



This month's study with
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*At the end of
every seven
years thou shalt
make a release.*

—Deuteronomy 15:1, KJV



Shmita

Imagine a world where once every seven years, society took a collective breather. No one would have to work, but all our needs would be met. Rich and poor alike would have access to all the food that they would need. No one would make a profit, and no one would lose money, but all debts would be forgiven. The year would be dedicated more to spiritual pursuits and less to physical aspirations. We would focus more on our faith in God and less on faith in our own talents. We would focus more on contribution and less on consumption. It would be a year of release – of letting go of everything and letting God into everything.

Welcome to the world of *shmita*. While the observance of this biblical law is only applicable in the land of Israel today, its spirit is something that can, and should, permeate everywhere.

The basic laws of *shmita*, which are outlined in several places in the Bible, demand that we cease from cultivating the land, that we release all debt, and that we relinquish ownership of anything that grows in our fields. According to the biblical law, all produce in the country of Israel becomes “ownerless” as soon as the *shmita* year begins, rendering it free for the taking by anyone.

The key to understanding the spirit of *shmita* is to understand the weekly

Sabbath. In fact, the year of *shmita* is also referred to as “a Sabbath to the LORD” (Leviticus 25:4). Just as we work for six days and rest on the seventh, we work the land for six years and rest on the seventh. The purpose of the Sabbath is to remember that God is the true Creator. So, too, the year of *shmita* reminds us that God is the Creator and Owner of all. The weekly Sabbath ensures that we have time to focus on God, our families, and our faith, and the year of *shmita* gives us time to focus on all three of those fundamental values – especially on faith.

Faith is the primary value of the *shmita* year. The Bible addresses the obvious question: If we don’t work the land, then what will we eat? God promises that those who trust Him and observe the laws of *shmita* will benefit from extreme abundance – so much so that what grows in the sixth year will be enough not just for the seventh year, but until the ninth year when the new crops come in. Those who rely on faith in this year of *shmita* will be richly rewarded.

Below we will look more deeply into the different aspects of observing *shmita* today, as well as offer several suggestions on how you can incorporate these principles into your own “Sabbatical year.”

Rabbi Eckstein



The Social Aspect

“For six years you are to sow your fields and harvest the crops, but during the seventh year let the land lie unplowed and unused. Then the poor among your people may get food from it, and the wild animals may eat what is left. Do the same with your vineyard and your olive grove.”—Exodus 23:10–11

From a social perspective, *shmita* is the great equalizer. The laws strive to achieve two separate goals simultaneously: to lift up the poor, and to humble those who are wealthier.

In Exodus 23:11 we read, “. . . during the seventh year let the land lie unplowed and unused. Then the poor among your people may get food from it.” Notice that there are two directives in this verse. The first is that the land cannot be worked. This relieves the landowner from feelings of ownership and releases him from the pitfall mentioned in Deuteronomy 8:17: “You may say to yourself, ‘My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.’” In the year of *shmita*, anything that

grows is God’s doing, not ours. It reminds the landowner that the land and everything in it belongs to God. While we may be entrusted with God’s abundance, ultimately, everything belongs to Him and it is our duty to share what we are given.

The second part of the verse is more straightforward. It simply states that the poor are permitted to eat whatever grows in the land of Israel for the entire year. This is more than just a handout to the hungry. Because the landowner hasn’t done anything to produce the food of the land, the poor person may collect with dignity knowing that he is being fed not by the hand of man, but straight from the hand of God.

In addition, another rule of *shmita*

is that all debts in Israel must be cancelled: “At the end of every seven years you must cancel debts . . . They shall not require payment from anyone among their own people, because the LORD’s time for canceling debts has been proclaimed” (Deuteronomy 15:12). Once again, the poor are uplifted as they get a “second chance” financially. The creditor, on the other hand, learns that it was never his money to begin with. He was simply doing the bidding of the Lord, and now God sees fit to give the poor man another chance.

Taken all together, these laws of *shmita* encourage us to remember that we are all equal in the eyes of God and equally deserving of His provisions, His mercy, and His grace.



The Observance of *Shmita* in Israel Today

Today, the land of Israel is in transition. We have experienced the fulfillment of many biblical prophecies, but Israel is yet to become the fully *Torah*-centered country that God intended. Likewise, the observance of *shmita* is also in a transitional phase. On one hand,

there is more awareness and observance of these laws than there has been in the past 2,000 years. On the other hand, due to many factors, including modern-day living and the diverse demographics within the state of Israel, we still have a long way to go until *shmita* is observed fully as described in the *Torah*.

For those who observe the laws, there are several main prohibitions: We are not allowed to plant anything new or prune any plants or trees in order to stimulate growth. Harvesting and gathering produce for the sake of selling and making a profit is also prohibited. Other activities that stimulate growth, such as fertilization, weeding, and spraying pesticides are also not allowed, except in extreme cases.

So what do *shmita*-observant Israelis eat during the year?

There are several options. The first is to eat produce that grows naturally during the *shmita* year and that is gathered according to specific laws governing how produce may be acquired. This produce is considered holy and must be treated accordingly. Many homes have a special bin designated for the remnants of this holy produce. Often, the words *Kedushat Shivi’it*, “Holiness of the Seventh,” is written on it. When the bin is full, the contents are disposed of in a dignified manner.

Other options for attaining produce during *shmita* include purchasing “year six” produce when it is still fresh, produce from non-Jewish land owners, or produce grown outside the land of Israel. In addition, with modern technology, some farmers are able to grow produce in greenhouses – leaving the land itself completely untouched.

Moreover, many Israelis honor the year of *shmita* by placing renewed focus on God and spirituality, even if it still means working their usual jobs. Others make a point to perform more community service and give extra charity. Still, for others, the year is a time to re-connect to the land of Israel itself. Overall, *shmita* is making its way back into Jewish life in a way not seen since biblical times.



The Spiritual Aspect

“But in the seventh year the land is to have a year of sabbath rest, a sabbath to the LORD. Do not sow your fields or prune your vineyards.”—Leviticus 25:4

We live in a world that functions according to cycles. The daily cycle is dictated by periods of light and darkness, the monthly cycle regulated by the waxing and waning of the moon, and the yearly cycle follows the orbit of the sun. However, the world also follows the weekly cycle which has no basis in nature whatsoever. The only reason for the seven-day cycle is because God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh.

The cycle of seven, which also dictates our *shmita* cycle, is intrinsically spiritual. It is a pattern that was created by God and affirms His mastery over all creation. Simply by observing this pattern, whether it be weekly or on a septennial basis, we

affirm that we live our lives according to a spiritual paradigm, not just according to physical patterns.

The seventh year has much in common with the seventh day of every week. In fact, in multiple places in the Bible the word “Sabbath” is used in connection to the year of *shmita*, just as it is to our weekly rest. In the words of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the first chief rabbi of Israel in the early 1900s, “The same effect that *Shabbat* has on the individual, the *shmita* year has on the nation as a whole . . . the Divine light within it reveals itself in its full glory, light that is not extinguished by mundane social life . . . with all its ire and competition.” The *shmita* year is “*a sabbath to the LORD*,” a time when we are free from the yoke of physical

labor and mundane living so that we are able to concentrate our time and energy on spiritual endeavors – both individually and collectively.

Another paramount aspect of the *shmita* year is strengthening our faith in God. As the Bible addresses, there is a great concern for what the people will eat if they don’t work the land. The solution is faith in God – that He is the ultimate provider whether we work the land or not. The courage to observe the laws of *shmita* requires an immense amount of faith, so exercising our faith is a central component during the year of *shmita*. Additionally, this most sacred year is a time for studying God’s Word, contributing to God’s purposes, and re-evaluating the spiritual direction of our lives.

think about it...

1. How has your life changed in the last seven years?
2. What would you like your life to look like seven years from now?
3. What changes can you make this year to achieve those goals?
4. Where in your life can you let go of worry and strengthen your faith? What is one step you can take right now to do that?
5. How can you contribute this year? To your community? To your family? To your workplace?
6. What steps can we take to create more equality in society? What could you do personally?
7. What are some practical ways we as a society can help the poor and needy? What can you do personally?



The Agricultural Aspect

“Do not reap what grows of itself or harvest the grapes of your untended vines. The land is to have a year of rest.” — Leviticus 25:5

When God first created man, there was a state of harmony between God, man, and the earth. Adam was placed in Eden and charged with the duty *“to work it and take care of it”* (Genesis 2:15). However, when Adam and Eve ate the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge – which had been prohibited by God – that harmony and unity were shattered. No longer would humanity enjoy the perfect balance, peace, and tranquility that briefly enveloped the world.

The laws of *shmita* were intended in part to restore that lost equilibrium. As we refocus our relationship with our Creator, we also revisit our relationship with the

earth. We take a break from working the land and focus on caring for the land. According to Maimonides – a medieval rabbi and scholar – the purpose of *shmita* is to make the earth more fertile and stronger by letting it lie fallow. We become keenly aware that the earth is not ours to use and abuse; rather it is God’s creation that we are to steward. To ignore the needs of the land is to sever the bond that should unite man, *Adam*, with the earth, *Adama*.

It’s not surprising, then, that God warns the children of Israel that if they fail to obey His laws and commandments, they will be exiled from the land: *“All the time that it lies desolate, the land will have the rest it*

did not have during the sabbaths you lived in it” (Leviticus 26:35). If we failed to live up to our responsibility to take care of the land by letting it rest once every seven years, then the privilege of living in the land would be taken away from us. God would make sure that the land got its rest whether we agreed to it or not.

By letting the land rest, we honor God and express our gratitude for all that He provides. By the end of the *shmita* year, we can potentially restore the harmonious relationship that existed at the beginning of time, and that is destined to be reinstated once more.

apply it... 7 Practical Steps to Capture the Spirit of *Shmita*

- 1. Give yourself a break.** Take some time off to rest and re-evaluate your life.
- 2. Donate time.** Set aside an extra hour a week for acts of kindness and community service.
- 3. Contribute financially.** This is the year for giving more than other years. Pick a favorite cause or charity and support it. As you give, give with faith.
- 4. Study God’s Word.** Set aside a time every week to study the Bible and meditate on God’s Word.
- 5. Pray powerfully.** As a year of faith, prayer is particularly relevant this year. Pray harder, deeper, and with more faith.
- 6. Explore God’s creation.** This is a year that honors nature. By spending time outdoors we cultivate our gratitude for the land and connect with God, the Creator of all land.
- 7. Be a good steward.** Be aware of the effects of waste and pollution and do your part to keep our God-given world healthy and clean.