

Article

# Shmita Revolution: The Reclamation and Reinvention of the Sabbatical Year

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**Abstract:** Jewish observance of shmita (alternatively spelled shemithah)—the sabbatical year, or seventh (sheviit) year—is changing. Historically rooted in agriculture, modern Jewish environmentalists are seizing upon the long-ignored environmental and social justice (tikkun olam) aspects of shmita as originally described in the five books of Moses, the Torah in the Hebrew Bible, the basis of Jewish law. Primary research was conducted through key-stakeholder interviews with leading American and Israeli Jewish environmentalists and thought leaders. They see shmita as a core Jewish value—one that, like Shabbat, the Jewish sabbath, has the power to transform society. Their work has brought shmita from an obscure law dealt with mainly by Israel’s Orthodox to a new Jewish ethos being discussed across the United States, Europe, Israel, and even on the floor of Knesset, Israel’s parliament. This article also describes shmita as delineated in the Torah and through the rabbinic canon of halacha (Jewish law), and explains shmita practice from biblical times to the present day.

**Keywords:** agriculture; Bible; debt relief; Diaspora; Israel; Jewish environmental movement; jubilee; slavery; sustainability; Zionism

## 1. Introduction

Shmita (alternatively spelled shemithah, shemitta, or shmitah)—the sabbatical year, or seventh (sheviit) year—is a biblical prescription for and inoculation against environmental and social problems, including habitat destruction, hunger, overwork, soil-nutrient loss, unabated growth, wealth gaps, and the disconnects between people and their food and people and the Earth. Because the laws of shmita are delineated in the five books of Moses, the Torah in the Hebrew Bible—the basis of Jewish law—shmita is as Jewish a practice as other biblical edicts, including abiding by kosher dietary rules and observing Shabbat, the Jewish sabbath. But over the past 2000 years of Jewish history, biblical commandments to forgive debts and let the land lie fallow during shmita have been reinterpreted through rabbinic workarounds. The result is that in common practice, shmita has been observed largely only in Israel, and even then only by those within Judaism’s Orthodox sects. Social justice and environmental components of the biblical laws have been pushed aside, widely through rabbinic-sanctioned exceptions and loopholes. However, that began to change over the last seven-year shmita cycle as the Jewish environmental movement has rediscovered shmita, promoted it as a core concept of Judaism, and led activities in North America, Europe and Israel that have reintroduced shmita to world Jewry. (See Appendix A for a list of seven Jewish environmental initiatives that are leading the shmita revolution). The reembracing of shmita is proving to be one example of how religious practice changes in response to modern environmental problems.

### 1.1. Shmita and Zionism

Shmita is tied to the biblical Jewish homeland, today manifested by the modern state of Israel, which itself was founded through the efforts of the modern Zionist movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when large numbers of mostly European Jews (and, to some extent, Asian Jews) joined then-Palestine's small Jewish community and, in the process, readopted—in a near-mythological obsession—a physical and spiritual connection to the land, through agriculture and arboriculture, as key components of modern Zionism.

Shmita and Zionism—particularly present in the Zionist goal that Theodor Herzl, the father of modern Zionism, called the formation of an ideal or “model State” [1], a fulfillment of the prophesy for the people of Israel to be a “light unto the nations” (Isaiah 42:6, 49:6, 60:3)—are both idealistic, utopic biblically based systems with ambitions that may be unachievable but that, like so many lofty goals, may result in better societies by virtue of their pursuit. Just as the utopic aspects of Zionism have been forgotten by many who instead have focused on Zionist goals as simply the creation and maintenance of a Jewish (and not model) state, so too many have ignored the utopic aspects of shmita in favor of the rigid practice of minimal shmita components.

### 1.2. Shmita Today

Until recently, the residual practice of shmita had been mostly limited to academia. The tradition of providing professors with a sabbatical year has its roots in shmita. It is even possible that in the last two millennia more people have observed academic sabbatical years than traditional shmita sabbatical years. Still, shmita has had a significant, although broadly undiscussed, influence on thought leaders within both the secular and Christian environmental and social justice movements.

Even though Aldo Leopold held disdain for organized religion—in his seminal *A Sand County Almanac*, he wrote that “conservation is getting nowhere because it is incompatible with our Abrahamic concept of land” as a commodity [2]—his land ethic clearly reflects shmita principles. That Leopold charged religion with lacking environmental-conservation ethics shows the extent to which Judaism and Christianity have overlooked the environmental aspects of shmita.

Shmita values are echoed through the field of sustainability, particularly via its frameworks of social-ecological and social-ecological-technical systems. And the values of “deep ecology”, as coined and defined in 1973 by Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss [3], resonate with shmita principles [4].

Today the Jewish environmental movement, in the United States, Europe, and Israel, is reexamining shmita and reclaiming shmita's environmental and social justice values. The movement is small—after all, it is estimated that there are only about six million Jews each in the United States and Israel and about three million combined in the rest of the world—and the Jewish environmental movement only represents a small percentage of the Jewish community. Nonetheless, a group of Jewish environmental organizations is revolutionizing the practice of shmita in the 21st century. The impact is being felt around the world, from American academia to the halls of Knesset, Israel's parliament.

### 1.3. Following Tu B'Shvat

On first blush, the Jewish environmental movement's embrace of shmita echoes the reinvention of Tu B'Shvat, the modern-day equivalent of a Jewish Earth Day. A non-biblical holiday, Tu B'Shvat became the New Year for Trees (one of five New Year days described in the Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 1:1)) during Judaism's Second Temple era, roughly the 500-year period before Christian tradition dates the birth of Jesus. While Tu B'Shvat always was connected to both trees and the land, it originally was a tax holiday—the day that determined in which year a tree's fruit would be tithed. After Jewish sovereignty was lost over the Jewish homeland (what largely constitutes modern-day Israel) in the year 70, Tu B'Shvat fell into disuse. In the mid-1500s, kabbalists in the Galilean city of Tsfat revived Tu B'Shvat observance and, inspired by Tu B'Shvat's earthy roots, reinvented the holiday as one celebrating trees and nature as manifestations of God's wonders and the abundance that God

provided [5]. Tu B'Shvat as we know it today is a refinement of the 16th-century kabbalist reinvention. The effect was that Tu B'Shvat was transformed from a tax day to an Earth Day.

As the kabbalists reclaimed Tu B'Shvat, most of the change in Tu B'Shvat observance from about 500 years ago to today was a reinvention of the holiday—inspired by history but newly invented. It was as if the kabbalists reclaimed Tu B'Shvat at its roots and reinvented it by growing a new and different tree than those roots had grown previously. Shmita has been a different story. Shmita's resurgence has been one of rediscovery. It is as if the modern Jewish environmental movement reclaimed shmita as a fully-grown but long-neglected tree and reinvented new ways of using its fruit.

#### 1.4. *Shmita in Modern Research*

Academic scholars are beginning to notice. After research and writing for this paper began, Adrienne Krone published "A Shmita Manifesto", borrowing the title from the publication by Yigal Deutscher that will be discussed later in this paper. She posited that shmita's "mixture of religious teaching spurring religiously intentioned action through non-religious methods exemplifies the ways that religion is lived out in the United States today" [6]. The implication is that a religion includes both religious and non-religious methods, whereas I would argue that all acts dictated or inspired by religion—not just those that seem overtly religious, such as attending religious services or observing religious dietary laws—are religious acts using religious methods by virtue of their religious origin. (But I digress, as a debate over what type of act constitutes a religious one is a topic for another paper).

This paper builds on Krone's contribution to the shmita canon by providing new and original insights and commentary on shmita laws; by taking an international approach; by including key-stakeholder interviews, which constitute the bulk of the primary research; by greatly expanding both the type and quantity of described shmita activities; and by researching not just the roots of Jewish environmental shmita thought but also the roots of shmita practice within the Jewish environmental movement. While Krone examined shmita practice predominantly through agriculture, this paper takes a more holistic approach to shmita practice, including food and agriculture but moving into shmita as a practice of environmental sustainability and social justice.

## 2. Seven as the Magic Number: Shmita in the Torah

In the Torah, the most sacred text in Judaism, there is special significance given to the number seven. Aside from the command to observe seven-day holidays, such as Passover (Exodus 23:15–16; Leviticus 23:5–8) and Sukkot (Leviticus 23:34–42), and to count every day in the seven weeks leading up to the holiday of Shavuot (Leviticus 23:15–16; Deuteronomy 16:9–10), each week is given seven days (Genesis 2:2). In turn, every seventh year is the shmita year. The 50th year after seven cycles of seven shmita years is the yovel (jubilee) year. (Rabbis later disputed whether the yovel year was, as the Torah implies, the 50th year sandwiched in between two shmita cycles, or the 49th year of the seventh shmita cycle, or, as in the opinion first posited by Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi in the Talmud (Arachin 12b), the first year of the next shmita cycle, making yovel "both the 50th year of the yovel cycle as well as the first year of the next yovel and shmita cycles" [7]).

Shmita has seven aspects as described in the Torah:

- (1) The land should rest;
- (2) Preferential treatment for foraging is given to the needy;
- (3) The land is re-wilded, once again allowing access to wild animals;
- (4) Debts are forgiven, helping to close the gap between the wealthy and the destitute;
- (5) Slaves are freed;
- (6) Upon release, freed slaves should be compensated for their slave labor;
- (7) All the people should gather for a public reading of the Torah.

Yovel, in turn, is a sort of once-in-a-generation super-shmita year. All of the regular shmita regulations apply, with an even bigger twist: Primarily, land ownership is to be redistributed. Those

who acquired too much land would have their excess land taken away and returned to those who had lost their land (Leviticus 25:10). This redistribution of privately held land to address wealth inequality may be the most radical law in the Bible.

Secondly, whereas Jewish slaves were freed in their seventh year of service (Deuteronomy 15:12)—a seven-year cycle that, depending upon one’s interpretation, may have operated either independently of or as a component of the seven-year shmita cycle—in a yovel year, all slaves, Jewish and not, and regardless of years of service, were to be freed (Leviticus 25:10). This may not sound particularly revolutionary today, but keep in mind that whether you believe that the Torah’s authorship was divine or not, it was written at least 2500 years—two and a half millennia—before the United States abolished slavery. (The eventual freeing of American slaves was, to many at the time, inspired by yovel—as Union soldiers “bring the jubilee” in the chorus of composer Henry Clay Work’s famous song, “Marching Through Georgia” [8], written at the end of the Civil War—and credited to yovel, as American slaves’ spirituals referenced the jubilee, memorialized in the naming of post-war performance groups of emancipated slaves, such as the globe-trotting Jubilee Singers of Nashville’s Fisk University [9]).

Appropriately, shmita is described or mentioned seven times in the Torah, most prominently along with yovel in the biblical portion of Behar in the book of Leviticus. (Any uncited commentary that follows represents my personal insights.)

### 2.1. Exodus 23:10–11

“Six years you shall sow your land and gather its yield; but in the seventh you shall let it rest and lie fallow. Let the needy among your people eat of it, and what they leave let the wild beasts eat. You shall do the same with your vineyards and your olive groves” [10].

From shmita’s first mention as a concept, if not by name, the Torah ties together the agricultural and social justice aspects of shmita. Not only shall the land be given the opportunity to rest, but in that time it shall serve those most in need instead of landholders in least need.

But shmita also may have meant rest for more than the land: In an agricultural society such as the one in which the Jews lived during biblical times, to not work the fields for a year may have meant not working, period. What is there for a farmer to do aside from farming? Shmita may have been a year off of work—a sabbatical as it has come to mean in a modern sense—a year for farmers themselves, and not just the land, to rest.

And as farmers are prohibited from working the land, the public is restricted to eating food from plants that grow wild; food from perennial plants; and food preserved from previous seasons. People may gather such food for their own needs, but they cannot commercialize the land by taking more from the shmita harvest than they need and selling the remainder, exporting it elsewhere, or saving some for later, as that effectively would put the land to work.

Shmita decommodifies food and land, ensuring that both are used to meet the needs of all, and not just the needs of the landed gentry. What remains is an agricultural public commons that produces a shared and locally consumed harvest [11]—it is a biblical local-food movement. By removing profit, food and land are able to meet basic human needs for all.

The decommodification also can lead to what Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin, founder of the now-defunct Baltimore Jewish Environmental Network, calls the “gifted economy”, a form of the gift economy where the exchange of goods is not merely seen as gifts between people, but as gifts from God and the Earth to people—as, according to Jewish tradition, we experienced in the biblical Garden of Eden—“an economy based on the primordial vision that the earth and all its bounty are gifts from God that are to be used by us all but not otherwise possessed, amassed, or hoarded by just some of us. It is a time when the work of the marketplace is held in check, when the dominant economy is one of enoughness and delight as opposed to ever-more and constant desire” [12]. Then shmita observance means a return to Eden [12], a peaceful and utopic place where Jewish tradition holds that no work was required and people had no unmet needs.

After the Torah's first reference to shmita, the following verse (Exodus 23:12) includes a commandment to observe Shabbat. In so doing, the Torah links shmita and Shabbat, and arguably places a greater emphasis on shmita than Shabbat. (It is a connection that has not gone unnoticed by traditional scholars of Jewish texts [10]). In that sense, shmita, Shabbat, and a return to Eden are all connected. To Cardin, Shabbat, shmita, and yovel are all about a return, albeit temporary, to idyllic Eden [13].

## 2.2. Leviticus 25:2–17, 28 (Behar)

“When you enter the land that I assign to you, the land shall observe a sabbath [Shabbat] of the Lord. Six years you may sow your field and six years you may prune your vineyard and gather in the yield. But in the seventh year the land shall have a sabbath of complete rest, a sabbath of the Lord: You shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your untrimmed vines; it shall be a year of complete rest for the land. But you may eat whatever the land during its sabbath will produce—you, your male and female slaves, the hired and bound laborers who live with you, and your cattle and the beasts in your land may eat all its yield.”

“You shall count off seven weeks of years—seven times seven years—so that the period of seven years gives you a total of forty-nine years. Then you shall sound the horn [shofar] loud; in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month—the Day of Atonement [Yom Kippur]—you shall have the horn sounded throughout your land and you shall hallow [make holy] the fiftieth year. You shall proclaim release throughout the land for all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: Each of you shall return to his family. That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you: You shall not sow, neither shall you reap the aftergrowth or harvest the untrimmed vines, for it is a jubilee. It shall be holy to you: you may only eat the growth direct from the field.”

“In this year of jubilee, each of you shall return to his holding. When you sell property to your neighbor, or buy from your neighbor, you shall not wrong one another. In buying from your neighbor, you shall deduct only for the number of years since the jubilee; and in selling to you, he shall charge you only for the remaining crop years: the more such years, the higher the price you pay; the fewer such years, the lower the price; for what he is selling you is a number of harvests.”

“...[W]hat he sold shall remain with the purchaser until the jubilee; in the jubilee year it shall be released, and he shall return to his holding.” [14].

In the Hebrew, the text refers to shmita explicitly as Shabbat, a sabbath, or as a week of seven years. Behar emphasizes the agricultural aspects of shmita with which Jewish observance of shmita would later become preoccupied over other aspects of shmita mentioned in other sections of the Torah.

Behar also represents the first and most descriptive mention of yovel. The commandment to reach yovel by counting mirrors the commandment to count seven weeks (known as counting the *omer*) from the holiday of Passover in order to determine the date of the holiday of Shavuot. Through yovel, Behar stipulates that land is not permanently owned, and therefore cannot be permanently exchanged. Verse 23 goes on to declare that “the land is Mine; you are but strangers resident with Me” [14]. During the yovel year, everyone must “return to his holding”—meaning that land is not *owned*, it is merely *held*, and that land must be redistributed according to original allocations. Those who have acquired more than their original share of land must return the extra land and those who have lost their land receive it back.

The concept of land being held rather than owned is consistent with Jewish concepts of land in biblical times as well as today in Israel, where almost all land is owned by either the state government



via its Israel Lands Authority or the World Zionist Organization government via its Jewish National Fund in Israel, and rented to the public through long-term leases.

Wealth and control of land are linked historically, but land in an agricultural society is the primary source of wealth much more so than in today's modern economy. By redistributing land, yovel becomes an economic equalizer.

### 2.3. *Leviticus 25:20–22 (Behar)*

“And should you ask, ‘What are we to eat in the seventh year, if we may neither sow nor gather in our crops?’ I will ordain My blessing for you in the sixth year, so that it shall yield a crop sufficient for three years. When you sow in the eighth year, you will still be eating old grain of that crop; you will be eating the old until the ninth year, until its crops come in” [14].

The Torah anticipates the skeptic's question—how can people be expected to survive without farming for a year?—and it answers that survival requires good planning. One has to use the years preceding the shmita year to prepare for shmita. Shmita observance, therefore, is not simply about the seventh year, but about every year of the shmita cycle. Since every year falls in a shmita cycle, properly observing shmita requires shmita preparation all the years of one's life.

### 2.4. *Leviticus 26:15–16; 34–35*

“If you reject My laws and spurn My rules, so that you do not observe all My commandments and you break My covenant, I in turn will do this to you: I will wreak misery upon you—consumption [perhaps tuberculosis] and fever, which cause the eyes to pine and the body to languish; you shall sow your seed to no purpose . . . Then shall the land make up for its [lack of observance of] sabbath years throughout the time that it is desolate and you are in the land of your enemies; then shall the land rest and make up for its sabbath years. Throughout the time that it is desolate, it shall observe the rest that it did not observe in your sabbath years while you were dwelling upon it” [14].

Between verses 16 and 34 the Torah lists a litany of awful outcomes, ending with the land's desolation. That sowing seeds will serve no purpose ties together verses 16 and 34. The Torah starts with what could be construed as a threat—if you do not follow these laws, then all these bad things are going to happen. Indeed, that is the traditional Jewish interpretation, that the punishment for not observing shmita is that the land will undergo a forced shmita of sorts [14]. But modern Jewish environmentalists have taken to a different interpretation—that the verses do not constitute a threat but a causal explanation. If you do not observe shmita, letting the land rest, then the land's capacity will diminish as the land becomes infertile, leading to an unintentional shmita. Jewish environmentalists see this playing out both inside and outside the land of Israel, in the form of the damaging of farmland never given ample opportunity to rest and replenish, necessitating an abundance of (usually petroleum-based) fertilizer inputs. From the Jewish environmental perspective, it is simple cause and effect: Ignoring the land's needs and disrespecting it by denying it rest leads to destruction of the land.

### 2.5. *Deuteronomy 15:1–2*

“Every seventh year you shall practice remission of debts [shmita]. This shall be the nature of the remission: every creditor shall remit the due that he claims from his fellow; he shall not dun [request debt payment from] his fellow or kinsman, for the remission proclaimed is of the Lord” [15].

Deuteronomy introduces the word shmita itself, literally meaning “release” in Hebrew, and in so doing also incorporates debt forgiveness, perhaps the most progressive, and, correspondingly, perhaps least-observed aspect of shmita. Through practice of shmita, the Torah plans a society where no one

should become so encumbered in debt as to never escape it. Indeed, under shmita, all loans are for no more than seven years and are forgiven every seven years. Clearly, if practiced, this would have all kinds of major ramifications throughout society. Through shmita, the Torah recognizes that capitalism inherently leads to economic disparity, that such disparity worsens over time and is hereditary from one generation to the next—what we know to be true today, as the greatest indicator of one’s economic class is the economic class of one’s parents [16]. The poor breed the poor, the rich breed the rich. But the Torah has a solution: debt forgiveness every seven years. Shmita becomes a societal reset button, and yovel a super-sized reset button [17].

### 2.6. Deuteronomy 15:12–15

“If a fellow Hebrew, man or woman, is sold to you, he shall serve you six years, and in the seventh year you shall set him free. When you set him free, do not let him go empty-handed: Furnish him out of the flock, threshing floor and vat with which the Lord your God has blessed you. Bear in mind that you were slaves in the land of Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you; therefore I enjoin this commandment upon you today” [15].

With this commandment, shmita becomes complete: Rest for the land, rest for the indebted, and rest for the slave. Further, the linkage in shmita between debt release and the release of slaves is even stronger, as at the time it was common for people to sell themselves into servitude as a means of paying off debts. Therefore, to forgive fiscal debts is to only forgive one kind of major debt; by adding freeing slaves to shmita, the Torah expands shmita debt release to include the debt of servitude, which itself was often a result of extreme fiscal debt. And released slaves should be financially remunerated for their service by being given the supplies to be self-sufficient. The Torah both recognizes their labor as well as addresses the difficulty of returning to the free world with empty pockets. (And in so doing, shmita provides grounds for reparations to the descendants of slaves, in America and around the world).

By tying shmita to the primary historically shared experience of the Jewish people—the Exodus after enslavement in Egypt—the Torah may be tying shmita practice to the core of Jewish identity and practice. It also may be recognition that a commandment to release slaves may encounter resistance, and therefore needs an additional commandment for empathy.

### 2.7. Deuteronomy 31:10–12

“Every seventh year, the year set for [debt] remission, at the Feast of Booths [Sukkot], when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God in the place that He will choose, you shall read this Teaching aloud in the presence of all Israel. Gather [hakhel] the people—men, women, children and the strangers in your communities—that they may hear and so learn to revere the Lord your God and to observe faithfully every word of this Teaching” [15].

The final reference to shmita in the Torah introduces the concept of hakhel, the gathering. After the shmita year ends, it is celebrated with a gathering of all those in the community, Jew and gentile alike. In this way, the Torah places shmita as core to practice of Torah law, where the shmita year concludes with a public reading of all the laws.

## 3. Shmita in a Historical (Biblical and Post-Biblical) Context

The laws of debt forgiveness were not unique to the Torah. For example, the Code of Hammurabi—which was written about 3800 years ago and predates the Torah by between about 300 to 450 years (dating the Torah according to Judaism’s Orthodox tradition, which holds a range of opinions on when exactly the Torah was completed) and about 1100 years (dating the Torah according to modern historians)—includes similar, and even more progressive, laws. The Code of Hammurabi frees debt-induced slaves after three years, as opposed to after six years in the Torah’s shmita practice. It also includes debt forbearance in the case of poor agricultural output [18]. From

a historical perspective, the newest part of shmita may have been mandating the practice of regular field fallowing.

There is some evidence that shmita was practiced in biblical times. In his commentary on Behar, for instance, Rabbi Joseph Hertz noted that the Roman historian Tacitus said shmita observance was proof of Jewish laziness, and that, as documented by Jewish–Roman historian Josephus, both Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar canceled taxes that otherwise would have been levied on Jews in the shmita year because they were not working their fields [19]. There is even Talmudic evidence that fences were removed during the shmita year, so as to not only allow easier field access to all but to remove symbols of private ownership [20]. Still, it is unclear to what extent shmita was practiced in biblical times, or if it, or yovel for that matter, was even ever once practiced fully. The presence of the laws within the Torah provides proof that shmita as codified was not naturally practiced, and biblical prophets chastised the people specifically for not observing shmita.

The prophet Jeremiah rebuked the Jewish people for not freeing slaves during the shmita year and predicted that such ignorance of the shmita law would lead to the Jewish people being plagued by war, pestilence, and famine, becoming “a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth” (Jeremiah 34:14–17).

The book of Second Chronicles references Jeremiah’s warning in blaming the destruction of the First Temple and the city of Jerusalem as well as the Jewish people’s exile on their ignoring shmita’s mandate to let the land rest (II Chronicles 36:19–21). Moreover, the Mishnaic text Pirkei Avot (Ethics of Our Ancestors) blames exile on four causes: idolatry, incest, bloodshed, and not fulfilling the laws of shmita (Pirkei Avot 5:10). (Clearly, the rabbis who wrote Pirkei Avot were strongly influenced by Jeremiah and Second Chronicles, but nonetheless it is a strong statement for shmita’s importance.)

Rabbis in the post-biblical era have written much about shmita, as they have done prolifically on so many other aspects of Jewish law. That does not mean that shmita has been observed, but rather, like much of rabbinic discussion, the volume of discourse is often disconnected from actual practice and is more about how shmita would have been observed in biblical times and how it would be observed ideally in a future (and possibly messianic) society.

One aspect of shmita that was not discussed much is slavery; the few scholars who have studied slavery in Jewish society during Greco-Roman times have concluded that the release of slaves was not widely observed [21]. Remember, while the yovel release of slaves affected all slaves, Jews and gentiles alike—and some rabbis question whether or not yovel was ever observed—the shmita release of slaves was only for Jewish slaves. Some say the release was only effective for debt-induced slaves. Nonetheless, the issue of shmita release of slaves is complicated by the greying of lines in whether or not a slave was considered really Jewish. Non-Jewish slaves in Jewish homes would be circumcised by their owners in joining the Jewish family but nonetheless would not be seen as full Jews. As neither fully Jew nor fully non-Jew, it was unclear whether the laws of shmita release applied [21]. (Today’s Jewish debate over who qualifies as being a Jew is not so new.) The discussion of the rabbis of the Talmud reflects a muddled reality concerning slavery—a reality in which Jewish slaves were not released every seventh year, nor all slaves every 50th [21].

Overall in terms of shmita, suffice to say that in the rabbinic era—whose beginning coincided roughly (and far from exactly, as historian Rabbi Lee Levine noted [22]) with the destruction of the Second Temple, seven decades into the common era—new rabbinic shmita rules effectively negated all significant observance of shmita for about the following 1800 years. That is, halacha (Jewish law) was adapted to better align with actual practice. There are four main rabbinic concepts at play: *prozbul*, land-based commandments, *shmita d’rabbanan*, and the *heter mechira*. The implementation of these four stripped shmita practice so that from the time of the second exile in the year 70 until the development of modern Zionism in the late 19th century, shmita was not practiced, possibly except for the small Jewish population that remained in Roman Palestine after the second exile and the even smaller Jewish population that remained in Palestine from the end of the Bar Kochba revolt circa 135 CE until the dawn of modern Zionism in the late 1800s. Without *prozbul*, land-based commandments, *shmita d’rabbanan*, and the *heter mechira*, modern Jewish environmentalists would have no need to reinvigorate shmita



practice since shmita practice would not have lapsed. But to truly understand how radical the current shmita revolution is, one must first understand how shmita practice disintegrated historically.

The most radical part of shmita—debt forgiveness—was also the first part to fall. Rabbis of the Talmud, and in particular Hillel, observed that people were more hesitant to make loans in the later years of a shmita cycle for fear of the debts being negated before being paid back (Mishna Sheviit 10:3). The workaround is *prozbul*. Since Deuteronomy mandates that creditors, i.e. *individuals*, release the indebted from their fiscal obligations, the rabbis invented a system where at the end of the sixth year of a shmita cycle, debts are transferred to the court, which holds them until the end of the shmita year, after which point the debts can be transferred back to the original creditors. As the court is not an individual, it is not bound by the Torah's command to release the indebted. Effectively, *prozbul* allows for debts to continue indefinitely and never be forgiven.

The second rabbinic concept is of land-dependent commandments: Torah laws that depend upon the land are restricted to the historic Jewish homeland (Mishna Kiddushin 1:9), manifesting itself today as large parts of the State of Israel, and parts of present-day Jordan and Syria. As shmita is deemed a land-based law, it is only applicable to Jews living in the Jewish homeland and not to Jews living in the Diaspora.

The third rabbinic concept is shmita d'rabbanan—that is, that shmita is a rabbinic law and in effect as a Torah law for all, both those who live in the historic Jewish homeland and those who do not, only when the majority of Jews live in the historic Jewish homeland according to their tribes. Even today, the majority of Jews live outside of the Jewish homeland, thereby restricting legally bound shmita practice to those Jews who live in the parts of Israel that were historically part of the Jewish homeland. (The borders of modern-day Israel and the historic Jewish homeland do not perfectly coincide; although there is much overlap, the historic Jewish homeland included parts of modern-day Jordan and Syria and modern-day Israel includes the Arava Valley in southern Israel, which was not part of the historic Jewish homeland.) Since most Jews have lost track of the specific tribe from which they descend, and since Jewish tradition holds that 10 of 12 tribes were conquered, dispersed throughout the world, and essentially lost to history about 2700 years ago, there will never be a (pre-messianic) time when Jews will have resettled the historic Jewish homeland according to tribe. (Although there also are a host of other reasons, including political and practical, why resettlement according to tribe will never happen.)

The influential 12th-century commentator Maimonides (also known as the Rambam), referencing the Talmud (Arachin 32b) [20], wrote in his Mishna Torah that observing shmita as a Torah law is contingent on observing yovel, and observing yovel is contingent on Jews living in the Jewish homeland according to tribe—and that otherwise shmita is a rabbinic law (Mishna Torah 7:7, Shmita 10:8-10,12). The upshot is that rather than Jews all around the world being obliged to observe shmita—as is the case with other commandments, such as Shabbat and kashrut (kosher dietary laws)—shmita became a law only applicable to Jews living in the Jewish homeland.

The fourth concept, heter mechira (a heter is a rabbinic exception), originates in the late 1800s as Jews began resettling Palestine (then part of the Ottoman Empire) in large numbers. In order to help struggling Jewish farmers in pre-state Israel—farmers who would be among the first Jews in roughly two millennia to be obligated to observe shmita—in 1888 a small group of rabbis developed a temporary workaround as the heter mechira: The farmers could sell their land temporarily to non-Jews before the shmita year of 1888–1889 and thereby continue to work the land during the shmita year. (Judaism keeps a lunar calendar that does not correlate with the newer solar-based Gregorian/Christian/Western calendar; the Jewish New Year is typically in September or October, so one shmita year falls over parts of two Gregorian years.) The farmers would repurchase the land at the end of the shmita year, in an arrangement similar to the one involving the Passover sale and subsequent repurchase of *chametz*, food that is not kosher for Passover.

In 1909, Rabbi Abraham Kook, who would later become the first Ashkenazi (Jew of Eastern European ancestry) chief rabbi of British-Mandate Palestine, famously made the heter mechira

permanent, and published “Shabbat Haaretz”, a treatise on shmita. In September 2014, on the eve of the 2014–2015 shmita year, Hazon—the largest Jewish environmental organization in North America—published Kook’s introduction in English, as translated by Rabbi Yedidya (Julian) Sinclair, who noted that it was in the introduction that Kook expressed his real thoughts on the potential of shmita:

“The introduction is an ecstatic effort to render the reminder, as vivid as possible, of what shmita could one day become. In the prefatory section, Rav [Rabbi] Kook paints a picture of Shmita as enabling a renewed connection to the divine life force in each individual and within us collectively. Like Shabbat, shmita quiets the tumult of the intervening periods and restores a more authentic relationship to ourselves, to each other, to nature, and to God. Its observance reveals the unique weave of socio-economic relationships that the Torah would have us pattern. The Jubilee year is a revelation of the cumulative insight and holiness that we will have achieved in the previous seven shmita cycles. Its ideals of liberty and emancipation bear universal meanings for the whole of humanity” [23].

In that sense, Kook’s shmita workaround of heter mechira may have been a pragmatic solution that overpowered his idealistic perspective on shmita. Since the public did not absorb Kook’s idealistic introduction on shmita, and simply focused on the workaround, heter mechira combined with the Talmudic rulings to strip shmita of nearly all its components.

Others argue that the pragmatic solution of the heter mechira was itself ideological—reflecting Kook’s favorable disposition toward settling the land—as the relatively lenient ruling was inconsistent with Kook’s tendency toward strictures [24]; however, if Kook’s heter mechira solution was idealistic, then his introduction was more so, perhaps even utopic. Regardless, as the heter mechira was adopted by the modern Orthodox, what remained was that shmita only applied to the then-less-numerous ultra-Orthodox (Haredi Jews) living in Palestine and, eventually, Israel, because they rejected the heter mechira (a dispute between the Orthodox and the ultra-Orthodox that still exists to this day [24]). In practice, that meant that the ultra-Orthodox only bought fresh produce that was grown outside the country or grown in parts of the country not historically part of the Jewish state (such as the Arava Valley, although as a desert it hosts a limited amount of agriculture).

In essence, for much of the 20th century, shmita observance became a question of kashrut for the Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox in Israel, and of little to no importance for everyone else. Although Israelis, including Israel’s secular majority, are often aware of the existence of shmita (if not necessarily all the laws governing it)—shmita even has been featured on multiple Israeli postage stamps—in practice it generally remained within the domain of Israel’s Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox, until the recent shmita revolution in Israeli society.

#### 4. Modern Jewish Environmental Perspectives

The development of modern Jewish environmental thought parallels (and may have arisen as a response to) the development of the modern secular environmental movement. In 1966, then-doctoral student Gerald (Ya’akov) Blidstein may have been the earliest modern scholar to approach shmita through an environmental lens, although that may not have been his intention. While focusing on the agricultural aspects of shmita, Blidstein—who went on to a long career teaching Jewish thought at Israel’s Ben-Gurion University of the Negev—dismissed those who see shmita “as embodying a type of ‘primitivism’”, and challenged Jews instead to embrace the spirit of shmita [20]:

“Man must relinquish that which his human capabilities have achieved, and in his use of the growth of the soil be reduced to the lowest of creatures that live off the soil. Man must live the rhythms of nature, despite his obvious ability and duty to circumvent them; he must live the rhythms of the countryside despite the city in which he dwells” [20].

In terms of influence on the leaders of today’s Jewish environmental movement, however, the shmita revolution—and, for that matter, perhaps the birth of the entire modern Jewish environmental

movement—traces back to the death of a Baptist minister. Rabbi Arthur Waskow—the unofficial patriarch of the modern Jewish environmental movement, and cited as an inspiration by all of the Jewish environmental leaders interviewed for this article [25–28]—was a public-policy wonk in Washington decades before he was ordained as a rabbi. But the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., on April 4, 1968, profoundly changed Waskow [29].

#### 4.1. *The Transformation of Arthur Waskow*

“I was a fellow at the Institute for Policy Studies,” Waskow said, “If somebody had asked me, ‘What about being Jewish?’ I would have said, ‘Oh yeah, sure—but you know, not a big deal’” [29].

After King’s assassination, riots engulfed Washington and Waskow joined with others to help provide food and medical supplies to the African-American community. As the first seder, the Jewish ritual meal of Passover, approached, Waskow made the connection between the political environment and his Jewish tradition [29].

“I went home to get ready for the seder. And that meant walking past the Army, which had occupied the city of Washington, taken over schools, taken over the traffic circles. With machine guns,” Waskow said, “And walking past the Army, I began saying, ‘This is Pharaoh’s Army!’”

“And for the first time, the seder, which had only been serious for me, the seder became not so serious but fully explosive. Like discovering you have a volcano in your backyard!” [29].

Seeing the parallel between the civil rights movement and the Exodus from slavery in Egypt, Waskow’s Jewish identity was reawakened and reinvigorated by the progressiveness within Jewish tradition [29]. The following year, Waskow wrote his now-famous Freedom Seder and, on the anniversary of King’s assassination, brought together whites and blacks, Jews and Christians, for an interfaith seder in Washington [30]—thus setting into motion a new line of research and thought for Waskow, into Judaism and, within the next decade, into Jewish environmentalism [29].

But when it came to shmita, Waskow never had an “aha moment” as he did when walking home during the Washington protests in April 1968. Rather, Waskow’s thoughts around shmita developed as a culmination of multiple events.

Waskow first encountered shmita in May 1971 at Washington’s Fabramen, a community synagogue alternative (also known as a havurah), which he helped start. It was the first time that he had read and discussed the Behar portion of the Torah that addresses shmita and yovel [29].

Four years later, Waskow was walking in Jerusalem and, seeing a sign for the Hebrew Union College library, entered on a lark [29]. There he found a copy of the Book of Jubilees, one of the Jewish books, along with the books of the Maccabees, which was left out of the Jewish biblical canon by early rabbis. Consisting of a jubilee’s worth of chapters—50—the Book of Jubilees retells the biblical story through 49-year periods.

“I was totally intrigued,” Waskow said, “I took it down from the shelf and sat down at a desk and started reading” [29].

That same trip to Israel, Waskow met with peace activists angered by unequal distribution of land, both between Israel and Palestinians and between Israelis and themselves. It dawned on Waskow that the equality they were seeking was inherent in the non-practiced tradition of the jubilee, yovel.

But Waskow would not encounter shmita or yovel again until about a year later, during plans in Washington for protests during the American bicentennial [29]. Waskow instigated [29,31] and helped plan [31] an interfaith demonstration organized by Jeremy Rifkin’s People’s Bicentennial Commission at the Jefferson Memorial on 4 July 1976. Shofars were blown [32]. A banner said, “Proclaim Jubilee throughout the Land” [31,32]. As a bicentennial is made of four jubilees, the group read aloud the section of Leviticus that commands observance of the jubilee year. Then the group marched to the National Mall, chanting, “Mobil, Exxon, ITT: Down with corporate tyranny” [32,33]. Judaism, the jubilee and protesting inequality—it was starting to click for Waskow.

The next year, Waskow’s son, David, was disappointed that the Torah portion for his bar mitzvah was projected to be Emor [29].

“He read it and said, ‘Dad, it’s totally boring.’” Waskow recounted, “So I said, ‘Well, what do you want to do?’ So he read the next one, which was Behar, and said, ‘Dad it’s really, really interesting’” [29].

Then-13-year-old David Waskow—who today works as the director of the International Climate Initiative at the World Resources Institute—gave his bar mitzvah sermon on shmita, and inspired his father [29], who in writing his first book on Judaism, 1978’s *Godwrestling*, included a chapter on shmita and yovel, the jubilee: “Beyond Marx and Buddha: The Jubilee.”

In *Godwrestling*, Waskow described how the idea of yovel shaped the plans for the interfaith bicentennial protest in Washington, and how yovel expresses socialist as well as Buddhist ideals, but that it contained even more than those ideals.

“It says, There [sic] is no way to achieve equality unless you accept that no human really owns the wealth, not even the proletariat, not even the people as a whole,” Waskow wrote, “It says, There [sic] is no way to achieve spiritual transcendence, no way to renounce material values, unless you know that everyone needs and must share the wealth” [31].

Waskow also contributed many practical ideas about how incorporating the values of yovel into modern American society could help the United States address economic disparity [31]. It has been more than 30 years, but many of the ideas would still work today—and they are even more needed since the wealth gap has only increased since then [34].

In *Godwrestling*, though, Waskow was more focused on yovel than shmita, which is significant because even though yovel is more transformative, it only occurs once every 50 years, whereas shmita, taking place every seven years, is more regular. After *Godwrestling*, there is a gap in the literature that addresses shmita through an environmental and social justice lens.

Waskow’s follow-up book—*Seasons of Our Joy* in 1982—includes four short paragraphs on shmita [35]. But if Waskow planted the seeds of Jewish environmental thought around shmita, it took decades for them to blossom through the work of Jewish environmental organizations.

#### 4.2. The Development of Modern Jewish Environmental Thought on Shmita

In 1984, mathematics professor and longtime Jewish vegetarianism activist Richard Schwartz—in his book, *Judaism and Global Survival*—noted the disconnect between Jewish environmental values around shmita and modern Jewish practice around shmita:

“While Judaism teaches about a Sabbatical year in which the land is allowed to lie fallow and recover its fertility and farmers may rest, learn and restore their spiritual values, today, under economic pressure to constantly produce more, farmers plant single crops and use excessive amounts of chemical pesticides and fertilizer, thereby reducing soil fertility and badly polluting air and water” [36].

Schwartz determined that re-embracing shmita could help solve environmental problems [36].

In his 1993 book about the Jewish Renewal movement, Rabbi Michael Lerner, founder of the progressive interfaith magazine *Tikkun*, proposed that about 85 percent of the population—or 6/7ths—all take a sabbatical every shmita year, with the remaining seventh of the population, representing those who work in essential services, taking the equivalent of a year off spread out through the other six years. Lerner wrote that Shabbat and shmita “are vehicles for introducing a different kind of consciousness, one that reconnects us with the earth’s rhythms and challenges the priority of making, conquering, subduing, shaping the world to our immediate needs. It is from a standpoint of reverence and wonder that we can begin to develop attitudes that would make us put the survival of the planet above other desires” [37].

Furthermore, Lerner envisioned the shmita year as a year of environmental consciousness and action.

“The seventh year becomes our joint commitment to working on the ecology of the planet together,” Lerner wrote, “The earth needs a rest from all our pollutants and from all of our complicated efforts to master and dominate it” [37].

Rabbi Dan Fink, a longtime pulpit rabbi in Boise, Idaho, contributed a short chapter on Shabbat, shmita, and yovel for Ellen Bernstein's 1998 compilation, *Ecology & the Jewish Spirit*. In it, Fink noted that shmita "represents the first recorded agricultural policy to provide for the replenishment of the soil" [38].

Fink also began to apply shmita values to modern society.

"If every industry shut down for one year out of seven," Fink wrote, "imagine how much pollution levels would decrease" [38].

Writing about Behar in *The Jerusalem Report* magazine in May 2001, then-doctoral student Jeremy Benstein noted how, in modern practice, shmita basically had become a subset of kashrut [39], since food grown by Jews on land where shmita was not observed properly would not be permissible for consumption by Jews. But Benstein also called for a rethinking of shmita in a modern context:

"[W]hat if we looked at shmitah not as a problem but as a solution, and then considered which problem it's meant to solve? In that light, shmita becomes a 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" [39].

Martin Yaffe's 2001 reader, *Judaism and Environmental Ethics*, republished Blidstein's 1966 essay and included a new essay by Eric Rosenblum. Rosenblum—who worked professionally in environmental services for the city of San Jose, California, while volunteering for his local Jewish Community Relations Council—used shmita as the biblical embodiment (and, in a sense, precursor) of the concept of deep ecology.

"What most ecological activists—and not a few Jews—might find surprising is that the principles of Deep Ecology are fully expressed in traditional Judaism," wrote Rosenblum, "The Sabbatical and Jubilee years in particular combine ecosystem management with progressive economic policies in an approach to environmental protection as radical as any proposed by the [environmental] movement today" [4].

Rosenblum also noted that "the word used to denote remission of debts (*shemittah*) is a nominative form of the word meaning 'to lie fallow' (*tishmetenah*), reinforcing the connection between ecology and economics through regulations designed to protect both natural and human resources" [4].

In 2002, Nahum Rakover, a former Israeli deputy attorney general, included shmita in his summary of Judaism's environmental tradition, citing Maimonides in explaining that in terms of shmita, "one of the goals of ceasing all agricultural activity is to improve and strengthen the land" [40]. Before the start of the shmita year in 2007, Jacob Feinspan, executive director of Jews United for Justice, writing in Lerner's *Tikkun* magazine, labeled yovel "the Marshall Plan of its time" because of how it would rebuild a broken economy [41].

#### 4.3. Shmita Thought in this Decade

Hazon's 2010 publication, "Sustaining Our Vision: The Jewish Climate Change Campaign," reprinted the document that the organization presented at the Alliance of Religions and Conservation Celebration in November 2009 at Windsor Castle. It included frequent mentions of shmita as part of a Jewish plan for sustainability [42]. In 2013, Deutscher produced 7 Seeds Project's "Envisioning Sabbatical Culture: A Shmita Manifesto" [43] and Deutscher, Hazon staffer Anna Hanau, and Hazon founder and executive director Nigel Savage wrote "Hazon's Shmita Sourcebook" [44]. The two publications combined to offer extensive Jewish environmental thought on shmita. Deutscher's *Shmita Manifesto* is his lavishly illustrated magnum opus on shmita. Filled with kabbalistic diagrams, the book viewed shmita through the lens of the Transition Movement (grassroots mitigation of economic problems and climate change) [45], permaculture, and what Deutscher described as the "Cultural Mentoring" movement (and resembles the "8 Handshakes" movement, "a set of agreements that define not only how we relate to each other, but also articulate how we conduct ourselves in the world at large" [46]). It included more than 100 suggested ways of taking sustainability-minded shmita actions.



But the zenith of Jewish environmental thought leadership on shmita may have occurred in December 2010 when longtime Jewish environmental activist and thought leader Rabbi David Seidenberg proposed what he called the shmita covenant, positing that shmita is far more important to Judaism than previously thought:

“The goal and purpose of the Torah covenant, for society as a whole, is that the Israelites will observe the Shmitah year, and that in doing so, they will repair the relationship with the Earth that was destroyed in the generations leading up to the flood. Essentially, the covenant with Abraham is meant to take one people and one land, and put them in a right relationship with each other, in order to create a model for how humanity should live. That model is found in the observance of Shmitah and the Jubilee” [47].

Seidenberg elaborated in May 2013, in advance of the Shabbat reading of the Behar Torah portion:

“The whole purpose of the covenant at Sinai is to create a society that observed Shmita. It is in a land where Shmita is observed that human beings will learn to respect the Earth herself, by remembering that none of us can own her. ‘For the land is mine,’ God declares, ‘and you are strangers and settlers with me’ (Leviticus 25:23). And if none of us can own the land, cannot sell it and buy it, then what we do own is ultimately not ours, then the difference between rich and poor is not ‘just the way things are,’ then a person cannot be owned and the difference between slave and master is not real and not loved by God ...Only in such a society, where ‘property’ does not designate the right to use up what one owns, but rather a kind of fleeting relationship to what one cares for, can people learn the true meaning of justice. Only in such a society can people learn to share their wealth, nurture the poor alongside everyone else, relieve debts, end hunger and respect the fundamental human right to be free. The Sabbatical year was the guarantor and the ultimate fulfillment of the justice that Torah teaches us to practice in everyday life, and it was a justice that embraced not just fellow human beings, but the land and all life” [48].

As, according to Jewish tradition, the Torah was given at Mt. Sinai just after the Exodus from Egypt, the purpose of Sinai was to give the Torah to the Jewish people. As the Torah is the core text of Judaism, for shmita to be the purpose of Sinai and the Torah covenant—the agreement between Jews and God that Jews would observe the Torah’s laws and God would care for the Jews—Seidenberg essentially argued that the core purpose of Judaism is shmita practice. That may seem a bit of an overreach, but given that shmita is a utopic vision, if one considers that the point of observing Torah laws is to create an ideal society, then shmita practice could be that embodiment.

#### 4.4. *Shmita Seders*

In May 2013, at the suggestion of Evonne Marzouk [49], founder of Orthodox environmental group Canfei Nesharim, Mirele Goldsmith developed the first seder—a prayer book and/or service oriented around a meal—for shmita. Originally intended only for programmatic use within a day of shmita learning that Goldsmith—lead founder of Jews Against Hydrofracking and then-director of Hazon’s Jewish Greening Fellowship—organized for Jewish Greening Fellowship fellows, her shmita seder consists of a simple double-sided page, with content on one side and suggestions for follow-up resources on the back. Mirroring the Passover seder’s emphasis on the number four (four cups of wine, four questions, the parable of four children, and the four times that Moses asked Pharaoh to let the Jews go free), Goldsmith’s shmita seder focuses on four aspects of shmita: shmita as ritual, shmita as rest for the land, shmita as release of debt, and the end-of-shmita hakhel [50].

Inspired by Goldsmith, Deutscher penned an expanded shmita seder, published by Hazon in August 2013. Intended for use in any meal during the shmita year, Deutscher’s shmita seder, like seders for Passover and Tu B’Shvat, focuses on ritual foods. But unlike seders for other holidays that focus on specific foods, such as matzah and bitter herbs (among other foods) for Passover and

the biblical Seven Species (barley, date, fig, grape, olive, pomegranate, and wheat) for Tu B'Shvat, Deutscher's shmita seder ritualizes categories of food that would have been eaten during shmita years in biblical times: fresh (local, seasonal, and ripe) and preserved foods from perennial and wild plants [51].

Like Goldsmith, Deutscher utilized the number four, including discussions of four types of food that can be eaten during shmita (wild and perennial; seasonal; local; and ripe) and four groups of questions to ask: on letting the land rest, on the monetary value of food, on food security, and on food access [51].

A year later, on the eve of the new shmita year, Cardin published a shmita seder in blog form. Cardin's seder centers on six cups of foods, representing what she sees as the six attributes of shmita: honey for contentment; wine for gratefulness; figs for abundance; raisins for generosity and kindness; pomegranates for fertility; and dates for Earth's shared resources [13].

For Tu B'Shvat in 2015, Chovevei Sheviit developed its own shmita-themed seder, and the Israeli Ministry of Religious Services printed and distributed 30,000 copies [25]. Chovevei Sheviit's seder, unlike Hazon's, was intended for use solely on Tu B'Shvat of a shmita year, as opposed to any day within a shmita year. It is a Tu B'Shvat seder with a shmita focus, and not a shmita seder in the vein of those developed by Goldsmith, Deutscher, and Cardin.

Shmita seders will never approach the popularity of either Passover or Tu B'Shvat seders, but they offer a new way of ritually integrating shmita into Jewish life.

#### 4.5. *Shmita Thought in Organizational Context*

Not coincidentally, the uptick in thought leadership around shmita and Jewish environmentalism maps to the organizational development of the Jewish environmental movement. The Jewish Vegetarian Society of America (what later became known as the Jewish Vegetarians of North America and is now known as JewishVeg) was founded in 1975. Waskow founded The Shalom Center in 1983. Bernstein founded Shomrei Adamah (which means "guardians of the Earth") in 1990. Both Teva (which means "nature") and the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life were founded in 1993. Savage founded Hazon (which means "vision") in 2000. Aytzim (which means "trees"), originally known as the Green Zionist Alliance, was founded in 2001. And the vast majority of Jewish environmental initiatives (including Israel's Teva Ivri, founded in 2007) were founded in the 2000s and forward [52].

## 5. The Shmita Revolution

The genesis of the shmita revolution fittingly began with seven leaders within the Jewish environmental movement: Benstein, deputy director of the Heschel Center for Environmental Learning and Leadership (named after Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel) in Israel; Deutscher, who headed the Shmita Project (which is discussed later in this section); Einat Kramer, the founder and director of Teva Ivri (which means "Hebrew nature") in Israel; Jakir Manela, the founder of Kayam Farm and director of the Pearlstone Center; Nati Passow, the cofounder and director of Jewish Farm School; Savage; and Waskow. (See Appendix B for shmita "on one foot" from five of these seven leaders).

In the history of the modern Jewish environmental movement, shmita was discussed to a small extent within Jewish environmental organizations but largely was absent from the movement's public activities, which focused on other Jewish environmental concepts. That began to change a few months into the shmita year of 2007–2008.

### 5.1. *The Shmita Revolution in America: Aytzim, the Green Hevra, Jewish Farm School, and Pearlstone*

In November 2007 (just after the start of the 2007–2008 shmita year), Becca Weaver, then-educational director of Aytzim, delivered a workshop about shmita [53] at the organization's second Green Israel Summit, hosted at the Pearlstone Center in Reistertown, Maryland, outside of Baltimore. A month later, Passow delivered a keynote address about shmita [26–28] at Hazon's annual Food Conference at the Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center in Falls Village, Connecticut. Passow's

speech was the first of what I see as seven key events on three continents that galvanized the Jewish environmental community around shmita.

Although Passow attended a Jewish high school, his shmita education really only began in 2001, when he took a break—one might even say a sabbatical—from his undergraduate studies at the University of Pennsylvania and went to Israel for a year, and it happened to be during shmita. Passow saw signs in Jerusalem's shuk, the city's famous outdoor food market, indicating fruits and vegetables that were kosher by strict shmita adherence, and it sparked his interest. He returned to Penn and took a class called "Religion, Social Justice and Urban Development," taught by Andrew Lamas, who required a paper about gift giving [27]. Passow responded by writing about Shabbat, shmita and yovel based on the idea that the three interconnected concepts were examples of Jewish reciprocal gift giving, with God giving the Jewish people rest and the Jewish people giving God their focus and attention, unhindered from work in the fields [54].

After Penn, Passow worked for Teva—the Jewish environmental initiative that is independent of Teva Ivri and became part of Hazon in 2013—where he heard Waskow speak about shmita. That experience in turn led to his thinking about shmita, incorporating it into curriculum that he developed for the social-justice-oriented American Jewish World Service and, after he launched it, Jewish Farm School. As the shmita year approached in 2007, Jewish Farm School received more and more requests to teach about it. So by the time of Hazon's 2007 Food Conference, shmita "just became something I was thinking more and more about" [27].

With about 200 people in attendance [26], Passow's 2007 speech dealt mainly with the food aspects of shmita within the context of the Hazon-led Jewish food movement (which in my perspective is a subset of the Jewish environmental movement), but he also challenged those present to transform the way that they thought about the notion of Jewish community life.

"Shmita is not some abstract idea. Shmita is not only about the meticulous examination of seeds germinating in the soil or loopholes to allow Israeli farmers to continue to grow food. It can be a radical paradigm shift for the Jewish community as a whole," Passow said, "How radically transformed would the Jewish community be if in seven years every Jewish institution somehow looked tangibly different? And what would we, collectively, need to do for the next six in order to make this happen?" [55].

Passow's speech spurred husband and wife Rabbi Fred and Trisha Margulies to start a Jewish educational farm on the grounds of their paper-envelope factory, about an hour to the west of Chicago [56]. "Pushing the Envelope" farm uses 14 acres of land that were formerly grass lawn outside the factory [57], and in preparation for the 2014–2015 shmita year, it hosted Organic Yeshiva, a grassroots group run by then-rabbinical student (and now rabbi) Garth Silberstein that spent the summer of 2014 working the fields at Pushing the Envelope and studying the laws of shmita.

Passow's speech was equally motivational for Manela, who, after not being taught about shmita in Hebrew school, first encountered shmita when he read the Torah on his own during his senior year of high school in 1999–2000.

"It was definitely noteworthy, definitely in my kind of young, idealistic impressionable mind, without having read Arthur [Waskow] or anybody else about it, [I] was just like, wow that's amazing," Manela said of encountering shmita in the Torah for the first time [26].

While Passow was in Israel on his sabbatical from Penn, Manela was a sophomore at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, where he took a class in fall 2001, at the end of the 2000–2001 shmita year, with famed Evangelical environmentalist Calvin DeWitt. The author of multiple books on caring for Creation from a religious perspective, DeWitt introduced Manela to Waskow's book, *Godwrestling*, and Manela went on to explore and be influenced by the body of Jewish environmental literature. After graduation, Manela worked for the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, and, like Passow, for Teva, before founding Kayam Farm at the Pearlstone Center, part of The Associated, Baltimore's affiliate within the Jewish Federations of North America. Passow's speech subsequently helped lead Manela to greater incorporate shmita into his work at Pearlstone [26].

Importantly, the Jewish environmental movement at large adopted and developed *shmita* as a paramount Jewish environmental concept as well as an organizing principle. In the second key *shmita* event, 10 leaders of the Jewish environmental movement, including Manela, Passow, and Seidenberg, convened a two-day meeting of the then-nascent Green Hevra (then-spelled Green Chevre)—a now-dormant network of 16 Jewish environmental initiatives—at the Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center in November 2010. Five more leaders, including Marzouk and Waskow, joined the meeting by phone. Their goal was to determine how *shmita* could inform the work of the Jewish environmental movement [58]. The group delineated the following as *shmita* values:

- Holistic sustainability that is beyond humans;
- Land and community stewardship;
- Psychological release and dignity;
- Leveling of the economic playing field and preventing cycles of poverty;
- Engaging long-term thinking;
- Developing deep connections with Earth’s rhythms;
- Thinking about the common good versus the individual good, scarcity versus abundance, and cooperation versus competition [58].

The group also brainstormed how *shmita* could be used as a framework for the Jewish environmental movement. Ideas of how Jewish environmental organizations could incorporate *shmita* during the *shmita* year included:

- Holding a *shmita*-themed event or activity every Shabbat;
- Ceasing all programmatic events during the year;
- Increasing organizational financial transparency;
- Improving gender parity;
- Working with secular and non-Jewish anti-slavery and debt-release organizations;
- Developing a branded but decentralized year-long program of “reflection, evaluation, celebration and study” [58].

Of those above, only the last idea came to fruition—principally in the form of Hazon’s *Shmita* Project, which will be discussed in the next subsection—but the Green Hevra meeting nonetheless served as a major catalyst for Jewish organizational work on *shmita*.

In March 2011, the Green Hevra reconvened to discuss *shmita* the day before Kayam’s Beit Midrash—the third key *shmita* event—brought together about 150 people to study *shmita* and, as an American corollary of multi-year agricultural planning, the U.S. farm bill. Afterward, inspired by *shmita*, the participants went to Washington to lobby legislators on the farm bill [26].

Going forward, *shmita* education became part of the regular curriculum at Kayam Farm, and Manela organized *shmita* educational sessions for Baltimore’s Jewish leadership [26]. Importantly, Jewish environmental leaders continued to use Green Hevra meetings to discuss how their organizations could incorporate *shmita*—including an (unexecuted) idea to withhold a percentage of employees’ salaries for six years to fund every seventh year as a non-working sabbatical year—until 2014 at the dawn of the *shmita* year, when the Green Hevra’s foundation funding expired and the network entered dormancy.

(When it was last active, the Green Hevra’s 16 member initiatives included Aytzim, the Baltimore Jewish Environmental Network, Canfei Nesharim, the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, Eden Village Camp, Hazon, Hazon’s Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center, Jewish Farm School, Seidenberg’s NeoHasid.org, Pearlstone Center, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, The Shalom Center, Shores Jewish Environmental Programs, Urban Adamah, and Wilderness Torah [52]).

In May 2011, the interfaith debt-release group Jubilee USA and its member Jewish congregations began holding an annual Jubilee Shabbat—the weekend of the reading of the Behar portion of the Torah—consisting of “prayer, worship, study, and action to end the cycle of poverty caused by international debt and transform our global economic system” [59]. A corresponding Jubilee Shabbat guide included biblical quotes on debt and poverty; a page of blessings—developed by prominent Reform movement Rabbi Jack Riemer—praising God for commanding the pursuit of justice; information about how to sign up as a Jubilee USA congregation; and a joint introductory letter from Lerner, Waskow, Rabbi Jill Jacobs (executive director of Rabbis for Human Rights–North America, now known as T’ruah), Ruth Messinger (then-president of American Jewish World Service), and Rabbi David Saperstein (then-president of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism) [60].

Also in May 2011, I started editing the Jewish Energy Guide as a joint publication of Aytzim and the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (part of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs). Designed around the concepts of shmita and yovel, the Jewish Energy Guide’s goal was to help the Jewish community reduce its energy consumption by 14 percent—or one seventh—by the end of the following shmita year. The book contained seven sections, each of which contained seven articles, with a 50th article that articulated a vision of sustainability for the next yovel year. Contributors included Cardin, Goldsmith, Jacobs, Kramer, Manela, Marzouk, and Waskow, as well as prominent non-Jewish environmentalists Al Gore and Bill McKibben, and it was published online in 2013 and in print form in 2014, in advance of the shmita year [61].

In the 2014–2015 shmita year, Pearlstone let much of its agricultural land rest for the shmita year, planned shmita-themed family farm days for shmita and a “Shmita Fest”, and took its farmer-apprenticeship program on a one-year hiatus [62]. Pearlstone staffers were awarded an extra seven days off, with one permitted for vacation and six allocated to community service [26]. (Heading toward the next shmita year, Pearlstone is continuing the practice by awarding three community-service days annually to every staff member [26]).

These shmita activities may seem fairly innocuous—and Manela reported that they were widely well received—but he also noted that he received some pushback from community members who preferred shmita practice as it has been interpreted over the last 100 years or so by much of the Orthodox community [26]—as not applying in a place such as suburban Baltimore, outside Judaism’s biblical homeland.

Meanwhile, Passow’s Jewish Farm School, rather than ramping up activities, instead went on semi-hiatus—a quasi-sabbatical during which Passow and other organizational leadership stepped back and reassessed the group’s mission, goals, activities and place in the world [27,63,64].

“We would not look to grow our programs or our budget, and would instead dedicate time toward relationship building amongst our current and potential partners and colleagues. We would build a new board of directors . . . and we would ask important questions about the most effective and responsible use of our resources to impact our local community,” Passow wrote about Jewish Farm School’s approach to the year as the shmita year was closing. “We are emerging from the shmita year with even greater clarity on the need to design and run our organization at a pace that nurtures and supports our staff to grow on both professional and personal levels. This means dedicating time to staff learning, and balancing administrative and computer-based responsibilities with hands on work such as farming, gardening, and building projects” [64].

## 5.2. *The Shmita Revolution in America: Hazon and the Pollinated*

Passow’s 2007 keynote address was also an “aha moment” for Hazon’s Savage. The week before, he had attended “The Shemitta Year and Us Today”, a daylong event at Lincoln Square Synagogue in Manhattan held by the Orthodox rabbinical school Yeshivat Chovevei Torah. It addressed shmita as pertaining to food kashrut in Israel, the way that Orthodox Jews generally have addressed shmita over the past 100 years. A few months earlier, Savage—who spent the first part of his career in London’s financial industry before moving to New York and founding Hazon—had been thinking about how a



2007 *New York Times* article on shmita resembled the article on shmita it published in 2000. As it had been seven years since he founded Hazon, he had been reflecting about how Hazon could continue to weave together Jewish tradition and contemporary issues [28]. When Savage heard Passow's speech, it all clicked: Hazon would start a project to organize the Jewish community around shmita [27].

Shortly thereafter, the Shmita Project was launched as a joint project of Savage's Hazon, Passow's Jewish Farm School and Deutscher's 7 Seeds Project, with Deutscher heading the program. Deutscher developed a network of partner organizations to work on shmita-related projects.

Early on, Hazon formulated seven-year goals for the Jewish food movement [28]. In 2012, Hazon published its first Food Audit and Food Guide Toolkit; it and subsequent editions prominently featured shmita [65]. From autumn 2012 to spring 2013, at its Manhattan headquarters, Hazon hosted a seven-part study-session series on shmita led by Rabbi Ari Hart—cofounder of the Orthodox social justice group Uri L'Tzedek—through Kevah, the Torah study group organizer [66,67]. In spring 2013, Hazon teamed with Urban Adamah in Berkeley, California, to host a similar shmita learning series (but in three parts instead of seven) [68], followed by a shmita-themed skillshare and swapmeet [69]. Also in 2013, Hazon, together with the Baltimore Jewish Environmental Network, Hebrew College (a pluralistic rabbinical school in Massachusetts) and Siach—a joint project of Hazon, the United Kingdom's Jewish Social Action Forum, and Israel's Heschel Center for Environmental Learning and Leadership—created the Sova Project, a blog focused on promoting thought on shmita [70]. Sova published a resource library [71] and about three dozen articles—including some by Benstein, Cardin, Savage, and Waskow [72]—before the site became inactive just after the start of the shmita year in 2014. Other contributions to Sova (which means “satiety” or “satisfaction”) included articles on shmita in relation to social media [73]; human rights [74]; pedagogy [75]; sharing intellectual property and copyright licensing through Creative Commons [76]; and Facebook executive Sheryl Sandberg's imploration for women to “lean in” [77].

In early 2014, Savage spoke about shmita with Charlene Seidle, executive vice president of the Leichtag Foundation, at a meeting of the Jewish Funders Network [28]. That played a role in the decision of Chip Edelsberg, executive director of the Jim Joseph Foundation—one of the largest funders of the Jewish-American community—to publicly inquire how foundations and other funders should incorporate shmita into their philanthropic practice [78]. Now there are even some Jewish foundations asking if their endowments should be maintained forever or if they should perhaps have 50-year lifespans based on the yovel cycle [27].

Sometimes Hazon's focus on shmita led to unexpected results. For example, at a Hazon retreat for the holiday of Purim in March 2014, a guest speaker at the event, the comedian Roseanne Barr, inspired by a talk on shmita given by then-Hazon staffer Sarah Chandler, secured a \$5000 donation from one retreat participant to relieve the debts of three others in attendance. Barr then matched the \$5000 donation [79]. It may have been shmita's closest equivalent to Oprah's “Everybody gets a car!” television episode [80].

Perhaps the most eye-catching shmita activity launched in June 2014, when Hazon's Teva program sent a half-dozen Jewish environmental educators on a cross-country “Topsy Turvy Bus” trip from Denver to Hazon's Isabella Freedman campus in Connecticut to teach communities along the way about shmita [81]. The bus originally was designed in 2002 as a double-decker school bus by famed graphic artist Stefan Sagmeister at the behest of Ben Cohen (of Ben & Jerry's ice cream) for a cross-country trip by TrueMajority, the progressive nonprofit Cohen founded. But in 2007, the now-late California-based “art-car maker Tom Kennedy and a team of Bay Area-based Burning Man artists, commissioned by Cohen and inspired by Sagmeister, combined the bus with another school bus to create its current topsy-turvy form” [82]—imagine two stacked school buses glued together at their roofs, so that wheels touch both the ground and the sky—to promote support for education, the environment and health care in two cross-country road trips during the 2007–2008 U.S. presidential campaign (which happened to coincide with the shmita year). After the election, “food-justice activists Daniel Bowman Simon and Casey Gustowarow acquired the bus and drove it cross country for TheWhoFarm

(The White House Organic Farm Project), advocating that an organic garden should be planted at the White House" [82]. After Simon and Gustowarow's successful campaign, they donated the bus to Teva [82], which subsequently used it as a mobile Jewish environmental classroom for five cross-country trips (in 2009, 2010, 2011, summer 2014, and 2016) [82,83] after long-time Teva educator Jonathan Dubinsky converted it to run on biofuel [84]. Appropriately, the summer 2014 drive was the seventh cross-country educational trip for the vehicle after its reincarnation as the Topsy Turvy Bus, and the first to be dedicated to shmita education.

Also in June 2014, shmita was used as a small part of the effort to organize Jewish communal participation in New York's People's Climate March [85], which took place the Sunday before Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year) and the beginning of the 2014–2015 shmita year.

The effect of the Jewish environmental movement's push on shmita resonated in the Jewish arts community as well. For example, during the summer of 2014, the National Havurah Committee's Summer Institute produced a shmita 'zine, featuring, like most 'zines, both text and art drawn by hand, alongside photocopied illustrations. Lessons included "how to free up your time to let your soul sing" and "how to share stuff in four easy steps" [86]. In October 2014, the Jewish Community Center in Manhattan held a shmita-themed family-art day [87].

In 2015, Hazon opened an office in Detroit; all of its plans for the branch revolve around September 2022, when the next shmita year starts [28]. Speaking about shmita at every opportunity, Savage and, under his leadership, Hazon became shmita evangelists—or, in a more environmental parlance, shmita pollinators.

"We were bumblebees going from person to person and institution to institution and saying everywhere, 'Wow, shmita's coming! Wow, what does it mean? Wow, isn't this amazing? Wow, what are you going to do about it?'" Savage said, "To a certain extent it was something newish in the Jewish world in the way that people were able to pick something out, feel a sense of ownership, feel that they were part of Jewish tradition on the one hand but also they were part of something contemporary" [28].

Overall, the result of the above-described efforts—and there even were more shmita activities than detailed here—has been unprecedented attention given to shmita by American Jews.

### 5.3. *The Shmita Revolution in Israel*

Einat Kramer grew up in Israel as a typical Orthodox Jew, learning about shmita simply as a kashrut issue, and even then shmita was simply one of hundreds of Jewish laws. She was taught that Israeli environmentalists were lost children—secular Jews who were not taught Torah values and sought to find values in environmentalism instead. But in 1998 Kramer began studying computer engineering at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, where she became involved with Green Course, Israel's nationwide network of campus environmental clubs. She started reading the Torah—and seeing shmita—through an environmental lens. Two years later in Nottingham, England, Kramer met Waskow at the Limmud Conference, the world's largest alternative Jewish education conference, and she bought all of his books. She read the work of Jewish environmentalists and began to see how intertwined Judaism and environmentalism are [25].

"I was keeping kosher my whole life. And I was vegetarian since I was 14," Kramer said, "But I didn't connect the two things. I was vegetarian because I was thinking about the animals. I kept kosher because I was religious. At this [Limmud] conference, many, many things got connected for me" [25].

After finishing her bachelor's and master's degrees, Kramer started doing Jewish environmental work informally. But it was the discourse around shmita during the 2007–2008 shmita year that really awoke Kramer's activism [25].

"During the shmita year I was shocked to see the only thing people are talking about in the shmita year is, should we buy food from abroad or sell our lands to non-Jewish people?" said Kramer, "They didn't say even one word about the values of the shmita, about the mission it gives us, about the vision" [25].

In response, Kramer founded Teva Ivri that year and in late 2011 she drew initial plans for the next shmita year—big plans. She convened a team of more than 20 progressive Israeli shmita thought leaders called Chovevei Sheviit, meaning the Lovers of Shmita [25], and named after the 19th-century Zionist movement Chovevei Zion [88], which in its time included shmita observance among its goals. Chovevei Sheviit in turn launched Shmita Yisraelit, or the Israeli Shmita Initiative [25].

In the meantime, Siach brought together Jewish environmental and social justice activists from around the world in June 2012 for its second conference, the fourth key shmita event. Meeting on the shore of the Sea of Galilee in Israel, the Siach conference featured a keynote address on shmita by Savage and Benstein.

“Until that point, I think shmita in Israel was really the property of the Orthodox community,” said Savage, “And all sorts of people that morning had light bulbs go off” [28].

The Israeli Shmita Initiative held its first shmita conference in Tel Aviv with about 120 participants in late 2013, about a year in advance of the shmita year. In early 2014, it followed up with a shmita conference at the Knesset in Jerusalem. In the fifth key shmita event, 15 Knesset members addressed the conference, hosted by prominent Knesset members Ruth Calderon and Yitzhak “Bougie” Herzog [25].

But the Israeli Shmita Initiative did not stop there. It partnered with other organizations and held a total of seven conferences on shmita all across Israel (with seven chosen intentionally as the number), and thousands of people attended. Chovevei Sheviit members published op-eds about shmita in Israel’s major newspapers. Kramer brought shmita to the Israeli public in an even more direct way: Following the example of the patriarch Abraham—who the Torah describes as offering respite, food, and water to strangers in the desert as he traveled in his tent (Genesis 18:1–8)—Kramer bought a large tent and traveled with it across the country. Kramer took it one step further than Abraham: Like the Jewish patriarch, Kramer offered respite, food, and water to strangers, but she also engaged them in conversation about shmita. During the harvest festival of Sukkot in 2014, she traveled with 5000 others on a two-day trek by foot from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and offered free water, coffee, and fresh fruit. She organized conversations about shmita inside the tent [25].

“If we had one year off, what would we do in this year?” Kramer said she asked the participants, “And then after everybody spoke, we said, ‘OK, this is the shmita year. This is like a one year off for the people of Israel. What can you take from your dream to your life?’” [25]

Every month of shmita Kramer moved her tent to a new location [25]. Her tent even gained the attention of *The New York Times*, which covered how for the first time shmita was being observed differently in Israel thanks to the efforts of Kramer and other like-minded Jewish environmentalists [25,89]. Energiya Global, an Israeli company dedicated to bringing solar power to the Global South—and run by Israel’s “Captain Sunshine”, Yossi Abramowitz—transitioned to a paperless office for the shmita year. Video-software firm NDS, inspired by shmita’s yovel cycle, developed a list of 49 ways technology firms could observe shmita [89].

Chovevei Sheviit held a nationwide contest for the best shmita activities. Hundreds applied and 49 (mirroring seven shmita cycles) were accepted [25]. One of the entries was from a group of Jewish and Arab women working on crafts together. Another urged the withdrawal of Facebook activity for the shmita year [90]. Someone else, independent of the contest, developed the “Hour of Shmita” program—an online volunteering time bank with the goal of generating as many volunteer hours as there were hours in the shmita year [25,89]. One person said he would buy monkeys from scientific laboratories and set them free [89] (which may be a bad idea given that primates in scientific labs may have been injected with infectious diseases, but nonetheless the intention was about releasing captive non-domesticated animals). And community gardens opened their gates to allow anyone to gather their food [25,57].

For the second half of the shmita year, Israel’s public-television network Channel 1 ran weekly five- to 10-minute programs of Kramer talking about shmita and the environmental aspects of the weekly reading of the Torah [25].

During Sukkot in September 2015, just after the end of the shmita year, for the hakhel—the communal gathering that follows the shmita year—Kramer traveled with her tent and 10,000 people, twice the number from the year prior, on a repeat of the two-day hike from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Chovevei Sheviit wrote a shmita declaration and it was signed by hundreds, including the chief rabbi of Israel, the mayor of Tel Aviv, the head of Israel’s non-Jewish Druze minority, the leader of Israel’s Ethiopian Jews, and female rabbis from Israel’s small Conservative and Reform movements [25].

Still, Israeli work on shmita had its challenges—particularly, both directly and indirectly, because of the Knesset. For example, Calderon and Israeli President Reuven Rivlin in October 2014 launched a privately run Shmita Fund (alternatively known in Israel as Shmita Project, but unrelated to the Hazon-led initiative of the same name) that would have helped relieve the debts of up to 5000 families [91]—but third-party funding for it dried up after Israel’s coalition government collapsed that December and Calderon lost her seat in Knesset following early elections the following March [92].

Other than the work with Kramer’s shmita group (as described above), and changing Knesset landscaping from annual to perennial plants in advance of the shmita year [93], the Israeli government’s primary investment in shmita activities was through a 100-million-shekel allocation (\$28.8 million at the June 2014 exchange rate) to a committee shared by the ministries of agriculture and religious services [94]. But that funding was dedicated to shmita kashrut—such as support for farmers who follow the heter mechira—and religious education for the Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox. When Calderon was in the Knesset, she tried unsuccessfully to add representation to the committee from the government’s education and environment ministries, with the goal of creating government-supported educational, cultural and environmental shmita activities that in turn would reach a wider swath of the Israeli population [25,92]. What Kramer described as a public smear campaign against Calderon that tried to discredit her as a politician and attacked the legitimacy of her practice of Judaism (such as her choice to include leavened bread on her Passover seder plate [95]) coincided with the period after her effort to diversify shmita activities—an attempt opposed by moneyed interests in the Orthodox community, likely out of fear that it would detract from funding dedicated to their initiatives [92].

Calderon also proposed a plan for the government to forgive billions of dollars’ worth of debt belonging to the country’s poorest citizens, but she could not gain traction on it before leaving Knesset [92]. In 2015, Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked submitted a similar bill to Knesset; if passed, the government would have erased about 10 billion shekels (about \$2.6 billion) in debt owed by about 35,000 Israelis [96]. It was merged with a bill proposed by Knesset member Merav Michaeli and it was passed unanimously by the Knesset Constitution, Law and Justice Committee [97]. But the bill was never approved on the floor of Knesset, and so never became law [92].

Working outside of Knesset, Kramer met resistance from Haredi groups who were concerned about her engagement of Conservative, Reform and secular Jews [25]—essentially, those Jews who practice Judaism the most differently (and more progressively) than the fundamentalist ultra-Orthodox and are therefore often seen by the ultra-Orthodox as practicing invalid expressions of Judaism. (Israel has a long history of vitriol between the Ultra-Orthodox and other Jews.) But, all in all, Kramer and her team succeeded in putting shmita on the public agenda and broadening the scope of interest around it well beyond the Orthodox community to secular Jews and mainstream Israeli society.

“It [shmita] became a conversation,” said Kramer, “Until then there was never a conversation about it” [25].

The creation of that shmita conversation—which included what Kramer described as “a vibe of being merciful about debt” [92]—helped drive positive change, even through the non-funded Shmita Fund. For instance, the Shmita Fund had planned to partner with Israeli nonprofits such as Yedid, which focuses on social and economic justice, and Paamonim, which helps families manage their budgets, to forgive the debts of all who participated in shmita-inspired financial literacy classes. But when the Shmita Fund’s fiscal support never materialized, Paamonim instead crowdfunded enough money to follow through and relieve the debts of program participants anyway. Even after Calderon left the Knesset, some utilities, banks, and other financial institutions proceeded with their own smaller

debt-relief initiatives anyway as a result of earlier conversations with Calderon and other government officials, such as Eugene Kandel, Hebrew University economics professor and chairman of Israel's National Economic Council [92].

Two weeks after the hakhel organized by Kramer's Chovevei Sheviit, I led a delegation—including Marzouk, Schwartz, and Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life chair Rabbi Fred Scherlinder Dobb—to the World Zionist Congress in Jerusalem, the seventh key shmita event (with the sixth to be discussed in the next subsection). Aytzim passed a law mandating that Israeli legacy Zionist organizations—such as the World Zionist Organization and its subsidiaries, Jewish National Fund in Israel, the Jewish Agency for Israel, and Keren HaYesod—use shmita as a framework for developing seven-year environmental plans to measure, report on and reduce their carbon emissions [98–101]. Initially there was a significant resistance to the shmita bill when it was proposed, but once it passed through Congressional committees and advanced to the floor of Congress, it was approved with near-unanimous support.

While the World Zionist Congress is not as influential as the Knesset, its jurisdiction is still significant: It governs about 14 percent of Israel's land, handles immigration to Israel, and runs the country's de-facto national park service, Jewish National Fund in Israel [102]. What will it mean for Israel when Aytzim's shmita law is implemented? Can the law inspire Israel's state government to dedicate funds and action to seven-year environmental planning? Beyond hosting shmita conferences, can Israel's state government see shmita more broadly than as an issue of kashrut? What would it mean for the Knesset to dedicate some of its 100-million-shekel shmita budget to shmita environmental activities or to debt relief for the country's poorest citizens?

A week after the World Zionist Congress, Hazon held its own hakhel in Jerusalem where a few dozen Jewish environmental leaders from around the world discussed plans for the next shmita cycle [28].

#### 5.4. *The Shmita Revolution in the United Kingdom*

In 2013, Hazon teamed with London-based Limmud, the organizer of pluralistic Jewish educational gatherings, to produce the "Limmud Online Chavruta Project", in which people around the world studied shmita together—a virtual version of the traditional bricks-and-mortar yeshiva-based chavruta in which partners learn Talmud together [103].

In June 2014, the third Siach conference was held, this time in London. A few dozen leaders from the Jewish environmental movement attended the sixth key shmita event specifically to discuss plans for the then-upcoming shmita year [28]. That effort, in part, helped lead to a British educators' guide on shmita, produced by the Jewish Social Action Forum and its parent organization, JHub [104], the British Jewish community's largest Jewish social justice group. During the shmita year, the group sent students to Israel to volunteer with Kramer's Teva Ivri to pick fruits and vegetables from farms and bring them to soup kitchens [25].

For Sukkot of that shmita year, the Movement for Reform Judaism—the second-largest organized Jewish sect in the United Kingdom—distributed an 11-page digital document on how Reform Jews could incorporate shmita into their holiday observance. In addition to issues such as climate change, organic agriculture, food waste and food insecurity that are typically discussed within the Jewish environmental movement, the Reform movement's shmita document touched upon debt release, anti-slavery efforts, and fair-trade goods [105].

Shmita-related activity in the United Kingdom was significantly less than in the United States or Israel, but the Jewish population of the United Kingdom is also about 1/20th the size of the Jewish population in the United States or Israel.

## 6. *Shmita Beyond Judaism: From Wall Street to South Park*

The influence of Jewish environmental work on shmita has been reverberating well beyond the Jewish environmental movement. Still, shmita's biggest resonance outside of Judaism may not be with



its approach to land, but with its integration of debt forgiveness. Numerous shmita- and yovel-inspired debt-forgiveness campaigns were developed in the aftermath of the most-recent financial crisis—and some even earlier—both in the United States and around the world. The campaigns have not been concerned with other aspects of shmita and yovel, such as letting the land lie fallow, and instead focused very narrowly on debt forgiveness. Seeing the work as inspired by shmita and yovel rather than as manifested shmita and yovel practice, these campaigns proceeded independently of the shmita and yovel calendars.

Leading up to the new millennium of the common era, the British group Jubilee 2000, supported by a myriad of celebrities including U2's Bono, led a campaign that resulted in “the cancellation of more than \$100 billion of debt owed by 35 of the poorest countries” [106]. Jubilee 2000 subsequently splintered into other groups, including:

- The Jubilee Debt Coalition in the United Kingdom [107];
- Jubilee USA, which in turn has more than 70 member groups in its network council, including a dozen regional affiliates as well as national secular and religious nonprofits, such as the AFL-CIO union, American Jewish World Service, Friends of the Earth, Global AIDS Alliance, Muslim Public Affairs Council, Oxfam America, the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, and more than 20 Christian organizations [108];
- Campaigns in more than 30 countries around the world, from Malta to Malawi and Argentina to Zimbabwe [109].

The creators of the animated television series *South Park* picked up on the jubilee fervor and produced an episode on debt forgiveness in March 2009. The episode is a parody of the story of Jesus as told in the New Testament, with the character Stan Marsh playing the role of modern-day Jesus. At the end of the episode, Stan redeems the people of South Park by paying off all their debts (and taking those debts on himself) [110].

It took a while for the financial world to catch up with *South Park*, but beginning in 2011, financial analysts and journalists in mainstream media, including CNBC [111], Forbes [112], Reuters [113], and *U.S. News & World Report* [114], started calling for massive debt forgiveness in order to fix the American economy. Some, such as James Rickards, called specifically for a jubilee.

“Mandatory debt forgiveness in part—a modern jubilee—for underwater mortgages, student loans and excessive consumer credit balances would be a tonic for the economy,” Rickards wrote, “Our post-modern policymakers and economists should take a lesson from the ancient Israelites. It’s time for a jubilee” [114].

From November 2012 [115] through December 2013, activists from the Occupy Wall Street movement launched a Rolling Jubilee campaign that raised about \$700,000 online, which they in turn used to eliminate about \$32 million in debt held by ordinary Americans [116]. Their website proclaimed: “Now is the time for a jubilee for the 99 percent” [116]. Thirty-two million dollars is not much when compared, say, to the more than \$1 trillion in American student-loan debt [117]—or to the roughly \$60 trillion in worldwide sovereign-nation debt [118]—but \$32 million in debt relief remains a significant accomplishment for a grassroots organization, and it also points to the potential for shmita to inspire and transform society.

Debt forgiveness today is very feasible in part because debt loses much of its value to the lender once it hits the secondary market. When creditors assume that debtors will not repay, they often will write off their bad loans and sell the right to collect them to third parties for pennies on the dollar. In spring 2016, the comedian John Oliver bought the right to collect about \$15 million in debt for only about \$60,000; and inadvertently following the example of shmita and yovel, he forgave the \$15 million in debt [119]. Subsequently, the group that managed the Rolling Jubilee campaign accused Oliver of copying its biblically inspired tactics without giving credit to its project [120].

In roughly the same time period as the Rolling Jubilee campaign, the nation of Iceland forgave about \$2 billion of debt held by its citizens. The result was not a complete yovel for

Iceland's 323,000 citizens—on average, about \$6200 per citizen was forgiven—but nonetheless most Icelanders benefited from a sovereign-initiated household-debt reduction similar to what would happen under shmita and yovel [121,122]. In February 2015, Croatia followed suit by forgiving an estimated \$300 million in household debt held by its poorest citizens—those without property or savings [123,124].

In 2014, the fiscal aspects of shmita began to filter back into Jewish discussions. In his book *The Just Market: Torah's Response to the Crisis of the Modern Economy*, journalist and labor organizer Jonathan Brandow provided shmita as one of six economic-justice lessons offered by the Torah. Unknowingly echoing earlier discussions of Jewish environmental leaders within the Green Hevra, Brandow suggested a "Shmita Set-Aside" system: Withholding a small percentage of employee salary for six years to fund three-month sabbaticals every seven years in every industry [125].

Other aspects of shmita were taken up by other thought leaders in society.

In November 2014, Laurie Zoloth, professor of religion and bioethics at Northwestern University and then-president of the American Academy of Religion, used her presidential address at the A.A.R.'s national conference, held together with the Society for Biblical Literature, to suggest that the nearly 10,000 scholars of religion refrain from meeting every seven years [126].

"We could create an A.A.R. Sabbatical Year," Zoloth said in her address, so groundbreaking for an academic conference that it was reported on by *The New York Times*. "We could choose to not meet at a huge annual meeting in which we take over a city. Every year, each participant going to the meeting uses a quantum of carbon that is more than considerable. Air travel, staying in hotels, all of this creates a way of living on the Earth that is carbon intensive. It could be otherwise" [126].

A few months later, Zoloth joined Aytzim's delegate candidate slate for the World Zionist Congress and was part of the team that wrote the law on shmita that passed at the Congress in October 2015 [100].

Even the Pope has taken inspiration from shmita. In his landmark May 2015 encyclical on climate change, *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis cited shmita among his reasons why people should care for Creation:

"This law came about as an attempt to ensure balance and fairness in their relationships with others and with the land on which they lived and worked. At the same time, it was an acknowledgment that the gift of the earth with its fruits belongs to everyone. Those who tilled and kept the land were obliged to share its fruits, especially with the poor, with widows, orphans and foreigners in their midst" [127].

Perhaps one of the reasons why shmita has been so inspirational, resonating from the halls of the Knesset to the halls of the Vatican, is because shmita represents a vision for society in which people put aside their differences and live side by side peacefully and as equals, a society where no one has too much or too little, a society that cares for the Earth that in turn cares for its people—essentially, a society that addresses the roots of many of the problems that plague the world today. A shmita society is one without war or strife, without famine or poverty, and without what Ernest Crawley called the "taboo of personal isolation" and Sigmund Freud called the "narcissism of small differences" [128]—the things that make groups of humans seem different to each other, the source of so many conflicts. Shmita can help negate envy, greed, want, and bias, and provide peace without hierarchic totalitarianism. At a time when the world seems to be on fire—as we are inundated with a seemingly nonstop assault of police shootings, terrorist attacks, armed conflict, and climate change-induced meteorological havoc—shmita could become a part of the solution.

## 7. Conclusions

Religious practice is always (even if often slowly) changing, and the reimagining of shmita provides one way that Jewish practice is adapting its millennia-old traditions to address modern environmental and societal problems. From the idea of the weekend to mainstreaming the notion of monotheism, Judaism has brought many important concepts to the world at large. If adopted on a broader scale, shmita likewise has the potential to transform society.

The Jewish environmental movement mainly has disregarded the slave-release aspect of shmita, but with more slaves today—an estimated 46 million—than at any point in recorded human history [129], Jews and non-Jews alike can draw inspiration from shmita in the fight to end slavery worldwide. Still, shmita is becoming a Jewish ritual whose environmental and social justice depths can be rediscovered, and even, like so many other biblical laws, inspire actions beyond those originally described in the Torah so that shmita can be observed in a modern era.

As shmita is being reclaimed and reimagined within Judaism, Jewish practice is changing—and both Jews and non-Jews alike have the opportunity to integrate the Torah’s ecological wisdom into our lifestyles. The effect so far has been relatively small but remains significant—particularly for what it offers society conceptually—and it is growing quickly. The shmita revolution may not be televised, but it has the potential to quietly transform our relationships with God, with each other as humans, and as humans with the Earth.

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## Appendix A. Organizations Leading the Shmita Revolution

Aytzim: Ecological Judaism—<http://aytzim.org>  
 Hazon—<http://hazon.org>  
 Jewish Farm School—<http://jewishfarmschool.org>  
 Pearlstone Center—<http://pearlstonecenter.org>  
 7 Seeds Project—<http://7seedsproject.org>  
 The Shalom Center—<http://theshalomcenter.org>  
 Teva Ivri—<http://tevaivri.org.il/en/>

## Appendix B. Shmita on One Foot

The Talmud tells a story about someone who wants to learn the whole Torah very quickly, so he approaches rabbis asking them to teach him everything while he stands on one foot (Shabbat 31a). Here is how some of today’s leading Jewish environmentalists think of shmita on one foot:

Einat Kramer

“Shmita for me is an opportunity to stop from the race—from our daily life—for one year and think again, rethink about your values, about your beliefs, about how much work do you really have to do, about your community, about your family, about the environment” [25].

Jakir Manela

“I don’t think the goal is shmita in and of itself—it’s: How do we bring social ecological financial and spiritual sustainability to the Jewish community and to the land and to the world?” [26].

Nati Passow

“Over the course of six years, our lives get busy and we get caught up in the day to day—we get concerned with making money and driving our businesses and whatever it might be—but we’re actually instructed for one year out of seven years to make that year different, particularly in terms of our relationship to land, our relationship to food, and our relationship to money. And if we can successfully dedicate a year that does tangibly look different and feel different in those respects, think about how radically changed our community could be” [27].

Nigel Savage

“The more that you engage with shmita, the more it enables people to think really seriously about the world we’re living in and our values and the choices that we make” [28].

Rabbi Arthur Waskow

“Shmita is an act of eco-social justice that has profound spiritual roots in the sense that only the breath of life [God] has ultimate control” [29].

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