



Shmita: The Sabbatical Year

“And six years you shall sow your land, and shall gather in its fruits. But the seventh year you shall release it and abandon it; that the poor of your people may eat...” (Exodus 23:10-11)

וְשֵׁשׁ שָׁנִים תִּזְרַע אֶת אֶרְצְךָ וְאַסַּפְתָּ אֶת תְּבוּאָתָהּ :
וְהַשְּׁבִיעִת תִּשְׁמַטְנָהּ וְנִטְשָׁתָהּ וְאָכְלוּ אֲבִינֵי עַמְךָ...

Rosh Hashanah 2014 (1st of Tishrei 5775) begins a shmita year. The Hebrew word *shmita* (shmee-ta) means “release.” According to tradition, every seven years Jews who live in Israel allow their croplands to lie fallow and forgive all debts (Deuteronomy 15:1-2). Shmita is a “Sabbath to the Lord” (Leviticus 25:1-7); just as people rest on Shabbat, the land rests in a shmita year. Shmita law requires farmers to refrain from cultivating their lands, vineyards, and olive groves. Food that grows on the land is deemed ownerless. Poor and rich alike may eat the food; owners may not hoard food or profit from it. Many observant Jews consider foods that grow during this year as holy, and take care not to waste any of it.



Shmita Concepts

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, one of the first chief rabbis of the State of Israel, taught that “what Shabbat achieves regarding the individual, the shmita achieves with regard to the nation as a whole.” In other words, shmita is a time of **rest and rejuvenation** – yet how does an entire nation revitalize itself? Nineteenth-century rabbi Zvi Hirsch Kalischer suggested that the **release from toiling** in the field for a year gave everyone the opportunity to **study Torah** or focus on artistic endeavors that would **benefit the world**. He believed that an important component of shmita was to **equalize the status** of the rich and poor. Rashi, the revered 11th-century Torah scholar, said that shmita helps remind us that **we do not own the land**, but lease it from God.

A Modern Outside-of-Israel Perspective

Shmita technically applies only to Israel, so how do we make this relevant to us? Many organizations are taking the opportunity to consider how the concepts of shmita can affect us in modern times, building on the concepts of rejuvenation, release, learning, and caring for the world. Environmentalists hope to stimulate a move toward sustainability, and social activists want to promote common justice. **Hazon** (www.hazon.org), an organization dedicated to healthier and more sustainable communities in the Jewish world and beyond, urges us to reimagine society...



How Might this Apply to Educators?

Before you think about how you will teach shmita to your students, consider how you will allow these ideas to affect you as a teacher. Focus on the concepts of release and reimagining.

- What can you release or let go of in your school, classroom, or teaching practice?
 - Clear out some clutter
 - Let go of a routine
 - Discard an old lesson that has become stale
 - Reimagine how you build community within your school/classroom
 - Re-envision the ways in which you engage families

Shmita in the Classroom

- Ask children to think about how they rest, how members of their family rest, and even how their toys might rest.
 - Discuss what it means to rest on Shabbat.
- Explain that during a shmita year even the land rests; we pay extra attention to taking care of the Earth
 - Farms and farmers have a chance to rest, too.
 - Discuss how some plants and trees grow fruit without having to re-plant seeds each year. (For older children and garden lovers)
 - Ask children to imagine what farmers could do with extra time.
- You might add that this is also a time to think about fairness and kindness.
 - What should we do when some people don't have enough food to eat?
 - How do we treat people so everyone feels like equally important members of our community?



Activities

- Develop systems for sustained giving and living
 - Start an annual rummage sale
 - Prepare “homeless helper” kits (food, toothpaste, soap, etc.) to distribute to those who are begging for food.



- Invite families to a hunger banquet. A hunger banquet is a learning tool that helps children understand inequalities in worldwide food distribution. <http://preview.tinyurl.com/oxfambanquet> (For older children)
- Repurpose scraps such as bottle caps (see picture, left), soap ends (<http://tinyurl.com/usedsoap>), or crayon pieces (<http://www.pinterest.com/pjgts/recycled-crafts/>)
- Brainstorm how to use every bit of your apple, such as making vinegar or potpourri. (<http://planetforward.ca/blog/10-creative-ways-to-use-apple-peels/>)



Outdoor Learning



➤ Visit a farm

- Participate in a gleaning project – pick remaining food from a harvested field and donate your gleanings to a food bank

<http://www.rachelstablespringfield.org/gleaning.html>

- Learn about crop rotation
Do some gardening

- Dig in the dirt and study worms; make a chart of all of the insects you discover on a piece of land

- Try composting – experiment with plants grown in composted vs. unenhanced soil (<http://www.michigan.gov/kids/0,4600,7-247-49067-62499--,00.html>)

Music to play:

Elana Jagoda's musical CD *Uri Uri*:

- “What Are You Thankful for Today?”
- “Good Job God”

Joanie Leeds' *Family Tree*

- “I Wanna Be Green”
- “Butterfly”

Lisa Litman (<http://www.pinterest.com/pjgts/videos-about-jewish-books-and-values/>)

- “Look at Me, I'm a Tree”
- “Now's the Time to Rescue the Environment”

