

Topic

<p>שְׁמִיטָה (<i>Shemittah</i>)</p>	<p>The last year of the seven-year agricultural cycle in the Land of Israel (literally: “releasing”)</p>
<p>צְדָקָה (<i>Tzedakkah</i> (from the root צ - ד - ק))</p>	<p>Charity (from the root for the word “righteousness”)</p>
<p>שֵׁטֶר (<i>Shetar</i>)</p>	<p>Legal Document</p>
<p>בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל (<i>B’nei Yisrael</i>)</p>	<p>The Israelites</p>
<p>הֶפְקֵר (<i>Hefker</i>)</p>	<p>Ownerless</p>
<p>בְּרֵאשִׁית (<i>Beresheet</i>)</p>	<p>The Book of Genesis</p>
<p>שְׁמוֹת (<i>Shemot</i>)</p>	<p>The Book of Exodus</p>
<p>וַיִּקְרָא (<i>Vayikra</i>)</p>	<p>The Book of Leviticus</p>
<p>דְּבָרִים (<i>Devarim</i>)</p>	<p>The Book of Deuteronomy</p>
<p>חז"ל (חֲכָמֵינוּ זְכוֹרֵנוּ לְבִרְכָה) (<i>Hazal / Hachameinu Zichronam Livrchah</i>)</p>	<p>Our Sages May Their Memory Be for a Blessing</p>
<p>בֵּית דִּין (<i>Beit Din</i>)</p>	<p>A Court</p>

Relevant Vocabulary

Shemittah, Prosbul

Grade Level(s)

6th – 12th

The Seven-Year Return

Big Ideas

Everyone needs the opportunity to start fresh at some point.

Sometimes people need help to do what is expected of them.

Learning Targets

Students will:

1. Understand the Biblical concepts of *shemittah* and *prosbul*
2. Connect leaving produce in the field to be taken by anybody to the idea of giving freely to those in need
3. Develop ways to give *tzedakkah* even when it is not easy to do so

Materials / Technology Needed

- Coded message (one per learner or team)
 - The decoded message says, “Prosbul keeps everyone eating even in the seventh year.”
- Code key (one per learner or team)
- Text of [Devarim 15:1 – 11](#)
- *Shetar prosbul*. Some examples can be found at these locations:
 - [בית המדרש הגבוה להלכה בהתיישבות](#) (Hebrew only)
 - [Chicago Rabbinical Council](#) (Hebrew and English)

Background

The creation narrative described at the beginning of the Torah (*Beresheet* 1:1 – 2:3) gives an early indicator of the concept of *Shabbat*, the Day of Rest that takes place every seventh day. Just as God created the world for six days and rested on the seventh, so too *B’nei Yisrael* are commanded to rest.

This seven-fold cycle of work and rest comes to the fore in other places as well. According to the Torah, Jewish landowners in the Land of Israel may work their land for six years; but every seventh year (*shevi’it*) is a *shemittah* year, when land must be left to rest. Any crops that develop from that year are considered to be *hefker* and available to be taken by anyone who wishes to partake of them (*Shemot* 23:10 – 11, *Vayikra* 25:1 – 7, et al.).*

The Seven-Year Return

In addition to the resting of fields and releasing of crops, *shemittah* also causes economic resetting in another way. At the end of the *shemittah* year, all personal loans are forgiven.** Thus, according to the Torah, anybody who lends money to someone in need would not get their money back at the end of the seven-year cycle. Moreover, while the releasing of land applies only in the Land of Israel, releasing of debts is meant to apply to Jews outside the Land as well.

Remission of debts caused a major problem that was foreseen by an additional edict in the Torah. According to the Torah, a Jew may not refrain from lending money to another Jew who needs the money even though the end of the seven-year cycle is approaching (*Devarim* 15:9). Despite that edict, *Hazal* realized that people were refraining from lending money lest they lose out at the end of the year. Thus, they looked for a mechanism that would prevent people from transgressing the *mitzvah* not to withhold funds from those in need.

Hillel came up with *prosbul* (sometimes spelled *prozbul* or *pruzbul*) as a solution. With *prosbul*, lenders would turn their debts over to the *beit din*, which would declare the money *hefker*. The *beit din* could then take the *hefker* money from the debtor and assign it to the lender, thereby circumventing the remission of the debt. Thus, people could continue to fulfill the *mitzvah* to lend money without concern for not getting their money back (*Mishnah Shevi'it* Chapter 10 and Babylonian Talmud Tractate *Gittin* 36a).

*The seven-year cycle is a general one for all Jewish farmers in the Land of Israel, so everyone is on the same cycle regardless of when they took ownership of their land.

**Note that this type of personal loan is different from a business transaction in which money might be owed. The differences between the types of debt and how they are dealt with are outside the scope of this activity.

Prepare in Advance

- Hide the code key for learners to find. Make sure that there is a hint somewhere that will lead learners to find the code. Possible hints might include putting Greek writing near the hiding place, leaving books by Greek philosophers in select locations, printing a menu from a Greek restaurant, etc. Note that keys for individual participants or groups can be hidden in different spots. Make sure to label the keys with names if they are being hidden in different places.

Description of Activities

1. Give learners the coded message. Tell them that, to break the code, they will need to search for the key.
2. Learners search for the key and attempt to crack the code.
3. After learners have cracked the code, it is likely that at least some of them will still be puzzled by the word "*prosbul*" since it is a Greek word.

The Seven-Year Return

- a. Before explaining what a *prosbul* is, ask participants when they are reluctant to lend money to others.
- b. If students don't share any ideas, have a case study ready to share with them. For example: "Ploni asks Almoni for a \$20 loan. Almoni knows that Ploni needs the money to feed his family but also knows that Ploni might not be able to get another \$20 to pay Almoni back. How do you think this situation affects Almoni's willingness to lend money?"
4. Explain the basics of *shemittah*, emphasizing the agricultural and financial aspects of it. (See "Background" for details.)
5. Show the *pesukim* from *Devarim* 15:1 – 11. Discuss:
 - a. Why might the Torah instruct that all personal debts be canceled at the end of the *shemittah* year? Discussion points might include the opportunity to start over even for those who are the deepest in debt.
 - b. What does the Torah emphasize must be done even though the end of the *shemittah* year is approaching? Center discussion on the *mitzvah* to give money to those in need.
 - c. Why do you think the Torah needs to emphasize this lending? What is the concern? Center discussion on people potentially not lending money to those in need because the lenders might not get their money back when the end of the *shemittah* year cancels all personal debts among Jews.
6. Explain what a *prosbul* is. (See "Background" for details. It could be worth noting that the message they decoded was transliterated into Greek and that, after the code was broken, the first word was transliterated into English.)
7. Emphasize that Hillel instituted *prosbul* because Jews were refusing to lend money to people in need because the lenders were concerned about getting their money back.
 - a. Some participants might raise the concern that *prosbul* specifically goes against the edict in the Torah that debts be canceled.
 - i. Point out that the same concern is raised by *Hazal*.
 - ii. Participants discuss how they think different instructions from the Torah should be weighted when they seem to conflict.
8. Show participants a modern version of a *shetar prosbul*.
 - a. Point out the legal mechanisms used to ensure that people lend money to those in need even when loans should be abrogated.
9. Participants use the model of the *prosbul* document to develop their own documents to make their own commitments to help others on a regular basis.

The Seven-Year Return

- a. Note that these personal documents do not need to specify that participants give money to others. Rather, participants should make a commitment to help others in a way that is reasonable for them even though it might not always be easy. Some possible ways to commit (other than giving money) might include:
 - i. Volunteering at a local shelter
 - ii. Helping a neighbor for whom doing chores around the house is difficult
 - iii. Tutoring younger students who are struggling with Hebrew or other subjects
- 10.** Do a periodic (biweekly, monthly) group check-in about how participants are doing with their contracts. Celebrate successes. Discuss how the contracts help motivate participants, if at all, to follow through on their commitments even when following through is difficult.

Differentiation Options

Knowing that students learn in a variety of ways and modalities, the following options are provided to adjust the above lesson to meet the unique needs of your learners.

For learners who need more assistance

- Learners use the medium of their choice to show how they help others.
- Learners show how they feel when they help others. Possible media include emojis, feelings posters, and recorded statements.

For learners who need extension opportunities

- Learners debate the arguments for and against *prosbul* in the text of the Gemara in Tractate [Gittin 36a](#).

προσβολη κεεπσ ευερυονε εατινγ ευεν ιν θε σευενθ υεαρ.

προσβολη κεεπσ ευερυονε εατινγ ευεν ιν θε σευενθ υεαρ.

προσβολη κεεπσ ευερυονε εατινγ ευεν ιν θε σευενθ υεαρ.

προσβολη κεεπσ ευερυονε εατινγ ευεν ιν θε σευενθ υεαρ.

The Seven-Year Return

α	β	γ	δ	ε	ζ	η	θ	ι	κ	λ	μ	ν
a	b	g	d	e	zd	ê	th	i	k	l	m	n
ξ	ο	π	ρ	ς	σ	τ	υ	φ	χ	ψ	ω	ευ
ks	o	p	r	s	s	t	y	ph	kh	ps	aw	ev

α	β	γ	δ	ε	ζ	η	θ	ι	κ	λ	μ	ν
a	b	g	d	e	zd	ê	th	i	k	l	m	n
ξ	ο	π	ρ	ς	σ	τ	υ	φ	χ	ψ	ω	ευ
ks	o	p	r	s	s	t	y	ph	kh	ps	aw	ev

α	β	γ	δ	ε	ζ	η	θ	ι	κ	λ	μ	ν
a	b	g	d	e	zd	ê	th	i	k	l	m	n
ξ	ο	π	ρ	ς	σ	τ	υ	φ	χ	ψ	ω	ευ
ks	o	p	r	s	s	t	y	ph	kh	ps	aw	ev

α	β	γ	δ	ε	ζ	η	θ	ι	κ	λ	μ	ν
a	b	g	d	e	zd	ê	th	i	k	l	m	n
ξ	ο	π	ρ	ς	σ	τ	υ	φ	χ	ψ	ω	ευ
ks	o	p	r	s	s	t	y	ph	kh	ps	aw	ev