

# Shemita: Relevance and Rebirth

Contemporary Shemita: Challenges & Compliance, Relevance & Rebirth, Part III  
Drisha Institute Shlomo Zuckier ה' כסלו, ה'תשפ"ב – 11.14.21

## I. Land – Otzar Beit Din

Rav Yosef Zvi Rimon, *Shemita: Halacha from the Sources*, pp. 72

1. *Otzar Bet Din*: A court has the authority to appoint agents to harvest produce on its behalf (usually it appoints the owner of the field himself), in which case the produce passes into the possession of the *Otzar Bet Din*. When following this procedure, it is permissible to harvest and market the produce in the ordinary manner. The money paid by the consumer is not for the produce itself, but rather for the **labor** invested by the workers. Accordingly, *Shemita* sanctity does not apply to the money, and there is no problem of trading in *Shemita* produce. It is customary practice to allow the regular weighing of such produce, though there are some who are stringent and sell the produce through estimation, so that it will be clear to all that the produce has *Shemita* sanctity. [346]

This solution does not allow for planting, and therefore only works for fruit, and for vegetables during the first few months of the year (before the prohibition of *sefichim* goes into effect). *Otzar Bet Din* produce has *Shemita* sanctity.



## II. Land – Not Working the Land (Supporting Farmers)



### Shalom Friends,

For thousands of years, Am Yisrael could only dream of Shemita.

The fact that we are privileged to observe the Shemita year is a constant reminder that we merit to live in the generation of our Geulah.

Shemita consistently reminds us who rules the world. This is particularly important in our time, after enduring a year and a half of Covid-19. Now, humanity understands who is truly in charge.

**Shemita teaches us how to do acts of Chesed.** Yet, Shemita does not only help the poor. It shows them respect and teaches us how to respect those in need. The individual in need does not take money solely thanks to the kind heart of the giver - the Ba'al Tzedaka during Shemita; rather he/she takes directly from the Creator!

**Shemita seeks to strengthen our powers of giving, our power to love, and the power of unity.** This unique Mitzvah is deeply meaningful and those who keep its laws deserve the appreciation and support of Klal Yisrael.

**This Shemita year, numerous families - Israeli farmers - will not be working their land (*shovtim*).** Your generous support will allow them to sustain their families while Halachically observing the laws of Shemita.

**Allow me to introduce you to exceptional farmers who need your support.** Enclosed is information about these families and an opportunity for you to 'get to know them' better.

Thank you for partnering with us in this crucial endeavor.

*With Torah blessings.*  
**Yosef Zvi Rimon**  
Founder & Chairman  
Sulamot

**Rav Yosef Zvi Rimon** is the Chief Rabbi of Gush Etzion, Rosh Yeshiva of Lev Academic Center (JCT), Founder and Chairman of Sulamot and La'Ofek (formerly JobKatif), and community Rabbi of Alon Shevut South.

In 2008, Rav Rimon founded Sulamot, an Israel based organization that engages an audience of tens of thousands of adults and children globally in a broad variety of innovative Jewish programming aimed at strengthening Jewish text study and Jewish identity. Our projects impact 21<sup>st</sup> century Jews in meaningful and relevant ways.

In honor of Shemita 5782, Sulamot launched numerous initiatives that generate genuine excitement for discovering and exploring the laws and ideals of Shemita at home, in the classroom, and as part of a community.

### Why Israeli agriculture?

**Only 2% of the Israeli population work in agriculture.**

Regardless, Israeli produce includes some of the highest quality fruits and vegetables in the world.

**A source of pride for the Jewish people globally,** Israeli agriculture utilizes advanced technologies to develop our ancient land and sustain modern Israeli society.

### Why is this year's Shemita different from other years?

During non-Shemita years, growing viable produce is a challenging process that involves great financial risk. **Covid-19 significantly exacerbated the financial hardships of Israeli farmers due to lockdowns and other limitations.**

*This is the situation in which farmers found themselves on the eve of the 5782 Shemita year.*

**Clearly, the decision to keep Shemita this year was complex.** Despite this, countless farmers in Israel are choosing to uphold the laws of Shemita.

### The 100% Model

Thanks to a generous donation from a dedicated partner, we were able to cover the overhead for this ambitious project. **That means that 100% of your donation will be allocated directly to support a farmer and his family.**

### You too can fulfill the Mitzvah of Shemita!

To express our deepest appreciation for your sponsorship, we are happy to gift you with a *Halachic partnership* (שותפות הלכתית) of 1 *dunam* of Shemita observant land located in Chalutza, Southern Israel.

**Your Halachic partnership during the Shemita year will enable you and your family to directly fulfill the Mitzvah of Shemita le'Chumrah** - of desisting from working the land during the Shemita year.

Agudas Shmita Why in the Agudat Shmita's? Shmita Today Legal Videos Contact 1-347-342-1070 English

How it Works Hashgacha (Rabbinical Supervision) Gedolei Yisroel Join The Land FAQ [Join Now!](#)

# SHMITA FOR EVERYONE

## NOT A RENTAL, NOT A LEASE, REAL OWNERSHIP!

[How does it work?](#) [Join Now!](#)

**You can still purchase land during Shmita and fulfill the mitzva of "Veshavta Ha'aretz" every moment of the remainder of the Shmita year, and merit the parnassa blessing of "Vetzivisi"**

[Join Now!](#)

### How can I be *zoche* to observe the *mitzva* of Shmita?

- 01 You join and appoint us to acquire a unit of farm land on your behalf.
- 02 We register the unit of land in your name in *tabo*.
- 03 We declare the land *hefker* in the beginning of *shmita*.
- 04 You are *zoche* to observe this unique mitzva and the incredible *segula* of *shmita*!

בס"ד  
 ערב שנת השמיטה  
 הננו בזאת לחזק ולאמץ את ידי המפעל החשוב והנעלה  
**אגודת שמיטה**  
 שע"י שומרי שביעית, אשר מטרתה קודש להפיץ את רעיון  
 שמירת השביעית כהלכתה בקרב תפוצות ישראל בכל אתר,  
 לזכותם קרקע בארץ ישראל, אשר על ידה יהיו נמנים גם הם  
 על גיבורי כח עושי דברו מקדשי שנת השמיטה.  
 ויזכו להיות בכלל ברכה המובטחת "וציויתי את ברכתי לכם"  
 לשומרי מצוה יקרה וחביבה זו.

**Chaim Saiman**  
 August 17 · 🌐

A: Heter Mechira: Symbolically sell land to enable persons to grow and sell produce during shmitta

B: Agudat Shmitta: Symbolically sell land to enable persons to NOT grow and sell produce during Shmitta

Think about that for a moment:

The move from A to B tells a fascinating story of changes in Zionism, halakha, economics, and communal identity over the past 140 years.

### III. Loans – Actual Hashmatat Halva'ot

#### הרב יואל בן נון, קרן שמיטת כספים והסדר חובות

...למימוש מטרות אלה מוקמת בזה "קרן שמיטת כספים והסדר חובות" שמטרתה הן: לקרוא לציבור להחיות את מצוות שמיטת כספים במידת האפשר, מבלי לפגוע בשטרי הפרזבול הנחוצים, על-ידי מתן צדקה בשנת השמיטה בצורת הלוואות שעתידות להישמט בסופה. לקרוא לציבור ולגורמים בעלי יכולת כלכלית, לתרום לקרן בהיקף מרבי, כדי לאפשר מו"מ רציני על הסדרי חובות עם נושים כבדים כמו חברת החשמל, חברת המים, עיריות, בנקים ובנקים למשכנתאות, ורשויות המדינה. ללחוץ על הנושים הציבוריים ולהקדיש חלק גדול מתקציבי גביית החובות שלהם – הון עתק שמשולם לעורכי דין ופקידי גבייה – לטובת הסדרי חובות. במקום לנתק חשמל ומים, ולנהל משפטים להוצאת חייבים מבתיים, יוקדש התקציב הזה להשתתפות הנושים בהסדרי החובות. כך אפשר יהיה לנכות מן החובות את מחיר הגבייה באמצעות צעדים אלימים. לנהל מו"מ עם הגורמים הנ"ל ודומים להם, תוך הסתייעות בגורמי הרווחה המופקדים על הנושא, (ובלי להוסיף מנגנון בירוקרטי נוסף), במטרה להגיע להסדרי חובות, בהם הקרן תשלם חלק מהחובות, החייבים יקבלו על עצמם מרצונם הסדרי פיקוח והתנהלות, ופרעון קטן-פרוס לזמן ארוך, והנושים ישמטו את יתרת החובות, לפחות בהיקף התקציבים המושקעים בגבייה. הקרן תפעיל לחץ ציבורי על הממשלה כדי שתשתתף מצידה במאמץ, לפחות באותו ההיקף שהציבור יצליח לגייס. הקרן תשתף פעולה עם גורמים אחרים הפועלים בתחום זה, אם יסכימו לפעול על פי המתווה האמור, לקראת שמיטת כספים והסדר חובות בערב ראש השנה התשס"ט.

יש לפנינו שנה שלמה לפעול – זהו זמן רב מאוד, וגם זמן קצר מאוד – תלוי במה שנעשה בו, בעזרת ה'.

...To realize these goals we are establishing a "Institute for Undoing Loans and Rearranging debts" with the goals of calling to the community to bring back to life the commandment of undoing loans to the degree possible, without undermining the necessary existing Prosbol, through giving charity in the Shemittah year in the form of loans that will ultimately be undone at year's end...

### IV. General – Israel Shmitah Initiative

[/https://shmita-il.co.il](https://shmita-il.co.il)



#### מהי שמיטה ישראלית?

"כי תבאו אל-הארץ אשר אני נתן לכם ושבטתה הארץ שבת לה" (ויקרא כ"ה, ב)

לוח השנה העברי כולל מחזור בן שש שנות מעשה ולאחריהן שנה של "שבת הארץ" – שנה בה האדמה עצמה "עושה שבת", וכולנו (כולל כולם!) מוזמנים: בשנה זו הרכוש אינו חזות הכול, הזמן אינו דוחק, הטבע הוא הרבה יותר ממשאבים לניצול ואנחנו נקראים להיות גרסה טובה ואמפתית יותר של עצמנו.

**שמיטה ישראלית** הינה יוזמה שנועדה להכיר לנו את הרעיונות והערכים העומדים מאחורי שנת השמיטה ולאפשר לנו לקבל את ההזמנה של השנה המיוחדת הזו – לנשום, ללמוד, להתחבר לקהילה ולסביבה הקרובה ולהיות חלק משנה של ריפוי ותקון.

שנה טובה



שומטים



משתתפים



לומדים

The **Israeli Shmita Initiative** seeks to reestablish the Shmita year as a time of personal reflection, meaningful learning, social involvement, and environmental responsibility in Israel.

With the return to the land of Israel in the last century, Shmita has once again become a practical reality. In the modern State of Israel, the Shmita year experience typically revolves around agricultural practices and Jewish dietary laws, and is often characterized by dispute between religious factions. Yet beyond its agricultural and legal significance, the Shmita year presents an opportunity to learn about the important links between social justice, environmental responsibility, and Jewish life. Today's Israelis, who are increasingly open to exploring and creatively applying the ideas and values found in Judaism, are in a unique position to experience Shmita as a medium for both personal and societal transformation.

Our goal is to ensure that every person in Israel knows that the upcoming year is a Shmita year, and to empower all who seek to bring Shmita into their lives to do so in a way that is relevant and meaningful.

The **Israeli Shmita Initiative** is a platform of individuals, NGOs, government officials, and corporate executives from all points on the Jewish spectrum. The Initiative President is Rabbi Michael Melchior, a former MK and well-known public figure. The Initiative is coordinated by Einat Kramer, Director of [Teva Ivri](#), who works together with a wide range of organizations that share both the deep values of Shmita and a strong desire for change in Israeli society.

### Israeli Shmita – Where do we stand today?

#### Launch Events

In the past several months, after a lot of hard work, two major conferences marked the launch of the Israeli Shmita Initiative through two significant conferences:

***“The First Israeli Shmita” Conference*** – Over 50 social, environmental, and Jewish identity organizations and businesses committed to promote the Shmita year as one of environmental responsibility, social engagement, and personal reflection.

***Lobby for Jewish Renewal Conference in the Knesset*** – the Ministries of Education, Environment, and Welfare committed to promote Shmita ideas in collaboration with Israeli non-profits. The Knesset session was led by MK Ruth Calderon, a member of Yesh Atid and the head of the Lobby for Jewish Renewal, together with MK Yitzchak Herzog.

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- Listen to what Shmita means to these conference participants [here](#).
  - View MK Ruth Calderon's address to the Knesset [here](#).
  - Join the Chief Rabbi of Israel and other supporters in signing the online [Israeli Shmita Declaration](#). The English version can be viewed [here](#).

**Publicity Campaign** – Einat Kramer and former MK Rabbi Michael Melchior, coordinators of the Israeli Shmita Initiative, feature in this entertaining [video clip](#) designed to introduce the general public to the concept of Shmita.

## Education

Tevel B'Tzedek, Ma'aglei Tzedek, Midreshet, Torah V'Avodah, and Teva Ivri collaborated to create a series of workshops for high schools that links Jewish values and social environmental activism....

The Shmita in Academia group, comprised of academics, deans of universities, and corporate responsibility experts, is exploring ways to integrate Shmita values in academic institutions. Topics for discussion have included the accessibility of higher education for students on the periphery of Israeli society, global release of patents and research, and other means of equalizing the educational system....

Agriculture and Environment Directors of agricultural farms throughout Israel have developed a Shmita work team to develop projects that focus on sustainability, community, and new educational programs that will attract wider audiences during the Shmita year. The Shabbat Ha'aretz work team is focusing on expressing Shmita values within the environmental field. The group is promoting cultural and spiritual events in urban community gardens, workshops about composting Shmita produce, and activities designed to help the public to view natural resources as treasures, not expendable commodities....

Projects in Action...

Debt Forgiveness for Thousands of Families in Need...

Hovevei Shvi'it Leadership Course...

Municipal Shmita Observance...

Behar: Shmita Awareness Week...

### ר' יובל שרלו, 'חידוש המצוות מתוך המסורת', מקור ראשון, ב' שבט תשע"ד, 3.1.2014

ואלה חלק מההצעות הקיימות כיום לשמיטה ישראלית: בקק"ל לא יהיו נטיעות בשנה זו, והיא תוקדש לשיפור היערות, לגיזום העצים ולפעולות תחזוקה שכידוע אסורות מדאורייתא; שנת אחוות כל העמים הגרים על אותה קרקע. פעולות שידגישו את החיים המשותפים שלנו בארץ האחת שהיא של כולנו, ואת שיתופי הפעולה בשמירתה ובטיובה; שיתוף אזרחים מדתות אחרות בכל הפעילויות של השמיטה; שנת ההשתלמויות המקצועיות, שהן למעשה הפסקה מעבודה שוטפת וטיוב האיכות המקצועית, כבבואה לחזונו של הרב קוק בדבר שנת השמיטה, אך ללא כל קשר למהות חזון זו, שהיא חידוש הברית עם הקב"ה. ועוד: קיום כנס "הקהל" אך בט"ו בשבט של שנת השמיטה, באחד היערות הגדולים של קק"ל, בראשות נשיא המדינה, כינוס שיעסוק בקשר שבין אדם, טבע וחקלאות בארץ ישראל, בשאלות אקולוגיות ובנושאי סביבה שונים; הקדשת שנה זו, יחד עם ארגוני "פעמונים", "מקימי" ודומיהם, לדרכים שיחלצו משפחות ממעגל החובות הבלתי פוסק, במקום לחלום על שמיטת כספים; הגנים הלאומיים ושמורות הטבע יהיו פתוחים חנים יותר ימים מאשר המקובל, לפחות בשבתות ובהגים; כנ"ל לגבימוסדות תרבות ומוזיאונים – כפיתוח רעיון ההפסקה מעבודה ועיסוק בתיאטרון, בספרות, בתרבות וכדומה; הוצאת עלון שבועי שיופץ לכל אזרחי המדינה, ויעסוק באקולוגיה, בשמירת הסביבה, באיכות החיים, במניעת רעש וזיהום; צמצום העבודה הוא גם הזדמנות לחיזוק הקשרים בתוך המשפחה, ולכן יתקיימו הדרכות הורים, סדנאות זוגיות וכדומה בסבסוד המוסדות הלאומיים.

לאחר ההתרשמות החיובית הראשונה מכל הנושאים האלה צפות ועולות, בקריאה שנייה, המשמעויות הרוחניות המהפכניות של קריאה זו: בראש ובראשונה – הקב"ה כלל לא נמצא ב"שמיטה הישראלית", ואין היא קשורה למצוות השמיטה; דרך "השמיטה הישראלית" מוחדרים רעיונות שהם במקרה הטוב לא קשורים כלל לשמיטה, כגון אחוות עמים בקשר לארץ או ענייני השתלמות מקצועית; ההצעות השונות לשמיטה ישראלית כוללות בתוכן באופן מובנה עברות חמורות, כמו חילול שבת, ועוד ועוד....

ואפשר שיש כאן בשורה הרבה יותר גדולה. בדי הארון, שנועדו להעביר את התורה מדור לדור, ניצבים בפנינו במלוא משמעותם. השערים שנפתחו מאפשרים לנו לדון בשאלה מתי מדובר בהתחדשות דתית ומתי ברפורמה; כיצד נדרוש את התורה בכל דור מחדש וזאת בלי לנתק את שלשלת מסירתה; איך פוסעים על הגשר הצר מאוד של אי הכפפת המצווה ל"טעמא דקרא" והתייחסות לעומק הציוריות התורנית ומשמעותו גם יחד; האם השמיטה תהפך להיות אחת מהבשורות הגדולות לעולם כולו שנושאת בחובה תורת ישראל, או שהיא דווקא מחייבת הקפדה על ראייתה כ"שבת הארץ" המיוחדת, ארצו של ריבוננו של עולם; האם החברה הישראלית תחזיר עוד יותר לשלשלת מסירת התורה בישראל; האם ייפתחו בפנינו שערים נוספים לכווננו ההלכה לאור רוחה המקורית והמשמעותית, ולהגדלת המרחב שבו אנו נפגשים עם מצוות התורה שלכאורה אינן רלוונטיות עוד?...

חזוני הוא שלא נמתין למחלוקות השוליות יחסית שתופענה לקראת שנת השמיטה, ולא נבוש מעצם העובדה שאנו מניחים מלאכה זו לאחרים. חזוני הוא שהתורה תתברך מהדיון הזה; שהשמיטה תהיה נוכחת בחברה הישראלית כולה, ותגרום להתרחשות רוחנית גדולה; שמציון תצא תורה ודבר ה' מירושלים, כפי שעשינו זאת ביחס ליום השבת; שהדיון על השמיטה יפתח פתח לעיסוק אינטנסיבי בכל אותן מצוות שהן "מת מצווה" וחסרות משמעות בימינו, ואין אנו פוגשים אותן כלל וכלל; ששנת השמיטה תחולל בעולמנו סערה רוחנית עזה שתפיח רוח נאמנה בכל עולמנו הקיומי ובכל מרחב עולם תלמוד התורה שלנו. האם נתבדה

Here are some of the existing suggestions for an Israeli Shmittah day: The JNF will not plant this year, which will be focused on beautifying forests, trimming trees, and upkeep activities, which of course are biblically

prohibited. A year of brotherhood of all nations living on this land. Activities that will emphasize our shared life in this land that belongs to everyone, and our cooperation in guarding and improving it...

After a first, positive impression from all these topics, on second reading, the spiritually revolutionary perspective here. First and foremost – God is not present at all in the “Israeli Shemittah,” and it is not tied to the commandment of Shemittah. In this initiative there are particular ideas that are in the best case not tied at all to Shemittah, like national brotherhood in the land...

The opening of these gates allow us to deal with the question of when to undertake religious renewal and when to undertake reform. How can we seek the Torah anew in every generation without detaching the chain of tradition? How do we walk across the narrow bridge of... tying a commandment to the depth of the biblical command and meaningfulness at the same time?...

My vision is that we not wait for the marginal fights that will erupt towards the Shemittah year on this point, and not be embarrassed of the basic fact that we are leaving this work [of making Shemittah relevant] to others. My vision is that the Torah will be blessed by this discussion, that Shemittah will be present in Israeli society overall and cause much spiritual movement. That Torah will come out of Zion and the word of God from Jerusalem, as we did with regard to the Shabbat day. That the discussion about Shemittah will open the door to intensive dealing with all commandments that are “a Met Mitzvah” and lack meaning in our days, and we do not meet them at all. That the year of Shemittah will trigger in our world a strong religious storm that will bring a trusted wind of our Torah into our spiritual worlds and in the entire world.

## V. General – Volunteering

### הרב יוסף צבי רימון, מיזם הפקרת שעות

...אחד הטעמים שמביא הרמב"ם (מורה נבוכים ג, לט) למצוות השמיטה שייך במובהק לתחום החברתי: “יש מהם חמלה וחנינה על כל בני אדם, כמו שנאמר ואכלו אביוני עמך...”

לכאורה, אם המטרה היא חברתית בלבד, הרי שהיה צריך להיות מותר לזרוע ולזמור, אלא שהיתה חובה להשאיר את התוצרת לעניים. אדרבה, באופן זה, היה יכול רב יותר לעניים! אולם, התורה אוסרת זריעה וזמירה. מדוע? ייתכן שהתורה אוסרת זאת, כיוון שישנו פן נוסף לשמיטה “ושבתה הארץ שבת לה) ” ’ויקרא כ"ה. (השבייתה ממלאכה מראה על כך שהכל שייך לקב"ה. אולם, ניתן להסביר באופן אחר, וכך הסביר מורי ורבי הרב אהרן ליכטנשטיין שליט"א...

מיזם הפקרת שעות פונה אל כל אחד במדינה! מבוגרים וילדים, גברים ונשים, עשירים ועניים ובעלי המעמד הבינוני. כל אדם בחברה הישראלית, יקדיש שעה בשבוע לנתינה עבור הכלל. בעזרת ה', בחודשים הקרובים ייפתח אתר מיוחד למטרה זו. באתר זה, יהיה ניתן להירשם עבור שעת התנדבות. כל אחד יוכל לכתוב מהם הדברים שהוא היה רוצה להתנדב בהם. בהתאם לכך, יקבל האדם הצעות להתנדבות במקומות שונים סביב מקום מגוריו או סביב מקום עבודתו. לאחר יצירת קשר עם מקומות אלו והתחלת ההתנדבות, יאשר אותו אדם את התנדבותו גם באתר (אין צורך להזדהות בשם מלא. כל אחד בהתאם לרצונו). באתר יהיה ניתן לראות, כיצד אט אט המפה הישראלית הופכת להיות כחולה יותר. כל צבע כחול נוסף, יסמל עשייה נוספת. כל אחד יוכל גם לתת הצעות לעשייה או להתנדבות וכך להגדיל את מעגל העשייה בשמיטה. בשנת השמיטה – כאשר עולם הטבע מקבל את מנוחתו (עולם ירוק), גם העולם החברתי, עולם החסד יקבל חיזוק, והחברה הישראלית תתמלא בצבעי הדגל, ותממש את עצמיותה.

...The initiative of ‘rendering hours ownerless’ calls to everyone in the country!...

Everyone in Israeli society sets aside an hour a week to give back to the community at large...

In the Shemittah year, when the world of nature receives its rest (a green world), the social world, the world of Hesed gets strengthened, and Israeli society will fill with the colors of the flag and will realize its character.

### הגית ברטוב, 'שעת שמיטה' – שעות של חסד

... אז מהי שעת שמיטה? ...

נסו לדמיין את הקהילה שלכם, הקהילה הגיאוגרפית, המקצועית או הווירטואלית שלכם, כשכל שבוע כל אחת ואחד ומחברות ומחברי הקהילה ‘שומטים’ שעה אחת. שעה של חסד אותה הם מעניקים למי שזקוק:

- אנשים צעירים יציעו עזרה בתיקוני הבית למבוגרים בקהילה
- מבוגרים יציעו שעת סיפור לילדים צעירים
- חבורה של ילדים תנקה בכל פעם פינה אחרת ביישוב
- בעלי גינת תבלינים יזמינו ליהנות מהתוצרת

- מורה יציע שיעור פרטי או קבוצתי
- עורכת דין תחתום על מסמכים משפטיים
- חשמלאי יבצע תיקוני חשמל
- גרפיקאי יסייע בעיצוב הזמנות או עבודות קטנות
- מורה ליוגה תעביר שיעור לקבוצות מתחלפות (בכל שבוע קבוצה אחרת)
- גנן יסייע בניקוי גינה
- אמא מנוסה תלמד ילדים לרכוב על אופניים
- אופה משובחת תכין עוגה לשבת
- אנשים יקדישו שעה בשבוע לסיוע במציאת עבודה למי שאבדו את עבודתם בקורונה
- אנשים יקדישו שעה בשבוע ליצירת שידוכים

What is ‘an hour of Shemittah’? Imaging your community – geographic, professional or virtual – where every week everyone ‘takes a break’ for one hour. An hour of Hesed where they give back to those who need:

- Young people offer help with cleaning the house for older people in the community.
- Elderly people offer reading hours for young children.
- A group of children will clean a different corner of the community...
- A teacher will offer a personal or group lesson
- A lawyer will sign on legal documents
- An electrician will offer electric work
- A graphic artist will assist in making invitations
- A yoga teacher will offer an hour to varying groups...

## VI. Environmental Concerns



Article

### Shmita Revolution: The Reclamation and Reinvention of the Sabbatical Year

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**Abstract:** Jewish observance of shmita (alternatively spelled shemittah)—the sabbatical year, or seventh (sheviit) year—is changing. Historically rooted in agriculture, modern Jewish environmentalists are seizing upon the long-ignored environmental and social justice (tikkun olam) aspects of shmita as originally described in the five books of Moses, the Torah in the Hebrew Bible, the basis of Jewish law. Primary research was conducted through key-stakeholder interviews with leading American and Israeli Jewish environmentalists and thought leaders. They see shmita as a core Jewish value—one that, like Shabbat, the Jewish sabbath, has the power to transform society. Their work has brought shmita from an obscure law dealt with mainly by Israel’s Orthodox to a new Jewish ethos being discussed across the United States, Europe, Israel, and even on the floor of Knesset, Israel’s parliament. This article also describes shmita as delineated in the Torah and through the rabbinic canon of halacha (Jewish law), and explains shmita practice from biblical times to the present day.

In essence, for much of the 20th century, shmita observance became a question of kashrut for the Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox in Israel, and of little to no importance for everyone else. Although Israelis, including Israel's secular majority, are often aware of the existence of shmita (if not necessarily all the laws governing it)—shmita even has been featured on multiple Israeli postage stamps—in practice it generally remained within the domain of Israel's Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox, until the recent shmita revolution in Israeli society.

#### 4. Modern Jewish Environmental Perspectives

The development of modern Jewish environmental thought parallels (and may have arisen as a response to) the development of the modern secular environmental movement. In 1966, then-doctoral student Gerald (Ya'akov) Blidstein may have been the earliest modern scholar to approach shmita through an environmental lens, although that may not have been his intention. While focusing on the agricultural aspects of shmita, Blidstein—who went on to a long career teaching Jewish thought at Israel's Ben-Gurion University of the Negev—dismissed those who see shmita “as embodying a type of ‘primitivism’”, and challenged Jews instead to embrace the spirit of shmita [20]:

“Man must relinquish that which his human capabilities have achieved, and in his use of the growth of the soil be reduced to the lowest of creatures that live off the soil. Man must live the rhythms of nature, despite his obvious ability and duty to circumvent them; he must live the rhythms of the countryside despite the city in which he dwells” [20].

In terms of influence on the leaders of today's Jewish environmental movement, however, the shmita revolution—and, for that matter, perhaps the birth of the entire modern Jewish environmental

movement—traces back to the death of a Baptist minister. Rabbi Arthur Waskow—the unofficial patriarch of the modern Jewish environmental movement, and cited as an inspiration by all of the Jewish environmental leaders interviewed for this article [25–28]—was a public-policy wonk in Washington decades before he was ordained as a rabbi. But the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., on April 4, 1968, profoundly changed Waskow [29].

##### 4.1. The Transformation of Arthur Waskow

“I was a fellow at the Institute for Policy Studies,” Waskow said, “If somebody had asked me, ‘What about being Jewish?’ I would have said, ‘Oh yeah, sure—but you know, not a big deal’” [29].

After King's assassination, riots engulfed Washington and Waskow joined with others to help provide food and medical supplies to the African-American community. As the first seder, the Jewish ritual meal of Passover, approached, Waskow made the connection between the political environment and his Jewish tradition [29].

In *Godwrestling*, Waskow described how the idea of yovel shaped the plans for the interfaith bicentennial protest in Washington, and how yovel expresses socialist as well as Buddhist ideals, but that it contained even more than those ideals.

“It says, There [sic] is no way to achieve equality unless you accept that no human really owns the wealth, not even the proletariat, not even the people as a whole,” Waskow wrote, “It says, There [sic] is no way to achieve spiritual transcendence, no way to renounce material values, unless you know that everyone needs and must share the wealth” [31].

Waskow also contributed many practical ideas about how incorporating the values of yovel into modern American society could help the United States address economic disparity [31]. It has been more than 30 years, but many of the ideas would still work today—and they are even more needed since the wealth gap has only increased since then [34].

In *Godwrestling*, though, Waskow was more focused on yovel than shmita, which is significant because even though yovel is more transformative, it only occurs once every 50 years, whereas shmita, taking place every seven years, is more regular. After *Godwrestling*, there is a gap in the literature that addresses shmita through an environmental and social justice lens.

Waskow's follow-up book—*Seasons of Our Joy* in 1982—includes four short paragraphs on shmita [35]. But if Waskow planted the seeds of Jewish environmental thought around shmita, it took decades for them to blossom through the work of Jewish environmental organizations.

##### 4.2. The Development of Modern Jewish Environmental Thought on Shmita

In 1984, mathematics professor and longtime Jewish vegetarianism activist Richard Schwartz—in his book, *Judaism and Global Survival*—noted the disconnect between Jewish environmental values around shmita and modern Jewish practice around shmita:

“While Judaism teaches about a Sabbatical year in which the land is allowed to lie fallow and recover its fertility and farmers may rest, learn and restore their spiritual values, today, under economic pressure to constantly produce more, farmers plant single crops and use excessive amounts of chemical pesticides and fertilizer, thereby reducing soil fertility and badly polluting air and water” [36].



But the zenith of Jewish environmental thought leadership on shmita may have occurred in December 2010 when longtime Jewish environmental activist and thought leader Rabbi David Seidenberg proposed what he called the shmita covenant, positing that shmita is far more important to Judaism than previously thought:

“The goal and purpose of the Torah covenant, for society as a whole, is that the Israelites will observe the Shmitah year, and that in doing so, they will repair the relationship with the Earth that was destroyed in the generations leading up to the flood. Essentially, the covenant with Abraham is meant to take one people and one land, and put them in a right relationship with each other, in order to create a model for how humanity should live. That model is found in the observance of Shmitah and the Jubilee” [47].

Seidenberg elaborated in May 2013, in advance of the Shabbat reading of the Behar Torah portion:

“The whole purpose of the covenant at Sinai is to create a society that observed Shmita. It is in a land where Shmita is observed that human beings will learn to respect the Earth herself, by remembering that none of us can own her. ‘For the land is mine,’ God declares, ‘and you are strangers and settlers with me’ (Leviticus 25:23). And if none of us can own the land, cannot sell it and buy it, then what we do own is ultimately not ours, then the difference between rich and poor is not ‘just the way things are,’ then a person cannot be owned and the difference between slave and master is not real and not loved by God ...Only in such a society, where ‘property’ does not designate the right to use up what one owns, but rather a kind of fleeting relationship to what one cares for, can people learn the true meaning of justice. Only in such a society can people learn to share their wealth, nurture the poor alongside everyone else, relieve debts, end hunger and respect the fundamental human right to be free. 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” [48].

As, according to Jewish tradition, the Torah was given at Mt. Sinai just after the Exodus from Egypt, the purpose of Sinai was to give the Torah to the Jewish people. As the Torah is the core text of Judaism, for shmita to be the purpose of Sinai and the Torah covenant—the agreement between Jews and God that Jews would observe the Torah’s laws and God would care for the Jews—Seidenberg essentially argued that the core purpose of Judaism is shmita practice. That may seem a bit of an overreach, but given that shmita is a utopic vision, if one considers that the point of observing Torah laws is to create an ideal society, then shmita practice could be that embodiment.

#### 4.4. Shmita Seders

In May 2013, at the suggestion of Evonne Marzouk [49], founder of Orthodox environmental group Canfei Nesharim, Mirele Goldsmith developed the first seder—a prayer book and/or service oriented around a meal—for shmita. Originally intended only for programmatic use within a day of shmita learning that Goldsmith—lead founder of Jews Against Hydrofracking and then-director of Hazon’s Jewish Greening Fellowship—organized for Jewish Greening Fellowship fellows, her shmita seder consists of a simple double-sided page, with content on one side and suggestions for follow-up resources on the back. Mirroring the Passover seder’s emphasis on the number four (four cups of wine, four questions, the parable of four children, and the four times that Moses asked Pharaoh to let the Jews go free), Goldsmith’s shmita seder focuses on four aspects of shmita: shmita as ritual, shmita as rest for the land, shmita as release of debt, and the end-of-shmita hakhel [50].

Importantly, the Jewish environmental movement at large adopted and developed shmita as a paramount Jewish environmental concept as well as an organizing principle. In the second key shmita event, 10 leaders of the Jewish environmental movement, including Manela, Passow, and Seidenberg, convened a two-day meeting of the then-nascent Green Hevra (then-spelled Green Chevre)—a now-dormant network of 16 Jewish environmental initiatives—at the Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center in November 2010. Five more leaders, including Marzouk and Waskow, joined the meeting by phone. Their goal was to determine how shmita could inform the work of the Jewish environmental movement [58]. The group delineated the following as shmita values:

- Holistic sustainability that is beyond humans;
- Land and community stewardship;
- Psychological release and dignity;
- Leveling of the economic playing field and preventing cycles of poverty;
- Engaging long-term thinking;
- Developing deep connections with Earth’s rhythms;
- Thinking about the common good versus the individual good, scarcity versus abundance, and cooperation versus competition [58].

The group also brainstormed how shmita could be used as a framework for the Jewish environmental movement. Ideas of how Jewish environmental organizations could incorporate shmita during the shmita year included:

- Holding a shmita-themed event or activity every Shabbat;
- Ceasing all programmatic events during the year;
- Increasing organizational financial transparency;
- Improving gender parity;
- Working with secular and non-Jewish anti-slavery and debt-release organizations;
- Developing a branded but decentralized year-long program of “reflection, evaluation, celebration and study” [58].

Of those above, only the last idea came to fruition—principally in the form of Hazon’s Shmita Project, which will be discussed in the next subsection—but the Green Hevra meeting nonetheless served as a major catalyst for Jewish organizational work on shmita.

Shmita-related activity in the United Kingdom was significantly less than in the United States or Israel, but the Jewish population of the United Kingdom is also about 1/20th the size of the Jewish population in the United States or Israel.

### 6. Shmita Beyond Judaism: From Wall Street to South Park

The influence of Jewish environmental work on shmita has been reverberating well beyond the Jewish environmental movement. Still, shmita's biggest resonance outside of Judaism may not be with

its approach to land, but with its integration of debt forgiveness. Numerous shmita- and yovel-inspired debt-forgiveness campaigns were developed in the aftermath of the most-recent financial crisis—and some even earlier—both in the United States and around the world. The campaigns have not been concerned with other aspects of shmita and yovel, such as letting the land lie fallow, and instead focused very narrowly on debt forgiveness. Seeing the work as inspired by shmita and yovel rather than as manifested shmita and yovel practice, these campaigns proceeded independently of the shmita and yovel calendars.

Leading up to the new millennium of the common era, the British group Jubilee 2000, supported by a myriad of celebrities including U2's Bono, led a campaign that resulted in "the cancellation of more than \$100 billion of debt owed by 35 of the poorest countries" [106]. Jubilee 2000 subsequently splintered into other groups, including:

- The Jubilee Debt Coalition in the United Kingdom [107];
- Jubilee USA, which in turn has more than 70 member groups in its network council, including a dozen regional affiliates as well as national secular and religious nonprofits, such as the AFL-CIO union, American Jewish World Service, Friends of the Earth, Global AIDS Alliance, Muslim Public Affairs Council, Oxfam America, the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, and more than 20 Christian organizations [108];
- Campaigns in more than 30 countries around the world, from Malta to Malawi and Argentina to Zimbabwe [109].

The creators of the animated television series *South Park* picked up on the jubilee fervor and produced an episode on debt forgiveness in March 2009. The episode is a parody of the story of Jesus as told in the New Testament, with the character Stan Marsh playing the role of modern-day Jesus. At the end of the episode, Stan redeems the people of South Park by paying off all their debts (and taking those debts on himself) [110].

<https://hazon.org/shmita-project/overview/>

## Shmita Resources



“ My class of adult Jewish learners loved Hazon's materials on the Shmita year! Everyone was impressed by the thoughtful teachings by a variety of scholars, and they said that the materials 'opened their eyes' to new Jewish ideas and perspectives. Real learning was happening when we studied Hazon's teachings. And the brochure was beautifully produced. Thank you, Hazon, for making my role as their rabbi so much easier!  
—Rabbi Andy Vogel, Temple Sinai Brookline MA

Hazon has developed and compiled a collection of educational resources about Shmita for you to utilize within various educational settings. Three main publications that have been developed by Shmita Project founding members are the Hazon Shmita Sourcebook, Shabbat HaAretz, and Envisioning Sabbatical Culture. We have also published a 4-page Shmita Supplement. View other resources in the library, and core Shmita texts, principles, values, and ethics in the tabs below.

We hope these resources are valuable, and would love to hear how you are utilizing them. Contact us with questions, stories, or ideas.

- core shmita texts
- shmita principles
- shmita values and ethics

Before you consider what Shmita might mean for you today, we encourage you to delve into the rich, complex texts that form the foundation for Shmita in the Torah and begin to consider the rabbinical commentaries that examine the spirit of life during a Shmita year.

## Values and Ethics

The Shmita cycle presents a cultural system rooted in local food security, economic resiliency and community empowerment. The first step in reaching towards this holistic and wide-ranging vision is in exploring shared ethics and values. We might consider this as the 'operating system' of the Shmita paradigm, the source code with which we may use to design businesses, community centers, schools, governance, etc. aligned with the Shmita vision. The more we can find a common language to celebrate a shared cultural value system, the easier the process ahead will be. So let's ask ourselves: If we are to create such a society grounded in equality, fairness, creativity and abundance, what values must we embody along the way?

18 core values and ethics are explored below as integral to the Sabbatical Cycle, and foundational to renewing a Sabbatical Culture. Ultimately, they speak directly to building a culture based on healthy relationships between self, community, ecology, and spirit. These values strengthen the cords between us, making the whole web more resilient. And it is this web of interconnectivity that will be the canvas upon which we might build a Shmita culture. Reflect upon these values, explore how they may play a role in your own personal sets of relationships, and experiment with putting them into practice.

### 1. Homegrown Resiliency

#### 1. Homegrown Resiliency

Shmita is not something we are all keeping on separate schedules and calendars. The Shmita cycle affects all of us at once, and we are all in this rhythm together. Many of the practices of the Shmita paradigm revolve around peer-to-peer relationships, taking place on the communal stage: in our homes, on our streets, in our shared spaces. Our ability to celebrate this cycle in abundance will depend on grassroots efforts, collective action, and community organizing: our ability to work together, to rely on one another, to depend on one another. Together, we are creating an extended family, renewing the village culture and the sense of tribe. We are all stronger the more we can learn to care for and support one another. We cannot do this alone.

Allow your synagogues, community centers, and schools to be the base for such activity. Step into active leadership positions where needed. Learn to make decisions together, to vision together, and to design together.

### 2. Local Health; Local Culture

The principles of the Shmita year stress locality. On the Shmita year, large-scale markets essentially close down, foods cannot be exported, and reliance transfers to community systems. The Shmita paradigm values an investment in local community efforts, designing for solutions that meet local needs and challenges, using local resources and creativity. Strengthen local economies and business development. Strengthen local food production and distribution systems. Support the preservation of local wildlands and the health of your own watershed. Support local education, art, and health systems. The more we keep energy circulating locally, the more resilient of a community will be created for it.

### 3. Embracing The Wild

The Shmita paradigm presents a covenant with the Wild, around us and within us. It creates a time to honor land and her soils, to celebrate the uncultivated, undomesticated, wild growth. The Shmita paradigm asks us to align our values and ethics with preservation, conservation, and respect of wild lands, animals and plants. We live within a larger ecology, and we are just one member of a much larger whole. Nature itself is not 'Other' and we are invited to form truly intimate and interactive relationships with the wild that supports us. The Shmita paradigm invites us to recognize how much we receive from our natural surroundings.

We are asked to harvest with respect, humility and honor. Be creative and careful about our patterns of consumption. Learn to leave no waste or pollution, and use renewable resources smartly. Learn the gifts of the wild, her foods, medicines.

### 18. Release & Faith

In all honesty, what Shmita asks from us, as individuals and as community, is powerfully challenging. Not just because it is hard, but because it directly shifts our relationship with food, land & money: the foundations for our sense of survival, stability, security. There are natural, genuine questions to ask about this year: What will we eat? How will we make money? Etc, etc. These questions touch upon deep areas of sensitivity and vulnerability. It is in this soil in which the seeds of our transformation may take root.

We have not lived with the Shmita Cycle for many generations. There will be endless questions along the way, most of which will have no clear-cut 'correct' answers. Walk into mystery, into the unknown, with humility, with sacred vulnerability. It is ok to not control. Shmita means 'release,' so find ways to begin releasing the sense that you must have the answers; that you must be in control. Find ways to offer genuine surrender, letting go into the gifts of Shmita that may be waiting for you. Allow fear to blossom into the possibility for your own evolution.

### 1. Homegrown Resiliency

### 2. Local Health; Local Culture

### 3. Embracing The Wild

### 4. Long Term Planning

### 5. Process Over Product

### 6. Personal Health & Vitality

### 7. Diversity & Unity

### 8. Mutuality & Trust

### 9. Co-Mentoring & Co-Creation

### 10. Abundance & Generosity

### 11. Redefining Value & Wealth

### 12. Equal Access & Fair Distribution

### 13. Embracing The Commons

### 14. Re-Skilling

### 15. Reclaiming Our Story

### 16. Sanctifying Time & Cycles

### 17. Apply Self-Regulation & Invite Accountability

### 18. Release & Faith

### The Origin of the Sabbath and Its Legacy to the Modern Sabbatical

In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, ten colleges and universities established the first sabbatical leave programs in America while recalling the ancient Hebrew Sabbath and sabbatical year.<sup>1</sup> Since that time, the biblical rest day has often been noted in promoting periodic leave times for academic faculty and workers in the labor force, as well as in proposals for full employment [8, 18, 22]. Yoked with these references to the Sabbath has been a utilitarian rationale which ignores much of the rich and complex meaning of the ancient Hebrew rest day, although that should not be surprising in a country where “utility” has so pervaded the national ethic. As Henry Steele Commager has noted, the American long felt that “education was his religion”; and, as with his religion, the American expected education “to be practical and pay dividends” [15, p. 299]. Certainly this is reflected in the 1922 report by the Committee on Sabbatical Leave at Dartmouth College:

The purpose of the sabbatical leave is to render the recipient more useful to the college as a teacher, as an investigator, or as an administrator. Leaves of absence are in nowise to be regarded as increased vacation periods, as primarily opportunities for increased financial advantage to the instructor, or as due him upon the ground solely of length of service. They are an investment of college funds designed to increase the efficiency of the teaching force. [10, p. 4]