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SHMITTAH: BALANCE WITH EARTH

“And six years you will sow your land, and gather in the land’s produce; but the seventh year you will release it from work and abandon it, that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave, the beast of the field shall eat. In like manner you will deal with your vineyard, and with your olive orchard.” (Exodus 23:10-11)

Shmittah, the sabbatical year, captivates our Jewish imagination unlike any other Torah tradition. What must it have been like for an entire nation to let the land rest? Perhaps we cannot even begin to understand the significance of *shmittah* since most Americans today are so alienated from land, agriculture and the earth as our source of sustenance. Yet our current environmental crises compel us to try. If we can push ourselves to imagine the magnitude of what *shmittah* meant to our ancient Israelite ancestors, we may find the historical, spiritual and political inspiration we need to address climate change.

Shmittah rests at the peak of land-based Judaism, an immersive nationwide attempt to regain balance with the earth and with God. In contrast to *shmittah*’s inspirational model, today’s environmental movement is pretty dreary. Too often our best ecological writing sounds like the heading on a tombstone: “Herein lies a civilization destined for ruin.”

The scientific data indicate rising global temperatures and subsequent losses in biodiversity and environmental quality throughout the world. But as Jews, as people of faith, it’s out of the question to simply lapse into the depression that could easily result from this sobering data. The Jewish environmental movement, and faith-based activism in general, offers a transcendent vision of justice, peace and sustainability. This view cannot and does not acknowledge the inevitability of impending environmental doom because we know that miracles happen, and because revolutionary practices like *shmittah* are in our cultural DNA, just waiting to be released from our souls and applied in the world.

What should *shmittah* look like today? Don’t think about what happens in Israel; think instead about how you would practice this tradition. What would it mean to you to let the land rest every seventh year? What would it mean to your family, to your synagogue, to your JCC, to your Jewish Federation? What would it mean for all American Jewry – one of the largest and richest Jewish communities in the history of the world – to recognize the power of *shmittah* and embark on a collaborative experiment with millions of Jews observing *shmittah* through a plethora of creative, dynamic and locally-based methods? Who knows what could happen?

- Locally grown food and sustainable agriculture would take on significant ethical and spiritual weight within the Jewish community. Jews would feel compelled to buy from local farmers who they would trust to make sure that the land rests and is restored through crop rotation.
- Renewable energy projects would multiply exponentially as Jews commit to letting the land rest by choosing to use energy that does not require fossil fuels pulled from the earth. We would surely minimize our mining and drilling into the land if we were to be serious about letting the land rest. Perhaps *shmittah* would be an opportunity to declare one-year moratoriums on fossil fuel extraction. Perhaps our response would be to develop renewable energy projects in every Jewish community.

- “*Shmittah* lawns” would sprout up throughout the country, where homeowners and Jewish institutions simply let the land rest without mowing. The ensuing political challenges with neighborhood associations would be ideal teachable moments to promote more sustainable lawn care practices such as using native plants and avoiding chemical pesticides.
- Awareness of consumption would grow within the Jewish community as we awaken and explore the *shmittah* ideal that all land is owner-less, with everyone having equal access to everything. In order to ensure equal access, the Torah dictates that during the *shmittah* year we only can harvest what we need for one meal. What if we all brought that awareness into our lives around energy, food and consumption? Would we buy as many new things? Would we waste as many resources?

Shmittah is in our collective unconscious, and our contemporary moment calls upon us to renew its wisdom for the good of all humankind. May God bless us that it may be so – that together we can be brave, creative and collaborative enough to embody the national experiment of *shmittah*. May we gain the same humility, awareness and inspiration that this awesome, radical tradition gave our ancestors. Of all things in the Torah, this is one tradition we cannot pass by.

“Exile comes upon the world on account of the failure to observe the shmita.” (Pirkei Avot 5:11)

As our rabbinic sages knew, *shmittah* reflects a universal principle of balance and sustainability, and as such it is critical to all people. This is not just about the Jews; it’s about the whole world. If we can commit to observing *shmittah* in its broadest sense, we will learn to live in balance with God’s Earth.

Source: Jakir Manela