

Introduction to Shmita: Values, Practices and Texts

According to the Torah, the Shmita year is a time of sabbatical--a year when land must be left to lie fallow and debts must be forgiven. It is a year-long Shabbat for workers and for the land and represents a vision for a just society. Today we see our society struggling - homeowners with underwater mortgages and workers without sick days. We face rising housing costs, unprecedented gaps in wealth and income, overwhelming student debt, and the increasingly high cost of caring for aging parents. As such, the Biblical concept of Shmita can inform us in our work for all forms of Social Justice.

(Adapted from: *Jewish Community Action Sourcebook*)

13 Principles of the Seventh Year

A Sabbatical Food System

1. Land Stewardship: There is no seeding or plowing of agricultural land.
2. Perennial Harvest: During the Shmita Year, harvests include wild edibles and perennial produce.
3. Full Ripeness: Harvests should be gathered at full ripeness.
4. Seasonal Diet: Harvests can be stored and eaten in season only.
5. Eat Local: Harvests must be eaten locally. They cannot be exported.

Community & Food Security

6. Creating Commons: All agricultural lands are declared public and become community commons.
7. Communal Access: All wild & perennial produce are declared public and shared equally.
8. Fair Distribution: When harvesting, only collect specific to your immediate needs and not beyond.
9. Land Ethic: Land is not property to be sold, rather it is linked to family lineage.
10. Sacred Harvest: Harvests have a special sanctity. They cannot be wasted or thrown away.

Community & Economic Resiliency

11. De-Commercialization: Produce can be harvested for nourishment & enjoyment; but not sold as a commodity, for the sake of profit.
12. Debt Release: All debts from previous years are canceled at the conclusion of the Shmita year.
13. Gift Economy: The value of exchange is based on the intention of offering of gifts, not the payment of money.

(Adapted from *The Hazon Shmita Sourcebook*)

Selected Texts on Shmita

Six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; but in the seventh year, you shall let it rest and lie fallow. Let the needy among your people eat of it, and what they leave, let the wild beasts eat of it. You shall do the same with your vineyards and olive groves.

(Exodus 23.10-11)

What the Sabbath achieves regarding the individual, the Shmita achieves with regard to the nation as a whole. A year of solemn rest is essential for both the nation and the land, a year of peace and quiet without oppressor and tyrant. . . It is a year of equality and rest, in which the soul reaches out towards divine justice, towards God who sustains the living creatures with loving kindness.

(Rav Kook, *Shabbat of the Land*)

God said to Moses in Mount Sinai, “Speak to the children of Israel, and tell them, ‘When you come into the land which I give you, then the land shall keep a Sabbath to Adonai. Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in its fruits; but in the seventh year there shall be a Sabbath of solemn rest for the land, a Sabbath to Adonai. You shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. What grows of itself in your harvest you shall not reap, and the grapes of your undressed vine you shall not gather. It shall be a year of solemn rest for the land. The Sabbath of the land shall be for food for you; for yourself, for your servant, for your maid, for your hired servant, and for your stranger, who lives as a foreigner with you. For your cattle also, and for the animals that are in your land, shall all the increase of it be for food.’ ”

(Leviticus 25:1-7)

The Shmita Year teaches us further that the rich should not lord it over the poor. Accordingly, the Torah ordained that all should be equal during the seventh year, both the rich and the needy having access to the gardens and fields to eat their fill. . . Yet another reason [for Shmita]: in order that they should not always be preoccupied with working the soil to provide for their material needs. For in this one year, they would be completely free. The liberation from the yoke of work would give them the opportunity for studying Torah and wisdom. Those who are not students will be occupied with crafts and building and supplying these needs in The Land of Israel. Those endowed with special skills will invent new methods in this free time for the benefit of the world.

(Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Kalischer, *Moral Treatment of the Poor & Opportunities for Self-Actualization*)