



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?*

9. Exile and desolation

Leviticus 26:34-35

³⁴Then shall the land make up for its 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.

³⁵Throughout 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.

ויקרא כו:לד-לה

³⁴אז תרצה הארץ את-שבתתיה כל ימי השמה ואתם בארץ איביכם אז תשבת הארץ והרצת את-שבתתיה: ³⁵כל-ימי השמה תשבת את אשר לא-שבתה בשבתתיכם בשבתכם עליה:

2 Chronicles 36:20-21

²⁰Those [of Judah] who survived the sword [King Nebuchadnezer] exiled to Babylon, and they became his and his sons' servants till the rise of the Persian kingdom, ²¹in fulfillment of the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, until the land paid back its sabbaths; as long as it lay desolate it kept sabbath, till seventy years were completed.

דברי הימים ב לו:כ-כא

²⁰ויגלו השארית מן-החרב אל-בבל ויהיו-לו ולבניו לעבדים עד-מלך מלכות פרס: ²¹למלאות דברי-יהוה בפי ירמיהו עד-רצתה הארץ את-שבתותיה כל-ימי השמה שבתה למלאות שבועים שנה:

Translation: NJPS

[Heter Mechira – the practice of nominally selling Jewish land to non-Jews so that it is outside the laws of Shmita –] is merely a temporary measure that we implemented only because of the overwhelming need to do so. God forbid that one should consider annulling a great and central mitzvah [commandment] such as the holiness of the Shmita unless it is a matter of life and death, such that if we do not sell the land, many will die of starvation and the fledging new Jewish settlement in Eretz Yisrael will be destroyed. However, at a time that a competent Beit Din [Jewish Court] will conclude that the sale is not necessary and that the nation can observe Shmita without endangering lives, then God forbid that the sale should take place in such circumstances.

Abraham Isaac Kook

Points to consider

How do you understand the relationship between, Shmita and abundance, on one hand, and exile, on the other? What is your take on this text, which implies that exile is a direct consequence of Sabbatical neglect? How might these values of Shmita offer us a redemption from this sense of exile, and a return 'home'?

What is exile to you? How might you experience this in your own life and how might you sense it in the society you live in?

We can read this text in terms of contemporary agricultural challenges: soil erosion, overgrazing, pollution, acid rain, etc. Do you think the environmental movement could find strength in a text like this? Why or why not?