

What Can a Bird and a Seed Teach Us about *Shemita*?

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One spring afternoon a few years ago, I was walking along Riverside Drive, not far from JTS, when I heard a chirping sound. At that time, my phone was set to tweet like a bird when I received a text message. So, naturally, I took my phone out and checked it. I was surprised to see there were no new messages. I pushed the power button to see if I somehow missed a text, but no notification appeared.

I heard the sound again, re-checked my phone, but still, no message. It took three rounds of this cycle to realize that the chirping wasn't coming from my cell phone—it was coming from a *real live bird* in Riverside Park! My brain had become wired to hear “tweet” and think that the *more likely option* in my day-to-day urban life was a text message on my phone, as opposed to an actual bird.

This tweet was the wake up call I needed to realize how disconnected I had become from the natural world—from the land, its sounds, and native inhabitants. I was ungrounded, and the birdsong was like a springtime shofar blast for sensory overload. It was the nudge I needed to spend more time outdoors, to mute my phone's pings and dings, and to look at the biblical concept of *shemita* (release) with fresh eyes and newly attuned ears.

In Parashat Behar, God tells the Israelites that when they enter the land that God will give them, “the Land shall observe a Sabbath of the Adonai”—*veshavta ha'aretz Shabbat l'Adonai* (Lev. 25:2). This becomes known as the *shemita* year. For six years, you can work to your heart's content—you can sow, prune, and gather, but in the seventh year, the land shall have a full, complete rest: *shabbat shabbaton yihiyeh la'aretz* (Lev. 25:4)!

The concept of *shemita* was radical in its original context in the Ancient Near East. For an agrarian society, dependent

on self-sustaining agricultural production, it was a bold move requiring immense faith and forethought to leave land fallow every seven years. In fact, one reason for the decline of the flourishing Neo-Sumerian economy of Mesopotamia in the early second millennium BCE was the high alkaline content of the soil in areas of the Diyala River region. Irrigation was overutilized, crop output faltered, and the economy failed.¹ Thus, it was indeed radical for our Israelite ancestors to put their faith, fortune, and future in God's hand. It was brave of them to trust that God's land would produce more productively, *if* it had the opportunity for a *shabbat shabbaton*—a period of complete rest.

As radical as *shemita* may have been for the ancient Israelites, perhaps the concept is even more radical for us today. We work “from the office” and “from home”—which actually means that we work wherever we are. We literally carry our work with us in our pockets. We *sow* at the supermarket, we *prune* on the pick-up line, and we *gather* while we wait for the green light. We toil until we can't tell the difference between a sparrow's trill and a sputtering social-media troll. It's hard enough for us to stop working at 5PM, and to shut our laptops for twenty-five hours over Shabbat. But a full year of complete rest from production?! Preposterous!

The Italian commentator Seforno (1475–1549) notes that “during the *shemita* year, the farmer, instead of ‘serving’ the soil which requires cultivation, will instead turn his efforts to serving God directly. Just as the weekly Sabbath is a day set aside for intensive service of God, so the *shemita* year

¹ Levine, Baruch. *The JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus*. Pg. 272, Excursus 10.

is to serve the same purpose.”² Seforno seems to imply here that it’s challenging to simultaneously serve God while also dedicating oneself wholly to one’s labor. (Thanks for the validation, Seforno!) The farmers were only able to dedicate themselves fully to God when they set down their scythes.

How then might we serve God, if we don’t have our own farms to leave fallow, and if we don’t work in fields that allow us to set down our pruning shears every seven years?

Perhaps we can infuse our lives with the spirit of *shemitah* through recognizing the blessings of nature and respecting the inhabitants of the land—from the birds that tweet to the seeds that grow. And we don’t even have to wait seven years to do so. *Shemitah* offers us a vision of a world in which we can live in harmony with our environment. Perhaps it’s an idealistic dream, yet it’s one worth envisioning and pursuing for the sake of our ancestors, ourselves, and our children in generations to come.

I started with a bird, and I’ll end with a seed. Researchers at the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies at Kibbutz Ketura recently harvested a crop of dates grown on palm trees from 2,000-year-old seeds retrieved from archaeological excavations.³ The Ketura ancient palm grove has a few trees—the most senior, nicknamed Methuselah, was planted in 2005 from a seed found at Masada during the excavations led by Yigal Yadin in 1960s. Since then, thirty-two seeds have been planted and six germinated, miraculously reviving an ancient variety of date. These special fruits resemble modern dates, and have a very sweet taste, like honey.

These miracle seeds didn’t just rest for one *shemitah* year—they rested for two millennia! Imagine for a moment, a weary rebel or a tired mother near Masada, plucking a date from a nearby palm tree and sucking its honey for a boost of energy. Then dropping that seed on the ground, only for it to be re-discovered 2,000 years later, and then planted and

harvested anew—so we today can savor its sweet honey and its even sweeter story.

Let the story of these date seeds give you hope: hope for a time when we can all enjoy the blessings of *shemitah*, and hope for a world where people live in harmony with our land and its inhabitants.

² Seforno on Lev. 25:2

³ Rosella Tercatin, “Kibbutz harvests previously extinct dates eaten in Judea 2000 years ago”, *Jerusalem Post* (August 14, 2021).