege but the peace of God reigns over all in which there is the breath of life. Sanctity is not profaned by the exercise of private acquisitiveness over all this year's produce, and the covetousness of wealth stirred up by commerce is forgotten. For food – but not for commerce.

– *Rav Kook, Shabbat Ha'Aretz*

Closing Questions:

Does the perspective of Shmita shift for you, when considering it simply as a system of values and ethics? Do you think Jewish culture could more deeply embody these values? If so, how?

Do you think the Rabbis see the idealistic possibilities and utopian potential of Shmita as the core reason of its observance or as an added romantic layer? How do you think the fact that they were not actually observing Shmita affected their own personal perspectives?

Section 5

Back To The Land: Shmita in Israel, From Early Pioneers to Modern Times



IT HAS BEEN over 100 years since the Jewish people have returned to the land of their ancestors, the stories of their indigenous past. It has been 65 years since the formal state of Israel has been established, and the question of what to do with Shmita is very much alive. Today, the arrival of the Shmita Year in Israel brings with it heated debates. For some, this tradition is a burden, an archaic notion worth forgetting. For others, it is a symbol of the hopeful culture that the Torah challenges us to create. As you read these texts considering Shmita in Israel today, try and shift your perspective towards the emotions, hopes, fears and desires of a young nation, taking shape once again, on a land they only dreamed about until now. Not only must they learn how to live on a land so different from where they came, they simultaneously must face many cultural riddles of how to renew the relationship between Torah laws and the land, in modern times. For Shmita, this means bringing abstract ideals to real-time applications. In this section, we introduce some voices grappling with this Shmita riddle, and some of the creative solutions that are emerging.

1. A First Impression

Do you resonate with the feelings the Shlah Hakodesh was having upon his arrival to Israel? Do you think you would feel a personal connection to observing Shmita if you arrived in Israel on the Shmita Year?

Do you agree with his statement that 'what is lost will be more than what is gained' in terms of living in Israel while not following the commandments of the land? Is the holiness of living in this land lost by not observing its laws?

One year after I arrived in the Holy City of Jerusalem, it is the Sabbatical year. Many of the inhabitants of the Holy Land wish to exempt themselves because of the great difficulty; the year preceding Shmita there was a famine in the land and there was insufficient food, day by day...I have contemplated the matter to myself and have thought, "I have a greater obligation to observe than they do, and even to sell the shirt off my back. God will say to me, Why have you come from a place where you were exempt from this and come to a place of obligation? And now in this place you will abandon this mitzvah? Why have you come to profane my land?" ...The mitzvah of dwelling in the Land of Israel should not come through the sins of ignoring the mitzvot of the Land, in which case what is lost will be more than what is gained.

– Rabbi Isaiah ben Avraham HaLevi, Shlah HaKodesh (16th Century)

2. Recalling an Ancient Practice & Its Challenges

Since the Zionist movement began to encourage agriculture in Palestine, the observance of Shmita has become a problem for solution. The leaders of the movement, who had the interest of the colonists at heart and feared that the Shmita might jeopardize their existence, claimed that the law is now obsolete. The Jewish periodicals, especially “Ha-Meliz,” strenuously objected to enforcing the law of Shmita upon the colonists. When the Shmita Year 5649 (= 1888-89) approached, the question was submitted to the chief rabbis in Europe and Palestine. Rabbi Isaac Elhanan Spector was inclined to be lenient, and advocated a nominal sale of the land to a non-Jew [Heter Mechira] and the employment of non-Jewish laborers during Shmita. But the Ashkenazic rabbis in Jerusalem opposed any subterfuge, and issued the following declaration: (“Ha-Habazzelet,” Oct. 26, 1888, No. 6; “Jew. World,” Nov. 16, 1888)

“As the year of the Shmita, 5649, is drawing nigh, we inform our brethren the colonists that, according to our religion, they are not permitted to plow or sow or reap, or allow Gentiles to perform these agricultural operations on their fields (except such work as may be necessary to keep the trees in a healthy state, which is legally permitted). Inasmuch as the colonists have hitherto endeavored to obey God’s law, they will, we trust, not violate this Biblical command.

An appeal, signed by prominent Jews in Jerusalem, for funds to enable the colonists to observe the Shmita was directed to the Jews outside the Holy Land. Dr. Hildesheim as president of the society Lema’an Ziyyon, in Frankfort-on-the-Main, collected donations for this purpose. Baron Edmond de Rothschild, being informed by Rabbi Diskin that the law of Shmita is valid, ordered the colonists under his protection in Palestine to cease work during the Sabbatical year.

– *Jewish Encyclopedia, 1900*

Heter Mechira literally means ‘Permit of Sale.’ Heter Mechira allows for the symbolic selling of agricultural land to a non-Jew, for the one-year Shmita period. Once the ownership of land has been transferred to someone who is not Jewish, the laws of Shmita no longer apply to the land itself, and food can be grown on it. While the state of Israel has developed a successfully strong and secure agricultural sector since its early pioneer days and the initial use of Heter Mechira, this method of symbolic land transfer is still the normative practice on a Shmita Year.

What are arguments for and against Heter Mechira? Agriculturally? Economically? Spiritually? In early times and in our current era?

If you had been an early settler in Israel, would you agree with Rabbi Spector or Baron de Rothschild? If you lived outside of Israel, would you have contributed to Dr. Hildesheim’s campaign?

Compare this text with Rav Kook's writings in section 4, source #7.

What tensions does he feel around the observance of Shmita? What was at stake?

This is merely a temporary measure that we implemented only because of the overwhelming need to do so. God forbid that one should consider annulling a great and central *mitzvah* [commandment] such as the holiness of the Shmita unless it is a matter of life and death, such that if we do not sell the land, many will die of starvation and the fledging new Jewish settlement in Eretz Yisrael will be destroyed. However, at a time that a competent *Beit Din* [Jewish Court] will conclude that the sale is not necessary and that the nation can observe Shmita without endangering lives, then God forbid that the sale should take place in such circumstances.

– *Rav Kook (Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi, Israel, 1921–35)*

For further reference to the concerns around Heter Mechira, read an excerpt of a letter from the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, dated from 1958, over 20 years after Rav Kook's time:

As we approach the Shmita Year 5719 we solemnly declare that it is our aim to uphold the laws of the Shmita Year in all their details. Unfortunately, however, the prevailing circumstances force us to make use again—as a temporary measure—of the Heter mechirah in accordance with the practice of our learned and pious predecessors of blessed memory. The Heter is granted to all those who signed the prepared authorization. Detailed instructions as to the kinds of work permitted or forbidden during the Shmita Year will be given in due course by the Chief Rabbinate. May the Almighty in His great mercy hasten the time of our complete redemption so that we may be privileged to observe the laws of Shmita and Yovel in their entirety, as well as the other laws referring to the soil of the Holy Land, including those referring to the Holy Temple. May it be rebuilt speedily in our days. Amen.

– *Chief Rabbinate, 1958*

3. Modern Tensions

Those who do not wish to rely on this Heter Mechira have the option of going to the trouble of importing produce from abroad. If they [believe] that the holiness of Shmita does not apply to produce grown by a non-Jew...they may purchase produce from the fields cultivate by Arabs. But what of this running to a lone fruit and vegetable seller in order to pay exorbitant prices for the produce grown by non-Jews, when the people buying are so annoyed by the trip and expenses, on the one hand, and half-proud of themselves for their 'great righteousness,' on the other? What has this to do with the biblical rule that "you may eat whatever the land produces during its Sabbath"? Is there any recognizable connection between this pride [of buying kosher Shmita produce] and the feeling of man's subservience and the Creator's supremacy, which lies at the heart of the mitzvah of Shmita? Among those who are punctilious about observing the prohibition on uncultivated produce, how many of them accept and live the Shmita Year in simple joy, as opposed to the many who are waiting, with all but bated breath, for it to end?

– *Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, Yeshivat Har Etzion, Israel, 1973*

The mitzvah of Shmita was intended for a simple agricultural society. Most Jews in the Land of Israel in biblical and Talmudic times grew the food they required. During the Shmita Year, it was relatively easy to stop working the land and eat whatever grew on its own. The crops in the field were left unclaimed, and the poor and the city dwellers could come and eat. If we lived in such a society today, we could probably observe the mitzvah of Shmita as it was legislated. But, today, 95% of the country's inhabitants live in cities, far from food sources. If all the *kibbutzim* and *moshavim* observed Shmita as it was legislated, a life-threatening situation would develop. In addition, at the present time, most of Israel's agricultural produce is destined for export. Agrexco – the Israel Agricultural Export Company – exports 4 billion shekels (1 billion dollars) of produce every year. If all the farmers were to observe the mitzvah of Shmita according to biblical law, Israeli agriculture would collapse and this could bring disaster to the State of Israel... If sowing in the seventh year was allowed in order to pay taxes, it is even more justified to allow this to ensure the livelihood of tens of thousands of Jewish farmers and in order to ensure the economic viability of the State of Israel!

– *Rabbi David Golinkin, Jerusalem, 1985 (excerpt from extensive halachic teshuva on the question of observing Shmita in modern times)*

Rabbi Lichtenstein is highlighting the stress and paradox that the Shmita Year brings up. Those who do follow the laws in a modern context seem quite removed from the original intention of the law.

Do you think observance of the laws of Shmita without a connection to the original intention of the law serves any value?

Should this be pursued even if it is causing wider tension on a societal level?

Do you agree that Shmita is only relevant to a rural agricultural society, where most people were engaged in land cultivation and food production? Since our modern societies today are predominantly urban, should Shmita no longer be an obligation?

To learn more about the leniencies of Shmita practice during Temple times due to taxes, see section 2, source #5

4. Shmita in Israel Today

If you were a farmer in Israel, what would your approach be during the Shmita Year? And if you were a consumer? What would you add to this debate, if anything?

Do you think Shmita is meant to be followed by the strict letter of the law or should it be adapted for modern times?

As Israel's Jews start a new year, the country finds itself in the middle of a fierce religious dispute about the sanctity of fruits and vegetables. Rabbis are pitted against one another, the state and the religious authorities are in conflict, the Israeli Supreme Court is involved, the devout are confused and the cost of produce is rising. And a country in love with flowers and proud of "making the desert bloom," in its own disputatious way, is letting much of its land go to seed. This year, 5768 by the Jewish calendar, is a Shmita, or sabbatical year...

That presumably worked fine in a primitive economy before decent fertilizer, but Shmita presented problems for the new Jewish state. Zionism was founded on the notion of a return to the land, but a modern country cannot live on what falls to the ground.

—As Farmers and Fields Rest, a Land Grows Restless, NY Times Oct. 7, 2007

Yochay Sorok and thousands of his fellow farmers should be taking the year off right now, allowing their land, and themselves, to rest in observance of a Jewish tradition that dates to Leviticus. But Sorok, customer relations manager for the Chubeza organic farm outside Jerusalem, is working—as are the vast majority of Israeli farmers. Just before the start of the Jewish New Year on Sept. 13, Sorok signed papers at the offices of his local chief rabbi, technically selling the farm to a non-Jew. He never met his farm's "buyer" and doesn't need to. Next September, the purchase check will be torn up and everything will return to normal. "It's a trick. But it's a smart trick," Sorok said of the nominal land sale. "That's the Jewish way of dealing with the Torah. You reinterpret—not for small, selfish reasons but for good reasons. . . . Giving people a living is a higher cause."

—In Israel, It's Temple vs. State Over Farming, Los Angeles Times Dec. 7, 2007

Every seven years, an increasing number of farmers defy economic logic and leave their lands fallow for the agricultural sabbatical. In the 1950s and '60s, only about 1,000 dunams (250 acres) of land lay fallow. Seven years ago, in 2001, it was about 220,000 dunams. And next year, 3,000-3,500 farmers will observe shmita, and 400,000 dunams will lie fallow, according to Keren Shvi'it. "This is very exciting," said Rabbi Shmuel Bloom, executive vice president of Agudath Israel of America. "We are hopeful that with the proper support, close to 40 percent of arable land in Israel will be resting this year." Over the last few decades agriculture in Israel has moved from a mom-and-pop based system, in which individual families tilled a plot of land, to one made up of large-scale operators who work thousands of dunams. On his recent visit in preparation for the coming shmita, Bloom said he spoke to farmers who gross \$1.5 million a year who were willing to shut down operations for Shmita.

—Michal Lando, Mitva Makers, Jerusalem Post, July 24, 2007

Beyond Heter Mechira, these are other creative solutions practiced in Israel today in relationship to Shmita:

Otzar Beit Din: The Rabbinic Court ‘hires’ a farmer to supply them with permissible foods during the Shmita Year. In buying this food, the court remains within the boundaries of religious law, as they are paying the farmer only for his time as a ‘worker’ of the court, and not for the actual food that he is providing. The next step is getting the food to the customer. Before the Shmita Year, stores sign up as in the court’s distribution system, paying for ‘membership’ rather than for the food they are receiving. In this way, no food is actually being sold even though harvests are still being distributed through the networks of the modern marketplace. (For the original model of Otzar Beit Din, see section 2, source #5)

Shmita Farming: Foods which are permissible to be harvested during the Shmita Year are perennial harvests (fruits, nuts, vine crops, herbs). Foods which are permissible to be cultivated are those grown in systems which are not directly touching the ‘land’ of Israel, such as raised beds and hydroponics. Lastly, foods grown outside of the biblical borders of Israel, e.g. farms in the Golan and the Negev, are not affected by the laws of Shmita.

Leaving The Land Fallow: Keren HaShvi’it is a public fund established in Israel to raise money for religious farmers who choose to follow the practices of the Shmita Year. This fund provides the farmers with financial support to compensate for lost income. In addition, they also offer guidance and advice to make sure the farmers fully understand how they can best prepare for the Shmita (focus on storage crops, perennial plants) and what agricultural practices they can continue with, once the Shmita Year has arrived.

Debt Release: Keren Nediveh Aretz is a public loan amnesty fund, established to help bail out those in debt. This fund raises money which is distributed, as a loan, towards the end of the Shmita Year, to specific individuals the fund is working with. At the end of the Shmita Year, the ‘loan’ is forfeited, and the recipient uses this money to pay back his or her remaining debts.

Closing Questions:

As Israel further develops as a Jewish country, there is the opportunity and challenges of building modern systems, rooted in practical *halachot*. Where should we celebrate and invest in this opportunity? And where should we develop separations to keep a healthy balance?

Is Shmita today a question primarily for Israel, or is this a system that we should consider adopting internationally, for all Jewish communities? What might Shmita look like outside of Israel?

How might Jewish communities in the Diaspora play a role in supporting the rise of the Shmita practice in Israel today?

Section 6

Reclaiming The Sabbatical Tradition: Exploring Shmita Today



WE NOW STAND in an age of global connectivity, in an age of interfaith sharing, in an age of diversified, multi-layered, international Judaism. While Shmita may not define us as a Jewish people or be on our highest cultural priority list, a conversation and movement is growing to reclaim and re-imagine Shmita for our modern era. If Shmita was a radical, challenging proposition back in early Israelite culture, how much more so today, in an era of industrial agriculture and the global marketplace! After all this time of dormancy, the time has come to once again explore this question of Shmita. And in so doing, let us meet this ancient tradition anew, ripe and fresh, to harvest her lessons for us today, and begin a conversation which will ripple into years to come, many generations ahead. What does Shmita mean for you today? What do you think we should do with Shmita right now? And how can we creatively adopt the core values and principles of this tradition to empower healthier, more sustainable, and resilient Jewish communities, both in Israel and beyond?

1. Tapping into Personal Faith

Do you agree about the impractical nature of Shmita? If so, do you think Shmita itself is inherently impractical or does it just seem so because of the current cultural systems we have designed for ourselves?

How do you think personal sacrifice comes into play with the Shmita tradition? Note: The Hebrew word for sacrifice, Korban, shares the same root letters as the word me'karev, 'to draw close together.' How might this shift your perspective? What would your own personal sacrifice be in forming a relationship with a Shmita observance?

What is your own personal relationship to faith, trust, and belief? Is this something you try to cultivate in your life? How?

What security might you find by 'touching what is underneath the speed'? Is the possibility of letting go of that speed something you would like to invite into your life? Is there a fear that comes along with such an idea?

One should not be deterred from Shmita observance by the obvious impracticality of the mitzvah. Shmita, unlike many other mitzvot, becomes a test of belief and faith. The Torah, which otherwise adamantly dictates a practical approach to life, here demands a leap of faith and an abandonment of the everyday practicalities of living. I have felt that the mitzvah of Shmita is the Jewish community's communal equivalent of the *akeidah* (sacrifice) of Yitzchak by Avraham, which was ordained on a personal level. The *akeidah* also was the height of impracticality. It flew in the face of all of the moral teachings and behavior of Avraham until that moment. Thus, it became the supreme test of faith in the lives of Avraham and Yitzchak and remains the symbol of Jewish belief and sacrifice until today... The modern world is long on narcissistic pleasure and short on faith and sacrifice. But without faith, without a feeling of the spiritual and supernatural, life is a very scary place and experience.

– Rabbi Berel Wein

Something miraculous happens when we stop. We get to experience the power that nature knows called dormancy. Dormancy, that which is holding; the heartbeat that rests; the hibernating animals, all of winter; waiting and waiting... There are seeds inside each and every one of us, inside this culture, that cannot emerge because we do not know that dormancy does not mean death, resting does not mean disappearing. What keeps us from stopping is that we are terrified of resting. We are afraid of the imaginative terrible things we will feel in the quiet. We fear that when we stop, even for a moment, the sheer enormity of our lives will overwhelm us. Our outspoken and unspoken fears, they speed up our lives. Like a stone being thrown over a lake, we've learned to skip so we don't get too wet, and we are terrified that if we let the stone fall, we will disappear. And so we think that our speed will save us from the void. We dance around the security that is offered from touching *what is underneath the speed*. Can we let go of the obsession of finishing what can't be finished?

– Rabbi David Ingber, *Shabbat Behar sermon, Romemu*

2. Cycles of Growth and Rest

What would have happened if God had not paused—had become so joyful in the process of creating the Six Days that S/He had continued straight on, into a seventh and an eighth day of work?...An artist will tell you: if you are painting a picture, there comes a moment when one more paint stroke will ruin it. You have to know when to stop, catch your breath, and be at peace with your painting. Then, on another canvas, you can start over. But always, in a rhythm, there must be a pause to not-do. If you will not stop to rest, the work will stop anyway willy nilly. By ruination, if we refuse to rest.

We need the Sabbath. It is the acceptance of a Mystery, the celebration of a Mystery rather than of Mastery... This does not mean cursing technology, work, production, consumption, accumulation. It means putting them in their proper place: within the framework of the Sabbath. [And] let it be clear that when I say the Sabbath, I do not mean only the literal Sabbath of the seventh day, nor even the extended Sabbaths of the seventh month, the seventh year, the fiftieth year. I mean a whole approach of mind and practice, a path of life that would affirm the worth of dawdling on the path.

– Rabbi Arthur Waskow, *Godwrestling, Round 2*

What if we looked at Shmita not as a problem, but as a solution, and then considered what problems it's meant to solve? In that light, Shmita becomes a political statement of social and environmental import, raising deep questions about the nature of a healthy and sustainable life, for individuals, society and the land.

For instance, currently only academics have a sabbatical year. Why? Our “affluent” society actually decreases leisure and family time, as more people not only choose to work to fulfill what they want to be, but feel compelled to work, in order to afford what society says they should have. Consumerism necessitates “producerism” to keep both supply and demand high. Yet as Shmita hints, people are indeed like the land, in ways that are more obvious in the modern world: For both, when overwork leads to exhaustion, we engineer continued “vitality” not with true renewal, but with chemicals... Just as silence is an integral part of speech, punctuated periods of fallowness are crucial for guaranteeing continued fertility.

– Rabbi Jeremy Benstein, *Stop the Machine! The Jerusalem Report May 21, 2001*

As the artist of your own life, where would you like to put down the paint brush?

What is your personal relationship to this rhythm of creation and rest? Is this a rhythm you feel in-tune with?

Have you had moments where you have felt that times of non-action have been more productive and rewarding than the action itself?

How often to you experience a personal ‘fallow’ period? How do you perceive this period: is there any self-judgment or guilt? Or is there simple pleasure? Does it feel like an escape, or a return?

If you can craft a full year Sabbatical, how would you fill this time?

3. Long Term Planning

Permaculture is a social and ecological design system that is modeled upon interconnected relationships and patterns of resiliency we see in nature and all her diverse ecosystems. It stands for 'Permanent Agriculture' or 'Permanent Culture,' which its design principles aspire to help its users create.

When you take the time to slow down and simply observe something—a plot of land, a group dynamic in your office or chicken flock, it gives you time to reflect on what is actually happening right in front of you. This gives you information that can be useful as you move forward in creating better, more efficient, and abundant designs for living. The classic exhortation in a Permaculture design system is to observe your land for ONE YEAR before placing any permanent features. This gives you time to observe microclimates, the path of the sun, different types of soil in your plot, rainfall, neighbor impacts, and so on. When every action is a response to what you are actively observing, your efforts become more effective and there is less need to undo mistakes.

– K Ruby Bloom, *Institute For Urban Homesteading*

Do you see a connection between the Shmita Cycle and the concept of observation, as practiced in Permaculture Design?

*How often do you jump into a project without a clear and well thought-on plan of action?
What value does our society place on fast-paced action?
What might be accomplished if we were to dedicate time for observation before action?*

In what areas of your life do you engage in multi-year planning? How different or similar was your life 7 years ago? How easy (or hard) is it to imagine your life 7 years from now?

Do you think that wrestling with the challenges of Shmita today will help to create healthier, more abundant lives for our children's children? Consider the source in section 1, source #6 on the tradition of Hakhel, and the role of children there.

In our every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the Seventh generation.

– *Great Law of the Iroquois*

4. Inviting Wilderness into Our Lives

Man-made landscapes survive only at the sufferance of the wildness around them, or the wildness that remains in them. The flow of energy, water, nutrients, and genetic information; the maintenance of temperature and the mix of atmospheric gases within narrow limits; the fertility of the soil: all these are achieved by wild nature in ways we do not fully understand... In other words, humans and their allies are able to conquer the world, but they are not able to run it all by themselves. If the waves of human advance go too far or run too deep, they may finally bring about their own undoing.

Ecologists estimate that at a bare minimum, 5 to 10 percent of an ecosystem must be preserved if it is at all to stay healthy. Make it a seventh and you have a margin of error. Besides, it is hardly arbitrary—or it is arbitrary in a useful way—to join a culture's sense of space to its sense of time, and to ground both in the bedrock of ancient symbols... If we can set aside sevenths of our time for holiness—that is, for purposes higher than human aggrandizement—why not sevenths of our space?

—Evan Eisenberg, *Wilderness in Time, Sabbath in Space, Torah of the Earth Vol. 2*

Do you agree that the way we celebrate our relations with time should be reflected in the way we design our relations with space? What would this look like to you?

As of 2008, 27% of the land area in the United States was under some type of 'protected' status. According to the Bureau of Land Management (U.S. Department of the Interior), there is only 2.5% of wilderness land in the lower 48 states. This percentage is not evenly distributed across the country.

How might our human landscapes and societal culture be altered if a 'seventh' of each country, each state, each city, and each property was devoted to wilderness preservation?

How might you consider infusing an aspect of 'wilderness' into a 'seventh' of your own life practices?

These are the core practices of the 'Shmita paradigm' as gathered from the three mentions of Shmita in the Torah, and numerous halachot compiled by the Rambam. Seeing the entire package all at once, can you imagine how all the pieces fit together? If so, what would the final picture of this puzzle look like?

Where in our culture today are the tensions with these points? Where are some of these points already being observed, even loosely?

5. Wrapping the Bundle:

An Overview of Sabbatical Principles

A Yearlong Shabbat

1. **Let Rest & Lie Fallow:** Take the time to form a new relationship with work and rest. Allow your land, your body, your workers, your economy of production and consumption, to rest.

A Sabbatical Food System

2. **Land Stewardship:** There is no seeding or plowing of agricultural land during the Shmita Year.
3. **Perennial/Wild Harvest:** Primary fresh harvests include wild edibles and perennial produce.
4. **Eat Local:** Harvests must be eaten locally. They cannot be exported.
5. **Seasonal Diet:** Harvests should be gathered at full ripeness, and eaten in their natural growing season.
6. **Animal Care:** Wild and domesticated animals must have free access to range and food.

Community & Food Security

7. **Creating Commons:** All private agricultural lands are declared public and become community commons.
8. **Shared Harvest:** All harvested and stored produce are declared 'ownerless' and shared equally.
9. **Fair Distribution:** When harvesting, only collect specific to your immediate needs and not beyond.
10. **Waste Reduction:** Harvests have a special sanctity. They cannot be wasted or thrown away.

Community & Economic Resiliency

11. **Land Value:** Land is not a commodity, and has no market value. If land is sold, the price is based on the potential harvest seasons remaining until the Jubilee Year.
12. **De-Commercialization:** Produce can be harvested and shared for nourishment and enjoyment; not sold in the marketplace as a commodity.
13. **Economic Exchange:** The value of exchange is based on generous giving and lending practices, without the need for profit or monetary gain.
14. **Debt Release:** All debts from previous years are canceled at the conclusion of the Shmita Year.

Jubilee Release

15. **Land Redemption:** Land is linked to family heritage and ancestral lineage, and always returns to such tribal connections.
16. **Release of Slaves:** Slaves are released from their work and are free to return home, to their community and land.

6. Blueprint for Sustainability

The whole purpose of the covenant at Sinai is to create a society that observed Shmita... The Sabbatical year was the guarantor and the ultimate fulfillment of the justice that Torah teaches us to practice in everyday life, and it was a justice that embraced not just fellow human beings, but the land and all life... In modern parlance we call it “sustainability,” but that’s just today’s buzzword. It’s called Shmita in the holy tongue, “release”—releasing each other from debts, releasing the land from work, releasing ourselves from our illusions of selfhood into the freedom of living with others and living for the sake of all life... This is what it means to “choose life so you may live, you and your seed after you.” (Deut. 30:19) This is what it means to “increase your days and your children’s days on the ground for as long as the skies are over the land.” (Deut. 11:21)

– Rabbi David Seidenberg, *Shmita: The Purpose of Sinai*

Taken on its own, Shmita is a riddle with no answer. In order to begin to understand the intricate puzzle that is Shmita, we must first connect the 6 years to the 7th, the individual parts of the cycle to its flowering conclusion. The 6 years of the Shmita Cycle are those of cultural design, and the 7th year is the indicator year; the ultimate ‘check-in’ to see how we are collectively doing as a culture. Shmita itself is not an isolated moment in time, but rather a cyclical expression of a vibrant culture rooted in local food systems, economic resiliency, and community empowerment. For us today, the Shmita Cycle can take shape as a story of transition, from the isolated self towards holistic community; from perceived scarcity towards revealed abundance. It is a story so old and ancient that we have forgotten just how much we need it today, now, for our own survival, for our own evolution and growth.

– Yigal Deutscher, *Envisioning Sabbatical Culture*

Closing Questions:

In which direction would you personally want to see this ‘Shmita movement’ go? What are your burning questions for this conversation? What are some ideas that you would love to see take shape? What is *your* Shmita Project?

The next Shmita Year begins on Rosh Hashana 5775 (2014-2015). How will we greet this year? And, perhaps just as important, is what we will be doing after Rosh Hashana 5776, when we have an entire Shmita Cycle ahead of us: How shall we, as individuals and communities, begin to prepare, from day one, for the seventh year? What are your seven-year goals, thinking ahead towards the next Shmita Year in 2021?

Do you think that Shmita, during biblical times, was a commandment rooted in ‘sustainability’ or is this more of a modern reading?

How might Shmita be used today as a Jewish offering to support the global movement for sustainability? What implications could Shmita have beyond Jewish communities?

Does thinking about Shmita in terms of a giant cycle of seven make it seem more or less “possible”?

How can we begin connecting the 6 years to the seventh year, so that the values and ideals of Shmita can influence the way we design our economies, food systems, and communities at all times?

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APPENDIX A

SHMITA FOODS: PERENNIAL & WILD HARVESTS

OK, we know what you're really wondering after all this is: What can I eat? The following is a list of what we would like to offer as plant-based Shmita foods, to help keep you fed and nourished during the seventh year. Beyond stored foods (dried, preserved, fermented, etc), the options for harvesting fresh produce during the Shmita Year are specific to wild (uncultivated) crops, and perennial plants (which requires no seeding or tilling).

There are some real tangible differences between annual and perennial plants, as it comes to cultivation practices. For one, perennials are planted once, unlike annuals, which are replanted each season. With a single planting, there is less need for soil disruption. Perennial planting systems work to create healthier and more stable soil ecologies, whereas continual cultivation and tillage for annuals, if not done properly, can lead to soil erosion and loss of topsoil. Also, perennials invest more into their own plant body (since they are long living), while annuals invest more in producing seed (since they live only through their seed reproduction). Because of this, perennials tend to have longer roots, which, in turn, make them more drought tolerant and more able to access nutrients in the soil. Their stronger plant bodies allow for stronger disease and insect resistance. Furthermore, over seasons, decaying organic matter from dead leaves and roots leads to building organic matter in its own soils. Annuals, on the other hand, usually require more water, more fertilizers and more pesticides. Taking all this into consideration, a more perennial based food system leads to a healthier and more resilient food ecology.

As you look through this list (which covers a wide variety of climate zones), consider:

- Is this a diet that would keep you happy and well fed?
- How familiar are you already with the process of harvesting, cooking, and consuming these foods? Where can you begin experimenting with these foods in your own diet today?
- If you have a garden or farm, how many perennials and herbs have you planted? Would you consider dedicating a significant portion of your planting space for growing perennials and herbs? How about dedicating a certain portion of land in your garden to wild plants?
- How many fruit trees are growing on your block? In your local park? On your school/synagogue/community center land? How might the local landscape shift if we had fruit trees growing all around us, especially on communal lands?

PERENNIAL VINES

Grapes	Passion Fruit	Kiwi
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PERENNIAL FRUITS

Apple	Apricot	Avocado	Carob
Cherry	Cherimoya	Clementine	Date
Fig	Feijoa	Guava	Grapefruit
Jujube	Lemon	Lime	Loquat
Lychee	Mango	Mulberry	Nectarine
Orange	Olive	Papaya	Peach
Pear	Persimmon	Pomegranate	Pomelo
Plum	Quince		

PERENNIAL BERRIES

Blackberry	Blueberry	Raspberry	Elderberry
Cranberry	Gooseberry	Currants	Huckleberry
Strawberry	Thimbleberry	Goji Berries	

PERENNIAL NUTS

Chestnut	Cashew	Hazelnut	Pistachio
Almond	Pecan	Coconut	Walnut
Macadamia	Butternut	Hickory	Pine Nuts

PERENNIAL HERBS

Garlic Chives	Lavender	Lemon Balm	Mint
Oregano	Parsley	Rosemary	Sage
Thyme	Savory	Taragon	Anise Hyssop

PERENNIAL VEGETABLES

Artichoke	Jerusalem Artichoke	Asparagus	Rhubarb
New Zealand Spinach	French Sorrel	Tree Collards	Water Cress

PERENNIAL ROOTS

Horseradish	Yams	Sweet Potato	Ginger
Oca	Yacon		

PERENNIAL GRAINS

The main grains in our common diet, such as wheat, barley, rye, etc are all annual plants. The Land Institute, based in Salina, Kansas, is one of a few organizations actively doing research and breeding trials to develop a perennial grain. For further information on this inspiring and valuable work, visit <http://www.landinstitute.org/>

COMMON WILD EDIBLES

Dandelion	Nettle	Chickweed	Plantain
Purslane	Mallow	Lam's Quarters	Clovers
Rosehips	Shepherd's Purse	Mushrooms	Berries

Cultivating More Permanence in Our Food Systems

While 'Jewish farming' may have sounded like a strange activity to North American Jews just a short while ago, the values of local and organic foods are rooting strongly in Jewish communities today, and we are doing more and more to bring healthy, community-oriented food production to our own backyards and community landscapes. There are productive Jewish farms in rural and urban centers across the country; there are gardens at Jewish summer camps, community centers, schools, and synagogues; there are numerous food educational programs for all ages, providing the possibilities for children and adults to learn the crafts of farming and cooking; and there are close to 100 Jewish-oriented CSA groups across the country. So how can we deepen into the evolution of this movement, continuing to build upon our commitment towards 'local' and 'sustainable,' while simultaneously adding the Shmita vision of introducing more perennial and wild foods to our communities, diets, farms, and education programs? Here are some short suggestions:

- **Plant Trees & Perennial Herbs:**

Every synagogue, JCC, and Jewish school with a garden should allocate a part of their garden towards the planting of fruit/nut trees, vines, and herbs. If your space does not have enough land for a large garden, plant some trees along your sidewalk or along the side of your building, or plant into large containers on your balconies or roof tops. For larger Jewish farms/community gardens, plant diverse perennials on the edges of your annual crop rows or interplant within your vegetable fields/gardens. For homeowners, transform part or all of your yard and lawn into a perennial, edible landscape!

- **Preserve and Enhance Wild Growth:**

In each garden or farm, it should be a practice to steward a patch of wild growth. If the wild ecology has already been removed, then native, wild plants should be re-introduced. Such 'hedgcs' not only will provide possible wild edibles, but they will also provide habitat for beneficial insects for the garden ecology, as well as nectar for our food-plant pollinators.

- **Support Land Conservation:**

Through donations of time or finance, support local Community Land Trusts that work with wildland conservation and protection, by purchasing land and keeping it wild for future generations. Do what you can so you will have a wild food ecology surrounding you, or close by, when you need it. Similarly, supporting Agricultural Land Trusts preserves land for the use of long-term agriculture, by protecting local farms from future development.

- **Create the Market for Perennial/Wild Foods:**

If you are part of a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture farm), ask your farmer to start offering a selection of perennial foods in your weekly harvest boxes. Work with your farmer to create a diverse selection by partnering with other growers of herbs, fruit trees, and vine crops. Such a market diversifies the local food economy, while encouraging further investment in fruit tree production and healthy land management.

- **Community Education & Organizing:**

Start a local foraging group to go on wild plant walks. Learn to identify wild edible plants, medicinal plants, and mushrooms. Learn their seasons and how to ethically and properly harvest such growth. Experiment with preparing and/or cooking such foods so they can be easily incorporated into your diet.

Begin to incorporate fruit tree classes into your local community garden educational programs and curriculums, covering subjects such as tree propagation, tree planting, seasonal pruning, and more. Map the fruit trees growing in your area, so you can realize the abundance around you. Join together as community work groups to tend local fruit trees and share in the harvest.

Start a local gleaning group, visiting farms to collect secondary harvests from fruit trees that the farmers might otherwise not take advantage of. If the farm is on a large piece of land, ask to forage for wild edibles, herbs, and medicinals that the farmer would not otherwise be harvesting for sale.

- **Shmita Foods & Shabbat:**

Shabbat tends to be one popular way Jews and food come together, in a community setting in people's homes or at synagogues. Occasionally, introduce a dish from wild and/or perennial foods and introduce it as a Shmita dish. When folks ask what that is all about, share what you know about these foods and plants! Get creative with unique recipes for each season.

APPENDIX B

SHMITA ECONOMICS: G'MACHS & INTEREST FREE LOANS

As an overview of what we have learned through the Shmita sources, we know that debts were to be cancelled at the conclusion of every Shmita Year. We also know that this ideal was not met with such real-time success. By the time of the Second Temple, lenders were not giving generously, concerned that their loans would never be paid back. Hillel instituted the Pruzbul, a legal-Rabbinic decree that let debts carry on into the next Shmita Cycle, essentially ending the Sabbatical debt release.

Before we can consider the possibility of a successful debt release, let's take a step back and consider debt itself. Debt, on its own, is not necessarily a bad thing. It is the end product of an exchange in which one person, the lender, has given another person, the borrower, a loan in the form of a specific item or amount of money. Giving and receiving is a natural part of any social ecosystem, and the flow of resources is a sign of healthy movement in a community, both in social and economic terms. Nevertheless, it is clear that debt has become a burden to many, and it is a problem that is seemingly growing endlessly, out of control. So we can see that there are forms of healthy debt and unhealthy debt, in which case, there follows that there are forms of healthy borrowing and unhealthy borrowing. What are the distinctions? Why might one type of debt feel natural while another might feel like a burden haunting you?

While we can focus entirely on the borrower and debt itself, a loan is a two way relationship between receiving and giving, and each are directly linked. So to explore debt without looking at the loan itself is to ignore half the picture. In fact, Jewish tradition puts much emphasis on economic lending. Taking a step back from the specifics of the Shmita Year, we also know from Jewish tradition that interest was not allowed to be charged on a loan (one was never allowed to profit from a loan), and that lending itself was highly regarded as the highest form of charity, especially when the loan was to help the borrower reach economic self-sufficiency. From this perspective, we can say the possibility of releasing debt first relies upon generating healthy and appropriate forms of giving.

As we explore the economics of Shmita, our focus should be upon the actual exchanges that happen throughout the Shmita Cycle: the intentions, values, and expectations that surround such economic forms of giving and receiving. Unless we can look closely and begin to shift some of these exchanges along the lines of Shmita values, the need of the Pruzbul will always be there as a way out, as an escape, so that 'normal' transactions can continue, uninhibited by Shmita.

The question we are most interested in exploring is this:

- "What are forms of healthy borrowing and unhealthy borrowing? What are forms of healthy lending and unhealthy lending?"
- How can we infuse the values and ethics of fairness, generosity, and community care in our personal practices of economic giving and receiving?

The Evolution of the G'Mach & Free Loan Societies

The G'mach (which stands for *Gemilut Chasidim* and literally means acts of kindness/generosity) is a model of Jewish-based lending grounded in Jewish values, which emerged in a time of recent necessity, similar to a Shmita Year. In this case, it was early immigration from Europe to North America and the financial aid was not in the form of debt release but through interest-free micro-lending.

According to Shana Novick, the director of the Hebrew Free Loan Society, "the G'mach was transplanted to America at the end of the 19th century, with the first great wave of Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe. They provided interest-free loans to pay the rent or buy medicine at a time when there was no government-funded safety net, and provided capital to enable thousands of micro-entrepreneurs to stock a pushcart or buy a sewing machine in an era when their only alternative source of credit was loan sharks. These organizations often became founding or early members of their local Jewish federations."

An article in the *New York Times*, "Society Makes No-Interest Loans to New York's Immigrants" (May 1, 1983) shows how successful this system became: "On a December evening in 1892, 11 men met at the Wilner Synagogue on Henry Street in Manhattan and pooled their savings - \$95 - to establish a free loan society similar to those they had known in their native eastern European countries... The first year the society lent \$1,205 in amounts of \$5 and \$10. By 1905, some 15,000 families, mostly Jewish immigrants living on the Lower East Side, had borrowed \$364,480."

Today, Hebrew Free Loan societies exist all over the world to help borrowers through interest-free giving and generous repayment schedules. The largest such free-loan society is in Israel, which began as a response to assist the large number of Ethiopian and Russian immigrants coming into the country in the late 1980's. Today, the Israel Free Loan Association has lent out nearly \$152 million to over 40,000 low income families and struggling small businesses. Its current estimate is a lending rate of \$15 million each year, to Israelis of all backgrounds. Many interest-free loan societies have a hugely successful rate of repayment because when loans are given, they are backed by two credit-worthy guarantors.

Similar to the early free-loan societies, a modern version of the G'mach has emerged as well, on a more local, community level, serving as a re-use, recycling, and sharing closet, offering a collection of many common household or ritual items people may borrow and return as needed. These types of centers are most common in ultra-Orthodox communities where there are many large families of low income, supported by a culture of strongly connected community interactions. These G'machs stock items to meet short-term needs. These needs are widely shared, so everyone in the community could make use of the items. And the need is so temporary it would be a waste for everyone to own such items on their own. The most popular g'machs of this sort might be for bridal dresses (why own one when you'll only use it once?) and baby clothing/strollers (the classic hand-me-down items). Today, there are g'machs for a wide set of diverse needs and they are becoming common in all types of Jewish communities.

To read one woman's account of accompanying her sister on a search for a bridal dress at a g'mach, visit: <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/1527/something-borrowed>

To see a directory of Wedding G'machs, visit: www.chossonandkallah.com/new-york/jewish-wedding/Gemachs.html

To see a directory of Baby G'machs, visit: www.utzedek.org/takeaction/new-york/chesed-a-tzedek.html

The model of the g'mach, both as a community sharing closet and as an interest free lending society, is a powerful model rooted deeply in Jewish values, and is one that can help inspire us to design for Shmita economics. Here are a few short suggestions of ways to further expand on the G'mach model:

- **Community G'mach:**

The traditional book library is a wonderful part of the neighborhood landscape, offering a space for free access to collective resource use. Can we expand upon this model, and have 'libraries' for tools, appliances, clothing, furniture, and more? Do you have perfectly usable items lying around your home that you have no desire or need for? Rather than watch these items gather dust in storage or add them to the waste stream, keep these resources circulating within community, so they can be put to good use. What if we could host such g'mach libraries at our Synagogues or schools? How would this influence and perhaps strengthen community bonds of mutual investment and care?

- **Community Swap Meets:**

If a permanent space cannot be found to host a full g'mach, what about hosting a monthly or seasonal swap meet? Invite community members to come out and bring along items that they may no longer want or need, but are still in perfectly good use. Drop off what you'd like and find something else in return. Swap meets can work wonderful for the same items as would be donated to a g'mach, but since this is a short event, this can also work as a crop swap and food exchange, as well.

- **Ethical Investing, Spending & Banking:**

Know how your savings are being re-invested by your banks, so you can make educated choices about where to keep your money. Explore the options of investing your money with local, socially responsible community credit unions and local, public banks. Keep your money circulating as close to home as possible, supporting local businesses and co-operatives. Explore creative forms of social banking networks, such as Time Banks, which allow community members to borrow and lend 'time' in the form of services, in which each person's hour is valued equally.

- **Financial Mentoring / Investment Circles:**

In these group circles, members come together to share best-practices concerning financial resource management and family/business budgeting. This is also a space to educate one another in strategies to best use and invest monetary assets while staying true to personal values. In these models, cooperation is the main incentive, and the competitive market model does not serve: the stronger each individual is financially, the stronger the community is. As the group establishes trust and experience, a next step would be to invest in one another: each participant offering a sum of money to the group fund, which can serve as microloans to other members.

- **Community Crowdfunding / Tzedakah Funds:**

A community fund is similar to the group model introduced above, but on a much larger scale. Ideally such funds are organized within the community networks that already exist within Synagogue, JCC, or Hebrew Schools. In this case, we are no longer simply a group that prays together, or that learns together—we are community that looks after one another's needs and wellbeing. Such a fund can be anonymous, based on donations received, and distributed as the needs arise; or they can be organized as community events, to offer grants/microloans in the form of seed-money to support a local community-based business, non-profit, artist, musician, or farmer with a creative vision.

APPENDIX C

APPLIED SHMITA: FOR COMMUNITIES & ORGANIZATIONS

This sourcebook is designed for people to learn from these texts—as individuals, or in a class. But one of the things we most want to engender is a conversation within a community. How could or should we mark the Shmita Year as a community? And how could or should we use the Shmita Year to prepare for an entire Shmita Cycle—in this case, the cycle that begins at Rosh Hashanah in September 2015 and runs until the day before Rosh Hashanah in 2022?

In short: How could or should your synagogue, JCC, camp, school, Hillel, or place of work register the Shmita Year? How could or might you be different during the Shmita Year—or in the next Shmita Cycle?

Here are some ideas, suggestions, questions, and processes. We offer them not as things that you have to do but rather as ideas to prompt ways in which Shmita could become a powerful organizational frame:

1. **Think about the full seven-year Shmita Cycle from 2015 to 2022 as an opportunity for change and renewal in your organization.**

The seven year framing of the Shmita Cycle offers a wonderful opportunity for long-term, expansive planning. Working with such cycles, we can approach our work with a new perspective, marking a specific beginning stage and an end stage, which then will naturally evolve into another new beginning. For some organizations the time frame of the next Shmita Cycle may not work, for various reasons. But in general, this period can be seen as an invitation for reflection, visioning, and design.

For many organizations, it may be helpful to imagine the upcoming Shmita Year (from Rosh Hashana 2014 until Rosh Hashana 2015), and the months leading up to it, as a time dedicated to brainstorming, planning, and imagining. What went very well in the previous six years? What did not go so well, and need adjusting? What are our goals for the years ahead? What do we need to make happen in order to reach such goals? What sort of timeframe can we envision for this process?

Such goal-articulation and design can easily fill the Shmita Year, giving way to a transition. Early in the years of the next Shmita Cycle starts a period of execution and growth, activation and adaptation. The reflections and designs from the Shmita Year can now begin to take shape as the process becomes defined. As the growth continues, it is always good to keep track of the larger cycle, recognizing if your work progress and flow is in alignment with what you envisioned during the previous Shmita Year. Obviously, periods of elongated observation and reflection do not need to wait until the Seventh year, as the values of Shmita are meant to guide us through the entire process of the cycle.

2. **Learning – widely construed.**

Shmita is a great opportunity to learn – not just about Shmita itself but more generally about a wide range of ideas that connect to it. Shmita touches upon all the challenges and exciting opportunities that are arising today with food, economy, governance, community, religion, and more, especially through the lens of sustainability. There is so many ways in which we can use Shmita as a jumping-off point to keep ourselves active and aware as students of life.

Shmita offers us a societal model that will only be possible if we all work together, and in this way, we are all invited to be teachers and students. No one individual person has ‘the answer.’ The process of working towards embracing Shmita must also include investing in community education, in which we are all learning and sharing from one another.

As a community, start a 7-year conversation – perhaps a series of book clubs. Or take seven topics to be learned, in different ways, as themes, each for one year. For synagogues, there is an interesting opportunity to reach out to people who might come to shul on Shabbat morning – but don't like to daven. Think of starting a cycle of Shabbat-morning discussion groups or study circles – running alongside services, or joining together for Kiddush. For organizations, perhaps host a weekly or monthly learning circle during lunch hours, where all staff join together to explore one area of focus.

3. Greening and organizational sustainability.

The issues involved in greening an institution and taking on issues of sustainability are understandably overwhelming. We may feel that we lack the knowledge, the time, the resources—or all three—in order to engage topics that seem too large, too complicated, and too expensive. The seven-year Shmita Cycle lends itself to a long-term process of slowing this design down into bite-sized organizational chunks, and offering a frame in which to move towards organizational sustainability step-by-step. This work can be guided by these questions: What do you want your facility to look like in seven years? What work will you start with, now, to reach such goals? Designing for sustainability is actually best done in the context of multi-year planning, without the need to rush and force change, which would likely result in many mistakes. Multi-year planning gives us the opportunity to set realistic goals, observe the work, reflect upon it, and re-design for the next set of implementations.

4. Develop an institutional food policy by the start—or end—of the next Shmita Year.

Most Jewish institutions have a kashrut policy. But a food policy is something broader. What food do we serve? Where is it grown? How are the workers treated? How are the animals treated? How is the land treated? What waste do we produce? Where does it go? How healthy and nutritious are the foods we serve? How much sugar or soda do we serve—and how much do we think we should serve? How deeply is Jewish food education integrated into what we do educationally? How does the food we serve manifest our connection to Israel? What do we mean by kashrut, and how do we deepen knowledge of, and respect for, kashrut in our community? Do we grow any of our own food? What about food justice? What about interfaith? What about advocacy?

You don't have to tackle all these questions at once. Nor are they all necessarily directly connected to Shmita. However, a core value of the Shmita tradition was in celebrating healthy, just and abundant local food systems. The lead-up to the Shmita Year, and/or the Shmita Year itself, offers a tremendous time-frame to begin a conversation about these issues, as well as a ripe opportunity to really begin experimenting with different ways to create local and healthy food systems for your own community.

Our recommendation would be to bring together a mixed group – clergy, professional leaders, educators, lay leaders, one or two teenagers – and map out a multi-month conversation of enquiry, learning, and ultimately a community-wide conversation leading to a new food policy – and a healthier and more sustainable community overall.

Hazon has a 60-page guide to food policy and food audits available free on our website: www.hazon.org/resource/hazon-food-guide-2/

5. Think about growing perennial plants: fruit and nut trees, vines and herbs.

This is a very different kind of example. It seems likely that in second temple times—when there's some evidence that Shmita was observed in the land of Israel—people observing Shmita particularly ate fruit and nuts, since perennial crops, unlike annuals, don't need to be sowed or reaped in the Shmita Year.

Today our food economy has become over-reliant on annuals. The period from now until September 2014, and then the period after September 2015 would be a great time to plant fruit and nut trees—an edible Shmita forest, so to speak—that would be there for people to help themselves from by the Shmita Year of 2021-22. (Or, equally, a group of trees from which members of the community regularly picked fruit, or nuts, to give to people who are food insecure.) See Appendix B for a deeper look at the abundance that is possible with perennial and wild foods.

6. Creatively approach and consider your relationship with money.

This may or not be feasible. But it would be interesting in a Jewish institution, at a time when affordability has become a vital Jewish issue, to think about how Shmita connects to this issue. Would it be possible for some people to choose to pay 7/6ths of a synagogue membership in order to make membership free in the seventh year? Might we create revolving loan funds – with or without debt forgiveness? And so on. See Appendix B for a deeper look at ways to explore this question.

7. Think about rest as a sacred practice.

The Shmita is an opportunity to think about rest and overwork. Do we have organizational yearlong sabbatical policies for employees? How would we develop them? What if a Jewish organization could simply offer its staff an extra seven personal 'release' days each Shmita Year? Or shorten the work week to four days each Shmita Year? At Hazon—an organization with a strong reputation for developing and launching new ideas—would it be possible for us to decide to launch nothing new in the Sabbatical year; simply to reflect on that which we've done thus far, and plan for the future? How would that affect our funding? Our programming? The years before and after?

In each of these seven examples—and of course many, many more are possible—what we most want to do is simply to spark ideas. These ideas might or might not be possible in practice. But each would be a powerful and rich way to bring awareness of Shmita, and of this time-frame for Jewish life, back into contemporary awareness.

One thing that is clear: We do not assume there is one correct or incorrect way to practice Shmita today, especially in regards to Shmita outside of Israel. Clearly, modern culture is far different than early biblical times. As this tradition comes to life again, for the Jewish people and the world, it will be different for each and every one of us. It will be different for a business than for a non-profit; different for a farm than a school, different for an urban neighborhood and a rural community. The possibilities are quite varied, and we will be learning much from one another as we creatively engage in this process.

Join the Shmita Project Network!

We are excited to continue this conversation with you, and we would love to invite you to join us in the Shmita Project network. The network is a group of Jewish organizations committed to engaging in the questions of what the Shmita Cycle could mean for them.

We invite you to become a Shmita Project partner by considering one or more of these following actions leading up to and during the Shmita Year:

- Organize a *chavruta* (partner) or community study group to learn more about Shmita, both from traditional and contemporary perspectives.
- Facilitate teachings about Shmita in your home, synagogue, community center, or farm.
- Support continued research, outreach, and education about why and how Shmita is both relevant and important in our lives today.
- Embrace the values and ethics integral to the paradigm of the Shmita Cycle when developing plans and goals for your home, community, or organization.
- Encourage local, long-term resiliency in food production/distribution methods, local economic structures, and community empowerment.
- Determine one or more ways in which you or your community will celebrate the Shmita Year, in a way that is substantially different from practices during the other 6 years of the Shmita Cycle.

In advance, thank you! Re-imagining Shmita will only be possible if we do this together. It is an honor to have you join us in partnership in this powerful journey. It has been literally thousands of years since the collective Jewish community has had the opportunity to experiment with the Shmita tradition in such a practical way, and to step such into personal and direct relationship with this profound tradition. Please be in touch with any questions or ideas, and let us know how we can support you.

**Learn more and get involved at
hazon.org/shmitaproject
or contact shmitaproject@hazon.org.**

APPENDIX D

SHMITA GLOSSARY

SECTION 1

Shmita: Literally, release; the seventh year in the Hebrew calendar cycle, also known as Shvi'it (the Seventh), Shabbat Lado'nay (Shabbat of the Lord) and Shabbat Ha'aretz (Shabbat of the Land), which brought about an agricultural and economic release. The common term for agricultural rest is Shmitat Karka (Land Release). The common term for debt forgiveness is Shmitat Ksaffim (Monetary release).
(See p. 4, 5, 15)

Hakhel: A commandment from the Torah for the entire community of Israel to gather together at the Temple to hear a public reading of the Torah. This special gathering takes place after Sukkot on the year following the Shmita Year.
(See p. 9)

Yovel: After 7 complete cycles of Shmita (49 years), the 50th year is Yovel, often translated into English as the Jubilee. This year is similar to the regular Shmita Year but includes some unique additional practices.
(See p. 10)

SECTION 3 (Part 1)

Hefker: Ownerless. In the Shmita Year, all private lands become commons and all harvests must be considered 'ownerless.'
(See p. 29)

Peah: The biblical commandment to plant and reserve a corner of your field to be harvested by local landless peasants.
(See p. 29)

Leket: The biblical commandment to allow gleaners onto your field during harvest periods, to collect what has dropped or what remains in the field.
(See p. 29)

Sfichim: Common garden annuals that may grow wild from seeds that dropped in the previous season and grew again, or from roots that continue to produce a stem/leaf body after an initial harvest.
(See p. 30)

Annuals: Plants that complete their life cycle in one season: once they produce the next generation of seeds, the plant dies. They must begin their life cycle anew each season, which generally requires soil preparation (tilling) and sowing. Most vegetables are annuals.
(See p. 31)

Perennials: Plants that live for many years: while they may produce seed each season, the plant bodies still live afterward. Trees, most vines, and many herbs are perennial plants. These plants do not need their seed to be sown each season, as their new annual growth comes from their long-living wood and root structure. Nor do they need the soil to be annually tilled: the soil is tilled once, for planting, and then that plant settles in for the years ahead.
(See p. 31)

Wild Plants: Annual or perennial edible plants that grow naturally without human intervention. Some of these plants were adopted by agriculture and have been developed through domestication and breeding. Others are highly nutritious even though we don't commonly eat them.
(See p. 31)

Shivat Minim: 7 species of plants growing in abundance in the land of Israel, mentioned by the Bible as indicator plants of the land's fertility. The 7 species include grape, fig, olive, date, pomegranate, barley, and wheat.
(See p. 30)

Biur: The period during the Shmita Year when a food is no longer naturally growing in season, in the fields or wilds. The widely accepted opinion is all such foods remaining in storage should be made publicly available.
(See p. 33)

Ma'aser: Literally, 'a tenth'; a tithing of the harvest, dedicated towards the Levites (a landless tribe, whose members served in the Temple and in spiritual leadership for the larger society) and the poor.
(See p. 32)

SECTION 3 (Part 2)

Pruzbol: A legal amendment to the law of debt release during the Shmita Year, created by Hillel the Elder in the 3rd century: private loans/debts transferred to public courts would not have to be legally forgiven in the Shmita Year.

(See p. 44)

SECTION 5

Heter Mechira: Literally, 'Permit of Sale.' A ruling that allows for the symbolic selling of agricultural land to a non-Jew, for the one-year Shmita period: once the ownership of land has been transferred to someone who is not Jewish, the laws of Shmita no longer apply to the land itself, and food can be grown on it and harvested from it.

(See p. 59)

Otzar Beit Din: Literally, "Property of the Court." The Rabbinic Court 'hires' a farmer to supply them with permissible foods during the Shmita Year. In buying this food, the court remains within the boundaries of religious law, as they are paying the farmer only for his time as a 'worker' of the court, and not for the actual food that he is providing.

(See p. 63)

SECTION 6

Permaculture: A social and ecological design system modeled on relationships and patterns in nature and all her diverse ecosystems. One key element of this design strategy is taking time for observation before action.

(See p. 68)

10 Ways to Get Involved With Hazon

1. **Join the Shmita Project network** at hazon.org/shmitaproject
2. **Ride for change.** Join us – or bring a team from your community – to ride for sustainable food systems, to renew Jewish life and to have a great time:
 - **Golden Gate Ride** (hazon.org/programs/california-ride)
 - **New York Ride and Retreat** (hazon.org/programs/new-york-ride)
 - **The Arava Institute Hazon Israel Ride** (hazon.org/Israel-ride)
 - **Cross USA Ride** (hazon.org/xusa)
3. See, touch, smell, and taste the Israeli sustainable food movement on the **Israel Sustainable Food Tour** (hazon.org/foodtour)
4. **Come to our national Food Conference and other retreats at the beautiful Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center** in Falls Village, CT.
5. **Come to one of our local Jewish Food Festivals** or talk to us about bringing a Jewish Food Festival into your own community!
 - 2013 Jewish Food Festivals: Denver, Philadelphia and San Francisco
 - 2014 Jewish Food Festivals are planned for: New York, Palo Alto, the Berkshires and more
6. Read, blog, or comment on Hazon’s award-winning food blog, **The Jew & the Carrot** (jcarrot.org), or our general blog at hazon.org/blog. If you’re doing something exciting with food in your community, write about it and send it to us, and we’ll publish it.
7. Think about food in a new way. **The Hazon CSA Program** currently includes 65 communities in the US, Canada and Israel. Our program grows each year. Interested in starting a Hazon CSA in your home community? Email csa@hazon.org for more information.
8. Join the **Jewish Food Educators Network (JFEN)** to access educational resources, curriculum ideas, and more around bringing sustainable food awareness and practices to your local community.
9. Navigate food choices in your synagogue or institution with the **Hazon Food Guide** and the **Hazon Food Audit**. These tools will provide practical suggestions for moving forward a conversation that will strengthen your community by integrating food in ways that are Jewishly-informed, pedagogically-open and ethically-focused. (hazon.org/foodguide)
10. **Donate to Hazon** to help create healthy and sustainable communities in the Jewish world and beyond! (hazon.org/donate)

About the Authors



Yigal Deutscher, Manager of the Shmita Project, is an educator, farmer, and permaculture designer. After participating in the Adamah fellowship, he continued his training with the University of California, Santa Cruz (Center for Agroecology & Sustainable Food Systems), as well as with the Permaculture Research Institute in Australia. From 2006–2010, he was the farm manager and permaculture educator at the Chava v'Adam farm in Israel. He is the founder of 7Seeds, an educational platform combining Jewish indigenous teachings and Permaculture Design strategies, and author of *Envisioning Sabbatical Culture: A Shmita Manifesto*.



Anna Hanau is the Associate Director of Programs at Hazon. She is the co-author of *Food for Thought, Hazon's Sourcebook on Jews, Food and Contemporary Life*, written during her first period at Hazon (2004–2007), which also included serving as the NY Ride Coordinator for the 2005 and 2006 Rides. Between 2007–2010 Anna was the Farm Manager at Adamah, managing a 4-acre organic farm and supplying the White Plains Hazon CSA. She is a graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary and Barnard College, and is originally from Vancouver, B.C. Anna and her husband Naftali Hanau co-founded Grow and Behold Foods, a kosher pastured meat business in 2010.



Nigel Savage, originally from Manchester, England, founded Hazon in 2000. He has an MA in History from Georgetown, and has studied at Pardes, Yakar and Hebrew University. Hazon has been recognized by the Slingshot 50 every year since its inception. In 2007, Hazon was recognized by the Sierra Club as one of 50 leading faith-based organizations in the US. Nigel has been listed in the Forward 50, the annual ranking of the most influential American Jews. Nigel is thought to be the first English Jew to have cycled across the state of South Dakota on a recumbent bike.



The Hazon שמיטה SHMITA SOURCEBOOK

SHMITA, literally translated as the 'Year of Release' and more widely known as the Sabbatical Year, is a biblical Jewish tradition that simultaneously re-adjusted agriculture and commerce on a personal, communal, and national scale, to ensure an equitable, just and healthy society. Shmita, the final year of a shared seven year calendar cycle, marked a period when all debts would be forgiven, agricultural lands would lie fallow, private land holdings would become open to the commons, and staples such as food storage and perennial harvests would be redistributed and accessible to all. The Shmita Year had a depth that reached into every aspect of society and culture. The powerful values of this Shmita Cycle were integral to the vision of healthy society, as originally mapped out by the Torah.

This sourcebook is designed for individuals, small groups, or classes to learn more about the core principles of Shmita and how it has been applied throughout history, and to contemplate the possibilities of translating Shmita into a modern context, empowering community building, local food security, and economic resiliency today.

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WITH SUPPORT FROM:

*The Opaline Fund of
the Jewish Community
Federation and
Endowment Fund*



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