

Saving Shmita

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The experience of Shmita is both fascinating and iconic. Occurring once in seven years, it carries the mystique of something "extraordinary" or even enchanted. Intended as a seminal national experience, it was rarely practiced in its truest form. In the modern context, our encounter with shmita has dramatically shifted from the fields and orchards to the rows of the supermarket. What are the deeper meanings of this multifaceted and complicated mitzvah?

Shmita distills several important Jewish values. It qualifies our ownership of land while moderating our response to financial successes. Returning the land back to its Creator, prevents the arrogance typically follows economic success. A full year of work stoppage underscores that human wealth is Divinely allocated and therefore transitory.

Additionally, shmita reaffirms our national rights to the land of Israel. As God's chosen people, we possess moral and historical warrant to this land. Throughout history, our deed to our land has been vehemently disputed. Every seven years, Shmita certifies that it will be Divine allocation and not political diplomacy or military aggression which will dictate the future of this land.

Furthermore, shmita reorders socio-economic hierarchies. Lands are left barren, and produce is equally and readily available to both rich and poor. The related laws of "shemitat kesafim" or the annulment of loans, in theory, are meant to dissolve all debt, effectively resetting financial imbalances. Every society struggles with wealth

inequality and its potential social repercussions. The rich accumulate more wealth as the poor sink into greater debt, eroding social unity and destabilizing economies. At our particular stage of history, wealth disparities are particularly exaggerated, as 1% of the world's richest possess twice as much wealth as 6.9 billion people. By resetting financial parity, Shmita rebuilds a more egalitarian and classless social fabric.

Finally, Shmita serves as a spiritual and personal 'retreat' from the hustle bustle of society and the pressures of our daily routine. Functionally similar to Shabbat, it provides a yearlong "leave of absence" enabling spiritual, personal and communal rebooting. As Shmita incorporates so many core elements of religion, it serves as a benchmark for Jewish residence in Israel. Adherence to shmita secures our presence in Israel, while violation of this commandment ousts us from the land of God.

Historical Cycles of Shmita

Similar to the Jewish people, shmita has undergone dramatic shifts throughout history. Many of the Torah's commandments are static and remain, more or less, unaffected by history. Other mitzvot are more fluid, fluctuating with the revolutions of Jewish history. Shmita has been deeply impacted by Jewish history and, particularly, by our unending struggle to settle our homeland. The journey to full shmita observance mirrors the odyssey of Jewish history.

Tragically, during the First Temple era, shmita was largely ignored. During that deeply flawed 400-year period, seventy shmita and yovel periods were disregarded. A seventy-year exile in Babylonia provided respite, allowing the land to recoup its lost shmita cycles. Ironically, the Jews of the second Temple era did adhere to the laws of

shmita. However, during this period, the caliber of this mitzvah was compromised. Most Jews did not return from Exile, as the majority of our people resided outside the boundaries of Israel. Under these disappointing conditions, the Biblical experience of shmita no longer applied. Shmita was still practiced at a Rabbinic level, but the ideal performance of the mitzvah remained elusive. In effect, during the initial nine hundred years of residence in our homeland, shmita never achieved its full stature. In the year 70 AD, the long night of Jewish exile began and shmita, effectively, faded from view for close to eighteen hundred years. When it resurfaced, it would become entangled in significant controversy.

Surviving Shmita

Toward the end of the 19th century, Jewish settlement in Israel expanded beyond the vicinity of Jerusalem. New agrarian settlements, almost exclusively dependent upon farming, were sprouting up. The specter of a full year of shmita, absent of any agricultural activity, threatened both the livelihood and the lives of these new yishuvim or moshavot. In the lead up to the shmita year of 1889, a fierce controversy erupted surrounding potential workarounds for shmita. Leading Israeli and European rabbis debated the legality of circumventing Shmita prohibitions by selling Jewish lands to Gentiles. Many authorities rejected this legal fiction known as 'heter mechira', recommending instead, full compliance and a complete work stoppage. Alternatively, many rabbis who were exposed first-hand to the dire situation, were more supportive of this potential leniency. Shmita became a divisive issue.

The struggle wasn't only divisive, it was also sadly ironic. We had dreamed of this historical "moment" for centuries. Having been scattered across the globe, we yearned for a return to the fields and pasturelands of Israel. How sadly paradoxical that, clawing our way home in the late 19th century, we were obliged to sell our land to Gentiles. What a sad commentary upon the imperfect nature of our return. Evidently, history and the land were not yet ready for a full Jewish return.

Gradually, as the cycles of Shmita passed, reality overcame ideology and the heter mechira policy of selling the land of Israel finally became institutionalized by Rav Kook in the year 1909.

Personal Religion or National Religion

For most of us who do not live agricultural lives, Shmita has transformed into a year in which we insert one more "check box" to our kashrut checklist. During shmita, in addition to inspecting general kashrut, we also examine "shmita kashrut". Most of the overall population relies upon the heter-mechira sale, while continuing to purchase Israeli products, as they would during a non-shmita year. Others, who are uncomfortable with this "halachik bypass", import their produce or purchase it from local Arabs, or from farms located outside the boundaries of Biblical Israel. It should be plainly obvious that each of these solutions is severely deficient.

Interestingly, these two differing strategies reflect two fundamentally different attitudes about religious life in Israel. One approach places almost exclusive emphasis upon personal religious experience. Imported fruits or Gentile-owned vegetables are optimal for preserving the kashrut level of my personal plate of food. If personal

religious quality is the primary factor, this approach is far superior.

Other Jews adopt a more nationalistic view- one concerned with sweeping shmita ramifications, beyond their own kitchen or meal plan. Individuals may be able to import from Gaza, Turkey or Jordan. Nationally though, a full cessation of labor would starve the agricultural industry. Shutting down this sector for an entire year and ceasing exports, would practically forfeit international markets. My personal salad can be imported, but the agricultural industry- a vital national asset- requires a different shmita solution.

Additionally, the heter-mechira bypass is valuable for national kosher 'coverage'. Fervently religious people may be willing to incur greater cost or enjoy lower quality produce to maintain shmita laws. General Israeli consumers, though, may be less dedicated and less willing to sacrifice quality. To enable national shmita observance, heter mechira is necessary to insure readily available "kosher" produce. Heter-mechira may not represent the highest standard of kashrut but it remains the best vehicle for stretching shmita to the national stage.

Religious One-upmanship

Shmita possesses unifying potential: Collectively we return the land to God and retire for a year-long spiritual retreat. Economic ledgers are wiped and, for an entire year, the divisions between affluent and poor vanish. During Sukkot immediately subsequent to shmita, in the aftermath of this economic and spiritual unity, an entire nation descends upon the city of unity for a public recital of Torah. The harmony of Hakhel torah-recital caps the solidarity built during shmita.

In the modern world we have lost so much of our shmita experience. Can we at least retain shmita as a unifier? Let us not turn shmita into a "kashrut competition" or a smug conversation about which "flawed approach" to shmita kashrut is halachikally superior. If we still haven't solved shmita in the modern state, let it not degenerate into sanctimony or holier-than-thou posturing. Those who don't rely upon the heter-mechira workaround should appreciate the needs of national shmitta. Those who do rely upon the workaround should have the intellectual honesty to realize how flimsy it is and how, in an ideal world, we would not sell off our country to non-Jews.

Shmita is also a year of humility before God. Hopefully, we all navigate the upcoming shmita with humility, appreciating and respecting different approaches to this quandary.

Shmita holds a mirror to Jewish history. Do we trust God enough and are we spiritually courageous enough to adopt full shmita compliance? Our track record isn't great. We still haven't cracked the riddle of returning to the modern Israel and maintaining shmita. As we inch closer to a fully redeemed state we draw closer to full shmita compliance. One day we will reach it. Until that day, let us stand together during shmita united by one common dream.

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