

For Seven's Sake – A Sabbatical Epic

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"Only connect! Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted..."

– E. M. Forster

Introduction: Connecting Normative and Narrative

Friday night, May 22, 2015, corresponding to the 5th of Sivan 5775, represents a rare confluence of three 'cosmic' cycles. First of course, it is the eve of the Shabbat – the seventh day. It also is the 49th day (7 x 7) of the Omer counting, and therefore the last day before the holiday of Shavuot, marking the giving of the Torah. And last but not least, this is all taking place in the shmita year, the seventh year of the sabbatical cycle. That may be interesting to some – but beyond the math, are there deeper connections here?

Part of the genius of Judaism is its creative synthesis of *halacha* and *aggada*, rules and stories, law and lore, normative and narrative. Or as Forster puts it, "prose and passion."² One paradigmatic example of this is Shabbat: defined by a raft of regulations (literally hundreds of do's and don'ts), aggadically speaking, Shabbat is both woven into the Creation cycle (Gen. 1,2), and also signifies *zecher leyitziyat Mitzrayim*, a remembrance of the Exodus from bondage in Egypt. Thus the regulations themselves connect us both to our place in Creation, and to notions of freedom from different sorts of slavery in our lives.

Likewise, the Omer period that links Pesach and Shavuot, ties together both the historical side of Exodus, freedom and the reception of the Torah, with the agricultural side of the wheat and barley harvests, culminating in the thanksgiving of the *bikurim*, the first fruits and their offering. The maturation of the recently enslaved people and their acceptance of a social and spiritual framework of civilization, and the growth of the grain that is the staff – and stuff – of life, the foundation of material civilization, parallel and mirror each other.

The shmita year does indeed possess a wealth of legislation which creates a yearlong Sabbath: releasing the land from cultivation, the poor from debts, and in general promoting social solidarity in getting through a year of a lower material standard of living together. However, the collection of mitzvot together known as shmita lack an overarching narrative, a mythic "back-story" that ties it in to the larger historical experiences and themes that inform the rest of Jewish existence. In that respect,

¹ This essay is based on a lesson given on Shabbat Parashat Behar at the Ve'ahavta congregation of Zichron Yaakov, and has been inspired in part by teachings of many, in particular, study with Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin, and *shiurim* by Rabbi Michah Odenheimer (founder of Tevel Betzedek) at a conference of Siach on Shmitah (London, 2014). See also his article "[A Jewish Response to Globalization](#)" reprinted in *Righteous Indignation: a Jewish Call for Justice*, edited by Or Rose, Jo Ellen Green Keiser, and Margie Klein (Jewish Lights, 2008)

² While we think of dry halacha as being more prosaic as opposed to often juicy aggadot, it is aggada that is literally prose, and any student of halacha will tell you that there is much passion there as well.

shmita seems to exist in glorious isolation from the rest of our Jewish lives, and that, coupled with the trenchant critique that shmita embodies of our economy and society – makes it more of a "hard-sell" in our world.

No longer: the confluence of the three "hepto-cycles" of Shabbat, shmita and the Omer, brings to light some deeper connections that can help us understand the deeper frame of shmita, and how it fits in to larger questions of Jewish being in the world.

Why Seven?

The seven year cyclicity of shmita is so basic that another name of shmita is *shvi'it*, "the seventh [year]." But what is the real significance of the shmita cycle being seven years? The number seven is so ubiquitous in Jewish tradition that we might miss some less explicit underlying connections. While the idea of a seven-day week seems fundamental,³ the idea of an agriculturally related cycle of seven years is less obvious. Here is where the important role of literary context and allusion comes in, to give us a back-story and a frame for a wider understanding.

Where else in the Biblical narrative is there the idea of agriculture and crop yields being connected to a seven year period? While Jacob working for Laban for seven years in order to win the hand of Rachel suggest itself⁴ - the more relevant parallel is with Pharaoh's dreams of cows and stalks, and Joseph's interpretations of them as signifying seven fat years of abundance followed by seven lean ones of drought and famine (see Gen. 41). With divine aid, Joseph interprets Pharaoh's dreams, but then goes one further and becomes development consultant to the Crown. He makes this charged proposal:

Let Pharaoh ...appoint overseers over the land, and organize the land of Egypt in the seven years of plenty. And let them gather all the food of these good years that come, and lay up grain under the hand of Pharaoh for food to be stored in the cities. And the food shall be for a store to the land against the seven years of famine, which shall come upon the land of Egypt, so that the land may not perish in the famine (Gen 41:34-36).

This of course sounds like the epitome of foresight and good management, and is indeed roundly understood as another of the many examples of Joseph's perspicacity and shrewd character.⁵ It also drives the narrative forward, for the vast stores of food in Egypt, collected and centrally administered by the State, are what bring the brothers down to Egypt, providing the setting and the setup for the confrontation there with Joseph, and subsequent reconciliation.

³ But not without its own story: see *The Seven-Day Circle: The History and Meaning of the Week* (New York: Free Press, 1985), Israeli-born sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel's seminal book on the origin of the seven day week in Western civilization. While of course the Bible was instrumental in promulgating the idea of a seven day week via the cosmogony of Genesis 1, this almost certainly goes back to older astrological beliefs connected to Sun, Moon and the five visible planets, as evidenced by the names of the days in scores of cultures, listed there.

⁴ And seems almost shmita-like in its image of years of labor crowned in the seventh by cessation and the attainment of love and the enjoyment of a home...

⁵ See eg, Nahum Sarna *The JPS Torah Commentary – Genesis* (JPS, 1989): "[This section] has been included here because it provides examples of Joseph's wisdom and leadership capabilities. It also supplies an explanation for the extraordinary contrast between the Egyptian system, which concentrated land ownership in the hands of the state, and the Israelite ideal of private ownership of property." (p. 321, at 13-26). The irony of this comment is of course that it is "Joseph's wisdom" that creates the "Egyptian system" that contrasts with the "Israelite ideal."

Bad Years After Good

But the end is well known: after the seven good years, where surplus yields are collected by the state apparatus, overseen by Joseph, come the lean years, where the people's food is sold back to them by the State. It doesn't seem to raise an eyebrow that widespread disaster relief is not freely given, that all the vast stores collected precisely for this purpose are monetized and that the royals here engage in the meanest form of profiteering. At first, of course, flush from the successes of the fat years, the system probably didn't evince much of a problem. After such a long winning streak, the people would have some savings set aside for the occasional setback – given the fear of drought, a *non*-rainy day, as it were. Likewise, each bad harvest is probably also initially perceived as temporary. No farmer has planned for seven years of famine.

It is not coincidental that in this hierarchical system of command and control, there is also no transparency: Joseph, and through him Pharaoh, are privy to the divine prognostication that has allowed them to corner the grain markets, and make ruthless use of their monopoly. The crucial information of the changing yields and availability of grain has been withheld from the citizens, preventing them from making rationally strategic economic and other decisions.

Space does not permit quoting in full the complete dismantlement of Egyptian society that is the direct result of Joseph's wisdom and shrewdness (Gen 47:13-26). But it is catastrophic and total: first all the money, the hard earned savings of the people, runs out, so they pay with their livestock (including draught animals). After that, with nothing left, they enter into complete subjugation – "buy us and our land for bread" (47:19) – allowing for the complete nationalization of the land, the removal of rural populations, and a grain tax in perpetuity.⁶

Is it any wonder that this is the society that later on enslaved the Israelites? In fact, their slavery was intimately bound up with the regime of accumulation that so characterized post-Joseph Egypt: according to the Biblical narrative, it was not the pyramids that the children of Israel built, but the great store cities – *'arei miskanot* – of Pithom and Raamses (Ex. 1:11).

In sum, the Bible documents the first boom and bust business cycle –and what happens when a canny tycoon is given both insider info and the keys to the kingdom. While the resulting hyper-feudal system is far from capitalism, the regime of amassing and hoarding is a precursor of Karl Marx's famous quote: "Accumulate, accumulate! This is Moses and the Prophets!" (*Capital*, vol. 1). Or given the fact that both capital and the means of production were appropriated here, shall we say: 'This is Joseph and the Pharaohs?'

This then is the ur-image of a seven year plan connected to agricultural fertility, property regime, decentralized versus concentrated wealth, and dealing with abundance and scarcity. This is what they are leaving in the Exodus from Egypt. This is the anti-model, the negative idea that the Torah's vision of a compassionate society is meant to negate. But before we can completely understand that other vision of an established, sustainable society, with its alternative idea of a seven year cycle, there is an important intermediate link, just as there is a transitional period that needs to be lived through to get from the House of Bondage to the Land of Milk and Honey.

⁶ The oppression of this entire plan did not completely escape traditional commentators – see e.g. Rashbam on 47:21 where Joseph's actions are compared to those of the evil conqueror and dictator, Sennacharib.

The Antidote to Egypt

What does it mean to leave this Egypt? What can lead to a complete paradigm shift among a newly liberated people, who has only known slavery and dependence, and a single response to fear and scarcity: stockpile, hoard, concentrate and oppress? What would represent and symbolize the opposite: anti-accumulation, anti-control, anti-Egypt?

It would essentially have to change their entire experience of their day to day sustenance, of what it is and how it is gotten. It would have to reinforce the idea that food is a gift freely given, to be enjoyed equally by all, that it shouldn't be stockpiled or owned, or even bought and sold. That it exists to fulfill need, not greed. This sounds like a pretty tall order, like it would take a miracle, an amazing surprising wonderful boon – like manna from heaven.

And indeed, it is that miraculous, mythical manna that is the ultimate contradiction to Egypt and all that it represents. As told in Exodus 16, manna is given by God to feed the people in the desert. It falls every day, and crucially – it can't be hoarded: neither overcollected (v. 17-18), nor stored (v. 19-20). Everybody gets exactly what they need, no more no less, and those who don't trust the system, and try to salt some aside – get only stench and maggots. Significantly, manna is implicitly contrasted with slavery in the description of its collection in Exodus 16:4, "and the people shall go out and gather each day that day's portion," *laktu devar yom beyomo*. For only a few chapters earlier, in Exodus 5 :13, the Egyptian taskmasters cruelly insist on the Israelite's fulfillment of their daily quota of bricks, even though they are now to be given no straw – *kalu ma'aseichem devar yom beyomo*.⁷ For slavery, the daily quota was a minimum to be produced and served up to the overlords, for the manna – the daily portion is a maximum, limiting personal acquisition and consumption

The only time a double portion is given is on Friday, for the Shabbat – to obviate work on the day of rest. That is, 'setting aside' is allowed for the sake of spiritual regeneration, but not for amassing wealth. A halacha that came from this aggada is that one of the reasons for Jews having two *challot*, loaves of bread, on the Shabbat table is exactly to remember this doubling, the *lechem mishneh*, of the manna of Shabbat (16:22). As we shall see, this linkage of manna and Shabbat is highly significant in the understanding of the deeper narrative context of shmita.

From Gathering to Ingathering: Shmita, Shabbat – and The Memory of Manna

The manna was unique to that time of wandering in the desert, which period itself was sui generis. What replaced the manna? What could replace it? According to the Book of Joshua, the manna ceased when the Israelites tasted of the bounty of the Land of Israel: "On that same day when they ate of the produce of the land, the manna ceased. The Israelites got no more manna; that year they ate of the yield of the land of Canaan" (5:12).

Joshua provides one angle of the story of the entrance to the land. Another is provided by Leviticus 25, the chapter that introduces the idea of shmita. There it states explicitly that immediately upon entering the land, the Israelite nation is meant to observe shmita: "When you enter the land that I assign to you, the land shall observe a sabbath of the Lord" (25:2). Putting the two together you get a whole nation going straight from being manna-eaters to being shmita-observers.

⁷ I'm indebted to Odenheimer, op. cit., for this connection, and other points regarding the significance of the manna in the narrative progression.

But even without that direct implied contiguity – shmita is a direct continuation of the manna paradigm. However, instead of being applicable day in and day out (*yom be'yomo*), it is deemed doable one year in seven; back to that seven year plan idea. If you are forbidden from tilling the land and commercializing what grows of itself, then you are thrown back willy-nilly into a veritable gatherer economy. Add to that the laws against stockpiling shmita produce, even fencing in property, not to mention forgiving loans and getting people out of debt – and you get a year-long anti-Egypt, that the manna was really only a foretaste of. In Egypt the regime centralized production and distribution and sunk people hopelessly into debt – the shmita paradigm does the exact opposite on all counts.⁸

There is a key insight that connects the weekly Shabbat cycle with the seven-yearly shmita cycle. Each of them is a cycle, and so it's hard to know where the loop begins. Most people probably assume that the Shabbat day comes at *the end* of the cycle: you work all week, and then you need to rest up, to be able to go back to that daily grind. Indeed, the Western economical-rational approach would say just that – rest in order to work. Rest should be R&R – recover and recuperate, a means for the sake of the end of productive labor.

That would be thinking like an Egyptian, and significantly, it is false. A wonderful midrash (B. Sanhedrin 38a) asks the simple question: why was *adam* created last in the order of creation? One answer is so that they enter immediately into a mitzvah, i.e., Shabbat. Imagine: freshly made in the dewy, week-old Creation, and the first thing the human beings have to do is get ready for Shabbat. Boil the water, light the candles! But why go directly into Shabbat? Clearly they needed no rest; the batteries were fresh from the divine shop, they needed no recharging.

Shabbat, then, is not rest rationally defined, a means to be able to work more productively, but a spiritual ideal to be obtained. It is not the end of the week, but its ends. This stands the labor/leisure ration (or work/life balance) on its head. It implies being over doing, and certainly over having. And that is the connection with shmita, for as we have seen above, the Land gets its Shabbat immediately upon the entrance of the Israelites.⁹ They don't need to work it for six years first. Just like Shabbat, shmita begins the cycle, and is its end goal.

Shavuot, Manna, Torah and Shmita: Tying It All Together

And now to the third member of the triad we opened with. Between the seven day cycle and the seven year cycle is a seven week cycle. It is *sefirat ha'omer*, the counting of the days between Pesach – leaving Egypt, servitude, the command and control civilization of Egyptian slavery to things and to political power – to Shavuot, and the receiving of the Torah, which is also *chag habikurim*, the holiday of the first fruits, and the gratitude for entering the Land (see e.g., Deut. 26).

⁸ The assonance of the Hebrew terms are striking: "control" is *shlita*, while *shmita* literally means "release" "let go" –again, the exact opposite.

⁹ This can also be seen from the divine blessing given in Lev. 25:20-22. In answer to the question what they were going to eat in the seventh year, God responds saying that in the sixth year of the cycle the land will be fruitful enough to produce for three years – enough for the sixth, the seventh, and into the eighth, since they hadn't sewn in the seventh. If the whole idea of shmita was regeneration for exhausted overused farmland, how could anyone expect heightened fertility exactly at its lowest point? The whole vision of a shmita-system agriculture requires a permaculture approach: that the regular tilling and tending add fertility to the soil, they don't deplete it, and so the seventh year becomes the end goal of an abundance, where the land can indeed be at optimal fertility, and the human community can basically coast. Thanks to Talia Schneider for that striking insight.

There are intriguing connections here as well. When the new grain offering is brought, at the end of the counting of the omer – it is accompanied by two loaves of bread (Lev. 23:17), echoing the two portions of manna. Even more strikingly, there is the connection between manna and the Torah. For what was placed in the Ark of the Covenant, as the most sacred of sacred mementos of the desert encounter with the divine? There were of course the tablets of the Law,¹⁰ and, yes, a jar of manna. How much manna? An omer (Ex. 16:32-34), which we are informed is the measure of human need (v. 16), *devar yom beyomo*.

And that is what we are to count, day in and day out, for 49 days – to get us to the Mountain, and to the Teaching.

The connections, though, are not just ritual ones. The first fruits can only be brought and the holiday celebrated once the poor have had their share – a full tithe of the bounty (Deut. 26:12). Likewise, in Leviticus 23, after the description of the holiday's Temple rituals (verses 15-21), the text repeats the commandments of *peah* and *leket*, to leave the corners of the fields and the unharvested gleanings of the crops for the poor. Why this ethical intrusion into a ritual calendar?

Pesah, with its unleavened bread and arduous dietary restrictions is clearly in some profound way about food. Sukkot, second only to Pesah in strenuous preparations, focuses on where, in what and how you live—it's theme is shelter. Both mandate a form of enforced poverty – eating matzah, the bread of affliction; living in a shack, the most modest of dwellings. These holidays are great social equalizers: fulfilling their two central obligations make the wealthy more like the poor, and no one, rich or poor, is excluded by the celebrations.

The Biblical Shavuot is different. The celebration focuses on the first fruits and newly harvested grain, and the main celebrants are the landowners, those who have grain and fruits to bring.

As such this festival is "about" land, a basic element of civilization along with food and shelter. Perhaps ideally, everyone was supposed to be a landowner – but the Torah realizes that this was never going to be the case. The holiday, then, has the dangerous potential of splitting the people between landed and landless, and rather than being a 'leveller' like Pesach and Sukkot, bringing rich and poor together in a shared experience, it could reinforce the socio-economic gap. The unexpected verse about leaving parts of the harvest for the poor (reinforced aggadically in the story of Ruth) is a reminder of mutual obligation, a reminder that the land should be a source of justice and not division, that the holiday requires an ethic of care, and not just a celebration of wealth.

This becomes a statement about holidays and celebration in general: gratitude for our bounteous harvests of various types is best expressed through compassion for those who have not been so blessed -- not through closed, self-satisfied convocations of the favored.

So now we know not only what shmita has to do with Mt. Sinai,¹¹ we can see how it fits into the larger narrative arc of the history of the Jewish people and our core values. Jewish tradition makes a huge

¹⁰ Some sources say *both* tablets: Rabbi Yehudah ben Ilai said that there were two arks – one with the first, broken tablets, the other with the second, whole ones (Yerushalmi, Shekalim 6b). Picture that: the first tablets – divine but broken; the second tablets – whole but human. And next to them, a little jar of white flaky stuff.

¹¹ Rashi's classic question, based on Lev. 25:1,2, mentioning the mitzvah of shmita as the only one said to come directly from Sinai. Personal anecdote: When I first came to Israel, I had an outstanding teacher named Debbie

deal of having been slaves in Egypt, and the Exodus from there, not only in the centrality of Pesach and the Seder, but in the ubiquity of Shabbat, an ever present reminder. We know what leaving Egypt means – but that is the going out, into the desert, the unknown. There we received the manna, and all that represents, which sustained us in our wanderings, and got us to the Land.

We make a much smaller deal (ritually, cultically) of having survived the desert and reached the Land. That is where the manna story leaves off, and where the shmita story begins: *ki tavo'u el ha'aretz* – when you come into the Land. But in our generation, with the existence of the State, as well as the wealth and power of Jews elsewhere, we can't use the fact of the age old Diaspora as an excuse anymore, for the Torah to be the "portable homeland"¹² and not to come to grips with responsibility for land – whether this Land or any land, or the *eret*, Earth, in general.

And here is the amazing part: there will be time for exerting some control, whether in labor or in sitting under one's vine and one's fig tree, but the first thing you need to do, upon entering the land is *sh'mot* (second person imperative of shmita)– let go, release. Do not – repeat do not - possess, do not own, do not lord yourselves and your needs over the land and its other inhabitants, citizen or foreigner, human or not. The deep message of shmita is how to train ourselves not only to build a society that is anti-Egypt in its commitment to compassion, collective well-being and social solidarity, but to actually want to build one.

Our globalized world, with its widening social gaps, more wealth concentrated in fewer hands, accompanied by grinding poverty, as well as fanatic accumulationism, which we call consumer culture, is looking more and more like that Egypt every day. What is to be done? Rightly understood, the values of Shabbat and shmita, with their deep critiques of our society and economy, are truly subversive. Implementing them on a large scale would truly be an act of Shabbatage.¹³

Weissman. One day, she was trying to explain to us just what it means to live in a Jewish state. She chose an example from the then very popular show of *Kojak*. When Telly Savalas in his role of the bald, lollypop sucking police detective Kojak, was confronted with something incomprehensible, he would respond: "*What's that got to do with the price of tea in China?*" The subtitles translated that as *mah inyan shmita etzel har Sinai?* Rashi's question that has become idiomatic: *what's shemita got to do with Mt. Sinai?* Kojak channeling Rashi? Clearly the fulfillment of the Zionist dream.

¹² The phrase is widely attributed to Heinrich Heine.

¹³ I so wish I had coined that term, but I heard it first from friend and teacher, the brilliantly innovative Rabbi Amichai Lau-Lavi.