



Let the Land Rest: Lessons from Shemita, the Sabbatical Sabbatical Year

By Rabbi Noam Yehuda Sendor

Shemita, the Sabbatical Year, comprises a number of the 613 commandments (mitzvot) of the Torah.¹ Like the commandment to rest every seven days on Shabbat, Shemita not only provides physical benefits but also enables humanity to develop spiritually and experience the unity of Creation. It also seems designed to shift how we relate the Earth.

With today's environmental challenges, these mitzvot may be more relevant and needed today than at any time in Jewish and world history.

While the laws of Shemita for Jews living in Israel are quite numerous and complex, there are four main commandments:

- The first commandment is that the land should rest, as the Torah says, “and the land shall rest a Sabbath to G-d.”² This occurs by people refraining from planting, pruning, plowing, harvesting or engaging in any other form of working the land.
- The second commandment of Shemita is that all seventh-year produce is hefker—ownerless and free.
- The third commandment is for Jews to cancel outstanding debt obligations between each other.
- The fourth commandment is to sanctify all seventh-year produce by handling it respectfully, consuming it completely, and not doing any business with it.

Shemita helps us realize that the Earth is not merely some resource to be used and abused. If we want to live on the land, it is our responsibility to let it rest. Shemita can also help us reflect on the sanctity in our food, and help us connect with the Source of all things.

When we abstain from working the land during the Shemita year and relinquish the ownership of its produce, we acknowledge that we do not own the land.³ This is a crucial insight for our modern world. It provides us with the opportunity to free ourselves from the constant pursuit of material goods and wealth -- and the idolatrous illusion that they signify our value and the value of our existence.⁴

The great commentator and philosopher Maimonides (Spain, 1135-1204) wrote that some of the laws of the Sabbatical Year “are meant to make the earth more fertile and stronger through letting it lie fallow.”⁵ The Torah warns us that if we fail to keep the mitzvah of Shemita, “Then the land shall enjoy her Sabbaths”⁶-- when we

¹ According to the counting of R' Aharon Halevi of Barcelona in *Sefer Hachinuch*, five of the commandments (#326-330) in regard to Shemita include not working the land or trees, not cutting aftergrowth of crops, not gathering fruit in a normal manner, and counting seven Shemita cycles. Other commandments relate to forgiving debts.

² Leviticus 25:2

³ Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin 39a

⁴ Abarbanel, Rabbi Don Yitzchak, *Nachalat Avot*, 5:11

⁵ *The Guide of the Perplexed*, III:39, p. 553, translation by Shlomo Pines, 1963

⁶ Leviticus 26:34

are expelled from it and it lies barren.

The way that we treat the land today reflects that humanity has yet to learn the lessons of Shemita. For example, the “slash and burn” method of clearing land for agriculture, employed globally by both small and large-scale cattle farmers, involves cutting the vegetation of a plot of land and allowing it to dry, at which point it is burned. The cleared forest lands are then cultivated for a few seasons until yields decline on the fragile, nutrient-poor soil, used for cattle pasture until it is further degraded, and then abandoned.

This method of agriculture is a significant driver of tropical deforestation. The Global Forest Resources Assessment 2005 of the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) reports that deforestation “continues at an alarmingly high rate – about 13 million hectares (or 32 million acres) per year.”⁷ As the UN FAO notes, “Deforestation causes incalculable environmental damage, releasing billions of tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere and driving thousands of species of life to extinction each year.”⁸

When we benefit from this degradation of the land by consuming the meat, produce, or timber that comes from it, we are contributing to its long term destruction as the world’s greatest source of biodiversity and stabilizer of the global climate. While we are not directly transgressing the laws of Shemita, we are demonstrating that we have not learned its lessons.

Shemita teaches us about the needs of the land, our responsibilities to the earth and other people, and the holiness in the world. Today’s society is in great need of this wisdom, not just to take care of the land itself but to preserve it for the future of human beings. How can we bring this wisdom into our lives and into the world? Here are some ideas.

First, keep track of the Shemita year so that you can be aware of the cycles of the land. The next Shemita year will begin on Rosh Hashanah 5775 (September 2014). Although you are likely not a farmer in Israel, contemplate the significance of a Sabbatical year occurring, and what that can mean to you personally. Second, Shemita is a cycle which includes both “working and farming” years and the “rest years.” So, the values of Shemita also can enrich our thinking every day, not just during the Shemita year.

Considering the significant impacts that our society is having on the land today, there is much that we can do to rectify this with values that reflect a deeper and more meaningful relationship with the land. For example, we might consider eating more healthy, organic and local food, in order to connect ourselves to the land where we live.

Shemita represents an ideal - a vision that can move us to treat the world around us, and its fruits, with the sanctity they deserve. May the Jewish people manifest the wisdom of Shemita and share it with the world.

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⁷ The report is described as “the most comprehensive assessment to date of forest resources, their uses and value, covering 229 countries and territories between 1990 and 2005.” Online at <ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/008/A0400E/A0400E00.pdf>

⁸ “Cattle Ranching and Deforestation,” Livestock Policy Brief #3, UN Food and Agriculture Organization, 2006 online at <ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/010/a0262e/a0262e00.pdf>