

Michal Govrin

## ***SHMITA*: A JOURNEY IN THE ISRAEL MUSEUM**

Let us now venture out on a tour among the artifacts of the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> This will be a sleuth-like tour in search of a mysterious significance known in Jewish ritual law as “shmita,” the seventh year in a seven-year cycle during which land in Israel must lie fallow and debts canceled. We will alight on its origins in the museum’s wing of archeology, in the remnants of a significant relation to the country/land, which has been forgotten and neglected, yet continues to haunt the Israeli unconscious. And we will uncover its ramifications in Israeli art and its unique longing for the sacred. The end of the tour will lead us to a renewed look at Jerusalem.

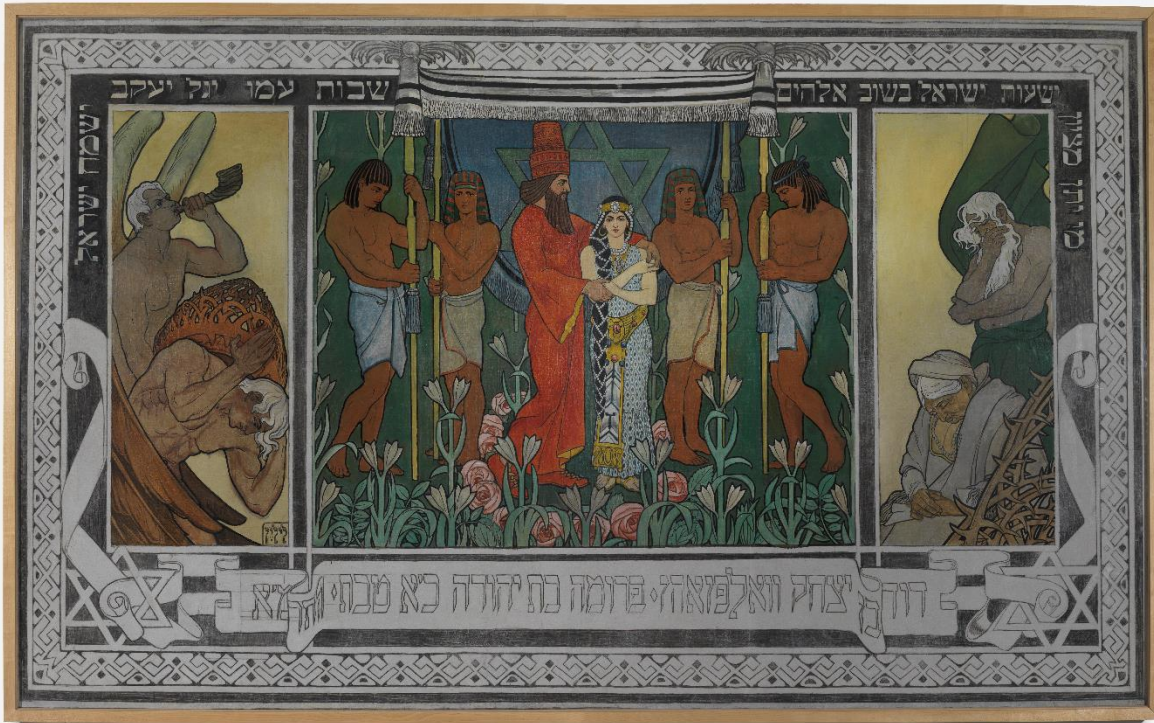
Gershon Scholem, in his noted letter of 1926 to Franz Rosenzweig, “A Confession Regarding Our Language,” warns against the secularization of Hebrew, which the “Zionist undertaking has of necessity summoned up,” and the evasion of the Names of the Lord ingrained in the language. “Must not,” he admonishes, “this abyss of a holy language which is being deposited in our children break open again now?” and “will not the religious power latent therein break out against its speakers?” The *shmita* too, the unique sacred dimension of the land, opens wide the interrogation of Jewish existence in the Land of Israel.

## THE BETROTHAL BETWEEN ZIONISM AND THE LAND

Let us begin our journey from the end, from the modern Israeli Art wing, facing the artwork by Ephraim Moshe Lilien executed in 1906. This is an Orientalist layout for a triptych that was prepared for the Bezalel workshops, established at the time, for the weaving of a carpet, a gift for the wedding of David Wolfson, Herzl’s successor as president of the World Zionist Congress. The triptych represents the Zionist myth in three sections:

---

<sup>1</sup> In the wake of the guided tour “Breaking the Israeli Frameworks” which I conducted during the International Festival of Writers in Jerusalem May 11, 2018. My gratitude to Liron Golod, the artistic manager of the festival, for the invitation, and to Shua Ben-Ari, the curator, for the accompaniment. All the images in this chapter are taken from displays in the Israel Museum, Jerusalem. Many thanks to Rachel and to Ophir from their assistance.



on the right “Exile,” “Redemption,” to the left and in between “The Nuptial Ceremony,” which one might entitle “The/A Zionist Nuptial.” Exile is portrayed in images of lament, borrowed from Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel. Jeremiah looks on from above at the Destruction and below him is Rachel, in the figure of the Sibyl on the ceiling of the Vatican, lamenting her sons. At their feet a crest of thorns, standing for ruin and mortification. On the panel to the left, Redemption is symbolized in the figure blowing the shofar of the Jubilee, heralding the return to the days of yore and the antique land, “Each of you shall return to his holding” (Leviticus 25:10), and the six wings of the angel from the vision of Ezekiel shelter him. The crest of thorns turns into an elaborate crown, in a dialogue replete with meaning in its allusion to Christ’s crown of thorns.

The triptych’s central panel depicts the nuptial ceremony. Let us first look at the groom. If we recall that the iconic photograph of Herzl, leaning in profile on a hotel balcony in Basel, was photographed by none other than Lilien, it won’t be difficult for us to discern Herzl’s own features, including his shovel beard, in Wolfson’s face, the groom (a conflation facilitated by the fact that Wolfson too sported a long and well-groomed beard, if not quite as impressive as Herzl’s). Wolfson-

Herzl the groom is attired in the clothes of a conquering Assyrian king, resembling the friezes in the British Museum, or as the sort we will meet again in our guided tour.

The bride, depicted in art nouveau style, is covered in ornaments reminiscent of the figure of Ashtoreth, the antique fertility goddess, consort of the god Baal. In Lilien's mythic nuptial and fertility ceremony the land itself is also penetrated and wedded to the president of the World Zionist Congress, embodying Zionist potency. In a frontal citation from the Song of Songs, the earth beneath the couple is festooned with roses and lilies. The erotic Zionist longing for Zion and Jerusalem is envisioned here in the sexual possession of the land, as in the primeval native tradition, echoed in the Orientalist colonial romanticism. Though not wishing to get ahead of myself, I would like to suggest here that the erotic façade of possession and nuptials will lead us along with shmita, to the possibility of a different form of Eros. So too the linear narrative of the Return to Zion in the wake of "Two thousand years of exile," which the triptych depicts, will be called into question.

But in the meantime, let us look more closely at the groomsmen under the chuppah, sons of the antique region, Akkadians bearing up the canopy, or Egyptians welcoming the couple with the waving of date palm fronds. With little effort we can also place in the same imaginary antique world the statue of the wild hunter Nimrod by Yitzhak Danziger which we passed by at the entrance to the hall, or – in an additional work by the sculpture – "Shebaziya:" both are carved in reddish Nabatean sandstone from an Edomite rockface – Petra. They too are the object of a "Canaanite" identification, bearing the Zionist longing to merge with a native antiquity as a means of returning and taking root and belonging to this place, Eretz Yisrael, the Land of Israel.

## THE RITUAL LAWS OF SHMITA

The hope, the aspiration, or the yearning to strike roots in the land (and region) raises – contrapuntally – the notion of shmita. I will at this point take advantage of our tour in order to briefly look at the nature of the "shmita," which is twofold: the lying fallow of land and the cancelation of debts. The former commandment is dependent on the land, and only he who lives in the Land of Israel and tills its soil falls under its obligation. And so it is presented in the biblical portion *Behar*: "The Lord spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai: Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: When you enter the land that I give you, the land shall observe sabbath of the Lord" (Leviticus 25: 1-2).

Midrash *Sifra* asks in connection to these lines, as cited in Rashi's well-known exegesis: "What meaning does shmita have in relation to Mount Sinai?" But in contrast to the common meaning, the

midrash points out that this is proof that all the commandments without exception were given on Mount Sinai. Today, in the spirit of our tour, I will ask: *Why* was the shmita commandment give on Mount Sinai? Afterall, it is hard to understand that prior to the nation entering the Land of Israel, prior to being bestowed its inheritance and tilling its soil, during the very heart of its wanderings in the desert, it receives in the smallest detail a commandment which can only be observed in the Land of Israel; if it had been, at the very least, instructions for the acquisition of landed property, or for the collecting of debts, or laws of ownership; but the commandment is contrariwise: the release (shmita) of land ownership and its yield and their abandonment, in addition to the release of debts. The surprise only grows if we recall that this is “A nation of slaves and convicts of hunger,” that had just fled enslavement, and that its deepest yearning was to be master of its own inheritance and land and tenancy, and what is it commanded? To let go.

I would like to suggest that in the Standing at Mount Sinai (*Maamad Har Sinai*) a paradoxical relationship between a nation and land, unique to civilization, has been formulated: the nation receives the land not as landowners, not to *possess* it, but rather conditionally, on loan. Reception in the name of release (shmita), in order to say, “The land isn’t mine.” This is a vision of freedom which isn’t ownership enslaved to property, clinging to material goods, but rather in the ability to let go of one’s grip, in order to hold onto what exits beyond time and matter. As in Yehuda Halevi’s poem: “The slaves of time are the slaves of slaves – /the Lord’s slave alone is free:/hence each mortal seeks out his portion/ ‘Mine is my Lord!’, my soul said.”

And the explanation is no less radical: the Land of Israel is not and never belonged to mankind but to God, who created it and everything in it. Beyond any transient mortal ownership, the land belongs to the Lord. Human beings are nothing other than “Strangers resident” on the land. Consequently, it’s impossible to purchase or sell the land in perpetuity: “But the land must not be sold beyond reclaim, for the land is Mine; you are but strangers resident with Me” (Leviticus 25: 23). The nation is charged over shmita as a distinctive means to reify the sacred at the heart of material existence, a sacredness in which the land, man and God are banded together.

The land itself cannot be appropriated or possessed in perpetuity. It is antithetical to the bride – the goddess of fertility, Baal’s consort – in Lilien’s painting. The land is *Bat Hurin*, Liberty’s Daughter, and she is deserving of rest, analogous to that of the Lord’s: “Six years you may sow your fields 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 (Leviticus 25: 3-4). In the myth the land is a persona with her own history. In antediluvian times, she too sinned in malformed intercourse: “The

earth became corrupt” (Genesis 6: 11). The Deluge, which destroyed the deeply flawed civilization, washed and cleansed it of its sins. However, according to R. Yohanan, the entire world was inundated by the Deluge, apart from the Land of Israel (*Zivchim*, Daf 113, B). The land hadn’t yet completed her sentence for her transgressions. How then shall she be redeemed? As the result of shmita and the cessation from work: “Throughout the land that you hold, you must provide for the redemption of the land” (Leviticus 25: 24). And the intention here is not to redeeming the land from its barren wastes, as with the Zionist settlements, but by letting her go.

Moreover, upholding shmita is a condition for securely inhabiting the land: “You will 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” (Leviticus 25: 18-19). The punishment for not preserving shmita is expulsion from the land, seventy years of exile in Babylon were the punishment for seventy years of shmita that the nation did not conserve since entering the land: “To fulfil the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had made up for the Sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept sabbath, to fulfil seventy years.” (Chronicles 2: 36: 21).

“The sabbath of the land” is also “her sabbath,” and the third partner to the shmita is man. Shmita exists only on account of the strength of his deeds, God rests and the land is redeemed. And in the human world, shmita is a means of struggling against inequality and social injustice: “Six years you shall sow your land and gather in 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” (Exodus 23: 10-11). The yield and produce, that grow wild during the shmita year when the land lies fallow, are abandoned, ownerless, available to all, without economic, social or national distinctions, to domestic and even to the beast of the field: “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” (Leviticus 25: 6-7). Accordingly – as it is explained in the laws of shmita (the seventh tract in the Jerusalem Talmud) – the owner of the field must remove his fences during the shmita year and leave his property open without boundaries or barriers.

The remission of debts isn’t dependent on inhabiting the land, but it defines the social and moral dimension of shmita: “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 neighbor; he shall

not dun his neighbor or kinsman, for the remission proclaimed is of the Lord” (Deuteronomy 15: 1-2). The regulation of financial matters and of property is the result of the awareness to the reality of social injustice: indeed “For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land” (Deuteronomy 15: 11), but the remission of debts every seventh year and the complete cancelation every seventh shmita, during the jubilee year, decrease the injustice. I cannot elaborate here on the radical approach to the release of fiscal matters, particularly in the light of the dominance of capitalism in our own times. Only think what would happen if the world bank would refrain, every seven years, from collecting debts from third world countries and that every jubilee year the debts would be canceled, and global property redistributed among different parts of the world.

However, shmita does not necessarily only benefit a propertyless people – the needy, the laborer, and alien resident – rather it also sets free the land and property owner himself. It isn’t solely a “sabbatical year” and a year free of labor (for Aristotle, “A free man” was he who did not have to work for a living): shmita was intended to release man from the dread of existence itself. The farmer was remitted from the burden of working his land in the unending cycle of the seasons of the year, the property owner was released from the obsessive fervor of accrual, and all were released from the fear of losing control. Clinging turns into letting go – an even more radical and meaningful act in our own times, with the unceasing rate of work of 24/7.

But straightaway, at the heart of the laws of shmita, fear too is expressed, and with considerable psychological sensitivity: “And you should ask, ‘what are we to eat in the seventh year, if we may neither sow nor gather in our crops?’” (Leviticus 25: 20). The fear is deep, for if we are unable to sow and gather in the fruits of our labor, what shall we eat? How frightening it is to let go of our grip, to lose control of reality. Fear is a significant facet, inextricably allied to shmita (and in the continuation of our tour we will be encountering such expressions of fear in Israeli art). And so, in the Biblical connection, shmita is directly conditioned on the faith that the yield of the sixth year will be sufficient for three years: “I will ordain my blessing for you” (Leviticus 25: 21). Trust and faith balance out the fear.

Finally, it is apposite to point out another significant dimension in the shmita commandments: such commandments are not solely redemption of the land and of man who is subject to existential fears, to lack or assets; shmita is as well the redemption of society and of time. Every seven years of shmita, every jubilee, it is possible to blow the shofar of redemption and to start anew, to return to square one and to “restart” all the systems. The lands and tenure return to their original owners, the

laborers are set free, and debts are canceled. The shmita and the jubilee, as with the sabbath, are exits from time and social conditions, the possibility to attend to the sacred in matter itself and in the world.

## SHMITA AND ZIONISM

The relationship between the nation and the land of Israel has never been “natural.” The land is bestowed upon the nation as a loan, not as property and not in perpetuity, but conditionally. The nation inhabits the land by virtue of its ethical conduct, consequent to following the commandments connected to the soil and the land and human relations. In this way, maintaining shmita – as we’ve seen in the midrash of the Babylonian exile – is a condition for the continuous habitation of the land. Which is to say, to dwell in the land does not mean holding on to it forcibly, but – every seven years – in fact letting go, letting it lie fallow! To what extent is this notion relevant to the reality of Jerusalem. And to what extent does it challenge the course of Zionism.

Zionism, which aimed to redeem the land from its desolation, established a narrative axis that moved from exile to redemption brought about after two thousand years, and Lilien’s painting expresses the fulfillment of the ancient dream with the nation and the land’s nuptial ceremony. This is an urgent one-way journey, wherein every deviance from its Messianic path is charged with catastrophic dangers (and this is not the place to dwell on the parallel between the hope for “The Messiah Now” and “Peace Now,” and the despair lurking in both camps from the postponement of the fulfilling of their vision).

Our tour will also put into question the linear perception of time and of the myth of “Two thousand years of exile,” the common catchall of Zionist marketing, rewriting history and ignoring the multivarious Jewish settlements in the land of Israel in the wake of the destruction of the Temple, which continued and clung to the land during the last centuries until it merged with the state of Israel. It also ignores the way Jewish settlements, in the first centuries after the Destruction, which was largely agricultural, sedulously observed shmita. Ignoring the historical “Twilight zone” leaves in the shadow the ethical and social and metaphysical lessons of settling the land by the selfsame ancestral custodians of shmita.

Now, before continuing our tour, and since you’ve already taken your place (and as we’ve seen, it’s a bit scary to leave a place which we’ve held on to), I will present to you two texts that may surprise you as they contain proposals for a different axis of time. Let us then turn our gaze from Lilien’s painting, which as mentioned was painted in 1906 in Jerusalem, and move on to Yaffo in the year

1910. At the time, one year after the foundation of Tel Aviv, the chief Rabbi of Yaffo was Rav Avraham Yitzhak Hacohen – also known as Rabbi Kook. Farmers from the First Aliyah, who were God-fearing Jews, turned to the Rav with the following question: “Lo, we’ve returned to the Land of Israel to till its soil, and in the Land of Israel there exists the commandment of shmita, a commandment that is dependent on and restricted in its application to the Land of Israel. If so, we, who’ve been fortunate to return from exile to till the land, what are we to do? For the days are hard, and we have no work, so how are we to let the land lie fallow? And what are we to eat on the seventh year? And the eighth year?” They ask the Rav, and a primal fear fills their hearts.

“The sheer stress” in which the Yishuv is under allows Rabbi Kook to temporarily bypass the shmita in a symbolic “sales permit” of lands to gentiles. But at the same time, he lays out the principles of shmita in his book, *Sabbath of the Land: The Seventh Year Ritual Law*. For the most part his interpretation of the Rambam’s *The Seventh Year Ritual Law*, and at its head a long introduction containing, remarkably, a fundamental perspective. Four years after Lilien’s layout of the nuptial ceremony, Rav Kook speaks completely differently about exile and redemption. For Rabbi Kook it isn’t a linear and direct eschatological course of action, but a cyclic and essential passage between exilic wandering and permanent life in the Land of Israel. And he explains, that over the years of inhabiting the land the nation’s heart has coarsened, and it perceives its tenancy as taken for granted. A coarseness in possessing the land, without honor/dignity, without allowing the land to rest, without consideration for who created the land and its inhabitants themselves, all these point to the sorry state of the “spirit of the nation” (*Sabbath of the Land*, p.19). Possession contaminates the land, and Destruction (*Hurban*) and exile are its punishment: “Thus the land became defiled; and I called it to account for its iniquity, and the land spewed out its inhabitants” (Leviticus 18:25). Hence the nation must live in exile and purify itself from the material attachments to which it clung in the Land of Israel. Living in exile, the nation regains its spirit: “Israel in exile left all its everyday worries ... and set its eyes and heart solely in matters of the heavens above” (*Sabbath of the Land*, p.11). It is in fact in exile, under monarchic subjugation, that the nation is revived: “In effect the nation’s great misfortune, once the tumult of national life and the infectious commotion withdraws, the spiritual light begins to slowly reascend from where it had descended” (p.11). Only then is the purification fulfilled and the nation can return to its land and its supreme spiritual origins and to the universal dimension of its existence. This is a periodic history vacillating between extremes – clinging and letting go (shmita), exile and redemption: these are the chronicles of the nation of Israel in the past and this will be its future. Thus, Rav Kook wrote in 1910.



H.N. Bialik, Rav Kook's friend, he too considered a spokesman of the Zionist movement, delivered a lecture in Berlin in 1922, entitled "Jewish Dualism," which was not less surprising. Bialik, echoing his friend, spoke of the existence of two common facets to the Jewish People, and he echoed Rav Kook's historio-philosophic perspective applying anthroposophical terms: humanity stemmed from two fundamental sources, personified in Abel and Cain, which continued to thrive, according to Bialik, as two inevitable poles in the history and spirit of the Jewish People: the wandering shepherd and the farmer tilling his soil. As with Rav Kook so too Bialik attributes the spiritual facet to wandering, to the shepherd in the figure of Abel, who isn't enslaved to the land and its tilling and can develop abstract thought. And like Rav Kook, Bialik too perceives the history of the nation as the movement between both poles: wandering and dwelling on the land. This isn't a one-way process across a unique, one-off redemptive path, but rather manifests itself in the continuous heartbeats between the two facets. In the face of the return to Zion of his own days, Bialik concludes his lecture as follows:

At the end of the Second Commonwealth the Hebrews took much spiritual wealth along with them to Babylonia—the teaching of the Prophets and basic Judaism. When the Babylonian exile was drawing to its close, the nation appeared to have become depleted. In reality, Israel had been considerably influenced by the Babylonians and Persians, so that by the time the exiles began their homeward journey, their spirit was enriched; they had adapted the foreign material, absorbed it, and then created a revised basic Hebrew culture.

After wandering for thousands of years and after endless changes and re-evaluations ... after influencing the whole world and being influenced by it, we are now, for the third or fourth time, once again returning to our land. And here we are destined to fashion a culture sevenfold greater and richer than any we have heretofore created or absorbed (from "Jewish Dualism," translated by Maurice Shudofsky, in H.N. Bialik, *Revelment and Concealment: Five Essays*, Jerusalem, Ibis Editions, 2000, pp. 43-44).

And this is the vision of the national Zionist revival in the Land of Israel. But listen to the last sentence:

And who knows? Perhaps after hundreds of years we will be emboldened to make another exodus which will lead to the spreading of our spirit over the world and an assiduous striving toward glory -- (ibid, p.44).

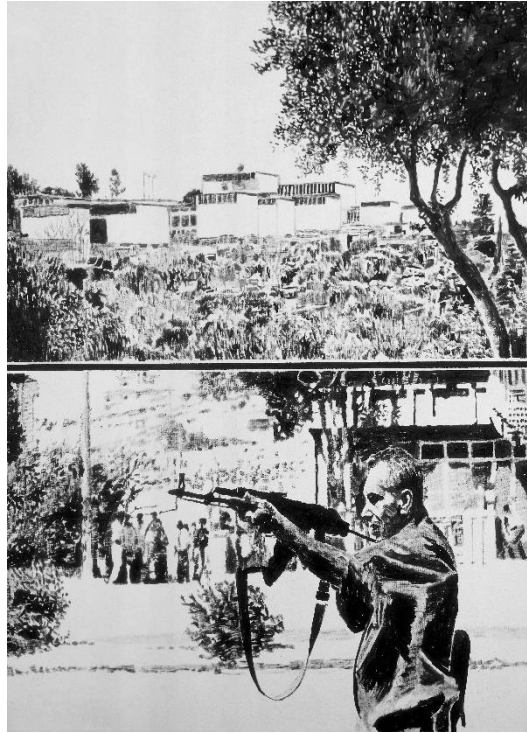
Bialik and Rav Kook, two prophets of the return to the new Zion, envision an unceasing movement. And the open hyphens with which Bialik concludes his essay remain an open question. Such thoughts hadn't been sounded in their time, which is understandable: after all this was an early period of settling the land, a period of construction, inaugurating, striking roots. Nevertheless, I would like to claim the following in concluding the opening section of our tour: in the national unconscious, in the individual unconscious, such voices remained as a residue of discomfort. In the face of the steadfast, secure hold of the farmer; in the face of the betrothal to the place, there remains a sense that something hasn't been resolved, some feeling of sin (spiritual? Political?); and the longings for a different dimension ("unnatural") in our relationship to place. Let us now take a look at its various expressions in works of art.

### THE ISRAELI ART WING

Let us now look at a painting by Yohanan Simon, "The Ploughers:" a painting that's all earth, brown colors, bodies toiling. It was painted in 1945, in the wake of the Shoah. The longing to merge with the place, the earth, is self-evident. "Here is the place," the painting states, "Here the redemption is taking place, here the soil is being tilled." Simon – born in Germany, a member of Mapam, the workers party, a social realist, deep in conversation with the Mexican muralist, Diego Rivera. The longing to merge, to strike roots, to assimilate with the earth, is perfectly understandable in relation to the Shoah (suggested, perhaps, in the downcast faces of the laborers). But what is it that continues to rage under the ground? What threatens the same complete devotion and merging?

Let us turn now to the wall with works of a more political cast, which preoccupies a significant number of Israeli artists. In our tour I will propose to also relate to such works from the standpoint of myth and the question of shmita, or, that is to say, from the tension between the forging of a nation and its defense and the early recognition that the place isn't ours, "For all the earth is mine (Ex. 19, 5)." How to live with this doubleness, to turn it into part of our experience?

Let us look at David Reeb's diptych "Nice Architecture (after a photograph by Mickey Krezman)," from 1997. In its upper register the Israel Museum is painted, while in its bottom register a Palestinian is shooting in the lanes of the old city during the uprising that broke out in response to the opening of the Western Wall tunnel. In an exposed defiance Reeb juxtaposes the two photographs on a black



and white canvas with the ironic title.

The sloping grounds on which the museum was erected takes up a large part of the upper register of the painting, extending to the olive trees in the Valley of the Cross. As though the artist asked: on what does the museum sit, the temple of Israeli culture and aesthetics? What was here prior to the museum? An Arab village? And to whom belongs the olive trees? (And I, who live on the other side of the Valley of the Cross, meet there on my walks during the olive picking season Palestinian women and men who've come to pick the olives, alongside the school children, and I too pick a few olives to preserve in a jar.) And take note of this detail, how Reeb paints in miniature the national flags flapping above the museum. As if saying: this story is complicated, and the museum too looms above the cocked Kalashnikov.

And not far from Reeb's painting hangs a work by Larry Abrahamson. In a striking contrast, Abrahamson has painted thin-stemmed plants with delicate brushstrokes overlaying issues dated from the Six-Day War of the *Jerusalem Post*. Some of you may also recall his well-known work "Tsuba-Tsubah," which lays bare the story of the Arab village Tsubah and the kibbutz that was built on its ruins after 1948, and below the ruins there are the remnants of a settlement from the First and Second Temple Period, as well as remnants of a Christian purification pool and a Crusader stronghold. The hold onto the land is complex.

Let us return for a moment to the question posed in the midrash – what meaning does shmita have in relation to Mount Sinai? – and continue with Rashi's interpretation of *Bereshit Raba*, at the opening

of the Book of Genesis. He evokes the words of R. Yitzhak, which begin with a similar question: after all the Torah is designated to the people of Israel and not to all of humanity; if so, why does it open with the story of the creation of the world and not with the first commandment in the keeping of Passover that was given to the people of Israel? And his answer: “If the nations of the world will say to Israel “You are thieves, for having conquered the lands of the seven nations,” you will answer, “All the land belongs to God, He created and bestowed it upon the just in His eyes, He willingly bestowed upon them and willingly took from them and bestowed upon us.”

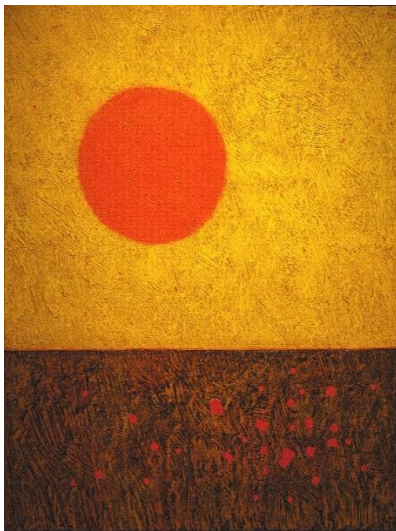
Casting aspersions at the nation of Israel, “You are thieves,” continued during the days of the Gemara, extended into the 11<sup>th</sup>-century when Rashi wrote, and unto our own times. The early halutzim or pioneer’s clinging to their soil and their world as evidenced in Simon’s painting, or in Lilien’s nuptial ceremony, hasn’t exempted us from the blame. The accusation “You are thieves” is at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the reason for the daily threat to the existence of the State of Israel and the reason why to this day Israel hasn’t determined its borders. And the questions, what is our connection to the place? What was here before us? [What is our relation to it?] These questions are still with us. Rashi reminds us that the connection between the nation and the land has never been “natural.” However, this memory and its claims have vanished from Zionist discourse. On “Mount Sinai in Basel” the members of the World Zionist Congress didn’t observe the lessons of shmita.

## MATTER AND SPIRIT

Here, in this hall, by virtue of the wonderful curatorship, there rises, from among the paintings a deep longing to break beyond the realm of the tangible. Let us look at the goat head in Moshe Kadishman’s work, melting into the white background. Kadishman, who was a shepherd on kibbutz Mayan Baruch, strolled about Tel Aviv as a shepherd, in shorts and sandals, and from the vantage point of a nomad has created both the howling face-disks as a monument to the Shoah and the goat that is all spirit. Or the abstract landscape of Moshe Kupferman, a survivor of the Shoah, one of the founders of kibbutz Lohmeh Hagetaot: in his works, the handling of the paint, the stratification and network of white lines form a fence, while at the same time they are pulled beyond the framework, calling to mind the Suprematism of Kazimir Malevich, and the impulse to break through the barriers that obstruct the movement of the body, of the gaze, and of thought. And here – is a work of Yosef Zaritzky, he too seeking out the locus’s poetic features in the lyrical-abstract of the country’s landscapes. And the “Mt Shmita (Mount Sabbatical), the anti-monument to peace of the heroine of *Snapshots*, speaks intimately

with the Israeli art that aspires – alongside political dissent – to reveal the spirit beyond the material existence in the country.

I would like now to consider closely a painting by Mordechai Ardon “Red Sun,” reading it in relation to Ardon’s sustained striving toward grounding the spiritual in its place, in Jerusalem, and in the light of the use he made of Lurianic Kabbalah in several of his well-known works. The canvas is divided into two parts, sky and earth. A red line separates – or combines – the two. The earth is dark brown, and the skies, considerably larger than the earth, extend the color of the earth in yellows and lighter browns, and in them is fixed the red sun. Also in terms of the application of the paint, the land, the skies and the sun are all made up of a unified field, painted in the same opaque materiality. From within the red sun small red spots (almost pointillistic) disperse across the skies and the land. I suggest reading this in the light of the Lurianic myth of the breaking of the vessels with the creation of the world, and the light



disperses from within in sparks toward the world of matter, sparks that are lodged in matter awaiting to be redeemed by the deeds of man (similar to shmita in which man redeems the land). Creation isn’t a unique primeval event. The world continues to be created in the spirit of the verses in the morning prayer: “And in goodness every day always an act of Genesis” – and man in his intentions and his acts, participates in the renewal of creation. In Ardon’s painting, skies and land and red sun are integrated in their materiality and in the sparks scattered within them. The feat of painting itself is turned, as it were, into act of redemption.

Next to Ardon hangs a diptych depicting a view of open fields by Michael Gross. (The prevalent use of the triptych, as we observed in Lilien’s painting, and of the diptych, present as well in Ardon’s

stained glass windows in the National Library – are such applications borrowed from Christian altar paintings, in a search for a form that may be seen as “sanctified” and “spiritual”?) Most of the airy composition consists of an expanse of fields, perhaps Emek Yizrael, and only in one corner appears the shadowy figure of a tractor driver, but it is the motive, the motivating force. The expanse of the soul and spirituality of Zionism takes place in the “fields that are in the emek,” there “Comes rest to the weary and solace to laborer,” as in the poem by Alterman, or in the “Valley of Ginosar” of the *halutzim* on which the sabbath descends in Yehoshua Rabinov’s song. In contrast to the marked colorfulness and tangible materiality of Ardon, Gross’s lyric application of paint is practically transparent and intensifies the sense of elevation that the horizontal line creates, stretching across both sides of the diptych.<sup>2</sup>

\*

In summarizing this part of our tour of Israeli art created in the shadow of the Zionist enterprise, or in its light – from Lilien and right up to artists of our own times – it is possible to say that today, with the passage of seventy years since the formation of the state and over one hundred years of Zionism, renewal may be better understood not as a continuous line, but as a radical undertaking, “In conversation with the grandfather,” in the language of the Russian Formalists. But we, we left the grandfather in exile, in a village, with the Mishnah and the Talmud, and Zionist redemption was “From Tanakh to Palmach” and not “From the Mishnah and the Jerusalem Talmud (composed in the Land of Israel) to the Palmach.” What would have happened if we’d lingered over the Mishnah and the Talmud, if we’d listened to the voices of the dwellers in the Land of Israel in a time of crisis, for we’d

---

<sup>2</sup> Michael Gross’s horizontal line reminded me of the stage setting of Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* as directed by Beckett in Berlin. Beckett worked for an entire year on the production. He choreographed the actors’ every single movement like an embodied musical score in the face of the replicates in the text. The stage décor in the tone value of nothing: a slanting surface with a slanting horizontal line at the back of the stage, wherein, against the backdrop, Gogo and Didi moved and stood waiting for Godot, and Pozzo tormented Lucky, also alluding to the Shoah (as I elaborated in my paper “I build sentences, a sign that I’m alive”). Beckett’s metaphysical staging led me to stage for the Israeli theater several productions of Beckett’s in order to seek out the spirit of the plays on stage. For the production of *Mercier and Camier*, an adaptation of Beckett’s early novel, which I staged at the Khan Theater in Jerusalem, Doron Livneh created a stage setting consisting of a horizon retreating into infinity by means of a series of semi-transparent tulle nets, one lying behind the other, which under the changing lighting – and hinting at the mood of the characters – created the illusion of the opening of the horizon, or its being sealed off. In contrast to *Waiting for Godot*, *Mercier and Camier* aren’t waiting but wandering, without however ever getting anywhere, since they never left their home. They wander in place. But their wanderings open a yawning gap in their lives and the landscape that surrounds them, in what a shmita of sorts, as Beckett would have it.

learned from them the complex nature of the relation to the land and our responsibility to such a relationship – how would the Zionist myth have been written? We haven't yet undertaken such a step; we haven't yet succeeded in listening to and learning from the centuries-old wisdom of dwelling in this place and reflecting on it from close up and from afar – “Shmita and Mount Sinai.” A form of “Neo-Zionism” is possible by reapplying terms that we've neglected, in the face of the vague and worrying feeling that to this day our unique and ethical and spiritual relationship to the land hasn't been clearly defined; that we still haven't sought out the connection between Sinai and shmita. And in order to take a better look at this let us continue our tour.

### THE JUDAICA WING: THE SUKKAH

On the way to revealing the connection between Sinai and shmita we pass by the Judaica wing. Here we can look at a sukkah, whose transient/temporary nature is also a “shmita/letting go.” The dwelling in a sukkah unravels the security of ownership over place and home. Once a year, across the “crack in time” of the Sukkot holiday, the sukkah restores the memory of wandering and the presence of the skies appearing through the natural roof covering. The details of the commandments related to sitting in the sukkah are a particularly rich platform for thought. I will mention only that the Talmudic formulation “You will sit as a dweller” (Sukkah, daf 27, Col. A) turns the minimalism of the sukkah into an answer, as it were, to a fundamental existential question: what is the minimum necessary for a person's existence? What is the meaning of “*Ladour*,” “to dwell?” And so, for the sukkah to be a living habitation, there needs to be in its interior at least a bed and table: a bed to sleep in and observe the commandment to be fruitful and multiply, and a table to eat and study.

The sukkah must allow for the gaze from its interior to extend out toward the skies – and for the gaze from the skies to penetrate its interior. But the connection to the skies isn't like the tower of Babel, whose head “grazes the skies,” and in this way it connects the uppermost to the lowermost, but not as in Heidegger's notion of a “Neo-pagan” merging between the gods, man and the world (on the ancient bridge in Heidelberg or in his hunter's lodge in Schwarzwald). Sitting in the sukkah is by force inhabiting a temporary dwelling, not too high, not too stable, not too constructed – two and a half walls and an improvised door are all it takes, and the size of four cubits, the space occupied by a person's body, and it is enough that only his head and more are inside, and above him not living plants but in point of fact (according to the general rule “Put together and not from the readymade”) a roofing set down by man, and the skies visible through the branches.

The sukkot displayed in the museum were built in exile, in cultures and climates that were different from those in Israel. Each sukkah is a personal version based on the general instructions for building a sukkah; for the nation bore the sukkah with it wherever it went into exile – and with it the sacred in the temporary, a window of freedom and shmita/release from ownership at the heart of its wanderings in the diaspora (and this way, in the East the sukkah was made of date palm fronds, while in Europe – from painted wood planks, or under a special removable balcony rooftop, or even – with a touch of anarchic Jewish humor – as I once saw in an apartment in Paris, in the corner of the bathroom in which the roof opened four cubits wide). And today, the sukkah is a radical reminder in the face of industrialization, urban development and the ecological crisis.

#### THE ARCHEOLOGY WING: ANCIENT SHRINES

Let us continue our tour in the wing of prehistory in the land of Israel. Touching on Bialik's notion of two main strands or spiritual modalities in the life of the Jewish nation, nomadic and sedentary, we will see here the tension between the remnants of nomadic encampments – the hunters, the gatherers, the shepherds – and the remnants of permanent early agricultural settlements. Here are revealed the two faces of early humanity, embodied in the story of Cain and Abel. Abel wanders over the face of the earth with his herd while Cain stays in place, rooted in earth from which he wrests his bread from its plowed depths by the sweat of his brow. Abel's dwellings are transient – as a guest for the night – in different places, according to the needs of pasturing, while Cain is a landowner: the land belongs to him inasmuch as he belongs to the land. His brother's herds graze his land, trespass its borders and provoke his fury. Abel's offering is heeded, not Cain's. The first murder takes place. Cain builds the first city. But the memory of his sin is soaked in the land. Abel's blood cries out from the ground. He's a ghostly presence, the subconscious, of the place. In the laws of shmita, handed down on Mount Sinai, the voice of the shepherd is preserved, the spiritual voice, who has no hold on the land, in the face of the promise of a country and place, and at the very heart of a permanent habitation.

From here the museum tour bifurcates. If we chose to follow the displays from the Land of Israel, we'd see the remnants of the daily life and rituals of the seven nations who dwelled in Canaan, or of the Philistines, they too struggling with a parched land crying out for seasonal rains and praying to the local gods, to Baal and Ashtoreth, whom we met at the beginning of our tour, in Lilien's canvas. Alongside these nations (for we were never here alone) we'd see the remnants of Jewish culture from the First Temple period. But we will follow the second path, through neighboring Near Eastern



cultures, in order to sharpen our understanding from a comparative perspective (glanced in passing) of the distinct presence of the sacred in Jewish tradition, which shmita encapsulates.

The eternal course of the Nile in Egypt sustained life, and in such a manner the sacred in ancient Egypt strove toward the eternal, toward life after death, memorialized in the pyramids, in the mummification of the dead, like in the coffins shown before us, or in the bearing of food during their journey to eternity as you can see in the next display. Here there is no fear of drought or famine (which brought the Israelites down to Egypt), and the sacred isn't attended by uncertainty: "What are we going to eat?"

The Mesopotamian cultures too, dwelling throughout the Fertile Crescent and the banks of the Euphrates and Tigris, were assured of a constant source of water. And yet, archeological excavations have revealed Babylonian precedents for the notion of the shmita and jubilee: an injunction given by Ammisaduqa, the king of Babylonia in the 17<sup>th</sup>-century BC in which he lists "Law-abiding rulings" that were aimed at assuring social equality in the light of an economic crisis that had visited the kingdom. The injunction speaks of the cancelation of debts: the breaking of clay tablets on which were listed debts is explained as "The leveling of justice" and uses the term "*duraru*" possibly a cognate to the Hebrew "*dror*," freedom or liberty. And yet, this injunction, which may very well have been a precedent to the Biblical shmita and jubilee, was a unique event, the merciful act of a king in ascending to the throne. It did not turn into a permanent cyclic event of the sabbath, shmita or the jubilee, wherein the sacred transforms the nature of time and place.

Let us stop here for a moment in front of the model of the ancient Ziggurat, a sacred tower resembling a pyramid pointing to another way of "ruling over" the land and skies by means of raising a vertical line to the heavens, like the Tower of Babel: "Come, let us build us a city, and a tower with its top in the sky" (Genesis 11:4). In the Bible the tower is shattered and the confounding of the "one language" of its builders creates the multiplicity of languages and civilization's diversity. Kafka, in his tale "The City Coat of Arms," offers a different, ironic interpretation to static time and the expectation of complete control. He describes the building of the tower, which keeps getting endlessly postponed in the light of disputes and conflicts, ending apocalyptically: "All the legends and songs that came to birth in that city filled with longing for a prophesied day when the city would be destroyed by five successive blows from a gigantic fist. It is for that reason too that the city has a closed fist on its coat of arms."

THE EMPTY SACREDNESS

As we continue our tour we pass by the figure of a conquering Persian king and we can see how Lilien in effect dressed up Wolfson, his bridegroom, as though he were saying: in his nuptials with the land the president of the World Zionist Congress came to conquer and possess, as was the way of the vanquishing kings of the neighboring lands, and in doing so he proudly flaunted, for a change, a Jewish eros.

From here we naturally move on to Herod the Edomite, who had close ties to the Romans and their culture. Of the elaborate Second Temple, built in the first century BC, it was said: “Who hasn’t seen Herod’s building, hasn’t seen [in his day] a handsome building” (Baba Bathra, daf 4, A; Sukkah, daf 51, B). But in this temple the essential was missing: the tabernacle and the cherubim. With the destruction of the First Temple, when the nation went into exile in Babylonia, the Ark of the Covenant disappeared – and the Tablets of Stone and its fragments – as well as the cherubim who dazzle each other blind. Some say that they were made captive and exiled by the Babylonians, others say they were hidden by the Temple priests (Cohanim) before the destruction of the Temple.

At the end of the Babylonian exile the Israelites who returned to Zion built a modest second House of Worship, and five hundred years later Herod built a magnificent Temple. But in the Second Temple, the Holy of Holies stood empty. All that remained was the Foundation Stone, the sole indicator. And it is this empty space that is grasped as the essence of the sacred. Sacredness that doesn’t necessarily exist in matter, but in time, embedded cyclically in the sabbath and the shmita year. So it is written in the Dead Sea Scrolls, as Rachel Elijor has shown, and so too in the *Book of Creation*, placing the sabbath at the center of creation, in Yehuda Liebes reading of this kabbalistic text, which he dates to the Second Temple period. The sabbath as the fulfilment of the sacred in rest. And in the *Zohar*, it occurs at the “Locus of Zion,” the Foundation Stone, God’s holy dwelling. The active rest, erotically charged as the vagina of Zion, taking place, on the sabbath, in the empty Holy of Holies, at the heart of Jerusalem.

In the aftermath of the destruction of the Second Temple, the Sages of Blessed Memory established the vacant space as a partition, between the upper and the lowermost; but it is this very gap that expresses the essence of the connection: Rabbi Yosef said, “The Shechina never descended and Moses and Elijah never ascended to the heavens, for it is said “The heavens are the heavens of the Lord; but the earth hath He given to the children of men [Psalms 116]” (Sukkah, daf 5, A); further on in the same discussion every Biblical instance of ascending to the heavens ends “below ten handbreadths” and each time the Lord descends ten handbreadths are left above.” A physical merging

isn't established between the heavens and the earth. The gap between the two equals the height of the Ark of the Covenant, or of the sukkah, which must be lower than ten handbreadth according to the requirements of Jewish ritual law, so as to create a manmade space, a space filled with yearning, longings, and desire between the separated - intimations of the Tabernacle, which we met on our journey toward myth.

Herod's Temple was destroyed by Titus in 70AD. A missive uncovered in the Colosseum in Rome, and only deciphered in 2001, relates that Titus's father, Vespasian, built the Colosseum with the gold from the Temple in Jerusalem. Hence, we are witness to a clash of civilizations – between as it were provincial Jerusalem and imperial Rome, that ruled over the entire antique world and its aqueducts, roads, and global market. The Romans, purely as a matter of political expediency, were not in the habit of razing to the ground temples belonging to other religions. The destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem was an exception to the rule. Titus dedicated the Colosseum after his father's death and built nearby the Victory Arch bearing his name as well as the frieze of the captives from Jerusalem pressed into exile and bearing on their shoulders the Temple spoils. In inverse symmetry to the worship and servicing of the Temple, and particularly to the vacant Holy of Holies, the Colosseum served up to the masses a spectacular ritual of human sacrifice. But this too did not prevent the monotheistic religion that came out of Zion to spread throughout the empire and the Christian civilization that emerged in its wake.

## SHMITA IN THE LAND OF ISRAEL

At this point we come full circle and arrive at the finishing and starting line of our sleuth-like journey on the trail of shmita.

After the Destruction (*Hurban*) all that remained amid the desolation was Mount Moriah. Aelia Capitolina was built on the ruins of Jerusalem, and the name “Yehuda” was blotted out and replaced with “Palestine-Syria” – a semantic erasure with present-day implications. And here we pass by a victory arch from the second century AD uncovered in the vicinity of Beit She'an, and which commemorates Hadrian's victory over the Bar-Kokhba revolt. Some seventy years after the destruction of the Temple Mount the Roman Empire found itself once again putting down a small-scale revolt. During the suppression of the revolt and in its aftermath hundreds of Jewish villages were razed to the ground, thousands were killed or sold into slavery. And yet Jewish life in the Land of Israel continued.

And now we've arrived at the hall in which are displayed what I've called "the repressed subconscious" of Zionism and return to the Land of Israel – what has been neglected and forgotten on the roads of exiledom. I mean the Jewish communities that never ceased existing in Israel and their relationship to the land, including the observance of shmita. We haven't succeeded in listening to its significant voice in the process of resettling the land. This very same forgotten relationship leaves us with unresolvable questions, and it continues to resound as a restless demand, or a proposition and horizon, which we haven't yet instigated.

At the beginning of our tour, facing Lilien's painting, we spoke of "Two thousand years" – the Zionist vision of bring the nation back to its native land that had been abandoned for two millennia. This vision, however, is borrowed, unwittingly, from the "gaze of the other," as Jean-Paul Sartre had it in writing of Anti-Semitism. Disregarding the existence of Jewish communities in the country, under whatever foreign rule, is taken from the Roman practice and from Christian theology, which laid the foundations for the uprooting the People of Israel from its land, as the prophets of wrath and admonishment envisioned. But even the Rabbinic sages residing in exile struggled as well over the centuries against the authority of the local Jewish communities in the Land of Israel, and the Babylonian tradition has always held sway. The Babylonian Talmud became the decisive while the Jerusalem Talmud held a minor status. For a nation, whose overwhelming majority was striving to exist in Exile/Diaspora this knowledge of a nation dwelling on its land was obsolete and irrelevant. The notion of the complete "Two thousand years" severance of the nation from its land – and the land from its people – continued in the thought of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Jewish Haskalah, seeped into the outlooks of the historians Heinrich (Zvi) Gritz and Shimon Dubnov, and provided the groundwork for the Zionist narrative. It ignores the continuous presence of Jewish communities in the Land of Israel and particularly of its culture in the first nine hundred years after the destruction of the Temple: during the period of the Tannaim, the Amoraim (the compilers of the Jerusalem Talmud), the ascetics of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the *paytanim*, composers of devotional verse, and the grammarians of Tiberius. Even later, important markers of settlement, such as the community of mystics in Safed after the expulsion from Spain, usually appear as islands of "spirituality," as though unconnected to the place where they were composed and ungrounded in the land itself. Astonishingly, despite the recent extensive archeological findings, in which the wealth of the Jewish material culture has been revealed, under Roman and Byzantine rule – amid its cities and churches, from the galilee to and the Golan and

southward to the Dead Sea – the perception of “Two thousand years” hasn’t changed. The knowledge hasn’t turned into awareness and a new consciousness.<sup>3</sup>

From here in the museum let us briefly look at the people of the Mishnah – whereof emerged the Mishnah and the *tosafot* (explanatory glosses) and the Jerusalem Talmud.

Jews living in the Land of Israel. No longer in Judah or Jerusalem, but in the Galilee, on the slope of the mountain and in the coastal plain. And they aren’t the sovereign rulers. It is a conquered colony, cruelly subjugated, threatened by edicts, living amid and under the rule of gentiles. And nevertheless, it cleaves to the land and its sacredness. What is the nature of its relation to the land and the tilling of its soil? This question doesn’t preoccupy the Jews exiled in Egypt, in Babylonia or the Mediterranean basin. They don’t need to follow the commandments that are tied up with the land. But the Jews living in the Land of Israel, for the most part farmers, are obligated to such commandments. So too the farmers of the First and Second Aliyah turned to Rav Kook with the same question. And it’s astonishing that the question instigates a dramatic dispute between Yehuda HaNasi, head of the Sanhedrin and the community at large, and Rav Pinchas Ben Yair, the Hassid. Yehuda HaNasi wanted to go easy on the impoverished farmers by canceling or bypassing shmita, but it was in fact the common folk, the farmers, and Rav Pinchas Ben Yair, their spokesman, who insisted on observing shmita, and in doing so preserving the sacred dimension (*Jerusalem Talmud*, Demai tractate, A, 22, A).

What first caught my eye during a preliminary tour of the museum, is the huge mosaic that you see here, covered in its entirety, from top to bottom, in writing, without any additional ornamentation. This is the floor of a synagogue from the ancient settlement of Rehov in Emek Beit She’an. It was built in the sixth century after the destruction of the Temple Mount. At the time, a province of Palestine Secunda in the Galilee, was ruled by the Byzantines who imposed restrictions on the lives of the Jews. The governing head of the Jewish administrative body was annulled, and the oppressed

---

<sup>3</sup> Not unrelated, it is fascinating to look at Bialik’s effort to restore the Mishnah to the renewed Hebrew consciousness, in his editing of *Mishnah for the Nation*, volumes edited in the spirit of the period of the Revival. In the introduction to the multivolume publication which remained unfinished, Bialik writes: “The Mishnah is the faithful and multifaceted expression of all the ways of life and cultural forms that existed in Israel several hundred years after the completion of the sacred writings, and at a time when the nation dwelled on his own land. Alongside the Bible, antique Hebrew’s purest vein of gold, the Mishnah serves us as an inexhaustible quarry of formidable depths of the same Hebrew tongue in its new guise, as it was expressed in the last days of its existence, before being cut off from the roots of its actual life and while before being entirely displaced by the people. For generations to come stones and forms will be retrieved from this quarry for the construction of our tongue and its oral and written revival, inasmuch as the language of the Mishnah, in all its aspects, is closer to the ways of thinking and speech of our own times than is the language of the Bible” (*Mishnah for the Nation*, p.20). I am grateful to Doron Livneh for drawing my attention to the text.

Jewish colony grew smaller in size and was practically swallowed within the Christian communities and their churches. And nonetheless, the Jews of ancient Rehov built a new and large synagogue, and what do they choose to inscribe on its floor? The ritual commandments concerning tithes and shmita!



Despite their daily hardships they adhere to shmita. They didn't ask what they would eat during the seventh and eighth year of shmita. Without sovereignty or a state, every seven years they enact – to the letter – the sacredness of the land, even to a greater extent than their predecessors who dwelled in the kingdoms of Judah and Israel. Think of the threatened colony, small, weak, without its Temple, living under an oppressive rule – and to what does it hold fast. Inhabitants of the Land of Israel, subjugated to a foreign kingdom, follow within their own world their tenancy of the land – not by seizing or holding on, but by shmita, letting go. The respect that the farmers earned from the Rabbinic sages resonates in the Jerusalem Talmud, in their descriptions of the Keepers of the Seventh, in the same language in which the receivers of the Torah are described at Mount Sinai: “Ye mighty in strength, that fulfil His word, / Harkening unto the voice of His word” (Psalms 103:20).

And now let us look at the sizable inscription. “Shalom,” it opens: “These fruits are forbidden in Beit She’an during the seventh year, but during other years of the seven-year cycle they are tithes as demai-produce” (also for the tithes a new formulation exists, despite the destruction of the Temple and the dispersion of the priesthood.): “cucumbers, watermelons, muskmelons, parsnip (carrots), mint that is bound by itself, black-eyed peas that are bound with rush, wild leeks [...] and the seed kernels

[...] and mustard, rice, cumin and dried lupines, and the large-sized peas [...] and garlic, scallions of the city that are sold by measure [...]” a complete list from the market, all of the Mahane Yehuda souk is here! ... and all of this in a precise, rich Hebrew, of a nation dwelling on its own land and country and bound to its material existence, the apex of a rooted Hebrew bound to the Mishnah; a language in which every object and implement has its name, every vessel, every seed and seedling, every jot or tittle of a teapot is named precisely.

But the rest of the mosaic inscription isn't less astonishing for our tour. It is a list of the “forbidden” places, tilled by Jews, wherein it is necessary to observe shmita, in contrast to the “permitted” places, which aren't cultivated by Jews, on which the rules of shmita aren't applicable. And this is its language: “These are the places that are permitted in the vicinity of Beit She'an: southward, that is to say, [from] the Gate of Kumpon extending as far as the end of the pavement;” and further on, “In those places that are within the gate, [what is grown] is permitted, but beyond [the gate without, what is grown] is prohibited. The towns that are prohibited in the regions of Sussitha (Hippos) [are as follows]: Ayyanosh, Ain-Hura, Dambar, Ayun, Ya'arut, Kefar Yahrib, Nob, Hisfiyyah, Kefar Semah [...]”

In other words, shmita delimits the country's borders. In a reality lacking sovereignty and a continuous chain of Jewish settlements (not unlike today's patchwork of Palestinian villages), time and the calendar create a place. Think of the paradox of erecting a border by what you release or let go of, especially if we remember that the laws of shmita prescribe not only the cessation of the tilling of the soil but also the tearing down of fences that delimit a person's property in order to allow anyone to enter and eat from your land: the poor, the widow and the stranger, the denizen and even the beast of the field. Shmita, the tearing down of the fence, and the breaking through borders, is delimiting boundaries and land ownership. For only what one loves, only what you own, can be released, or let go.

The mosaic floor, blessing the few in the synagogue of Rehov, reminded the worshippers that they were the Human Temple and that it was in their power, even in the harsh reality they faced, to relax their grip. In the seven-year cycles they turned the place, their fields and inheritance into something sacred by freeing themselves from material existence and straying away from the bounds of social standing. They, who were disenfranchised by a foreign power, emancipated the land, releasing it from its bondage. Thanks to shmita they turn into the owners of the place and remind us, given the double meaning of *place* as one of God's names, that “The Place [...] is the place of the world but the world is not Its place.” Even when lacking independence, they are the masters of the place: not as a result of the ruler's mercy, but thanks to their freedom and their efforts to let go.

\*

We will bring our tour to an end alongside a few small displays, which I discovered to my delight when I returned to the museum on the eve of our tour. These are small gravestones uncovered in burial cave niches belonging to remnants of the Jewish settlement in Zoar on the south side of the Dead Sea, and they too are from the 5<sup>th</sup>-century Byzantine period, decorated with incised Jewish symbols: a menorah, a sukkah, a shofar and the four fruits. The words carved on the stone are no less astonishing. For instance, the following gravestone, from 438 AD: “This is Hannah, daughter of Ha[nie]l Hacoheh, who died on the sabbath, *yom tov*, the first day of Passover. On the fifteenth day of the lunar Nissan on the fifth year of shmita [!], which is the year 369 since the destruction of the Temple.” The inscription is signed, like all the other gravestones, with the word “Shalom:” “Shalom, rest your soul, Shalom.” And here is Ben Maglos’s gravestone, on which is carved: “Died on the sabbath, twenty-five days to the month of Tevet, on the first year of shmita. The year 386 since the destruction of the temple – Shalom.” And the finely ornamented gravestone alongside it, is also dated in the following manner: from the year of shmita and from the year of the destruction (Hurban).



The Jews of Zoar on the south shore of the Dead Sea tally the years according to the “Hebrew calendar,” beginning with the creation of the world, and not with the birth of Jesus. Time is reckoned from the destruction of the Temple, ever present in their lives, bearing in mind the desolate Temple Mount and Jerusalem, which they are forbidden to enter. In lieu of Jerusalem, they’ve placed the cycles of shmita. As though saying: every seven years the Temple that was razed to the ground would witness “a small revival.” They weren’t left with utter unrestorable destruction, and they weren’t idly expecting the apocalyptic redemption at the end of all days, rather they would break through historical time and the boundaries of mourning and ruin, to tear open a window of rest. All of this – in contrast to the



perception of time in the Zionist myth, which moves toward an all-embracing, one-off messianic restoration, after two thousand years of exile, and whose hold on the land is steeped in the eros of possession.

Here, in these small gravestones from the fifth century, in the giant mosaic floor from the sixth-century synagogue, shmita isn't solely a way of life in a vanquished land and in the shadow of the destruction of the Temple Mount, rather it is a living horizon extending to the sacredness of cyclical time, touching upon "the beyond," in "the world to come, as it were," here and now, every sabbath and every seventh year, in man's horizon of consciousness, and by the strength of his deeds.

\*

Shmita, and its antique echoes, opens before us a new horizon. To its depiction in the early sources are added the manifestations that have reached us from the remnants of the life of those who lived here for centuries and who've been forgotten. Is there not here a profound lesson to be learned when it comes to questions that occupy our thoughts today, with the return to Zion in modern times and Israeli statehood? Political questions, but no less the disquiet lodged in the repressed memory: how shall we live in a land that is and isn't ours, that is ours on condition that we know how to let go, to release it, to break through the barriers, and to believe that we can go on living here in such a fashion? Can we possess the land? And at the same time how are we to release the land?

And the fear? What shall we eat on the seventh year, if we release it? Or, in contemporary terms, how are we to defend ourselves from outside threats of security if we let go as shmita demands of us? And what will be our borders? Perhaps once we know how to let go – and no less important, when our neighbors will also agree to let go, we can delineate a border in which both the disenfranchised are released every seven years and debts are canceled, and every fifty years arable lands are freed and returned to their original owners ...

And truly, is there a way to establish shmita in the space between Judaism and other religions – a space containing cultural and political dimensions? Shmita found its place in a few remote corners in the Christian world. For example, lavender fields belonging to monasteries in Provence are left to wither every seven years, the year of shmita; but does the notion of shmita exist in Islam, in the face of the jihad and *sumud* (holding on to the land)? And will we succeed one day in applying the notion shmita to the Palestinian-Israeli territorial conflict?

And until then? Shmita is a challenge. It demands of us to radically define our living on and our right to the land. The return to Zion and the Land of Israel isn't merely a unique historical exception, it is also a unique connection of a nation to its land. A connection which is also a mission: not solely a return to the land but an indwelling which includes a social and ethical dimension bond to shmita. Not tenure and possession but nuptials wherein a space is vacated for desire. And perhaps after seventy years of statehood, at a time when we have something to hold on to, not as the indigent farmers of the first waves of Aliyah, or immigration, who turned to Rav Kook, but in the strength of our love of the land, we will know how to let go.

The journey down the strata of memory in an archeological site, as too the journey into the depths of myth, reveal old-new paths in which to reify the sacred in the here and now, showing us perhaps a means of turning in the end Jerusalem into a site of shmita, observing within her parameters the deep desire, unique to her – the desire for a seat of sabbath rest.

And in the meantime? Let us recall the spirituality rising from material existence and the open horizon of shmita in the Land of Israel. And at the end of the tour in the museum you are invited to walk through the garden of statues and visit James Turrell's marvelous "Space that Sees," and from within the open roof, the skies of Jerusalem appear, surrounded by a framework which holds and let's go of the skies at one and the same time.

For the skies don't belong to us. And now the shmita will remind us that the land too isn't ours, "For the land is all Mine."

Translated by Gabriel Levin