

## Report on the Shmita Conference at the Knesset

Place – The Jerusalem Hall of the Knesset (just past the *basari* cafeteria, all the way down to the end and turn left...)

Time: from about 10:30 to 12:30, Monday morning, Jan 6, 2014.

Host: The Knesset Caucus for Jewish Renewal (sounds different in Hebrew)- MK Ruth Kalderon, presiding. From the bride's side: Einat Kramer of Teva Ivri / Shmita Yisraelit, and of course Siach. It was a minor competition who between them received more thanks and praise from all the speakers.

Logo: A beautifully designed banner which says: אחריות, ערבות, אמוון – שנת שמיטה – which roughly translated means: The Shmita Year: Responsibility, Mutual-Aid, Trust

Politicians also present (at least part of the time): MK Buji Herzog (Head of the opposition, also in the Caucus), Educ Min Shai Piron, Env Min Amir Peretz, Deputy Min of Religious Affairs Rabbi Eli ben Dahan, Speaker of the Knesset Yuli Edelstein, Prof. Eugene Kandel, Chicago-trained economist head of the National Economic Council, Rabbi and former MK Michael Melchior, David Hahn, the state's *apotropus* and *kones* (whatever that means – has to do with debt collection), MKs Aliza Lavi, Elazar Stern, Shuly Mualem (and probably a few others I didn't recognize), and also: Rabbi Yoel Bin Nun, Rabbi Yoki Amir (head of the Reform movement in Israel), Mordechai Bar Or of Kolot, as well as Limor, R. Yedidya Sinclair, Tamir Nir, and myself, from Siach, and about 50 others.

It should be noted that, except for Ruth Kalderon, most of the politicians came, spoke, made profuse apologies and left. But there were also a fair number of speakers who were not politicians (including Einat, and Yaron Kenar, another Siachite, head of Panim), there was a hefty packet of materials, both study sheets and programmatic info of various organizations re shmita (see below), put together and distributed to everyone, and Kalderon even went around at some point to see who was there among her constituency – reps from orgs dealing with Jewish renewal (again – in the Israeli sense), and/or economic rehabilitation.

Kalderon gave a short and eloquent introduction, followed by Herzog, both noting the historical significance of the gathering, and the unique coalition that has arisen to promote the social and environmental dimensions of shmita. She then introduced Edelstein, who among other things, quoted MK Herzog's grandfather, former Chief Rabbi Herzog, who said that the shmita year should be "a year of national education."

The meeting was built around the four themes of economy, education, environment and society. If I had had an opportunity to say anything, I would've pointed out that they are speaking "sustainability" without being aware of it.

Economy - The Russian born secular Kandel then gave a sort of "economic *dvar torah*" (his words) citing Hillel's prozbul and other examples of shmita practice to emphasize that the (re)establishment of trust and what we might term social capital is key to the social and the economic functioning of society. Melchior spoke well, as he indeed always does, about the potential of shmita to go from being a force for division in society (because of conflicting "solutions" to the shmita problem, and therefore different kashrut observances) to being a force for bridging social gaps, and for unification.

Education - Min Shai Piron first praised Rabbi Yoel Bin Nun who sat opposite him, as the key shaper of his spiritual world, and then spoke what I felt was a very "environmental" message- and a very Heschelian one - emphasizing that our society has become far too materialistic, and that we have a stance of lordship (*adnut*) over nature, rather than one of humility. He concluded with a quote from Ps 46:11: *harpu veted'u sheani hashem*- "let go [relax your grip] and know that I am God" as a key shmita insight.

Then Dep Min of Eli Ben Dahan didn't relate to the larger social issues, but rather to the traditional issues (of food and agriculture and the kashrut fracas), promising that "it will be different" this year

- that they have taken measures with farmers, etc. He didn't specify. And while *emuna*, faith is a key facet of shmita - I'll believe it when I see it. But he also noted that Min for Senior Citizens (yes, there is such a thing), Ori Urbach, has committed to special debt arrangements for the elderly, in the spirit of shmita.

MK Aliza Lavi (secular from Yesh Atid) read a passage of the Rambam from the "Guide," and spoke rather movingly about the need for a renewal of *chemla*, compassion, in Israeli society. Movingly that is, until later in the session someone pointed out that shmita is about social justice, that is, rights by law, not about voluntary compassion, and "good deeds." (This reminded me of a slogan from the social protests of two and a half years ago - that we need *tzedek*, justice, and not *tzedaka*, charity. Interestingly while we Jews pride ourselves on the idea of "our charity" being an act of justice and not of *caritas*, love, here that idea boomerangs).

MK Elazar Stern spoke briefly, and mentioned that shmita is exciting for him, because it brings "Jewish meaning to the general society." I had a sort of visceral response clarified some things about the nature of discourse around shmita in Israel. While Shmita Yisraelit, the civil society initiative led by Einat and Melchior, is one thing (bottom up, voluntary, privatized, as it were), and I am excited about it, having shmita now become the inspiration for the law of the land is quite another. What does it mean that we are framing social policy based on shmita in the Knesset? Do we need shmita to try to address indebtedness and poverty, or environmental woes? (By the way, notably absent, in addition to any non-Jewish parliamentarians, were active MKs of the left, and especially from the Env Caucus). I think there is more thinking to be done on the translation of Jewish ideas into political language in a democratic state. For instance, I would turn Stern's statement on its head: I'm not sure I want more Jewish meaning in general society, but I do like the idea of having real world impact for Jewish ideas – which I think is a very different ball-game.

Environment - Min of Env Peretz spoke was true to his colors, literally, when he said that being the Min of Env, he's been painted "green," but let there be no mistake – he's still "red" deep down, and that for him, shmita represents the ideal combination of environmental and social justice. He has committed his ministry to several initiatives: moratorium on Mediterranean fisheries to let fish stocks replenish themselves (with appropriate compensation for fishermen); free entrance to many parks and nature sites during the year, and maximizing use of recycled materials.

Then came Einat's turn, and she gave expression to the key points of the initiative, also expressed in the Amana, among them to see in the natural world the source of abundance in equal measure for all, and not an object of instrumental gratification and ownership (for the privileged). Bottom line: through the myriad initiatives, small and large, top-down and bottom up, to change the association of the average Israeli that has a vague but definitely negative feeling about shmita (some bizarre argument between the different *dosim* that just raised the price of vegetables) – to a clear knowledge that yes, this year is the shmita year, and how great that is!

Society - Then came the social component, re poverty and debt reduction. The chief advisor of the Min of Welfare spoke about how they are working to erase or reduce debts (sometimes just erasing the accumulated interest is enough) and work with people in order to permanently get them out of the cycle of poverty, and not just until the next shmita. They are devoting up to 70 million NIS to the project and hope to be able to raise over 5000 families out of debt.

Here is an example of what looks like good coordination between the government and civil society initiatives. The Paamonim NGO that works on educating people about household management and personal fiscal responsibility, together with Machon Torah Vехаaretz, starting last shmita has set up a dedicated fund to collect money (and debts actually – see below) – and they offer a 1/3 – 1/3 – 1/3 model: for severely indebted families that agree to enter the program, they pay a third, the debtor (usually taxes or utilities) forgives a third – and the family pays the remaining third, after a restructuring and an training they undergo.

A person can also do the *mitzvah* of helping an impoverished person with a loan, and then do an additional mitzvah of donating the debt to the shmita fund which will erase the debt. From money donations, and debts given and forgiven, they have managed to leverage a few million shekels into over 20 million NIS of debt relief. They too hope to affect some 5000 families.

It was pointed out that the idea of erasing interest on a debt is not a technical detail – a) it makes the idea more palatable for those afraid of encouraging rampant freeloading, and b) conceptually, it transforms a for-profit loan into using the money for more *tzedaka* like aid.

One of the last words in the formal session was had by none other than Zev Jabotinsky, in a text of his where he claimed that the cyclicity of the Torah, which ordained free market capitalism for six years and then one year of corrections and redistribution is preferable to the wild dreams of a permanent socialist revolution.

There were then some comments from others in the room, including Rabbi Yoel Bin Nun, who spoke about how he has lived through a good many *shmitot* in his life, and how he always had dreamed that this is how we should talk about it – and now it's happening! He also commented on how the idea of debt release is not at all foreign to the Israeli banking world – it's just that they only apply it to tycoons, who get "haircuts", and forgiveness of hundreds of millions, and more, in debts (Nochi Dankner was very much in the news that week– but also Victor Teshuva and Moti Zisser are not far behind).

Rabbi Mordechai Bar Or of Kolot countered that not all businessmen are evil, and that they are actually one important public noticeably absent from the room, who he personally would very much like to get involved.

The materials – I'll close with a list of the organization who got their materials into the impressive folder that was handed out to all the participants. They are of varying levels of quality and depth of commitment, but the sheer breadth is impressive, and should be kept on our collective radar screens. In no particular order

- Siach – yay, us! Our study sheet from the last conference puts us squarely on the map
- The Reform Movement
- Secular Judaism – Temura and Merchav
- Kolot
- Beeri / Shalom Hartman Inst
- The Jerusalem Botanical Garden- a whole visitors center devoted to Shmita (will definitely be a stop on the 2014 Hazon-Heschel Shmita Tour)
- Midreshet Torah Ve-Avoda
- Machon Hatorah Ve'haaretz
- Paamonim
- Ezra Mi-Gad
- Maagal Tov
- Mid-reshet and Tevel Betzedek- info on debt remission for developing countries