



Food for Jewish Thought

Exploring the Jewish Sources Underlying ICJW's Policy Priorities

The Shmitta Year: Our Environmental and Social Action “Reset Button”

The Jewish Approach to Sustainable Development and Social Justice

Rosh Hashanah 2014 marks the start of the Jewish New Year 5775 which is a Shmitta year.

What does Shmitta mean?

The Hebrew word means to stop, to abort, to release, and to surrender.

What is a Shmitta Year?

Shmitta is the sabbatical year. Just as the six days of creation are followed by the seventh day of Shabbat, so we count 7 years. After six years of investment, development, working and planting, the seventh year is designated as a year of rest. During this year we cease working the land and let it rest so that it can replenish and renew itself. This is the beginning and the essence of the concept of sustainability, as set out in the Torah.

However, this concept does not only apply to agricultural land. Most importantly to our modern society, it also applies to the human-social environment. We also need to regenerate and rebalance our socio-economic relationships in order to foster greater equality, reduce the wealth gaps, and create new economic opportunities for every person and family in our society.

What Does the Torah Say?

1. And the Lord spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying, 2. Speak to the children of Israel and you shall say to them: When you come to the land that I am giving you, the land shall rest a Sabbath to the Lord. 3. You may sow your field for six years, and for six years you may prune your vineyard, and gather in its produce, 4. But in the seventh year, the land shall have a complete rest a Sabbath to the Lord; you shall not sow your field, nor shall you prune your vineyard. 5. You shall not reap the after-growth of your harvest, and you shall not pick the grapes you had set aside [for yourself], [for] it shall be a year of rest for the land. 6. And [the produce of] the Sabbath of the land shall be yours to eat for you, for your male and female slaves, and for your hired worker and resident who live with you, 7. And all of its produce may be eaten [also] by your domestic animals and by the beasts that are in your land. (Leviticus 25: 1-7)



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What Does Shmitta involve?

The main principle of Shmitta year as defined in the Torah is to surrender control and accept responsibility.

"Not only must the owner of the property rest the land which he is not permitted to process, but everyone, including the poor and the stranger, slaves and women, is invited to invade his field and vineyard ... and do as they please!"

(Avraham Burg, "Parshat HaShavua In the Language of Man", p. 279)

The sabbatical year was designed to reduce economic disparities and encourage social equality.

The most important aspect of Shmitta is the social responsibility and mutual responsibility of the members of society to themselves and to each other, regardless of their economic status. This responsibility is not only relevant to other members of society but also applies as the overall responsibility of all human beings to all the creatures in the world, who are also entitled to their rest, and to the earth itself which, as we have said, also needs its rest and renewal. This responsibility is, according to the Jewish approach, the physical responsibility of each person located in the land of Israel, but it is also a universal idea that is not dependent on location.

This principle of social responsibility is also a way to increase equality, because if each person behaves responsibly then every member of society becomes equally responsible. Therefore, not only the rich members of society and the land-owners are responsible for helping poorer members of society, but the poor are also must take responsibility for not being ashamed of their situation and for recognizing their ability to influence and their opportunity to work to improve their economic and social situation, in order to contribute to themselves, their environment and their society. This socio-economic aspect of the Shmitta year is the Jewish approach to social sustainability - maintaining human society as a single organic entity that is built on mutual responsibility.

What Does Shmitta Mean Today?

Many religious and spiritual leaders have applied themselves to this question.

[Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein](#) wrote in an article for the book "Judaism in Today's Society":

"Halacha prefers restraint. It prefers constraint of the self over expansiveness ... It is willing to sacrifice the qualities of drive and vigor required by society for its stability, in order to achieve peace of mind and rest for the body in exchange for a certain moderation of the "quantity" of life, particularly in the economic and technological arenas."



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[Rabbi Dr. Avraham Yehoshua Heschel](#) writes that there are three perspectives from which mankind can relate to the world: technical engagement, aesthetic engagement and religious engagement. Technological man utilizes the resources of nature while aesthetic man enjoys nature and stands in awe of its powers. In both cases man stands at the center and nature exists to serve him. However, there is a Chassidic idea that man should carry two imaginary pieces of paper in his pockets. On one is written "the world was created for me" and on the other "I am just dust and ashes". Western man has lost that balance, and no longer carries the second piece of paper. He is locked inside himself.

According to Heschel the Jewish approach is to show mankind that he can improve himself and show empathy for others. The Shmitta year is one of the central mechanisms which recalibrates and restores the relationship between mankind and nature, man and his fellow man, and between the individual and society.

Professors Avi Sagi and Yedidya Stern wrote in their article "Shmitta in the Bible":

"The Bible does not require the redistribution of wealth every seven years ... Shmitta is a balancing factor. Six years you shall work and accumulate, but take advantage of the seventh year to rest, redistribute and enjoy."

These understandings and interpretations of the Shmitta year about to start are presented as the Jewish approach to environmental sustainability and socio-economic justice. They can help us as the women of ICJW to actualize our commitment to Tikkun Olam - "repairing the world" – which is the mission of our organization since its foundation.

With blessings for a Happy and Healthy New Year blessed with celebrations, and a year of friendship, peace and quiet, and a year of solidarity with our environment and with our society.

"May there be peace within your walls and prosperity in your palaces."

(Psalms 122:7)

Prepared by Rina Cohen, Co-Chair of the ICJW Education Committee

Further Reading & Action Ideas:

[Let The Land Rest – Podcast by Jewcology.org](#)

[Hazon Shmitta Project Network – Ideas for Your Community](#)