'A Shmita Manifesto'

A radical sabbatical approach to Jewish food reform in the United States

ADRIENNE KRONE

A revolutionary movement recently cropped up with a vision to revitalize American Jewish environmentalism through food reform. This movement implemented *shmita* (sabbatical) year practices, which Jewish law mandates only inside the land of Israel, in the United States during the *shmita* year that began in September 2014. This article offers a brief historical overview of *shmita* and then utilizes the main texts of the *shmita* movement to explore how the Shmita Project connects the diverse worlds of Judaism, environmentalism, ethics, and food reform. The Shmita Project encapsulates a multivalent environmentalist strain of American Judaism that is deeply concerned with climate change, industrial agriculture, and food injustice. The unprecedented observance of an American *shmita* year, focused on land stewardship and food security, is emblematic of this movement's efforts towards sustainable agriculture, animal welfare, and repairing the American food system through practices that are inspired by Jewish tradition and values.

Introduction

A revolutionary movement recently cropped up with a vision to revitalize American Jewish environmentalism through food reform. This movement implemented *shmita*[1] year practices in the United States. *Shmita* is translated literally as 'release' but it is more popularly translated as 'sabbatical'. *Shmita* is a sabbath for the land. Similar to the weekly sabbath, a day of rest after six days of work, *shmita* is a year of rest for the land after it has been worked for six years. *Shmita* highlights both the importance and the sacred qualities attributed to land in Judaism. For these reasons *shmita* has garnered the attention of Jewish

1 As is the case with the transliteration of many Hebrew words, there are various options for transliterating the Hebrew word שמיטה. I will use 'shmita' because this is the spelling that the majority of the American Shmita Movement texts utilize. Throughout this paper, when I am quoting other sources, I will maintain the transliteration used in the texts. Popular variations include *shemita* and *shemittah*. Similarly, capitalization will be maintained in citations and in the title of the movement, the Shmita Project, but I will otherwise avoid capitalization.

environmentalists, finding new life in the United States. On Rosh Hashanah in September 2014 the Jewish year 5775, a *shmita* year, began.[2] American Jewish environmentalists greeted the *shmita* year with a reimagined approach to sabbatical practices. This movement, called the Shmita Project, is the joint vision of a number of Jewish organizations focused on environmentalism. According to their website '[t]he Shmita Project is working to expand awareness about the biblical Sabbatical tradition, and to bring the values of this practice to life today to support healthier, more sustainable Jewish communities' (Hazon website 2014: 'The Shmita Project'). The leaders of the Shmita Project conceive of *shmita* as a node connecting a diverse and expansive network of Jewish organizations. The Shmita Project encapsulates a multivalent environmentalist strain of American Judaism that is deeply concerned with climate change, industrial agriculture and food insecurity and often expresses itself through food reform. The Shmita Project is inherently connected to a vast web of religious, environmental, and agricultural networks of the past and present in both the United States and Israel.

Shmita through texts and time

The Shmita Project traversed temporal boundaries as it revived ancient religious practices and spatial boundaries and brought these practices to a continent outside its intended purview. In order to understand the revolutionary character of the Shmita Project, a discussion of the textual basis for *shmita* is required. The laws of *shmita* related to food and cultural systems are initially laid out in the book of Exodus in the Hebrew Bible.

> Six years you shall sow your land and gather its yield; but in the seventh 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. (*JPS Hebrew–English Tanakh*, Exodus 23:10–11)

These verses establish the agricultural practice of a sabbath for the land and fair distribution of harvested foods during the seventh year for the Israelites. These verses also lay out the basic parameters for a number of *shmita* year practices. First, land must 'rest and lie fallow'. This resulted in *shmita* year

2 For information on the calculation of the sabbatical (and jubilee) years, please see *A Treatise on the Sabbatical Cycle and the Jubilee* (1866) by Dr B. Zuckermann.

prohibitions against seeding, planting, and ploughing land. The diet during *shmita* years was based on perennial crops and wild edibles because these plants did not need to be planted or cultivated. This text also lays out the basis of a cultural system that requires the fair distribution of food. The text reads 'Let the needy among your people eat of it' which is an important addendum in a culture where those without access to the land would otherwise fare poorly during the sabbatical years. Additionally, animals are considered in this holistic vision of the sabbatical cycle, as the text reads 'and what they leave let the wild beasts eat'.

This basic description is amended in the book of Leviticus with additional details regarding what is expressly forbidden during the sabbatical year as well as what the Israelites were meant to eat during that year.

> The Lord spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai: Speak 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. 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 during its sabbath will produce – you, your male and female slaves, the hired and bound laborers who live with you, and your cattle and the beasts in your land may eat all its yield. (*JPS Hebrew–English Tanakh*, Leviticus 25:1–7)

The text in Leviticus clarifies that Israelites may eat perennial produce during the sabbatical year: 'But you may eat whatever the land during its sabbath will produce'. It also specifies forbidden practices – sowing, pruning, and reaping. In Leviticus, the purpose of the sabbatical year is added: 'it shall be a year of complete rest for the land'. According to Louis Newman, author of *The Sanctity of the Seventh Year: A Study of Mishnah Tractate Shebiit*, 'implicit in this view is the notion that the Land of Israel has human qualities and needs' and it requires a sanctified day of rest (Newman 1983: 15). Later in the same chapter in Leviticus, more information regarding the source of the sabbatical year food is found.

> You shall observe My laws and faithfully keep My rules, that you may live upon the land in security; the land shall yield its fruit and you shall eat your fill, and you shall live upon it in security. And should you ask, 'What are we

> to eat in the seventh year, if we may neither sow nor gather in our crops?' I will ordain My blessing for you in the sixth year, so that it shall yield a crop sufficient for three years. When you show in the eighth year, you will still be eating old grain of that crop; you will be eating the old until the ninth year, until its crops come in. (*JPS Hebrew–English Tanakh*, Leviticus 25:18–22)

These verses point to the key role of the land in the relationship between the Israelite people and their God. God commands them to let their land lie fallow, and in return promises to provide enough perennial crops to last three years (the sixth, seventh, and eighth years in the sabbatical cycle). The land is able to provide enough food for all of the people and beasts for three years because God has promised to bless it. Newman argues that this is the explanation for why the sabbatical year for the land applies only in the land of Israel: 'The Land of Israel, unlike all other countries, is enchanted, for it enjoys a unique relationship to God and to the people of Israel' (Newman 1983: 15). This unique relationship exists because the land of Israel was promised to Abraham and his descendants as part of his covenant with God.[3] Newman continues: 'Israelites must observe the restrictions of the seventh year as an affirmation of the unique bond between God's holy land and his chosen people' (*ibid.* 16). So, the land is a vital actor in the covenant between the Israelites and their God and for this reason, the land too requires a sabbath.

Additional references to the *shmita* year, which also detail the economic and cultural practices associated with the *shmita* year are found throughout the Hebrew Bible in Deuteronomy, 2 Kings, Jeremiah, Nehemiah and 2 Chronicles.[4] These texts expand upon the agricultural restrictions of Exodus, establish a system of debt relief during the *shmita* year and prescribe a public Torah reading during Sukkot of the *shmita* year. These texts also describe the timing and requirements of the Jubilee year. The Jubilee year occurs after seven cycles of seven years, in the fiftieth year.[5] According to the text of Leviticus during the Jubilee year slaves and prisoners must be set free, land must be released from ownership and debts must be forgiven (Leviticus 25:13–18, 23–55).

3 Genesis 15:18–21.

4 Deuteronomy 15:1–11, 31:10–13, 2 Kings 19:20–30, Jeremiah 34:13–14, Nehemiah 10:32 and 2 Chronicles 36:20–1.

5 There is some disagreement over whether the Jubilee year occurs in year forty-nine or in year fifty of the cycle. For more information see Zuckermann 1984 [1866].

The rabbis interpreted the biblical texts on *shmita* but after the destruction of the Second Temple the sabbatical cycle was often discussed but rarely enforced. Gerald Blidstein, author of *Man and Nature in the Sabbatical Year*, asserts that *shmita* is representative of 'the commonplace struggle between a radical religious demand and an un-consenting world' (Blidstein 1966: 50). Blidstein suggests that the potency of *shmita* lies in its power:

> [W]e have here an institution that in its essence contests the legitimacy of the world, and threatens to become not merely the symbolic repudiation of its normal social and economic patterns, but its real menace and ultimately its victor (Blidstein 1966: 50).

The disruptive potential of *shmita* posed a threat to the agricultural economy of the late ancient world and as time went on, the strength of *shmita* began to diminish.

Given these factors, it is rather extraordinary that *shmita* is the topic of the fifth tractate of Seder Zeraim ('Order of Seeds') entitled Shevi'it ('Seventh Year'). Louis Newman (1983: 20) argues that the decision to include an entire tractate on *shmita* was, in fact, surprising, given that none of the other surviving texts of late antiquity contain a discussion of the sabbatical year. Newman (1983: 117–20) proposes that *shmita* was highlighted in the Mishnah because it empowered ordinary Israelites. After the destruction of the Second Temple, the Israelites may have questioned their covenant with God and *shmita* enabled them to enact God's will. Newman stresses that the Mishnah's attention to *shmita* reflects an emphasis on the fact that the Israelite people were 'the sole surviving source of sanctification' (Newman 1983: 20). It was up to the Israelites to maintain the holiness of the Land of Israel by adhering to the requirements of *shmita* as a vital aspect of their relationship with God. It was the authorities of the Mishnah that determined the boundaries within which *shmita* would apply 'by delineating several distinct geographical regions of the Land within which the various restrictions of the Sabbatical year take effect' (Newman 1983: 19). The rabbis of the Mishnah discussed *shmita* at length and established its boundaries, but they were not necessarily in favour of continuing to abide by the *shmita* laws. Jeremy Benstein, author of *The Way Into Judaism and the Environment,* notes that 'Rabbi Judah the Prince, redactor of the Mishnah, called for the annulment of the *shmitah* year because its implementation was so arduous' (Benstein 2006: 190).

Once the majority of the Jewish people were exiled from the land of Israel after the destruction of the Second Temple, *shmita* was weakened. Blidstein

explains that the rabbis understood the exile 'as a disruption in the ideal state of Israel's relation to God through the land' (Blidstein 1966: 50). Blidstein continues, 'the Torah no longer expected the Jew to continue as if nothing had changed; God Himself had declared and decreed the change' (*ibid.* 50). The exile brought a reclassification for *shmita* from Torah law (*d'oraita*) to rabbinic law (*d'rabbanan*). Blidstein clarifies that as a rabbinic law 'shemittah can be narrowed, limited, and in effect abolished' (Blidstein 1966: 51). This shift is seen most clearly in the rabbinic texts that followed the Mishnah. *Shmita* is discussed in tractate Shevi'it in Seder Zeraim in the Palestinian Talmud, but this tractate was not included in the Babylonian Talmud. When *shmita* was mentioned in the Babylonian Talmud, the discussion often related to the debt forgiveness aspects of *shmita*, since they were initially understood to apply outside the land of Israel.[6]

Rabbis continued to discuss *shmita* in their legal treatises, but these discussions were mainly theoretical because the majority of the Jewish people were living outside the land of Israel. In the twelfth century, Rabbi Moses Maimonides determined that there was a scientific explanation for *shmita*. According to Ronald Isaacs, author of *The Jewish Sourcebook on the Environment and Ecology*, Maimonides wrote that 'allowing the land to lie fallow gives it an opportunity to rejuvenate itself and yield more abundant crops in the years to come' (Isaacs 1998: 49). Maimonides also included detailed rulings about the *shmita* year in his major work, the Mishneh Torah. Although *shmita* continued to appear in major rabbinic works, *shmita* remained an ideal instead of a reality.

The absence of a practical history became a problem in the late nineteenth century when Jews began to emigrate to Ottoman-ruled Palestine in large numbers. The rabbinic leadership came up with a solution, the *heter mekhira* (sale permit), in anticipation of the *shmita* year 1888–9. The *heter mekhira* is a leniency that allows Jewish farmers to sell their land to non-Jews for the year thus exempting it from the *shmita* regulations. Julian Sinclair, who recently published a translation of Rabbi (Rav) Abraham Isaac Kook's influential *Shabbat Ha'aretz* ('Sabbath of the Land')[7] discusses the implementation of the *heter mekhira* in his introduction.

6 The Rabbis devised a system of transferring debts to the court during *shmita* years. This system, called the *prozbul*, ensured that lenders would not suffer when debts were cancelled during the sabbatical year, thus protecting the poor from lenders refusing to loan money during year six of the sabbatical cycle.

7 The new translation of *Shabbat Ha'aretz* was published by Hazon.

> With the advent of the shmita of 1888–89, it was clear to the pioneers that observing the sabbatical year as commanded in the Bible would be economically ruinous and would likely lead to the extinction of the nascent agricultural settlements (Kook 2014: 35).

Sinclair stresses that the *heter mekhira* 'was seen as a temporary expedient' that 'was renewed for the *shmita* years of 1895–6 and 1902–3' amid much controversy (Kook 2014: 35). By the *shmita* year 1909–10, the agricultural settlements had grown but were still unable to withstand full *shmita* observance (*ibid.* 36). It was in anticipation of this *shmita* year that Rav Kook published *Shabbat Ha'aretz*. Sinclair argues that in the book, Kook endorsed the *heter mekhira* 'but throughout Shabbat Ha'aretz, and particularly its introduction, shines a vision of how *shmita* could be much more than it is today' (Kook 2014: 21). Blidstein also emphasizes the 'anguish' that plagued Rav Kook as he sanctioned the *heter mekhira* and his hopes for a future *shmita* observance: 'so the reality of *shevi'it* must be deferred, hints Rav Kook, until the Messianic age' (Blidstein 1966: 51). Rav Kook, who later became the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of British Mandate Palestine, is still seen as authoritative on *shmita* by many Israelis, but controversy over the *heter mekhira* persists. The Haredi (Ultra-Orthodox) Jews in Israel follow the position of Rabbi Avraham Yeshaya Karelitz, known as the Hazon Ish. According to Julian Sinclair 'The Hazon Ish believed that the Torah prohibition of selling land in Israel to non-Jews (Deuteronomy 7:1–2) was an insurmountable obstacle to the *heter mekhira*' (Kook 2014: 145). Sinclair explains that '[d]uring the *shmita*, his followers eat produce that is imported, grown by Arabs, or they rely on the *otzar beit din* method' (*ibid.* 145). The *otzar beit din* (the rabbinic court's storehouse) method refers to a system in which fields are handed over to the court for *shmita* and the court oversees the care of the fields, collection of produce and distribution of produce to the public. *Shmita* continues to be observed in Israel by Torah-observant Jews through these methods and its observation remains a point of contention between the Orthodox and Haredi Jews in Israel. Secular Jews engaged in agriculture in Israel do not observe *shmita*.

Jewish environmentalism

As Israeli Jews argued over the legal implications of *shmita* and their practical application, American Jews began to discuss *shmita* for very different reasons. Torah-observant Jews in Israel debate the intricacies of *shmita* because they are bound by the law to acknowledge *shmita* and observe it in some way.

Conversely, Jews outside the land of Israel are exempt from the observance of *shmita* and rabbinic tradition suggests that observing *shmita* outside the land of Israel would be considered an additional and unnecessary obligation, which is usually forbidden. However, most of the Jews drawn to the practice of *shmita* in the Diaspora are not Orthodox Jews. They are Jews who seek to reinvigorate American Judaism through environmentalism. Jeremy Benstein elucidates this unique paradox of *shmita*:

> As a problem, shmitah has become of interest to limited sectors of the Jewish people. As a solution, it can serve as a bridge to all those seeking answers to pressing social and environmental problems. (Benstein 1966: 192)

So, a century after the publication of his treatise on *shmita*, these American Jews also turned to Rav Kook because he 'believed in the power of social and spiritual reawakening embodied in *shmita*' (Kook 2014: 21). The reimagined *shmita* year is based on these biblical and rabbinic sources but it differs in its overall vision for the *shmita* year based on contemporary environmental concerns.

Julian Sinclair identifies four ideals of *shmita* in Rav Kook's writings: '*shmita* is for the community what Sabbath is for the individual,' '*shmita* is an expression of the interconnection between people and land,' 'in the *shmita*, treat food as food, not as commodity', and '*shmita* as a year of human health' (Kook 2014: 67–80).[8] These ideals identify many of the goals associated with the reinvention of *shmita* in America. Nati Passow, current Manager of the Shmita Project and Co-Founder and Executive Director of the Jewish Farm School, hints at these ideals in an article he published in 2008:

> And while the agricultural laws apply only within the borders of biblical Israel, there is so much potential to use the *shemita* year as a foundation for renewed Jewish ecological education around the world, for *shemita* requires of us a humility and reverence for that which is greater than any one person (Passow 2008: 4).

8 Sinclair identified three additional ideals associated with the Jubilee year: 'shmita and the Jubilee are interconnected rhythms and structures', 'Jubilee as a year of truth and reconciliation,' and 'Jubilee as a universal principle' (Kook 2014: 67–80).

As Passow suggests, when American Jews began to discuss the possibility of bringing *shmita* to the United States it appealed to a growing Jewish environmentalism movement. Passow explains what he believed was an inherent connection between Judaism and environmentalism in the same article.

> Judaism is a culture rooted in its connection to the land. … Our major holidays are agricultural festivals, celebrations of harvest and the seasons. And what is becoming clear is that, for some people, being exposed to the agricultural and ecological roots of our tradition opens up new avenues for relating to God, our rituals, and our heritage. (Passow 2008: 1)

Although Passow notes that Judaism has 'ecological roots' others suggest that Jewish environmentalism is rather new. The editor of *Judaism and Ecology*, Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, asserts that the 'Jewish voice has joined the environmental movement relatively recently' (Tirosh-Samuelson 2002: xxxiii). She continues, 'Jews are not among the leaders of the environmental movement, and environmental activists who are Jews by birth have not developed their stance on the basis of Judaism' (*ibid.*). Tirosh-Samuelson identifies the early 1970s as the beginning of 'the creative weaving of Judaism and ecology' and she noted that '[s]ince then, Jews from all branches of modern Judaism… have contributed to Jewish ecology thinking' (*ibid.* xxxvii). In his chapter in the same volume, Mark Jacobs, founding Executive Director of the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL), identifies four stages of Contemporary Jewish Environmentalism beginning in the late 1960s. The first stage, 'defense and inquiry' came as a response to Lynn White Jr's assertion that the roots of the ecological crisis are religious.[9] The second and third stage, 'grassroots awakening and foundation building' and 'engaging leadership' brought Jewish environmentalism into the early 1990s. Jacobs calls the final stage 'movement building' (Jacobs 2002: 450–63). Jacobs continued by clarifying the purpose of these movements.

> It is the goal of the Jewish environmental movement to engage all Jewish institutions and their members both in becoming environmentally responsible in their own practices and in using their political and financial power to further the cause of environmental protection (Jacobs 2002: 463).

9 See 'The historic roots of our ecologic crisis' (Science, 1967) by Lynn White Jr.

Jacobs also pointed out that Jewish environmentalism movements tended to concentrate their efforts in three areas: 'education, community building, and activism' (Jacobs 2002: 461).

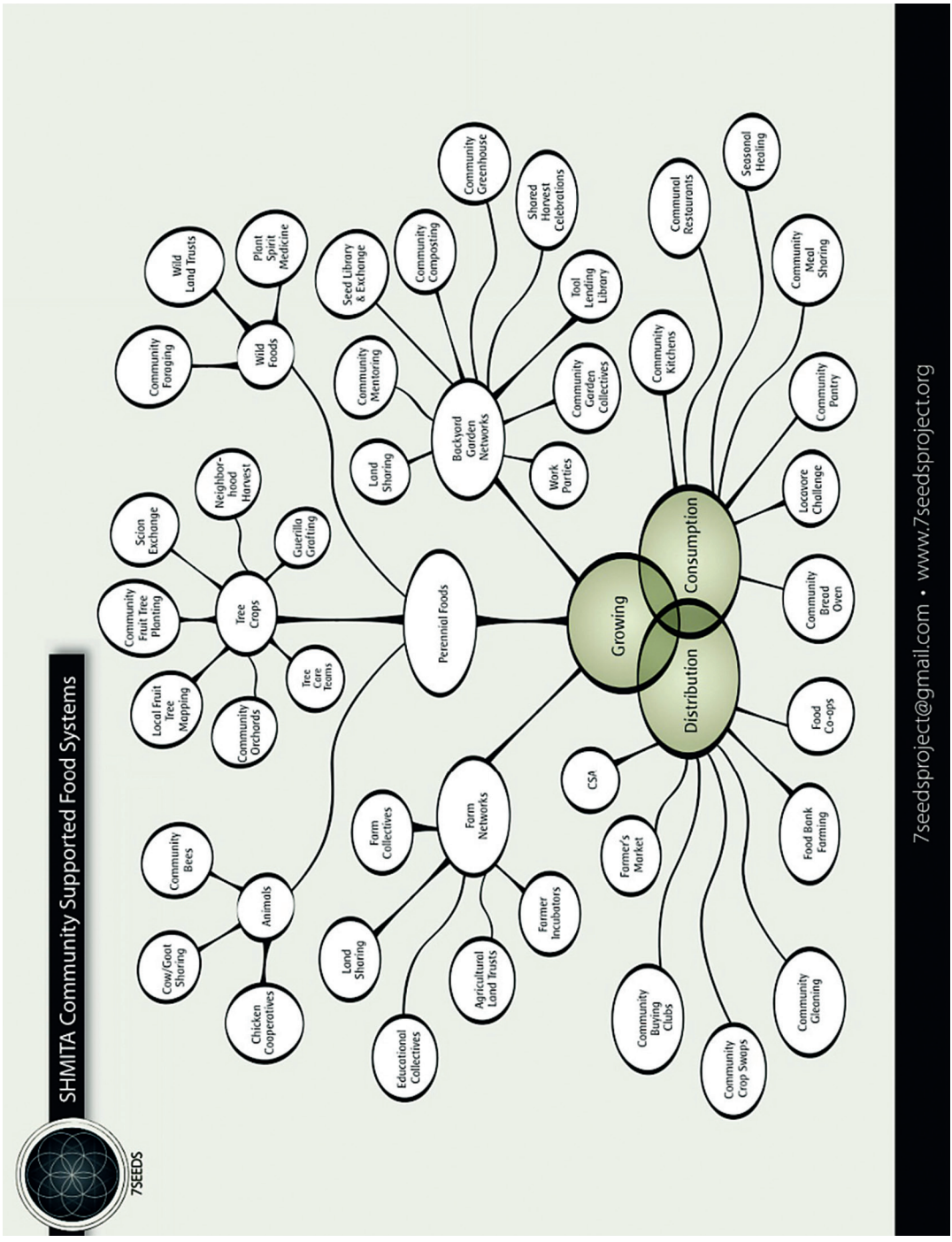
The Shmita Project exemplifies the goals and actions of the Jewish environmental movement identified by Jacobs. The Shmita Project is housed within the larger Jewish environmentalism movement under the ideological umbrella 'Jewish Outdoor, Food & Environmental Education' (JOFEE). The world of JOFEE comprises Jewish farms, Jewish retreat centres, and Jewish educational organizations and advocacy groups. At the centre of this sector of Jewish environmentalism is Hazon, an organization that seeks 'to build healthier and more sustainable communities in the Jewish world and beyond' (Hazon website 2014: 'Overview'). The Shmita Project has worked to revitalize *shmita* in the United States because they identified within it the potential for engaging Jewish individuals and organizations in environmental awareness, action, and activism.

The Shmita Project

Even in the relatively new world of Jewish environmentalism, The Shmita Project is young. Nigel Savage, Executive Director of Hazon, writes in *Shabbat Ha'aretz* that 'at Hazon, we have been working on *shmita* fairly steadily since 2008' (Kook 2014: 15). This is the same year that the article by Nati Passow, cited above, appeared in *Jewish Education News*. Although the practical implementation of the Shmita Project is a recent development, Rabbi Arthur Waskow, a leader in the Jewish Renewal Movement and Founding Director of The Shalom Center, suggested an adaptation of the sabbatical year in the 1990s 'as a way to enforce cessation of economic activity and promote reflection concerning the effects of our work and economy on the earth and each other' (Jacobs 2002: 451). This aspect of *shmita* appealed to Jeremy Benstein as well.

> Indeed, the biblical *shmitah* is a stirring example of an entire society choosing to live at a significantly lower material standard for a year in order to devote itself to more spiritual pursuits than the daily grind (Benstein 2006: 189).

The spiritual appeal of *shmita* that entranced Waskow and Benstein remained a part of the Shmita Project as it grew. In its current form, the Shmita Project is a partnership between Hazon, 7Seeds, and the Jewish Farm School. The Shmita Project is small in numbers but its leaders are connected through Hazon and JOFEE to each other and to an expansive list of Jewish and



(Deutscher 2013: 22)

non-Jewish environmental organizations and individuals. Together, they have reimagined *shmita* and worked to enact their vision in the 2014–15 *shmita* year.

The Shmita Project is not only located within an American context; it is enabled by that American context. The history of *shmita* reveals a resistance to observing the sabbatical year, within the Land of Israel for economic and social reasons and outside the Land of Israel for legal reasons. The United States in the early twenty-first century provided the perfect setting for the implementation of this environmentally-focused revitalization of an ancient religious practice. This backdrop combined a concern for the growing environmental crisis, increasingly industrialized food production, and an atmosphere that enables and even encourages religious cooperation and innovation.

As evidenced by the image above, published in *Envisioning Sabbatical Culture: A Shmita Manifesto*, the actors and actions embedded in the *shmita* network are often not exclusively Jewish. In fact, the chart above does not include a single food system that is identifiably Jewish. There are no synagogues, Jewish community centres, Jewish farms or Jewish camps listed on the chart. The actors listed on the chart also exemplify the connections between human and non-human actors within the network structure. The chart includes animals, land, foods and plants as vital actors in the Shmita Community Supported Food Systems (Deutscher 2013: 22). The Shmita Project is a network that exists in the very material world of food production. Blidstein highlights this central aspect of *shmita* in the Mishnah when he wrote '*shevi'it* demands the equalization of all who live off the soil' (Blidstein 1966: 49). The Shmita Project is a network where humans, plants, and animals act upon each other.[10] *Shmita*, at its very heart, is focused on the needs of the land, not humans. The texts related to *shmita* identify the land as sacred and it is so valued in the Biblical text that it requires rest along with the Jewish people and their God. In this non-anthropocentric network, *shmita* is the soil it seeks to repair, the seeds that will be stored instead of planted, the wild edibles it promotes for consumption, and the animals it hopes to feed and protect. The Shmita Project comprises people, animals, things, ideas, and organizations. Each of these aspects of the Shmita Project is vital to its existence. As is the case with most complex networks, the Shmita Project is not a neatly closed system. The *shmita* network is enmeshed in a web of organizations and individuals focused on animal rights, environmental protection, food reform, agricultural industry, and Judaism in America,

10 I rely here on Jane Bennett's discussion of vital material assemblages in *Vibrant Matter* (2010) and Tim Ingold's discussion of Actor-Network Theory and distributed agency in 'When ANT meets SPIDER: social theory for arthropods' (2008).

Israel and beyond. Nigel Savage suggests that *shmita* might provide a locale for interfaith cooperation:

> I hope that as this century unfolds, the Jewish tradition of *shmita* may become an opportunity to learn and share among religious traditions of all sorts. What would a Tibetan Buddhist make of *shmita*? How does a Native American read Rav Kook? … We hope that, in due course, some of these conversations will unfold. (Kook 2014: 14)

Savage also aspired to a *shmita*-based connection between religious and non-religious people.

> Those of you whose focus is not religion but, for instance, permaculture; land use; crop rotation; cohousing and intentional community; ecological restoration… if you are involved in any or all of these topics, or a hundred others, we hope that you will read this book, discuss it with your friends, teach it, critique it, and, most of all, engage deeply with it. (Kook 2014: 14–15)

The Shmita Project is a Jewish network but it actively works to participate in a larger conversation. The extent to which the Shmita Project is connected to other religious and non-religious movements is enabled by the religious diversity and tendency towards religious mixing and innovation present in the contemporary United States. The main texts of the Shmita Project, *Envisioning Sabbatical Culture: A Shmita Manifesto*, and *The Hazon Shmita Sourcebook* will be analysed closely below as evidence of the interconnected and diverse worlds of Judaism, environmentalism, ethics, and food in the proposed observance of the *shmita* year.

Envisioning Sabbatical Culture: A Shmita Manifesto

In *Envisioning Sabbatical Culture: A Shmita Manifesto*, Yigal Deutscher (2013) lays out a broad vision for the American Jewish community with goals of healing the world. Deutscher was the founding manager of the Shmita Project and he directs 7Seeds, 'an educational platform weaving together Jewish wisdom traditions & Permaculture Design strategies' (Hazon website 2014: 'The Shmita Project'). In *Envisioning Sabbatical Culture* Deutscher highlights the aspects of the *shmita* culture that he hopes will inspire a new holistic sensibility in American Jewry:

> Shmita is more than a calendar year; it is primarily a way of being, a blueprint for a sacred, whole-systems culture, one grounded in vibrant, healthy and diverse relations between self, community, ecology, economy & spirit (Deutscher 2013: ii).

In a slim book that brims with spiritual language, Kabbalistic diagrams, and artistic renditions of *shmita* concepts, Deutscher lays out the essential elements of a 'sabbatical food system'. The focus of the sabbatical food system is land stewardship. As mentioned earlier, the prohibition against seeding, planting and ploughing requires a reliance on perennial produce and wild edibles and Deutscher highlights the importance of these foods in his proposed sabbatical food system. He also stresses gathering the harvest at full ripeness, eating harvests in their natural growing season and eating harvests locally. Deutscher identifies the 'broken link' between food producers and consumers as a central problem in American society and he sees this problem as one that the *shmita* year can address head on. He argues that a connection to the land our food comes from is vital. He explains that the *shmita* year 'offers us a direct challenge to re-enter the sacred relationship with food production, distribution and consumption' (Deutscher 2013: 23). Toning down his language slightly, Deutscher then frames the sabbatical food system as an invitation:

> This is an invitation to start reconnecting to perennial food systems: fruit trees, culinary herbs, healthy animal-based diets, and home drying, canning & fermentation. This is an invitation to cultivate awareness of wild edibles and medicinals, and to begin crafting intimate relationships with these plants and their gifts. This is an invitation to start the process of returning food production to our own backyards and neighborhoods, to take down fences and create networks of food producing commons. This is an invitation to join together to share in the sacred process of growing and harvesting food, to cook together and eat together in celebration of the seasonal abundance, which surrounds us. (Deutscher 2013: 23)

This invitation is offered beside the image included above that details the possible actors in a 'SHMITA Community Supported Food Systems' network (Deutscher 2013: 22). Deutscher is inviting his readers to explore the available resources in their local communities, Jewish or not, in order to embrace the spirit of the *shmita* year. This is reflective of Deutscher's focus on community building as an essential aspect of the *shmita* year, but it also points to a key reality of American Judaism. In the United States, many American Jews have the

option to make Jewish choices using non-Jewish resources. For example, sticking to food-based examples, there are hundreds of kosher products produced by non-Jewish companies. Deutscher taps into this tendency of American Jews to incorporate non-Jewish people, organizations, companies and products into their Jewish lives.

Deutscher offers his vision for a reconnection with the land and with food through indirect channels. Since most American Jews do not seed, plant or plough in order to eat, the Shmita Project is geared more towards the potential inspirational aspects of *shmita*. In keeping with these educational and inspirational aims, towards the end of his manifesto, Deutscher offers over one hundred ways to 'ReNew Shmita Culture'. Deutscher's suggestions are divided into three categories that reflect his *shmita* triad – community food systems, community economic systems and community design systems (Deutscher 2013: 35–9). In the section on food systems, Deutscher encourages establishing personal and communal perennial gardens, hosting harvest parties, composting, becoming familiar with wild edibles, buying local, organic and seasonal produce and storing the harvest by canning, preserving, fermenting and drying, as well as many additional suggestions (*ibid.* 35–6). Deutscher brought these ideas with him when he joined forces with Hazon as the founding manager of the Shmita Project.

The Hazon Shmita Sourcebook

Many of the ideas laid out in *Envisioning Sabbatical Culture* were fleshed out in later Shmita Project resources. *The Hazon Shmita Sourcebook*, authored by Yigal Deutscher along with Hazon staffer Anna Hanau and executive director Nigel Savage (2013), moves Deutscher's broad vision into a practical handbook meant for use in Jewish communities. *The Hazon Shmita Sourcebook* contains one hundred and twenty-five pages of biblical and rabbinic texts, resources, and suggestions so that American Jews can become educated about *shmita* and act in accordance with the essence of *shmita*. These texts are provided in order to inspire action among American Jews:

> If Shmita was a radical, challenging proposition back in early Israelite culture, how much more so today, in an era of industrial agriculture and the global marketplace! After all this time of dormancy, the time has come to once again explore this question of Shmita. And in doing so, let us meet this ancient tradition anew, ripe and fresh, to harvest her lessons for us today, and begin a conversation which will ripple into years to come, many generations ahead. (Deutscher *et al.* 2013: 65)

In accordance with their goal of resurrecting this ancient tradition for use in the modern world, *The Hazon Shmita Sourcebook* lays out the central *shmita* principles that they hope will inspire American Jews to adopt a sabbatical mindset. For each *shmita* principle, one or two environmental and/or cultural issues are highlighted and creative responses are offered with resources for further information. A total of sixteen *shmita* principles are listed and detailed in the sourcebook. These principles are divided into five categories: A Yearlong Shabbat, A Sabbatical Food System, Community & Food Security, Community & Economic Resiliency and Jubilee Release. The Sabbatical Food System principles listed in the sourcebook are Land Stewardship, Perennial/Wild Harvest, Eat Local, Seasonal Diet, and Animal Care. The Community & Food Security principles include Creating Commons, Shared Harvest, Fair Distribution and Waste Reduction, are listed under the heading Community & Food Security (Deutscher *et al.* 2013: 70).

It is important to mention that the Sabbatical Food System is given much more attention in the sourcebook than it received in Deutscher's manifesto. Where it was included as one third of Deutscher's original tripartite vision for *shmita*, the authors of the sourcebook, a group that includes Deutscher, dedicate more than half of their Sabbatical Principles to foodways. The relevancy of these food-based principles to contemporary conversations about food production in the United States are likely the motivation behind this promotion of food reform as the primary aspect of *shmita* year action. The remaining principles are concerned with the economic aspects of the *shmita* year and the Jubilee year. Below, I discuss the principles associated with the Sabbatical Food System as they are described in the sourcebook and the religious and non-religious actions, or 'creative responses' that are provided as suggestions for embodying the spirit of the *shmita* year. The creative responses offered fall into one of two types: they are either intended for action at the individual level, or they are offered to a national or international organization working in the area that would benefit from monetary support and increased awareness and education. So, readers can either participate in direct action or they can act by learning more, spreading the word, or contributing money. It is clear through the presentation of these issues and the suggestions offered for action that the *shmita* movement is enabled by and embedded in wider networks in the United States that are similarly focused on environmentalism, food production reform, and animal rights.

Land Stewardship

Land Stewardship is the central principle of the sabbatical system. It is based on the prohibition against the 'seeding or plowing of agricultural land during the Shmita year' (Deutscher *et al.* 2013: 74). The following explanation is offered for this principle:

> This fallow period provides an invitation to be in relationship with land as land itself: soil, minerals, rocks, communities of fungi, bacteria, earthworms, all nourishing the roots of plants, purifying the underground waters, generously supporting so many diverse forms of life (Deutscher *et al.* 2013: 74).

This is an invitation to American Jews to stop taking the soil for granted, to enter into or deepen their relationship with the land their food comes from. The authors urge readers to consider the issue of land degradation in light of this principle. As is the case with almost all of the Sabbatical Principles they discuss, the authors turn to outside sources to explain the need for action in this area. Here, they provide brief statements from scientists at The Land Institute and the University of Connecticut that illuminate the economic and environmental costs of soil erosion and the over-tillage of soil (Deutscher *et al.* 2013: 74). Creative responses to land degradation follow and include conservation tillage and no tillage systems as well as information related to soil fertility management. The responses here are directed at individual action in backyard gardens.

The loss of biodiversity and wildlife is also connected to the principle of land stewardship in the sourcebook. The authors explain, 'In the ideal sense, the Shmita year shaped the process of rejuvenating wild ecologies' (Deutscher *et al.* 2013: 80). On the creative responses page for this issue information about wild land trusts and the wild farm alliance is offered. Both of the resources listed – The Wilderness Land Trust and Wild Farm Alliance – are non-religious non-profit organizations working to protect wild ecologies (*ibid.* 81). Here, the response requested of the readers comes in the form of furthering their knowledge on the subject and perhaps even supporting other organizations financially.

Perennial/Wild Harvest

The *shmita* principle of the Perennial/Wild Harvest is linked to the impact of annual crop farming.

> As fruit and nut trees do not need seasonal sowing or tilling, these plants still produce abundant harvests during the Shmita year. However, the conventional, large-scale mechanized and chemical monoculture farming systems in place today are best suited for the production of annual plants, which are primarily grown for processing and for animal feed. (Deutscher *et al.* 2013: 78)

Educational information is delivered through excerpts from the Union of Concerned Scientists and The Land Institute. Deforestation and the high percentage of agricultural land dedicated to the production of annual crops are highlighted as issues that Jews should consider during the *shmita* year. The creative response section provides two resources: The Land Institute, a 'non-profit farm research facility' and community fruit tree projects (Deutscher *et al.* 2013: 79). Interestingly, the two resources listed for information on community fruit tree projects are non-religious organizations in Portland (the Portland Fruit Tree Project) and Boston (the Boston Tree Party). These examples are interesting choices given that a frequent contributor to the Shmita Project, Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin, is Executive Director and Founder of a community fruit tree project, the Baltimore Orchard Project. Choices like this point to an intentional avoidance of Jewish and Jewish-led organizations in favour of non-religious non-profit organizations. In addition to these resources, Appendix A of *The Hazon Shmita Sourcebook* is dedicated to lists of perennial foods and wild edibles to assist people interested in amending their diet to align their eating habits with this particular *shmita* year principle. The appendix also includes additional suggestions for action in this arena including wild plant walks, perennial gardens and starting a local gleaning group. None of the authors appear to expect a complete adoption of a perennial and wild edibles diet, but they do ask readers to consider adding more of these foods to their diet in order to engage in the spirit of *shmita* and support healthier and more stable soil ecologies.

Eat local

The *shmita* principle Eat Local is highlighted because of the texts that call for harvests to be eaten locally and prohibit exporting *shmita* year produce. This principle is used to highlight the difficulties associated with eating local today:

> Today, our food system is complex and global. With a few exceptions, government support for local food economies and holistic, sustainable 'food sheds' tend to be bypassed in favor of subsidies given to large farms that grow food for global industry and export market. This has directly affected the security and strength of local food systems, both ecologically and socially. (Deutscher *et al.* 2013: 84)

Besides the obvious prescription to eat local, the sourcebook uses this principle to call attention to some of the issues of the global food trade. Brief but educational pieces from *The Ecologist* and World Watch Institute consider the issue of monocultures and the homogenization of people's tastes as well as the extensive amounts of fuel used and the pollution created in the conventional food distribution system in America. Creative responses offered include accessible options for individuals looking to participate in *shmita* including shopping at local farmers markets and participating in a locavore challenge. These options provide familiar suggestions for American Jews interested in observing the unfamiliar *shmita* year.

Seasonal Diet

The *shmita* prescriptions to gather harvests at full ripeness and eat produce during its natural growing season are the basis for the *shmita* principle dedicated to a Seasonal Diet. In a section dedicated to the principle of the Seasonal Diet, Eat Local is also included once more. Together, these principles are utilized to discuss unhealthy food choices.

> Considering our modern food industry, this Shmita diet would limit the diversity of possibilities we have available in the selection of processed, non-local, and/or non-seasonal foods we can find in the common super-market. The Shmita year created an opportunity to explore the rich possibilities of a simple, natural diet. (Deutscher *et al.* 2013: 88)

These principles offer the authors an opportunity to discuss the unhealthy food choices that have come to define the American diet. An excerpt from a *New York Times* article by Jo Robinson provides information about the reduced nutritional value of modern foods. The authors also include a paragraph from *In Defense of Food* by the popular American food activist Michael Pollan describing the rise of highly processed foods and refined grains which is provided to describe the dangers of unhealthy food. Creative responses to the prevalence

of unhealthy foods come in the form of the slow food movement and community supported agriculture (CSA). Here the authors do offer a Jewish initiative as a resource, because Hazon has been running its own CSA programme since 2004. Their programme now includes 'over 65 sites in the US, Canada and Israel, and over 2,300 households' (Deutscher *et al.* 2013: 89). Each site for the Hazon CSA programme represents a location where people can pick up locally grown produce on a regular basis. Even here, where Hazon itself is a resource for action, a non-Jewish resource (localharvest.org) is listed first. This reveals a dedication to broadening the reach of the *shmita* year beyond Jewish organizations and initiatives.

Animal Care

The laws of *shmita* call for animals to have free access to both range and food. Animal Care is included as a central principle of *shmita* because of this requirement, and it is extended to include consideration of animal treatment:

> The intention during the Shmita year was to unlock fences surrounding our agricultural fields so that anyone in need would have free access to come and harvest. This would have affected our relationship with animals, as much as with our human neighbors. Just as we unlocked fences for our human neighbors, would we unlock the fences keeping in our domesticated animals? ((Deutscher *et al.* 2013: 82)

The inclusion of Animal Care as a central principle speaks of the commitment of the authors to appeal to American Jews in the twenty-first century. It would be almost unthinkable to establish a movement related to food reform in the United States today without considering the treatment of animals as a central issue. The authors discuss the treatment of animals in agriculture in relation to this principle. Once more, information is provided through the words of Michael Pollan. The inclusion of his short but evocative piece from *The New York Times Magazine* calls attention to the ethical and health issues associated with American industrial animal farms. The suggested creative responses are the consumption of pasture-raised animals and community-supported meat. Again, these options will be familiar to many Americans. The authors also include a separate list of resources for readers interested in kosher free-range animal products. This points to the growing associated movement in eco-kashrut that calls for animals to be raised as ethically as they are slaughtered and the attention to animal husbandry on Jewish farms in the United

States. Once more, these Jewish options are offered as secondary to broader non-religious resources.

This pattern of highlighting secular voices of authority and both non-Jewish and Jewish resources persists throughout the sections detailing the food security, economic resiliency and Jubilee release principles. Many of these principles are coupled with issues that proliferate in the pages of newspapers in the United States today. Food insecurity, income inequality, slave labour, overconsumption and the student debt crisis are all mentioned as possible areas for action during the *shmita* year. The Shmita Project offers an opportunity for American Jews to educate themselves and take action on myriad issues affecting Americans today. The Shmita Project resources are a convincing reminder that *shmita* is a holistic vision meant to inspire American Jews, but it strives to repair the entire world.

Conclusion

It is clear that many of the issues raised by the Shmita Project mirror those raised by secular environmental organizations and activists. Throughout the section of *The Hazon Shmita Sourcebook* that details the *shmita* principles and resources the authors utilized secular experts, institutions, organizations and initiatives as they called the American Jewish community to action. After a lengthy section of Jewish texts and rabbinic commentary encouraging American Jews to revive an ancient practice and bring it to a new land, readers are treated to thirty pages of education, discussion, and resources for the implementation of this Jewish practice through mainly non-Jewish means. This mixture of religious teaching spurring religiously intentioned action through non-religious methods exemplifies the ways that religion is lived out in the United States today. Outside the bounds of the synagogues lies a world of Jewish practices that are part of a vast and tangled web of other religious and non-religious practices. The Shmita Project offers a glimpse into the practices that are enabled by the inter-religious and extra-religious mixing that occurs in the American context.

The Shmita Project provided an opportunity for a number of Jewish organizations that work both separately and together on these issues to reclaim the sabbatical year in order to raise awareness among Jews of the environmental issues facing America. United in an effort to reimagine the *shmita* year, these organizations are encouraging American Jews to consider an environmentally sustainable permaculture model and a diet based on ethical food production, consumption and food security. The leadership of the Shmita Project worked

hard to ready the American Jewish community for participation in the unprecedented observance of the *shmita* year in the Diaspora. The movement remains small but many local *shmita* year events hint at the potential of this movement. A careful examination of the resources of this movement offers a clear picture of the vision for this revitalized practice, the level of innovation that is practical and possible in the American Jewish community and the extent to which this movement is a product of its location in the United States in the twenty-first century. However, since the true implementation of *shmita* requires attention to the entire seven-year cycle, only time will reveal the potential power of *shmita* in America.

Adrienne Krone is a PhD Candidate in American Religion at Duke University. She is interested in the religious practices that occur at the intersection of religion and culture in America. Her current research is focused on the multifaceted development and current state of the vast web of contemporary religious food reform movements in the United States.

Resources

Bennett, Jane, 2010. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press)

Benstein, Jeremy, 2006. *The Way Into Judaism and the Environment* (Woodstock, VT, Jewish Lights Publishing)

Blidstein, Gerald Jacob, 1966. 'Man and nature in the sabbatical year', *Tradition,* 9(4), pp. 48–55

Deutscher, Yigal, 2013. *Envisioning Sabbatical Culture: A Shmita Manifesto* (7 Seeds)

Deutscher, Yigal, Anna Hanau, and Nigel Savage, 2013. *The Hazon Shmita* השימש *Sourcebook* (New York, Hazon, Inc.)

Ingold, Tim, 2008. 'When ANT meets SPIDER: social theory for arthropods' in *Material Agency: Towards a Non-anthropocentric Approach* (New York, NY, Springer), pp. 209–15

Isaacs, Ronald H., 1998. *The Jewish Sourcebook on the Environment and Ecology* (Northvale, NJ, Jason Aronson Inc.)

Jacobs, Mark X, 2002. 'Jewish environmentalism: past accomplishments and future challenges' in *Judaism and Ecology: Created World and Revealed World*, ed. Hava Tirosh-Samuelson (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press)

JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh: Pocket Edition (Philadelpha, PA,The Jewish Publication Society, 2003)

Kook, Rabbi Abraham Isaac, 2014. *Rav Kook's Introduction to Shabbat Ha'Aretz* (New York, NY, Hazon)

Newman, Louis E., 1983. *The Sanctity of the Seventh Year: A Study of Mishnah Tractate Shebiit* (Chico, CA, Scholars Press)

Hazon website: 'Overview', 2014. <http://hazon.org/about/overview/> (accessed 14.12.2014)

——'The Shmita Project', 2014. <http://hazon.org/shmita-project/overview/> (accessed 14.12.2014)

Passow, Nati, 2008. 'Shemita as a foundation for Jewish ecological education' in *Jewish Education News* (New York, NY, Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education, Summer)

Tirosh-Samuelson, Hava, 2002. *Judaism and Ecology: Created World and Revealed World* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press)

Waskow, Rabbi Arthur, 1996. 'Toward a jubilee economy & ecology in the modern world' in *Godwrestling – Round 2* (Woodstock, VT, Jewish Lights Publishing)

Zuckermann, Dr. B., 1984 [1866]. *A Treatise on the Sabbatical Cycle and the Jubilee: A Contribution to the Archaeology and Chronology of the Time Anterior and Subsequent to the Captivity* (New York, NY, Hermon Press)