

# The Sabbath of the Land

Selections from Rav Kook's *Shabbat HaAretz*  
and Contemporary Reflections on Renewing Shemitta





Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook

*The Sabbath*  
**of the Land**

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TRANSLATION AND COMMENTARY BY

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*Foreword*

# Why Shemitta Is Not Just for Farmers

Nigel Savage\*

**S**even years have gone by since our first edition, which was published on the eve of the shemitta year of 5775, in 2014–15. That year saw growing interest in, and awareness of, the profundity and relevance of shemitta as a concept. And yet we have barely scratched the surface of what is possible and necessary in relation to shemitta.

I want to offer two reasons why I think shemitta has been overlooked.

First, shemitta seems to be about *farming*. Indeed, in Israel, every seven years, there is an argument about which fruit and vegetables you can eat. This was the impetus for the publication of *Shabbat HaAretz*

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in 1909, in the first place. But apart from the question of what you can eat in Israel – and perhaps because of that, also – it is easy to read the primary texts of shemitta as if they were “beautiful” or “inspiring,” but otherwise entirely removed from normal life for most people today, since most of us are not farmers.

To my mind this is a mistake, or at the very least, a misconception. We forget that the land of Israel twenty centuries ago was an agrarian society. The teachings of shemitta were thus not only about *farming*, narrowly construed, in our terms; they were about *life*. “Shemitta” was addressing issues today encompassed by culture, economics, education, ecology and, perhaps overarchingly, political philosophy: how people self-organize equitably and peaceably.

So I invite you to see this book as the beginning of redressing this misconception, in how *you* think about shemitta, and in how you talk about it with others. Shemitta is or should be critical to what it means to be Jewish today, and to a range of major challenges confronting Israeli and Diaspora Jews.

For Israeli Jews: How does the concept of shemitta challenge this sovereign state to craft a Jewish commonwealth which embodies the great aspirations and high standards of Jewish tradition? Helping those in need. Caring for the land itself. Being concerned for the welfare of animals. Seeking to ensure availability of credit, while finding ways to release people crippled by too much debt. Breaking down barriers, literal and metaphorical. Seeing every member of society as playing their own unique role in society.

For Diaspora Jews, a distinct but related challenge. The larger issues mentioned above are in the headlines every day. Shemitta thus invites us to ask if the Jewish community has anything distinct to add to the public conversation. The arguments between “progressives,” “liberals,” “conservatives,” and “populists” have grown more unpleasant these last seven years – unpleasant, and also in some ways stale. There is a temptation simply to plug in to these political tribes, gluing Jewish tradition somewhat awkwardly into contemporary political frames. This does a disservice to the richness, complexity, utopianism, and practicality of the tradition. As you read this book you might ask yourself, *If I were to try to allow these teachings to guide me as a citizen of*



*Israel, or the United States, or anywhere else, how might they inflect what I say, or do, or advocate for?*

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, of blessed memory, taught that while it is unwise to align Jewish tradition with specific political parties and movements, it is vital to allow the uniqueness and richness of the tradition to inform the wider contemporary political and cultural conversation. In that sense, this book, which aims to introduce Rav Kook's teachings to the wider world, also takes inspiration from the teachings of Rabbi Sacks.

There is a second reason that shemitta has been overlooked, and a second distinct way that I hope we can continue to bring the wisdom of shemitta to more people, more deeply. This second aspect is, in a sense, distinct from the content of shemitta; it begins simply by thinking about shemitta as *a seven-year frame in time*.

It is striking that we do indeed overlook it in this sense. The Jewish world runs on Jewish time, and this is true across all distinctions of place and denomination. In any Jewish institution Tuesday is different from Shabbat; Pesah is different from Rosh HaShana; Purim is different from Hanukka; and so on. The only exception – the *only* exception – is shemitta.

The reason is twofold. First, in relation to shemitta, there's nothing we have to do, or not do. Certainly for a Diaspora Jew there are, in practice, no halakhot – no religious injunctions – that (unlike every other distinct Jewish date) prescribe or proscribe behavior. It is thus very easy to ignore or forget shemitta. For Israeli Jews it is only a half-step further. For an observant Israeli Jew there *are* practical questions raised by shemitta, preeminently the question that prompted Rav Kook to write *Shabbat HaAretz* in the first place: What fruit and vegetables can or should I eat during the shemitta year? But this question, real though it is, continues to obscure all the other ways that Israeli Jews could be thinking about shemitta – but in general are not.

And second, and linked to this, unlike every other date on the Jewish calendar, shemitta has no associated rituals. What would be our relationship to Shabbat without Shabbat candles, or Havdala? Or to Sukkot, without the *lulav* and *etrog* – and the *sukka*? Would we register the fourth or the seventh night of Hanukka if we didn't light Hanukka candles every night? Would it be Rosh HaShana without apples and

honey, or the different Mizrahi food traditions? What would Pesach be without Seder, or the Haggada, or *Had Gadya*? And so on. Our tradition is beautiful and wise in the way that the marking of time interweaves three things: the actual time of Shabbat and the festivals, i.e., the distinctiveness of that particular unit of time; then the particular rituals that reinforce and signify the observance of these different times; and then – and this is arguably the most important of all – the wider lessons that we derive for our lives and for our behaviors, *from* Shabbat and the festivals. Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur are on specific dates, and they have specific rituals; but their actual focus is *teshuva*, the question of how we return, repent, make amends. The interrelationship of time, ritual, and meaning is so obvious, so central to Jewish life, that we take it for granted – and thus miss the significance of the *absence* of ritual reinforcement and time delineation in the case of shemitta.

There are two things we must do in relation to these two challenges.

The first is simply choosing to mark shemitta as a frame in time, and encouraging our families, our friends, and our institutions to do likewise.

As the shemitta year approaches, it is a time to start to prepare for *shnat shemitta*. We should ask: *How will this year be different for me, for my family, for my institution?* How should we observe and respect it?

Then the shemitta year itself. A time to look back and a time to look forward. Where was I six years ago? What have I learned, what has changed? How do I live more lightly? How do I consume less? How do I strive to ameliorate inequality in my community – so that “the needy of your people may eat” (Ex. 23:11)? And – a deep visioning exercise – where will I, or we, be seven years from now? What is my vision for myself, my family, my community, looking out over that time horizon?

And the third period is, of course, the next full seven-year shemitta cycle in Jewish life. In the Torah, this new cycle is marked by *hakhel* (Deut. 31:10–12), a national convocation to renew the covenant with the Torah. I would argue that *hakhel* stands in relation to shemitta the way that Havdala does in relation to Shabbat – both an end and a beginning. (And it is significant that *hakhel* is a national and political event, involving the king, the priests, and *all* of the people, a point which the Torah

goes out of its way to emphasize. In and of itself, *hakhel*, which marks the conclusion of the shemitta year, comes to remind us of some of the larger messages of shemitta.)

So we should take steps to mark shemitta time in Jewish life, just as we mark every other distinct period in Jewish life; and, as with Pesah (in relation to liberation from enslavement) or Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur (in relation to *teshuva*), the whole shemitta year should be a time to engage with the themes of shemitta, and to ask how we could or should address them today.

And second – and going back to the absence of ritual – I think we should take steps to engender our own “rituals.” Just a little while after writing the first preface to this book, seven years ago, I found myself wondering how I might remind myself of the forthcoming shemitta year. Somewhat randomly – but not entirely randomly – I decided that I would not buy any books or Scotch whisky during the shemitta year. The first of these ideas stressed me out so much that, for several months prior to Rosh HaShana, I went around my apartment, taking off the shelves either books that I hadn’t yet read, or books that I had read but wanted to reread. I wrapped them in newspaper – unmarked – and stacked them up. Then if, during the shemitta year, the urge to buy a new book finally became too great to bear, I could simply take one of these, unwrap it, and delightedly say, *Gosh, I always wanted to read this!*

I made this commitment, as we say, *bli neder*: maybe I would stick to it and maybe I would not; we would see. And the same with not buying Scotch. I wasn’t prohibiting myself from buying wine or beer, so this was hardly a huge hardship. But, in these two ways, I wanted to try to remind myself that it was the shemitta year – distinct from the other six years of the cycle.

And what happened was fascinating. First, I was indeed reminded, repeatedly, that the year was different. Every time I thought about buying a book (i.e., frequently) and every time I offered someone a Scotch (i.e., not infrequently) I was reminded that this was the shemitta year. And, more remarkably, I indeed didn’t buy a single book, nor did I open a single one of the books I had wrapped. And because people brought gifts of Scotch (unasked, not knowing about my not

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buying Scotch), my liquor cabinet miraculously lasted the whole year. The lesson – in both cases – was that *I had enough*. Had, indeed, more than I needed.

Yet a couple of years ago, reflecting on this, I realized I was also missing one key aspect of shemitta's teaching. Shemitta is more than simply letting go or consuming less; it is also about *helping those who have less in the first place*. For this shemitta year I've decided again not to buy books or Scotch, and this time not to buy clothes also; but I've also decided to figure out what I spend on those things in a normal year, and give that instead directly to people in need.

And this is just one small step toward the deeper lessons of shemitta. As Rav Kook repeatedly stresses, the goals and the vision of shemitta are ultimately societal. It's about a lot more than whether we do or do not buy books or clothes or Scotch. But Jewish tradition teaches us, through daily practice, about the interweaving of ritual, personal behavior, and communal and societal vision. This is why it is important that in this edition we have begun to translate the halakhic parts of *Shabbat HaAretz*. High ideals and a great vision are important. But in Jewish life, high ideals make their presence felt in daily practice. Establishing actionable ways to mark the shemitta year will be significant if they help remind us of the larger lessons of shemitta and inspire us in our behaviors to touch people's lives for good.

This year, thinking about this, inspired by Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin, and with the support of Marc and Karyn Schiller and the partnership in Israel of the Shalom Hartman Institute, we have launched a series of Shemitta Prizes, precisely to encourage new ideas and new rituals – and interesting ideas are starting to sprout. Shoshana Gugenheim Kedem, for example, envisioned shemitta tableware, to grace our tables during the shemitta year and to remind us of the values of shemitta every time we eat. Rachel Jackson and Jackson Mercer are working on public crates, modeled on the pop-up libraries, and inspired directly by the provisions of shemitta, which could be situated outside public institutions, for people to deposit canned food, or fresh fruits and vegetables – and for others simply to help themselves to them. My friend Daniel Taub suggested quite simply that every Diaspora Jew commit to study Hebrew during the shemitta year – and every Israeli Jew commit to study Arabic.

The Institute for Jewish Spirituality is thinking about shemitta in relation to *middot*, the ongoing process of striving to improve one's behaviors. On a larger public scale, Shaul Goldstein, the long-time head of the Israel Nature and Parks Authority, has adopted the shemitta idea as a frame to develop closer connection and responsibility between Israel's inhabitants and the Land of Israel. INPA is developing a campaign to encourage a million people to commit to clean up the country during the shemitta year –both to make a practical difference, and to change public consciousness in relation to littering and harming the natural world.

So shemitta is coming to life in new and fresh ways. And yet we have indeed barely scratched it. This is why it is important to read Rav Kook – to think anew about how great is the ideal, how great the challenge, and how very far we are from bringing any serious version of it to fruition.

And as we think about shemitta, we now have the frame of Covid to offer further perspective. Covid helps us understand shemitta afresh, and shemitta in turn may be uniquely valuable in framing thoughtful post-Covid conversations. This is precisely what we mean by “The Torah is a commentary on the world, and the world is a commentary on the Torah.”

The challenging and disruptive period that began in March 2020 was, like a shemitta year, marked by significant changes to “normal” life. Many of us experienced both sides of this – that which was hard, and that which was positive. There was enforced immobility: not being able to go to an office, a restaurant, a place of work. There was physical disruption, economic disruption. Loss of physical community; not being able to see people, or hug people. Yet, on the other hand, and amidst all the hardships, there were for many unexpected compensations. We “got back to basics.” We saw fewer people and connected with those who were most important to us. Traveling less was good for the world. Many people have commented on the extent to which it was a year of clarification – thinking about choices, vision, the sort of lives we want to lead. Having a year to step back, live more lightly, think about big choices – this is also what shemitta is about. I hope that, in future decades, we will be able to learn some of these lessons from shemitta, without having first to endure a global pandemic.

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Covid also threw into relief some of the challenges that shemitta seeks to address. Inequality increased. People with means were mostly okay. People who had less money, fewer health resources, and weaker school systems suffered far more. Post-Covid, many governments are trying to address these issues. We cannot try to map a biblical concept directly onto our complex postmodern world. But the questions raised by shemitta – and the deep humanity implied by its provisions – can and should help us face these challenges.

This applies, for instance, to *shemittat kesafim*, the prescription to annul debts in a shemitta year. Aggregate student debt in the United States has increased by nearly half a trillion dollars since the start of the last shemitta year. Is that healthy, or viable, or wise – and what, if at all, is to be done about it? And how should Western governments – including the Israeli government – redress financial hardships endured by the poorest in our societies, because of Covid? These are real questions, and there are no simple answers. My point is that we should allow the teachings of shemitta, and this seminal contribution of Rav Kook, to inform our values; and our values, in turn, to influence public policy. In summary: *Shemitta, at its core, is about envisioning a world of radical equality and freedom.* That is what should inspire and provoke us today.

I end with *hakarat hatov* – great gratitude. I'm so excited that this revised and enlarged edition of *Shabbat HaAretz* is being published. I am delighted that Maggid has chosen to publish this new edition, and I thank Matthew Miller, Reuven Ziegler, Ita Olesker, and their team for their confidence in this project.

The somewhat different foreword to the first edition is online at [hazon.org/shabbathaaretz](http://hazon.org/shabbathaaretz) and I'm happy to point you there, not only for additional comments but also to acknowledge the many people who helped bring the first edition to fruition. In addition to them, and the people already mentioned, I want to thank Rabbi Sam Feinsmith, Michal Fox Smart, Hannah Knibb Henza, Jack Henza, Dr. Rani Jaeger, Shira Hecht Koller, Rabbi Aharon Ariel Lavi, Jakir Manela, Rabbi Dr. Adam Mintz, Irit Offer-Stark, Dayan Yehoshua Pfeffer, Dr. Renana Ravitzky Pilzer, Stefanie Raker, Rabbi Isaiah Rothstein, Bruce Spierer, Eliot Sacks, Rabbi Lewis Warshauer, and Sarah Zell Young for help,

advice, inspiration, and ideas. I thank the growing number of organizations that have joined the Shemitta Project, our open-source platform to magnify the teachings of shemitta. I gratefully acknowledge the support of the Covenant Foundation and the Jim Joseph Foundation in enabling us to do this work.

I am again delighted to thank Jorian Polis Schutz for support both existential and practical. Jorian in his life and in his work continues to model the many different ways that we can and should try to bring these values and ideas to physical fruition.

And I am immensely grateful to the board, staff, and stakeholders of Hazon. Since 2007 they have supported and encouraged my fascination with this topic, and they have steadily advanced our work. This time around they have also enabled me to begin the shemitta year in Jerusalem...on sabbatical. Thank you!

Finally, I hope that anyone reading this book will realize not just how extraordinary Rav Kook was but also, in fact, what a remarkable teacher Rabbi Yedidya Sinclair is. One sees on every page of this book, in his introduction, in his translation, and in his notes, how deeply he combines immense Jewish learning with a thoughtful and serious engagement with the larger issues raised by shemitta. It is a tremendous achievement to produce such a superb, annotated translation of this rich, unique, and complex work, and I thank him very greatly, on behalf of all of us, for the great mitzva he has done.

May we be blessed to have the opportunities to rest, to renew, and to mark time in ways that create a healthier, more equitable, and more sustainable world for all.

Jerusalem  
September 2021 / Elul 5781





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## *The Sabbath of the Land*

For the current edition, I add my gratitude to Professor Yonatan Brafman for his insightful comments on the translation of the halakhic sections from *Shabbat HaAretz*; to Brandeis University Press, and Professors Brafman and Leora Batnitzky, editors of the excellent “Jewish Legal Theories” anthology, in which some of the translated halakhic sections were first published in 2018; to Reuven Ziegler, Ita Olesker, Caryn Meltz, Aryeh Grossman, and everyone at Maggid Books for their enthusiastic support and meticulous editing; and to Rabbi Dov Berkovits, Rabbi David Ebner, Rabbi Dr. Benjamin Elton, David Jackson, Einat Kramer, Aharon Ariel Lavi, Rabbi Michael Melchior, Nigel Savage, and Rabbi Josh Weisberg for illuminating conversations and *havrutot* about shemitta over the past seven years.

Yedidya J. Sinclair

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## Introduction

# Rav Kook and the Meaning of Shemitta

**S***habbat HaAretz*, published by Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook on the eve of the 1909–10 shemitta year, is undoubtedly the most important and influential book on shemitta to have appeared in the modern era. It is indispensable to understanding how shemitta is currently observed and not observed.<sup>1</sup> The context, arguments, and aftermath of *Shabbat HaAretz* remain formative forces upon the status of shemitta in the State of Israel. There is probably no more important text for understanding why shemitta is the way it is today.

But throughout *Shabbat HaAretz*, and particularly throughout its introduction, shines a vision of how shemitta could be much more than it is today. Rav Kook believed in the power of social and spiritual reawakening embodied in shemitta. He hoped that the leniency that enabled the land to be sold (*heter mekhira*) and, effectively, shemitta not to be observed, was a step on the journey toward the renewal of shemitta.

This introduction will outline some of the sources in Rav Kook's life and his work for his thinking on shemitta, summarize the outlines

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1. For a comprehensive practical guide to the observance of shemitta, see Rabbi Yosef Zvi Rimon, *Shemita: From the Sources to the Practical Halacha* (Jerusalem: Yeshivat Har Etzion and Maggid Books, 2008).

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of his halakhic argument in *Shabbat HaAretz*, and explore briefly the resources in Rav Kook's introduction to *Shabbat HaAretz* that point beyond the *heter mekhira* compromise to a fuller and richer observance of shemitta.

### **SHEMITTA**

Three passages in the Torah discuss shemitta. Each passage reveals a different dimension of shemitta's values and practices. Let us briefly examine each section in turn.

You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having been yourselves strangers in the land of Egypt. Six years shall you sow your land and gather in your yield; but in the seventh year, 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. Six days you shall do your work; but on the seventh day, you shall cease from labor, in order that your ox and ass may rest and that your bondsman and stranger may be refreshed. (Ex. 23:10–12)

The passage above focuses on the egalitarian aspect of shemitta. In the seventh year, agricultural work ceases, and the produce of the land becomes ownerless. The poor and needy enter into previously private fields, vineyards, and olive groves and eat the crops. Animals may come and eat what is left. Property rights in the land and its produce are erased; rich and poor, humans and beasts, all share what grows naturally in the shemitta year. The verses about shemitta are placed between the reminder not to oppress the stranger because we were once strangers in Egypt and a repetition of the command to keep Sabbath, which emphasizes the rights of your servants and animals to rest with you. This juxtaposition sites shemitta in the context of the Torah's concern for the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed.

When you enter into the land that I assign you, the land shall observe a Sabbath 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 will produce during its Sabbath – you, your male and female slaves, the hired and bound laborers who live with you, and your cattle and the beasts on your land may eat all its yield. (Lev. 25:2–7)

The Torah repeats the command to cease agricultural work in the seventh year, but the focus in the passage above is not on the poor but on the land. Just as people enjoy Sabbath one day out of seven, so, too, should the land have its Sabbath, one year out of seven. This is our duty of stewardship to the earth. We should not treat it as merely a resource to be endlessly exploited for our benefit; the land must also rest. During the land's Sabbath, we do not plant or cultivate it, and we eat only what grows by itself. Thus we show that we are not the land's ultimate masters. In this year, land is a place where humans, animals, and the earth itself meet on equal terms; there are no owners or exploiters but only fellow creatures.

Every seventh year, you shall practice remission of debts. This shall be the nature of the remission: every creditor shall remit the due that he claims from his fellow; he shall not exact payment from his fellow or kinsman, for the remission proclaimed is of the Lord. You may exact payment from the foreigner, but you must remit whatever is due you from the kinsman . . . . If, however, there is a needy person among you, one of your kinsmen in any of your settlements in the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not harden your heart or shut your hand against your needy kinsman. Rather, you must open your heart and lend him sufficient for whatever he needs. Beware, lest you harbor the base thought, the seventh year, the year of remission is approaching, so that you are mean to your needy kinsman and give him nothing.

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He will cry out to the Lord against you, and you will incur guilt. Give to him readily, and have no regrets when you do so, for in turn, the Lord your God will bless you in all your efforts and all your undertakings. (Deut. 15:1–3; 7–10)

The passage above adds a further dimension of shemitta: the remission of debts. Every seven years, debts are canceled. The crushing obligations of debtors that weigh them down and can permanently cripple their flourishing are lifted. (It may be meritorious for the debtor to repay the loan after the shemitta year, if he can, but he does not have to do so.) The Torah warns potential lenders against the suspicions that they may harbor of moral hazard in this situation. As the seventh year approaches, they should not withhold loans out of fear that the shemitta will wipe out the debt. Rather, they must know that lending to the needy is among the responsibilities of the propertied, in full knowledge that the sabbatical debt remission may intervene to cancel the loan.

### **JUBILEE**

The Torah describes the Jubilee (*yovel*) as the culmination of seven cycles of shemitta observance:

You shall count off seven weeks of years – seven times seven years – so that the period of seven weeks of years gives you a period of forty-nine years. Then you shall sound the horn loud; in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month – the Day of Atonement – you shall have the horn sounded throughout your land, and you shall hallow 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 holding, and each of you shall return to his family. That fiftieth year shall be a Jubilee for you: you shall not sow, and neither shall you reap the aftergrowth nor harvest the untrimmed vines, for it is a Jubilee. It shall be holy to you: you may eat only the growth direct from the field. In this year of Jubilee, each of you shall return to his holding. (Lev. 25:8–13)

The Jubilee, which crowns seven seven-year shemitta cycles, is a kind of super-sabbatical year. In addition to ceasing agricultural work, Hebrew slaves go free and every person returns to his ancestral holdings – meaning the piece of land that his family held when Joshua divided up the Land of Israel on entering the land three thousand years ago. Whatever gains and losses in land holdings may have occurred over the previous fifty years, whether through good or bad luck, alacrity or laziness, talent or foolishness, were all erased. There was a society-wide reset as each family returned to its original patrimony. Accumulated socioeconomic advantages could not be passed down indefinitely to one’s descendants; with the restoration of land, each family was returned to an original position of dignity and opportunity.

The shemitta and Jubilee commandments are immensely radical. They legislate a septennial time-out in Jewish economic life, a year of spiritual renewal, a holiday for the land, a yearlong ceasefire in the economic struggle of all against all, an abolition of many of the rights of private property, a leveling of rich and poor, man and beast, earth and earth-dwellers, an amnesty on debt and, every half-century, a reset on the vicissitudes of the free market. These mitzvot represent a periodic challenge to the whole socioeconomic order. As Gerald Blidstein put it in an important article: “We have here more than the commonplace struggle between a radical religious demand and an unconsenting world. Rather, we have here an institution that contests the legitimacy of that world.”<sup>2</sup>

So it is not surprising that the history of these commandments has been marked by conflict between their exacting requirements and the demands of economic reality. Indeed, it is remarkable that shemitta was observed as diligently and for as long as it was. There is strong evidence that the sabbatical for the land was observed throughout the Second Temple period. At the famous assembly described by Nehemiah on their return to Israel in 516 BCE, the Jews took upon themselves the observance of shemitta as a central element of their renewed commitment to the covenant (Neh. 10:32). Among the many sources testifying that they indeed kept shemitta is an account in Josephus’ *Antiquities* of Alexander

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2. Gerald Jacob Blidstein, “Man and Nature in the Sabbatical Year,” *Tradition* 9, no. 4 (1966): 50.

## *The Sabbath of the Land*

the Great reaching Jerusalem and acceding to the high priest's request that the Jews be exempt from paying tribute during the sabbatical year, when they did not work the land.<sup>3</sup> Numerous tannaitic sources attest that Jews in Israel continued to observe shemitta for centuries after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. After most Jews were exiled, shemitta of the land (*shemittat karkaot*) brought ever-greater economic hardships for the remaining Jews in the Land of Israel and despite various rabbinic leniencies, eventually lapsed around the fifth century. With the rise of a vibrant Jewish community in Safed, northern Israel, in the sixteenth century, shemitta once again became a live issue. A celebrated dispute occurred in the shemitta year of 1532 between the two greatest authorities of the Safed community, Rabbi Yosef Karo and Rabbi Moshe di Trani (known as Mabit), about the sabbatical year status of produce grown on land owned by non-Jews. The argument enjoyed a long after-life, and Rabbi Karo's view became a cornerstone of Rav Kook's position nearly four hundred years later.

The remission of debts (*shemittat kesafim*), though technically binding inside and outside Israel, became largely moot from the first century BCE. Hillel the Elder saw that people were doing exactly what the Torah had warned them not to do: they were withholding loans in the run-up to the shemitta year. The poor suffered most from people's reluctance to lend them money, an unintended consequence of a law that was meant to help them. So Hillel instituted the famous *prozbul* enactment, which handed over the responsibility for outstanding debts to the courts, which, as a public authority, were allowed to collect debts. Thus, observance of *shemittat kesafim* may be avoided. As for the Jubilee, according to most traditional sources, its practice ceased sometime during the First Temple period, when two and a half of the twelve tribes were exiled,<sup>4</sup> and there is some doubt as to whether the Jubilee was ever properly observed.

Maimonides writes, in his account of the messianic era at the end of the *Mishneh Torah*, that among the many enactments to be expected of the Messiah, he will "cause the *shemittot* and the Jubilees to be observed

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3. Josephus, *Antiquities* 11:338, quoted in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 14:583.

4. Arakhin 32b.



as they are commanded in the Torah,”<sup>5</sup> clearly implying that they will not be fully observed until the Messiah comes. Rav Kook also suggests this in *Shabbat HaAretz*. Only then will the socioeconomic order make space to fully honor these mitzvot, which radically question its legitimacy. The *heter mekhira* controversy has been the main modern arena for this clash between the demands of shemitta and the exigencies of economic life and the principal modern test of the pre-messianic viability of shemitta. The controversy was inextricably bound up with the life, times, and thought of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook.

### LIFE OF RAV KOOK<sup>6</sup>

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook was born in Grieva, a small town in Lithuania, in 1865. His father, Shlomo Zalman HaCohen Kook, was descended from a distinguished rabbinical family and studied at the Volozhin yeshiva, the greatest academy of talmudic learning and piety in nineteenth-century Europe. His mother, Perel Zlota, came from a Chabad Hasidic family. She had imbibed the mystical passion of Hasidism and maintained her connection to Chabad after her marriage. When the third Lubavitcher rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, died in 1866, she received a button and some threads from his cloak, which she sewed into the skullcap of her eldest son, Abraham Isaac. Later in life, Rav Kook remarked to one of his students that his parents used to argue whether he would become an ascetic Mitnagdic rabbi in the Volozhin mold or a Hasidic master. In any event, he was able to integrate both models into his complex and multifaceted personality.

Abraham Isaac was recognized early on as a prodigy of rabbinic learning. From a young age, he studied alone or with private tutors, soon mastering the Talmud and Jewish law. At age fifteen, he left home to study in the *beit midrash* of Litsin, where he encountered *maskilim*

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5. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Melakhim UMilhemoteihem* 11:1.

6. I was fortunate to benefit from prepublication access to Yehudah Mirsky's outstanding biography of Rav Kook, which surpasses previous attempts to write about Rav Kook's life. See Mirsky, *Rav Kook: Mystic in a Time of Revolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014). This biographical sketch is highly indebted to Mirsky's book, and statements in this section that are not otherwise attributed may be assumed to be from there.