



Call of the wild

Shmita is a Biblical concept based on ancient agricultural rights. So what's it got to do with us? **Agi Erdos** investigates how shmita has been reborn as a hot new campaigning tool

WHAT IS SHMITA?

Shmita is a *Torah* commandment that reads: "Six years you shall sow your land and gather in its produce, but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave, the beasts of the field may eat" (*Exodus 23.10*). Shmita is supposed to be observed every seventh year according to the Jewish calendar: this year we are halfway through a shmita year – it began in September 2014 and runs until September 2015.

In a shmita year, working the land in any way – whether by sowing, fertilising, pruning, or harvesting – is forbidden. The consumption of anything sown or planted in the shmita year is also forbidden, even if it is consumed after the year has passed. Traditionally, the law applies only to produce grown in the 'Land of Israel' as defined by *halakhah* (Jewish law). Eilat, for example, falls outside this area, so shmita does not apply there, and it only applies to Jews, including those in the diaspora if they buy or consume Israeli produce.

However, you can protect what you have from dying. For example, you are allowed to water your plants or mow the lawn. All produce that grows without cultivation in the shmita year is considered ownerless, *hefker*, by

Jewish law: anyone can take what they need. Today in Israel, much of the land is handed over to the Rabbinate, whose workers collect and distribute produce to those in need. All shmita produce is considered sacred, cannot be wasted, and cannot be taken out of Israel – even bottles of wine must stay in the country.

WHAT DOES SHMITA MEAN?

Two things are paramount: to let the land rest and to allow anyone (including animals) to feast on the land's produce. Shmita has been coined the "hippest commandment for progressive Jews" because of its concern for the environment and those in need.

The idea behind shmita is that by leaving land fallow, a period of renewal can take place. It emphasises giving up what we possess and sharing it with others, shifting our focus from private to communal and only taking as much as we need. Shmita also includes Biblical instructions stating that any debt owed by fellow Jews should be cancelled out.

Whilst some aspects of shmita are rarely practised in their original sense these days, many social activists have seized on the issue recently as a way of addressing inequality. We look at how shmita – with a contemporary twist – is being revived around the world.

“The Biblical idea of debt forgiveness is a radical, amazing social concept”

Shmita: refresh, renew

SHMITA AROUND THE WORLD

United Kingdom

SHMITA FOODBANKS: The charity Mitzvah Day runs the Shmita Foodbanks project as part of the Jewish Social Action Forum and in conjunction with the foodbank organisation Trussell Trust. They are asking organisations and communities to connect with their local Trussell Trust foodbank and set up collections of non-perishable food that can be donated to the project. Last year 25 groups in cities including London, Cambridge, Edinburgh, Leeds, and Nottingham set up collections for the Trust. Alternatively, Mitzvah Day are encouraging groups to hold 'shopping days', where shoppers are invited to donate an extra item from their supermarket run. "We hope that groups develop a relationship with the foodbank outside Mitzvah Day, and continue to build this through the year," said Mitzvah Day project coordinator Elliot Steinberg.

GIVE IT A REST: Run by the Jewish Social Action Forum, this combines social and environmental justice campaigning with teaching about shmita. They have published a resource book for educators who want to lead study groups on shmita and food inequality.

www.mitzvahday.org.uk,
www.trusselltrust.org, tzedeck.org.uk



Pushing the Envelope Farm, Illinois



USA

PUSHING THE ENVELOPE FARM, ILLINOIS: Trisha and Fred Margulies founded the farm seven years ago, right at the cusp of the last shmita year. They had been struck by ideas on environmental responsibility, food justice and Judaism's agrarian roots at the second Hazon Food Conference (Hazon is a US-based Jewish environmental group). Following the conference, the couple decided to transform 14 acres of land owned by their family to create an educational farm based on the principles of shmita. The name of the venture came from the family's business - in envelope production.

To prepare for the initiative, they held a planting party to help cultivate the farm's fruit and nut orchard. Organic Yeshiva, a group of five rabbinic and education students from New York and Boston led discussions on shmita. The group lived at the farm for five weeks, spending half of each day learning about sustainable, organic farming and the other half studying aspects of shmita, in classes also open to the wider community.

The farm has many projects, including the Tzedaka Donation Garden, which is dedicated to growing fruit and veg for various foodbanks. Youth groups such as the Youth Food Justice Corp and B'nei Mitzvah Corp also work on the garden; home composting, animal care and healthy cooking classes are all promoted on the site. The garden is also hoping to have Jewish war veterans work on plots there. Plans for no-till plots and raised beds for senior citizens are also on the agenda. "Through the opportunity to touch the earth, plant a seed, pull a weed, pet a chicken, take food to those who are in need, learn how to keep the earth healthy and connect to our people through our history, we become a richer, more grounded people," Trisha Margulies told JR.

www.pushingtheenvelopefarm.org

Israel

SHMITAT ISRAEL: Ruth Calderon, member of the Israeli Knesset for the Yesh Atid (There is a Future) party has just set up a project to enable families to free themselves from the pressure of debts. Working with community investment fund Matan, the project aims to help around 5,000 families. Applicants must participate in a programme in which their source of income and spending will be analysed. They are expected to undergo further training in their profession and acquire new financial, family and self-management skills.

Families are expected to pay back at least one-third of their debt from their own resources. A second part of their debt will be written off, and the third will be paid for from a 'shmita fund'.

Speaking about the Biblical idea of debt forgiveness in an interview for the *Jewish Journal* last year, Calderon said: "It's a radical, amazing social concept."

COMMUNAL VEG GARDEN

IN JERUSALEM: Mizmor L'David, a Modern Orthodox community in Jerusalem's Talpotei neighbourhood, runs a vegetable garden right next door to their synagogue. This year, being shmita, a sign invites passers-by to take organic veggies for free. People are encouraged to work in the garden, and there's been a lot of interest according to organiser Neil Kummer. Before the community took over the land, it was "an unkempt ownerless lot covered in weeds with much garbage, shrubs and a dead cat," said Kummer. How did the project start? Twenty years ago Neil had the idea of creating an 'urban spa' built on "sustainable farming, alternative medicine, and music and staffed by new immigrants who needed a soft landing." The plan had to be downsized, but a plot was acquired and Neil worked on it, selling the veg he grew to synagogue members. This year, the gardeners are working to "discover the deeper thoughts behind shmita, such as revoking ownership of food sources. It is about putting the wealthy on the same level with the poor." ■

See Mizmor L'David Community Garden Facebook page.



Mizmor L' David communal garden