



Limmud Online Chavruta Project – 5774 – Shmita

Introduction to the *Limmud Online Chavruta Project*

Chavruta learning (learning in pairs) is one of the oldest and most powerful Jewish learning techniques. The *Limmud Chavruta Project*, now an international collaboration, is also one of Limmud's oldest and best-loved traditions, at Limmud Conference in the UK and at Limmudim around the world. Teams from different countries put together a Chavruta source book, filled to the brim with traditional and modern Jewish and secular readings for study which hundreds of Limmudniks use for studying in pairs. It is a wonderful, formative experience, opening people's eyes to new concepts and ideas, and helping people to forge life-long friendships.

Now, you can continue the Limmud chavruta experience into your daily life!

Try studying it at home, with your family, with colleagues at work during a break, with friends, during your commute, or by Skype or internet.

Shmita – The Sabbatical year

This year (2013-2014/5774), spread over 10 months (October-July), the Limmud Online Chavruta Project will be investigating the theme of **Shmita (the sabbatical year)**. This is particularly pertinent as the next Jewish year (2014-2015/5775) is a shmita year and this raises a lot of questions in modern Israel, as you will see in this series. The shmita is a biblically mandated once every seven year rest for the land – it is forbidden to plough the fields or reap the harvests. As a radical and difficult idea, many Jewish sources over the generations have a lot to say about this and the concepts that lie behind it, as we will explore.

We are blessed to have supporting this year's project with their expertise, **Hazon**, a New York based Jewish organisation trying to help create healthier and more sustainable communities in the Jewish world and beyond. Thus this series was created jointly with Limmud volunteers and Hazon Shmita Project staff and we are very excited about this collaboration. To learn more about the Shmita Project, visit www.shmitaproject.org

Over the next 10 issues of the Limmud Online Chavruta Project, the following key questions will be explored in depth:

KEY QUESTIONS:

- *The word 'Shmita' means 'release'. What is the 'release', on a personal and societal level, that the Shmita is trying to instill?*
- *What are the values at the core of the biblical sabbatical tradition? What are the challenges that might be associated with the implementation of the sabbatical tradition in this time?*
- *Can we make the sabbatical vision relevant today, adapted for a modern society? If so, how?*



1. Letting the land rest

Leviticus 25:2-4

²Speak to the Israelite people and say to them:

When you enter the land that I assign to you, the land shall observe a sabbath of the Lord. ³Six years you may sow your field and six years you may prune your vineyard and gather in the yield. ⁴But 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.

Translation: NJPS

Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of the Sabbatical and Jubilee Years 1:4

When a person digs or plows for the sake of the land, removes stones, fertilizes the land, or performs another similar type of work on the land or grafts, plants, or performs other similar types of work with trees, he incurs guilt [by rabbinic decree].

ויקרא כה:ב-ד

דַּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם

כִּי תָבֹאוּ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי נֹתֵן לָכֶם וְשָׁבַתָּה הָאָרֶץ
שְׁבַת לַיהוָה: ³שֵׁשׁ שָׁנִים תִּזְרַע שְׂדֶךְךָ וְשֵׁשׁ שָׁנִים תִּזְמַר
כַּרְמְךָ וְאָסַפְתָּ אֶת־תְּבוּאָתָהּ: ⁴וּבַשְּׁנָה הַשְּׁבִיעִית שְׁבַת
שְׁבַתוֹן יִהְיֶה לְאָרֶץ שְׁבַת לַיהוָה לֹא תִזְרַע וְכַרְמְךָ
לֹא תִזְמַר:

רמב"ם, משנה תורה, הלכות שמיטה ויובל א:ד

כיצד החופר או החורש לצורך הקרקע או המסקל או המזבל וכיוצא בהן משאר עבודת הארץ, וכן המבריך או המרכיב או הנוטע וכיוצא בהן מעבודת האילנות מכין אותו מכת מרדות מדבריהן.

The maintenance of the fertility of the soil is the first condition of any permanent system of agriculture.

Sir Albert Howard (1873-1947), *An Agricultural Testament*

A major recent study published in *Science* pegged the cost of soil erosion at \$44 billion per year in the US alone. Reliable estimates contend that up to half of America's topsoil has run to the rivers and seas since the white settlement of this continent. Meanwhile, the average rate of topsoil erosion in the US continues at five tons per acre per year; for croplands it is nine tons per acre per year. But can soil erosion be such a dangerous problem if it has been going on for thousands of years? First, contrary to the thinking implicit in this question, the damaging and widespread effects of soil erosion have already appeared numerous times. History bears out a disturbing pattern: worn out and eroded soils cause civilizations to crash, and if they do rebound it is to a reduced level. Secondly, the question *itself* reflects the seriousness of the problem. Food *depends* on soil. Agricultural use of fossil fuel inputs cannot mask the true costs of soil loss forever, and the confidence in a future high-tech soil alternative is sorely misplaced.

Jacob Gatschet, *Natural Systems Agriculture at the Land Institute*



Rabbis are pitted against one another, the state and the religious authorities are in conflict, the Israeli Supreme Court is involved, the devout are confused and the cost of produce is rising. And a country in love with flowers and proud of “making the desert bloom,” in its own disputatious way, is letting much of its land go to seed. This year, 5768 by the Jewish calendar, is a Shmita, or sabbatical year...That presumably worked fine in a primitive economy before decent fertilizer, but Shmita presented problems for the new Jewish state. Zionism was founded on the notion of a return to the land, but a modern country cannot live on what falls to the ground.

‘As Farmers and Fields Rest, a Land Grows Restless’, NY Times Oct 7 2007

Points to consider

Are you personally involved with agricultural activities? If so, in what way? Do such Shmita prohibitions feel like they would directly affect you?

The sabbatical year might well have been introduced to care for the soil by letting it lie fallow. What if we have better ways in the modern world to do this (like crop rotation or modern irrigation systems)? Should we still try to implement this Torah law? In Israel? Or outside Israel?

What is your relationship to soil? To land? Do you think there is a direct correlation between the health of soil and the health of people?