

SUKKOT 5775
SHABBAT HOL HAMOED
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5775 is a special Jewish year. According to the count, we have begun the Shmitta year – the Sabbatical year. In accordance with Biblical law, the Land of Israel must lie fallow during this Sabbatical year. This means that farmers may not plant or reap their crops, sell their produce within Israel, or export their crops abroad.

There is much discussion in modern Israel as to the Biblical and Rabbinic injunctions that now fall upon the land and its farmers as we now have an independent State of Israel. It is only in the Land of Israel that the Shmitta rules officially apply and over the years various solutions to some of the challenging issues have been both proposed and used.

For those farmers who consider themselves observant of Jewish law, the Shmitta year is a commandment which must be followed. For instance, on our family's kibbutz, Sde Eliyahu, which is situated not too far from the city of Tiberias, they must take the laws into consideration as they plant, sow and harvest their crops.

In general, a few methods have been used by Jewish farmers in the State of Israel that are based upon the fact that Shmitta today is no longer a Biblical prohibition, but a Rabbinic one. Because of this and the great difficulty in keeping the law, the Chief Rabbinate in Israel adopted the legal fiction of selling the land to a non-Jew, the same practice we invoke when we sell our Hametz just before Pesach. If the land does not belong to us we are permitted to work on it. Another solution that has been proposed is that the farmers harvest the Shmitta's year's produce as Rabbinic court agents and sell it to the consumers through this legal fiction. In this case the court represents the consumer and hires people to do all the work necessary to bring the produce to market. For still others, the practice of hydroponics, the growing of the produce in pipes filled with water, solves the problem as the produce is not officially grown in the ground and is thus considered permissible to be sold. Those of you who have been to the area around the Dead Sea have seen this as a normal procedure for growing plants and vegetables since the ground is too salty to allow for the proper growing of vegetation.

Still other solutions have been offered by those, in particular, in the ultra-Orthodox camp. Since produce can be used that is either grown by a non-Jew or come from outside the land of Israel, their solution is to do exactly that – to buy food from those farmers who are not Jewish or to import produce from outside the land of Israel.

All of these solutions create their own problems. Ideologically, are we really in favor of selling the land of Israel to a non-Jew? We have worked so hard to gain our own state in our ancient land and it seems somewhat improper to do so. Is it better for the court to make the arrangements and use this legal fiction procedure? To create the predicament that non-Jewish farmers succeed with their harvest while Jewish farmers do not, or, to import food from outside Israel when that food might be available in Israel also does not seem to be a proper solution? So what then should Israelis who care about this do?

Rabbi David Golinkin, of the Schechter Institute in Jerusalem, the Conservative Movement seminary in Israel, wrote a Teshuva at the time of the last Shmitta, in 2007-2008 on this very issue and suggested a number of possibilities. These would include timing the growing season appropriately to not intervene with the prohibited work on the Shmitta year, or to leave one field with a large sign designating it a “Shmitta corner” in which all the laws of Shmitta would be observed. Since that land would lie fallow, it would open to all who wish to partake of whatever is grown. He bases this decision on the fact it is now a Rabbinic law, that Shmitta was an ideal written for ancient economies, and that the possible loss to Israeli farmers and businesses would be quite severe if they are not appropriately compensated.

Since we do not live in Israel, these specific laws do not apply to us. However, should we buy Israeli products, those who are concerned about it, will look for special designation on those products that Shmitta was observed. On the kibbutz itself, special arrangements are made for this year which include greater concentration on those parts of the kibbutz economy which are not based upon agriculture.

However, it is also important to look behind the law and understand its purpose. Perhaps in that way we can make Shmitta even relevant to us, though we live in the Diaspora. The anonymous Medieval author of Sefer HaHinukh offered four different reasons for the mitzvah of Shmitta. The first is to train the farmer in the attribute of yielding and relinquishing thereby defining his character. In other words, we should not expect that everything will come our way, but understand that there are limits to our consumption. Not everything we wish for is granted. This is a good lesson not only for agriculture, but in all walks of life. The second is to highlight that one’s prosperity and sustenance actually come from G-d and are not solely the result of our own human efforts. We are to recognize that the land does not belong to us. It belongs to G-d, as the Bible distinctly states. Thus, though we think that everything will always go well with our harvest, this is not necessarily the case. Rain, fertility of the soil, good weather in addition to hard work, are all necessary for the crop to be abundant and that is not an area over which we have control. The Shmitta year teaches the farmer and all of us as consumers that we should be grateful for G-d’s and nature’s gifts.

The third benefit of Shmitta, according to Sefer HaHinukh is that it increases one’s trust in G-d. Though one is not farming to secure food during the Shmitta year, the Bible tells the children of Israel that observing this law will not bring famine upon the land, but instead they will continue to sustain themselves appropriately. The final reason is that Shmitta, like Shabbat, is a reminder that G-d created the earth in six days and rested on the seventh. As another cycle of seven, Shmitta, known as the Sabbatical year, reminds us of the importance of resting and following G-d’s example.

It seems to me that those lessons should not be lost on us, even if we do not live in Israel, are not farmers, and are not required to follow the Shmitta laws. It does impress upon us the great lesson that not everything can be gained by our own hands. Only a few days from now, we will recite the prayer for rain on Shmini Atzeret as we recognize that without rain the land and, in turn, its inhabitants suffer. Over the centuries it has been common for all individuals, whether religious or not, to ask G-d for rain to fall allowing fruit and vegetables to grow. Thus, when food appears in our grocery stores or on our plates we should be thankful for those gifts.

Judaism thus has instituted an entire set of blessings for both before and after the meals. Perhaps the Shmitta year can teach us to be more sensitive to these lessons as we are grateful for the gifts which are ours.

Since the land was to lie fallow it was to be open to all peoples, especially the poor. We can follow that dictate by sharing our bounty with others. I encourage you to follow the work of our Social Action Committee as they have instituted the “Take a Bite out of Hunger” project. Throughout the year we have food collections for the Ark, for students in our schools here in Highland Park, for our Moraine County food pantry among other localities. I encourage you to support those organizations which give food to the poor either in our community or in others. Examples include the Ark here in Chicago, Mazon, the national Jewish response to hunger, and Leket, based in Israel, which collects usable food which might otherwise be discarded and shares it with the poor. In this way, we will follow the purpose of the Shmitta, even if we do not follow its dictates in the Biblical or Rabbinic manner.

The holiday of Sukkot is, of course, the holiday of the harvest. When all seems to go well, we usually feel good about ourselves and become smug in our success. We need to learn to be grateful for all that we have been granted. It should also be the time to share our bounty with others. It is on this holiday that we invite guests into our Sukkah, either specific friends and family, or our ancient ancestors through our Ushpizin ritual. We should be prepared to share with those who are not as fortunate as we.

This lesson especially rings true on the Shabbat during the holiday of Sukkot. Shabbat asks us to rest, to recognize G-d's creation, to stop in our pursuit of economic riches and appreciate the spiritual side of life. Shmitta does the same. It impresses upon us the need to appreciate the world in which we live and the responsibility to periodically, once in seven years, acknowledge that. It teaches us that the spiritual is the essence and goal in life; that the “earthly” the material has a *raison d'être* only if it is permeated with the idea that “the earth shall rest a Sabbath unto G-d.”

Thus, on the holiday of Sukkot, in the Shmitta year, when the cycle comes only once in seven years, important lessons can be taught to us. It is crucial to recognize the bounties given to us by G-d and appreciate them. It is important to share those bounties with others who may not be as fortunate. We have the responsibility of creating a just and ethical society so that the weakest link of our society is cared for by all of us.

Even those of us who do not live in Israel at this point, I believe, can follow the essence and the spirit of the Shmitta year and allow it to make a difference in our lives. It is a once in seven year opportunity, let's not lose the chance to learn from it.