

SHMITTAH – Rosh Hashanah, Day One, 5774 (2013)

Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation, Rabbi Fred Scherlinder Dobb

(2021 NOTE)

Just as the covid-19 pandemic begins (in wealthy nations) to abate, we welcome the return of the sabbatical year – a.k.a. **shmita**, meaning “radical release.”

Across the last shmita cycle (six to eight years ago), this series of Adat Shalom sermons sought to suffuse **shmita-consciousness** within our community (see examples elsewhere and more great resources at www.hazon.org/shmita). Today, shmita’s themes – like preparing for and being resilient through periodic disruptions to our normal ways of being! – are newly **resonant**, following the coronavirus’ death and dislocation.

Stepping into the new shmita year of 5782, perhaps these messages from last time can serve as a primer -- and inspire us to make maximal modern meaning from this returning religious rite. See the full series at <https://adatshalom.net/learn/rabbi-freds-teachings/shmita/>.

Blessings, all...

What if, one year from today, the spinning cogs of commerce came screeching to a halt? That entire year, Fall 2014 to Fall 2015, plows and combines would be locked in the shed. No commercial agriculture. No high fructose corn syrup; no corn. No trucks or trains to carry produce: teamsters and track workers are off. No Giant, or Trader Joe’s. No NPR, Starbucks, Washington Post; no Politics & Prose! All closed. Imagine it: Zero business. Some may still do what they love, but *everyone’s off* the job: social workers and therapists and lawyers (94% of the room ;-), custodians and carpenters, bureaucrats and bell-boys, actuaries and artists. Everyone. Imagine.

Really: starting this time, *next* year. By the traditional count *today* starts year six, of our seven-year sabbatical cycle – the last productive year of the cycle. We have only ‘til next Rosh Hashanah to prepare ourselves, before agriculture and our whole known economy hibernate for twelve long months.

IT’S CRAZY – How unworkable, right?! How insane, this mitzvah of “*shmittah*”, a year of release! It’s hard to imagine that folks really did *shmitah* – also known as *shvi’it* / ‘the seventh’, or famously *shabbaton* / sabbatical.

Were the biblical laws, and the profound pause they decree, *ever* consistently followed? Over the millennia, legal fictions sidestepped the injunction.ⁱ Just pieces of *shmitah* were likely observed – and not too strictly, or by just a few. Could it work in *today’s* crowded cities and ‘burbs? Could we go back to hunter-gatherer, next year? Hardly.

And, shmittah law applies only to agriculture (though that was most folks, in bible days). It only applies to Jews; and only *in* Israel; and maybe just in Temple times (it fell 2000 years ago).

So if Shmitta is untenable, *and* irrelevant, WHY talk about it?

No bit of Torah is wasted; there's something to learn from every word.

But more, this is a particularly rich vein of Torah to tap – not to follow literally, but to mine for values, which might just make a difference for us today. Shmittah's core values range from economic justice, to personal enrichment. It teaches us social, ecological, communal and spiritual resilience. It's worth a look.

This summer Nigel Savage, founder of Hazon, wrote: “here is this gift from Jewish tradition that invites us to think about...our relationship to land and food, inequity, debt, and rest, to name just a few... *now* is the time to start a conversation about shmita. Let's put the shmita year – and the shmita cycle – back into the frame of Jewish life.”ⁱⁱ

Yes, at Hazon, Israel's Heschel Center, the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (in which I'm involved) – Jews around the world are talking up shmittah as a resource, a model, a beacon pointing us toward not what to do exactly, but what should *matter*. I'm thrilled to bring Adat Shalom into that global conversation.

So: WHAT'S SHMITTAH?! As we learn its basis, think with Sarah Chandler, of Adamah: “Imagine the Jewish community digging into these ancient texts about shmitta and renewing them for modern times. Imagine disaffected Jews igniting change through community organizing inspired by Torah.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Exodus (23:10-11):^{iv} “Six years you'll sow your land and gather its produce. But in the seventh year, תַּשְׁמִטָּה, ‘shmittah it’, release and abandon [the land]; the poor of your people shall eat, and what they leave, the beasts of the field shall eat; [so with...] your vineyard [and] olive tree[s].”

Leviticus (25:1-7) adds שְׁבַת הָאָרֶץ שבת ליקוק, the *land* observes a holy Sabbath. This sabbatical year *is* לֵארוֹץ *for* the land. Don't plant, prune, or reap. What grows anyway is for you, your male and female servants, your hired worker, the immigrants by you; and even *for* your, and wild, animals.

Deuteronomy (15) opens, “*ta'aseh shmitta*”, make shmitta, release! – which here means ‘release *all debts*.’ Even slaves go free in year seven. Open your hand to the needy among you; lend them what they need, even though shmitta's coming. “Give, surely give, to them... open, yes open your hand to your brother, to your poor, to your needy, who are in your land.”

And (Deut. 31) we learn, on the seventh year: gather everyone together for a big bash, and some serious Torah study.

So: We forgive debts. We deal with each other directly, intensely, but never through commerce.

We live *off* the land, and *with* it, not bending it to our will. What grows naturally is holy; it feeds us; but it's not for profit.

And in later halacha, we can't hoard. Once a food is no longer available in the field, we must open our 'private' stores, to all.

We share, and release. We sustain, and renew. **That's shmitta.**

Dr. Jeremy Benstein, of Israel's Heschel Sustainability Center – spoke at Adat Shalom; 50 stories above Tel Aviv, met with last year's Israel trippers – a key thinker in this field. Jeremy calls the concept of Shmittah “revolutionary,” in its “*radical egalitarian thrust*.”^v Whether Shemittah ever was, or could be, fully implemented, he deems it Torah's “political statement of social and environmental import, raising deep questions about the nature of a healthy and sustainable life -- for individuals, society, and the land.”

Shmittah, in this light, is ripe to re-examine and **RECONSTRUCT**. Let's! Try on “shmittah-consciousness.”

Traditional shmittah applied just to farmers – most of the workforce, back then – our reconstructed Shmitta, too, should cover most workers. We *can* do it, university-style – they don't close one year; they rotate who gets sabbatical, when.

I want Politics & Prose open on my shmittah! Or, if it's about people-to-people non-commercial ties, maybe the library. But like all people, sales clerks and librarians deserve shmittah too. Couldn't we pay 14% (1/7th) more – or consume 14% less – so *everyone* can take 1 in 7 seven years off?

Think big. If we *were* bound for a year of forced redistribution and rest: How else might we non-farmers stop working our “land”? What “fields” do we, too often, seek to bend to our will?

I like Rabbi Arthur Waskow's idea for a modern shmitta: one year of ethical reflection, for every six years of rushing new products to market. From farming (with toxic pesticides) to pharma (think thalidomide, DES); from nanotech to nuclear power: our ability to put out new stuff, outstrips our wisdom – and, our knowledge of their *long*-term implications. That's a big problem, one that shmita could solve.^{vi}

What if: every seventh year, professionals just wrap up loose ends of work projects, and dedicate most talent and time to the greater good? If creative folks could pursue inspiration, rather than dollars?

Food: besides planting lots of fruit trees (as we should!), how might we prepare, to eat? We'd build up reserves, of food and other resources – again, by consuming less. We'd work harder so no one goes to bed hungry in six years, much less on the seventh. And we should! After all, this mitzvah teaches us to value, to privilege, the least among us.

Shmittah equalizes rich and poor, native and immigrant, nature and humanity. (See why I love it?!)

Finally, to prepare for a real shmittah, we'd have to examine our current networks—and those in place (or not) for others. Who would we, or those less-resourced or less-connected, turn to in times of need?

On your handout (bottom): six key VALUES to shore up, to live “as if” shmittah was coming.^{vii} (It is). Follow along:

Resilient Micro-Community: Are we ‘ready for anything’? Not even close! Readiness begins at home, in neighborhoods, in micro-communities. It takes networks, connections. That’s Adat Shalom, or any strong fellowship, at its best: we’re more ready – for spiritual growth; for losing a loved one, adding to our family; any next step – when ensconced in a supportive micro-community.

The resilience and inter-connection we develop by planning some kind of shmittah, are just what we need to face the next Sandy, or 9/11, or Dust Bowl. Shmittah is hyper-local; mega-communal; and all about resilience.

Social & Economic Justice: Concern for the most vulnerable, a Jewish value throughout our tradition. *Pe’ah* is an everyday example – the corner of the field is for the poor, the stranger; ‘your’ land, ‘your’ produce, is not all yours. In year seven, it’s not ‘yours’, at all! Then there’s Shmittah’s debt release: *hit* that economic ‘reset’ button every so often! A compassionate capitalist society should take risks; we should try to get ahead; but we need *limits* on how deep a hole one unfortunate (or overconfident) person might dig themselves into.

Ecological Sustainability: Be good stewards of the land: let it lie fallow; rotate crops; fix nitrogen with alfalfa, not chemical fertilizer – and then understand (like Leviticus)^{viii} that the land itself is alive, it’s an actor, it has rights. So do the critters, millions of other species equally part of the divine plan, nature’s creative bounty. With shmittah-consciousness, we’ll finally give ‘em some respect. And as for eating local, healthy, in-season, *and* equitably: that’s ‘food justice’, its own exciting movement.^{ix}

Personal Sustainability: Like Shabbat, sabbatical is for each of us to rest, and renew *ourselves*. With ‘voluntary simplicity,’ living lightly is good for society and the Earth; but also good *for us*! And, for our communities. Freed from workaday commitments, on *shmittah* we focus on study, spirituality, and the interpersonal. This is not just the *nagging* Rosh Hashanah message of “Judaism demands that you treat others better”, it’s also the *supportive* Rosh Hashanah message, “take care of yourself! These Jewish resources, these riches, can help.” And, Shmittah aids emotional resilience – just like the 7th day each week, we need this 7th year to step back, take a deep breath, let all that’s swirling around settle in...^x Both the land, and we as people, *need* to recuperate, before going back to the grind of production and consumption!

Redistributive Justice: All agricultural lands become community commons – *it's not yours!* That we're actually all in this together, de-commercialization, may be shmita's top value for today. Take the wild & perennial plants (just what you need!). Take from the storehouses. There *is* enough. When the rich don't take extra, the poor don't go hungry. No less a socialist than Rashi thus explicates God's logic: "When I forbade you Shmittah produce, I didn't prohibit your eating or benefiting from it; it's just that you must not treat it as if you were its owner. Rather, everyone is deemed equal: you, your worker, and your resident alien."^{xi} (Love it!)

Last, **THINKING LONG-TERM:** So far we've seen carrots, incentives – doesn't a liberally-shmita-infused world sound great?! But there are sticks, too, dire warnings. Like Leviticus 26: whatever *shmittot* we deny the land, the land (God!) will make up, through our exile and desolation. Shmita's right; it's also necessary.

What IF, next year, commerce and agriculture ***did*** grind to a halt?

We're so smart; yet we never expect the unexpected – occasional drought, or social upheaval; war, or epidemic; gamma ray burst, or meteor; or earthquake, literal or figurative – these catch us unprepared, un-resilient, and become our downfall.

To sock away 14% of our income for retirement is wise; some can; fewer do. To sock away one-seventh of our *everything* – to live with less now, so we're more prepared for what comes next – it's the same principle, broadly applied; and a wise investment. (I'm not urging go-it-alone survivalism; shmitta's resilience is for everyone, the stranger, too: don't hoard; do fairly distribute, so we all have enough).

Now, this is *not* a sermon *about* climate change: but that's the now-expected, big, "unexpected" – which we're hardly fending off, and insufficiently preparing for. Just a percent or two of gross global product, nothing near one-seventh, could retool us for survival and sustainability. But unwilling to do even that, we treat this fast-spreading and potentially curable cancer with a mere topical – we rearrange deck chairs, and drift toward calamity. (Why I'm so keen on shmitta-consciousness? To help with our future resilience, *now* -- to defend Creation, and poor people, and our own grandchildren from the havoc we now wreak).

Related: we can't do a full, no-farming shmittah, with 7 billion mouths to feed. But shmittah-consciousness reminds us that 1 in 7 are hungry, *now*. With shmittah's scarcity and intentionality, how can we get everyone fed? How should we 'prepare'? It raises questions of equity, and sustainability: if today's 7 billion all consumed and emitted at a cushy Montgomery County level, the world would run out of everything, including resilience, pretty darn quick.

And related: Families who know they'll forage every seventh year, choose to stay small. With population,^{xii} or the economy, shmittah-consciousness questions growth. Much growth is great: but there should be a limit to how deep a hole we *collectively* dig

ourselves into. Can we grow in the right ways, but not push everything to the straining point?

Shmittah reminds us: we *can* live with less; and should. Says Mordecai Kaplan: “We are not denying the physical appetites their just place in life; we are simply recognizing the need of putting them in their place.”^{xiii} That’s shmitta – “*a stirring example*,” says Jeremy Benstein, “*of an entire society choosing to live at a significantly lower material standard of living for a year, in order to devote itself to more spiritual pursuits than the daily grind.*”

That **SPIRITUAL PURPOSE** is in הַקְהֵל – Devarim 31:10-12 – *hakeh*, assemble the people every 7 years – young and old, native and immigrant – to hear & discuss the Torah. That seventh-year conclave is all about spiritual growth; but so’s the whole shmitta cycle! Rav Kook taught that shmittah affects people spiritually, “by causing them to realize that they are not in control of everything.” Giving it up (to God, at least in metaphor), is the spiritual call of Shmittah.^{xiv}

TAKE THIS WITH YOU (a real ‘take-home’, your handout, lower-left, p. 1). Rabbinic student Adina Allen:^{xv} Observe one good *Shmita*, and the next six years are deepened.

“*Shmita* creates an island in time where we live according to our highest—and most difficult to achieve—values. Then, slowly,” we integrate them. We must *live* it: *then* “the frozen ground around our well-trodden ways, habitual patterns, and hardened ideas” [a New Year’s message for sure!] will thaw; “new ways of being can emerge”. With Adina, let’s ask “How else could we live?” – and how might we prepare ourselves for that journey?

Shmita-consciousness – *just like Rosh HaShanah!* – “ensures that we loosen the shackles of our own ideas of how life must be lived, and invite in the freshness and hope of new possibilities.”^{xvi} Be creative: the sky’s the limit for how the world might look, and for the good we can do, when we live in the light of shmita.^{xvii}

This Rosh HaShanah, I’m inviting us to think deeply about – and spend the next 55 weeks – developing resilience and creativity, moving toward sustainability and justice. And before next/sabbatical year, don’t ignore 55 glorious Sabbath *days*. Shabbat and shmitta are *both*, as Heschel said, “a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord.”^{xviii}

Some rabbis give multi-part High Holy sermons across these ten days. This is a multi-part High Holy sermon, across the years! In 5774: let’s think about ‘release’; get ready; plan our reconstructed shmittah, 13 new moons from now. Then, the year after, we’ll experience that ‘release’, deepen those commitments, live the holy cycle.^{xix}

Here’s the end of the beginning of our shmita conversation. We end this Rosh Hashanah’s message, not with an exhortation, but a question: how *can* we make shmitta *ours*?^{xx} And how can we *prepare* – by becoming more *resilient*, more *just*, more *sustainable*, in 5774, and beyond?

Shanah Tovah.

ⁱ Key legal fictions were Hillel's complex *Prozbul* in the first century BCE; and with the rise of early modern religious Zionism, the *heter mechira* or permissibility-through-nominal-sale-of-Jewish-owned-land-to-a-non-Jew -- begun in 1888 and defended by Rav Kook and others (though as a temporary measure), it's now the subject of intense debate in the Haredi world.

ⁱⁱ 7/18/13 email, entitled "only 434 shopping days 'til next *shmita* year" accessible via www.hazon.org. He continues: "How could or should we eat differently that year? What are our goals for our institution? What if we planted fruit trees together – between now and then – so that we could enjoy them in the next *shmita* cycle? What's our sabbatical policy, and what should it be? What if we framed the full *shmita* cycle – from Rosh Hashanah in 2015 to the day before Rosh Hashanah in 2022 – into Jewish life? What would that look like? What could it or should it look like?" Also referenced here, www.coejl.org, and more. Together these groups sponsor the *Shmita* Network: <http://www.hazon.org/resource/shmita-project/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sarah Chandler (former education director at JRF's West End Synagogue in NYC), <http://www.jta.org/2013/04/29/news-opinion/opinion/op-ed-how-shmitta-can-help-us-kick-the-consumerist-habit>.

^{iv} These original sources, and many more on the development of *shmitta*, abound on the web; for instance, [http://www.canfeinesharim.org/uploadedFiles/site/Torah Study/Core Topics/Shemita Core Teaching/ShemitaSourceSheet.pdf](http://www.canfeinesharim.org/uploadedFiles/site/Torah%20Study/Core%20Topics/Shemita%20Core%20Teaching/ShemitaSourceSheet.pdf).

^v Dr. Jeremy Benstein, "Stop the Machine! The Sabbatical Year Principle"; in *The Jerusalem Report*, 5/21/01, p. 35. See also his indispensable *The Way Into Judaism and the Environment* (2006) – and his organization, <http://www.heschel.org.il/en>.

^{vi} This is inspired by Jeremy Benstein, who asks (this and all his quotes here are from his 2001 article, op. cit., written two *shmitta* cycles ago): what if we viewed *Shemittah* "as a *solution*, and then considered what problems it's meant to solve?"

^{vii} As appears on the 2013 High Holy Handout at Adat Shalom:

Shmita Core Values (Shemita, Shmitta, Shmittah... ! שְׁמִיטָה)

Resilient Micro-Community: Handling a year unlike other years (as could come any time), at a small scale

Social / Economic Justice: Special concern for the most vulnerable, i.e. through peah, debt release, etc.

Ecological Sustainability: Land stewardship; eating locally and seasonally; less waste; respect for all creatures

Personal Sustainability: We each rest & renew; benefits of 'voluntary simplicity' accrue; community strengthens

Redistributive Justice: All ag lands become community commons; wild & perennial produce is shared equally

Thinking Long-Term: Living the six non-*shmittah* years aware of 'scarcity' ahead, keeping 'growth' within reason

^{viii} Lev. 26:34-35: "I will unsheathe the sword after you. Your land will be desolate, and your cities will be laid waste. Then, the land will be appeased regarding its sabbaticals. During all the days that it remains desolate while you are in exile, the Land will rest, and make up for its lost sabbaticals."

^{ix} See Rabbi Sid Schwarz's 2012 Yom Kippur sermon, searchable via www.adatshalom.net; see also www.hazon.org.

^x I am indebted to Adat Shalom's Fran Zamore for the framing of this insight. Thanks also to the shul's President, Alissa Stern, for introducing me to the profound *shmitta*-thoughts of Adina Allen, cited below – and to Joelle Novey of www.gwiapl.org for helping me think through the entire topic; she and I both studied *shmita* at the Kayam Farm at the Pearlstone Retreat Center.

^{xi} Rashi (the key French 12th-century Torah interpreter) comments here on Leviticus 25:5. Jeremy Benstein expresses the economic implications of *Shmita* well in his 2001 article: "*as Shemittah hints, people are indeed like the land, in ways that are more obvious in the modern world: For both, when overwork leads to exhaustion, we engineer continued "vitality" not with true renewal, but with chemicals... The sabbatical principle, dictating periods of enforced restraint, rededication and redistribution, presents a compelling alternative to business as usual. Limiting the share that production and consumption have in our lives will create the space for higher pursuits. The economy must not be an engine that runs of itself, disengaged from social and environmental concerns, but a conscious expression of our spiritual and moral values. Wealth, both money and land, are not personal property to be accumulated, but divine abundance channeled through us to be shared for the benefit of all.*"

^{xii} To be clear: Biblical *shmittah*'s built-in-check on population, by eliminating agriculture one year in seven, is crazy (if applied today). But having *some* check on growth may prove vital for our resilience – even our survival.

^{xiii} Mordechai M. Kaplan, *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion*, 1937, p. 169.

^{xiv} Rav Avraham Yitzhak HaKohen Kook, the first Chief Ashkenazic Rabbi of Palestine (1919-1935), as cited by Rabbi Jonathan Neril, at <http://www.canfeinesharim.org/coreteaching14/>.

^{xv} From <http://adinaallen.com/shmita-and-the-power-of-imagination/>. The full adapted quote, as appears on the Adat Shalom handout: "It would be impossible to observe [any meaningful version of] *Shmita* one year out of every seven, and have the other six years remain unchanged. The ritual of *Shmita* creates an island in time where we live according to our highest—and most difficult to achieve—values. Then, slowly, over time, we practice integrating those values into the rest of our lives. It is only through the actual experience of what living this way feels like that the frozen ground around our well-trodden ways,

habitual patterns, and hardened ideas can begin to thaw, and new ways of being can emerge. Observance of the *Shmita* year allows for endless possibilities. When we are forced to ask the question, “How else could we live?”, the door to our imagination—and to our hearts—is opened... *Shmita* ensures that we loosen the shackles of our own ideas of how life *must* be lived, and invite in the freshness and hope of new possibilities.”

^{xvi} Adina Allen also waxes poetic on the Gandhian notion of being the change we want to see in the world: She writes that Shmittah “affords us an opportunity to live *as if*. By following ... *Shmita*, we experience what it would be like to live in a world where everyone’s needs were taken care of and no one went hungry, where we respected the land as a living being deserving of rest, where resources were shared equally, and where we yielded to a power beyond our own needs and desires.” (op. cit.).

^{xvii} See over 100 ways of taking Shmita seriously today, by Yigal Deutscher, at <http://7seedsproject.org/>. Along those lines, Adina Allen writes: “The possibilities of what might arise from the observance of *Shmita* are endless. What changes when those of diverse social and economic strata come into relationship with one another? How does our relationship to the land change when we exist alongside it rather than working it? What begins to fill our time when we are no longer occupied with our daily toil? What shifts for us emotionally and spiritually when we forgive a debt, or when our debt is forgiven?” (op. cit.).

^{xviii} Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 1951, p. 3.

^{xix} I commit now to this multi-year arc: we’ll reflect again on these themes next Rosh HaShanah, as shmitta begins; and *again* when it’s time for debt release and hake! (the Torah be-in!) at the *Rosh* of 2015. And in this coming year, look for text classes, divrei Torah, and more, on these resilient-just-sustainable themes of shmittah. Let the conversation continue!

^{xx} Hazon, a few days after Rosh Hashanah 5773, sent this, including resources for our continuing conversation:

Welcome to 5774: "Erev Shmita"

[\[Image\]](#) The start of this new year means we’re officially one year away from welcoming the next Shmita year, the seventh year of the biblical sabbatical cycle. Shmita, which literally means ‘release’ and is more widely known as the ‘sabbatical year’, was a yearlong period when land was left fallow, debts were forgiven, foods were distributed fairly, and a variety of other agricultural and economic adjustments were made to ensure the maintenance of an equitable, just and healthy society.

Comparing the Shabbat and Shmita cycles with one another, you can say we have just now entered the ‘Friday’ of this current Shmita cycle. There is a saying by the Rabbis, ‘Those who prepare before Shabbat will eat on Shabbat; those who did not prepare before Shabbat, what will they have to eat on Shabbat?’ (Avoda Zara 3a). We are getting close to a yearlong Shabbat. How will you prepare to welcome this period of release?

Join us over this year as we learn about the impacts that the Shmita tradition could have on Jewish communities and on ecological/economic sustainability. What might this Shmita year look like in today’s world -- for yourself, for your community, and your organization? Learn more about Shmita in this [collection of educational resources](#), and by joining our [Shmita Project network](#). [Learn More](#)