

Two Rationales

The mitzvah of *shmitah* has two rationales: a social rationale and a religious rationale, specifically in that order. *Shmitah* is first and foremost a social arrangement designed to solve the fundamental social problems of Jewish – and universal – society through the means of annulment of personal property on a national level, if only for a year at a time. The second rationale for *shmitah* is a "religious" rationale: "the sabbath of the land" is defined as a "sabbath for the Lord": there is no justification or validity to the legal demand for annulment of personal property in this year other than the argument "for the earth is mine" (Leviticus 25:23), which is to say, the land is not ours, but God's, and in the seventh year we return the ownership of the land to its owner... Fifty years ago, Israeli society was notable for its lack of economic gaps. But today, we have reached the opposite situation: we are among the nations with the greatest degree of socio-economic gaps. Perhaps we have advanced over the years in finding sophisticated technical solutions to *shmitah*, but we have moved very far away from the Torah's original intent with regard to this important and dear mitzvah.

– *The Ideological Foundations for the Debates about Shmitah*,
Dr. Amnon Shapira

Letting Go

The emphasis here is clear – helping the individual. Not simply as an act of lovingkindness, one person reaching out to his friend, but rather on the level of the general society, in that a situation of equality has been created. There are no givers, there are no receivers, no rich or poor. All soil, all produce, are *hefker* – ownerless. Worker and employer are all cut off – "and the poor of your nation shall eat"... The social reform, the striving for equality, connect to the monetary *shmitah* [in which debts are forgiven], as if all return to the starting point and begin anew.

– *The Ideological Basis of Shmita*, Rabbi Abaron Lichtenstein

Shmitah and Rosh Hashanah: Two Sabbaths

כִּי תֵבֹאוּ אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי נֹתֵן לָכֶם, וְשָׁבַתָה
הָאָרֶץ שִׁבְתָּ לַה'. שֵׁשׁ שָׁנִים תִּזְרַע שָׂדֶךְ, וְשֵׁשׁ שָׁנִים
תִּזְמַר כְּרִמְךָ, וְאַסַּפְתָּ אֶת תְּבוּאֹתֶיהָ. וּבַשָּׁנָה
הַשְּׁבִיעִת, שִׁבַת שְׁבִיתוֹן יִהְיֶה לָאָרֶץ, שִׁבַת לַה': שָׂדֶךְ
לֹא תִזְרַךְ וְכִרְמְךָ לֹא תִזְמַר.

– ויקרא כה:ב-ד

When you come to the land that I am giving you, the land shall rest a sabbath for the Lord. Six years you may sow your field and six years you may prune your vineyard and gather in the yield. But in the seventh year the land shall have a sabbath of complete rest, a sabbath of the Lord: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard.

– Leviticus 25:2-4

בַּחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי בְּאַחַד לַחֹדֶשׁ יִהְיֶה לָכֶם שְׁבִיתוֹן,
זְכֹרֹן תְּרוּעָה, מִקְרָא קֹדֶשׁ. כָּל מְלֵאכֶת עֲבָדָה לֹא
תַעֲשׂוּ.

– ויקרא כג:כד-כה

On the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall have a sabbath celebration of blowing horns, a holy gathering. You shall do no manner of servile work.

– Leviticus 23:24-25

A Day of Friendship

"You shall have a day of blowing horns (*t'ruah*) (Num. 29:1) – you are obligated to behave in love and deep friendship (*re'ut*). Blowing horns (*t'ruah*) comes from the language of deep friendship (*re'ut*). You shall have a day of blowing horns: a day of unity and love.

– *Korban He'Ani*,
Rabbi Yaakov Yitzchak of Lublin

Who is Mighty?

"The mighty in strength that fulfill His word" (Ps. 103:20). To whom does Scripture refer? R. Isaac said: To those who are willing to observe the *shmitah* 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? Throughout the *shmitah* year this mighty man sees his field declared ownerless, his trees 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 he?

– Leviticus Rabbah 1:1

Giving Circles

Circular giving differs from reciprocal giving in several ways. First, when the gift moves in a circle no one ever receives it from the same person he gives it to... When I give to someone from whom I do not receive (and yet I do receive elsewhere), it is as if the gift goes around a corner before it comes back. I have to give blindly. And I will feel a sort of blind gratitude as well. The smaller the circle is – and particularly if it involves just two people – the more a man can keep his eye on things and the more likely it is that he will start to think like a salesman. But so long as the gift passes out of sight it cannot be manipulated by one man or one pair of gift partners. When the gift moves in a circle its motion is beyond the control of the personal ego, and so each bearer must be a part of the group and each donation is an act of social faith.

– "What is Good is Given Back," Lewis Hyde

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Shmitah: A Year Without Givers or Receivers

The Nesiya Commentary

This year the celebration of Rosh Hashanah marks the beginning not only of the New Year, but also of the observance of "*shmitah*", the sabbatical year, which takes place every seventh year in the land of Israel. The word *shmitah* is from the Hebrew root "שָׁמַט – *sh'm't'*", to let drop or fall, to release. During the *shmitah* year, Jews living in Israel are commanded: 1) not to sow their fields or vineyards (Lev. 25:4-5); 2) to release control over their fields, so that anyone – neighbors, poor people, animals, or the original owner – can come and eat any produce they find in the fields (Exod. 23:11, Lev. 25:6-7); and 3) to forgive all loans and debts (Deut. 15:1-3).

What can we learn from the laws of *shmitah*, whether we live outside or inside the land of Israel, and whether or not we farm land? How can our understanding of *shmitah* enrich our thoughts and actions in the coming year?

The intent of *shmitah* is both spiritual and social. The Torah legislates a sabbath rest for the land of Israel, and restores the land to its true owner, God. According to the Torah, even when the Jewish people control the land of Israel, it is not truly ours. God gave the land of Israel to the Jewish people only as a contingent gift, which can be revoked. *Shmitah* reminds us every seven years of our lack of ultimate ownership of the land.

By annulling personal ownership, *shmitah* also creates a new, though temporary, social order in which people are challenged to change the way they see themselves. During *shmitah*, we are forced to let go, to acknowledge that not everything is within our control: not our land, nor our produce, nor even our money. As we relinquish our sense of ownership, we likewise relinquish our social definitions, and the lines between classes become blurred. We are no longer defined as rich and poor, employer and worker, creditor and debtor, giver and receiver. *Shmitah* calls upon us to free ourselves from the competition inherent in always being aware that there are those who have more than we do. We become equal in both our responsibilities to the larger community and our right to receive from the community.

Shmitah challenges us to see the world without givers or receivers. At its core, *shmitah* is not about giving, but about recognizing that the world is not ours to acquire or own, that what we consider ours is not truly our own to give away. In universal terms, the whole earth belongs to everyone.

But *shmitah* is only temporary, a break, every seventh year, from traditional concepts of ownership and social structure. *Shmitah* reframes the way we look at ownership in the other six years, but does not eliminate ownership. The temporary nature of *shmitah* reflects both how hard it is to relinquish control over our possessions and the positive values of ownership.

Rosh Hashanah is also defined by the Torah as a "sabbath." During *shmitah*, the land has a sabbath of agricultural rest, and we withdraw from working it. On Rosh Hashanah, we celebrate a sabbath in which we withdraw from work and create a holy gathering that centers around "תרועה – *t'ruah*," the blowing of the shofar. R. Yaakov Yitzchak of Lublin connects the word *t'ruah* with the word "רעות – *re'ut*," deep friendship, and urges us to see Rosh Hashanah as a time for renewing deep friendship and love.

Just as Rosh Hashanah invites a recognition of divine sovereignty, an awareness of control greater than our own, *shmitah* also suggests an experience of being still and letting go. Both call upon us to see our place in a greater scheme, and to experience ourselves in deep kinship and caring relationships with others, rather than in competition with them. As we celebrate the high holidays this year, may we have the strength and courage to look forward to a year of becoming less focused on our possessions, of being able to let go of the usual ways we compare ourselves with others, and of sharing what we have and who we are more freely.

Suggested Discussion Questions for Your Holiday Celebrations

Personalizing *Shmitah*: Is there an aspect of your life that is important for you to let go of and take a break from every few years? How would taking that break help you and how might it help others?

Taking a Sabbatical : The idea of a sabbatical originates with *shmitah*. If you were to take a sabbatical, how would you use it? Would you focus more on personal growth or on giving to others?

Forgiving Debts: The *shmitah* year includes a commandment to forgive debts. Have you ever forgiven a debt, monetary or otherwise? How did it change the way you related to the person who owed you? How did it change the way you saw yourself? Are there debts you have now that you would like to forgive or be forgiven from?