

## THE SEVENTH YEAR: WHAT TO DO?

Every seventh year the farmland in Israel is supposed to be given a rest. As we approach another of these, what is being done in Israel and how should or could a modern state accommodate this biblical suggestion?

What we find in Israel right now are a large number of Jewish farmers wondering how they would make a living if the law were nationally observed. Many are not observant and would be totally unconcerned except that their sales would suffer due to the food supervision put in place and guarded by the orthodox. Many other farmers are no doubt sympathetic to the Torah's instructions but must still feed their families from some kind of land-related productive activity, which is where their interests and skills lie.

How do the orthodox authorities respond to this dilemma? We are hearing that a group of rebellious rabbis want to approve the shameful procedure of "selling" your land to non-Jews for the seventh year and "buying it back" afterwards. That way, while the Jewish farmers are not the owners of the land they wouldn't be obligated by the rest requirement. The orthodox establishment, to its credit, does not approve of this scam.

Two things need to be mentioned with regard to orthodoxy's strict interpretation in this matter. First, selling the land is no different than "selling" your leavened bread before Passover and "buying it back" afterward. This is a widespread orthodox practice whose gross distortion of the laws' intent does not seem to be troubling the group. So, twisting some laws out of shape to suit your comfort, but not others, seems to be the erratic course of current religiosity. (You want another example? Consider the less than full participation in the armed forces by orthodox men and women.) Second, no real alternative has been suggested nationally to deal with the financial hardships that would ensue from a year of resting the farmland. It is the responsibility of concerned Jews to make these laws workable. We need a plan that could be developed and implemented gradually. It's a bit late for the upcoming rest-year but we could be ready for the next one.

### **Here are some ideas that I would like to suggest as a starting point:**

1. *The state of Israel would guarantee alternative employment to all Jewish farmers during the rest year and would have for them a choice of land-related projects.*
2. *As I understand the Jewish law or would like to interpret it, the only type of land required to rest is farmland. Therefore the employment offered by the government would be of a land-reclamation type, bringing unfarmed land into public use.*

### **Three types of projects would be available:**

1. *reclaiming land such as the many square kilometers of the Negev or other currently-unused pieces*
2. *developing public parks and nature preserves*
3. *beautifying all areas by landscaping, tree planting, and flower decoration*

Jewish farmers would be kept constructively engaged in the improvement of their homeland, putting into productive use many many pieces of desert or other wasted land or beautifying the cities, towns, highways, parks, and so on.

Of course my plan requires a people that is inspired to go back to the beautiful basics of Judaism and a government that similarly respects the basis of our claims to Israel.

Wouldn't the country be far better off with this approach? We would rest the working land as our books of wisdom, the Five Books of Moses, suggest and we would feel great about that. At the same time, we would do wonderful things for the current Israeli lifestyle and for the future of the country.

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