



BeHar/Bechukotai / 27 Iyyar, 5775 / May 16, 2015

**Is the biblical seventh year sabbatical still relevant today?**

**ובכל ארץ אֲחֻזְתְּכֶם גְּאֻלָּה תִתְּנוּ לָאָרֶץ**

*Lev 25:24 And all the land in your possession, you shall redeem that land*

For most of the Jewish people's existence, we have not been landowners. Yet, in part due to the narrative perpetuated by one of this week's assigned *parashiot*, the Jewish people have felt longing and entitlement to be in the Land of Israel. Well described rights and responsibilities of the Israelites as landowners are outlined in *BeHar* and these laws only apply to Jews living on the land itself.

The descriptions here take on human qualities. The land, like the people, require *shmitah* - a "rest" each seven years and furthermore a complete suspension from being "owned" by anyone every 50 years during the *yovel* – "jubilee."

In 1909-1910, Rav Avraham Kook published an in depth analysis of these laws of *shmitah* and *yovel*, in his book, *Shabbat Ha'Aretz* (recently translated to English). Kook reflects on the growing return to Eretz Yisrael by Jews in the Diaspora and what it means to be reconnected to the land both physically and spiritually. Inspired by early messianic or kabbalistic Zionism, there was a burst of return to Eretz Yisrael leading up to the year 5600 (1840), which represented the 600th year of the 6th millennia. Between 1808 and 1840, the Jewish population there more than doubled. The disciples of the Gaon of Vilna, alone numbered 500 who immigrated in 1813. Kook, who later became the first chief rabbi of Palestine in 1921, asserts, "The



**Additional References:**

[The Heter Mechira Debate](#)

[Rab Kook's Introduction to Shabbat Ha'Aretz](#), Bilingual Ed. Translation and Introduction by Julian Sinclair, 2014

[Shmita 5775 – Restoring the Soul of an Ancient Tradition](#)

reestablishment of the people in its holy land is still young, and what has been built until now is minuscule compared to the grandeur of our hope, which is mantled in godly power...so, too, the spiritual revival within us that is starting to raise up our precious country is small and weak.” He continues, “Our spirits are lifted by what we can fulfill of the *mitzvot* that are connected to the land, even though what we have is still only partial. Now is the time to revive those aspects of the Torah that speak precisely to the revival of the land: learning about the special *mitzvot* of the land is becoming more and more significant for all those of God’s people who are focusing on what is happening in the land to which G-d’s spirit has returned...”

History of observance of *shemita* in modern Israel has been a fascinating development. Trying to integrate the laws of Torah while in the land and yet protect the future of Jewish settlement in Eretz Yisrael was the goal. Rav Kook reminds early farmers about *heter m’khirah* to ensure that the young, poor landowners will be spared debilitating financial losses while remaining religiously observant. Land owning Jews could symbolically sell their property for the *shmitah* year thereby enabling them to profit from the yield of their land. And, consumers could then purchase local produce and not go without or be charged exorbitant prices for imported produce.

Controversy has and continues to surround this observance and its halachic loophole. Some religious communities still insist on purchasing produce from other countries, and anti-Kook leaders pressure their constituents to do so. Price gouging and shady business practices are prevalent. Leading into the past two *shmitah* years, the Israeli government has become heavily involved in attempts to protect both businesses and consumers. (See additional references below)

Some communities reflecting on the sentiments of Rav Kook have tried to establish ways to observe *shmitah* in a more holistic way. Allowing the earth to regenerate and lie fallow for the sake of natural progression, some Israelis have committed to cultivating and purchasing only hydroponically grown produce. Certain businesses and families have heightened their practices that embrace conservation and sustainability in observance *shmitah* years, turning off their printers and working only electronically, using non-disposables for all occasions and composting rather than disposing.

Whether people are observing *shmitah* in a traditionally *halachic* way or through a modern understanding of what it means to allow the land to “rest” these are all terrific

examples of how life in Israel moves forward as people negotiate ways to be contemporary Jews in a progressive land.

Balancing our pride of Israel and all the tremendous accomplishments of this young nation while offering a much warranted constructive appraisal of the areas where Israel falls short of its very own ideals is a challenge all modern Zionists can meet head on.

**Discussion Questions:**

1. In your opinion, by reminding the new farmers and landowners about *heter michirah*, did Rav Kook depart from being a traditional Jew?
  
2. Consider the consequences for each of us individually if we took the seventh year off to regenerate or recharge. How could we do that as a society? How would we pay for it? Could we expect compensation through taxes? Why can't we rest for an entire year? Should we have goals and expectations for the time off? How and by whom would it be administered?



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