

Tablet



Eliezer Bikhsnapper on kashrut duty in Jordan. PHOTO COURTESY OF ELIEZER BIKSCHNAPPER

Roll, Jordan Produce, Roll

In the ‘shmita’ years, Jewish farmers can keep the produce coming—by sneaking into Jordan

BY INNA LAZAREVA SEPTEMBER 16, 2015

As a group of ultra-Orthodox rabbis approaches the Israeli-Jordanian border, the knotted tassels of their Jewish prayer shawls are discreetly disappeared inside their trousers, out of sight. Jalabiyas, loose robes traditionally worn by Arabs, are swiftly whipped out of a bag and pulled over the shirt and trousers. Palestinian keffiyehs follow, carefully draped around the shoulders like a cape.

Suddenly, the rabbis no longer appear to be Jews, but rather Arab farmers. Guarded by Jordanian police, they are escorted through passport control toward an armed convoy of four-by-four jeeps with reflective windows. Within minutes, the disguised rabbis drive away, vanishing into a cloud of dust.

Far from prying eyes, at the Israeli-Jordanian border, this unusual kind of religious hocus-pocus has been taking place for the past 12 months. But the Jews would say it is the opposite of hocus-pocus—to them, it’s observing biblical laws to the letter. Enabled by agreements between private Israeli and Jordanian businesses, and sanctioned by the religious rabbinate, going to the Hashemite Kingdom

enables deeply religious Jews to observe shmita—the year when farming land in Israel must not be cultivated by Jews—without losing a year of profit.

According to the Torah, every seventh year, the agricultural lands in Israel have to lie fallow. The latest shmita year began in September 2014 and ended this week. So, over the past 12 months, rabbis and kashrut supervisors have been traveling to Jordan on a weekly basis—to cultivate crops, and keep the profits coming, all while ensuring that religious laws are obeyed.

The end of shmita is a relief for Eliezer Biksnapper, 34, from Ashdod, who has been traveling to Jordan to work as a manager for kashrut supervisors. “The work is very hard,” he said. “When the weather is so hot like now, the supervisors, who work in groups of five or six, go out to the fields or the greenhouses at 4 in the morning and return around 11 a.m. and stay indoors until the evening hours. It’s impossible to be outdoors for the rest of the day.”

On farms such as these, the produce is grown by local Jordanian workers—usually Bedouin farmers—but overseen by Israeli kashrut specialists, who ensure that the food will comply with kosher standards.

The practice of growing produce in Jordan for the shmita year has been going on since 2000, said [Avinoam Koacher](#) of the Jerusalem Rabbinate. Every week,



A member of the Jerusalem rabbinate briefs the kashrut supervisors ahead of their departure. (Photo courtesy of the Jerusalem Rabbinate)

according to Koacher, dozens of kashrut supervisors leave Israel for Jordan.

The deal is win-win for both sides: Jordanian farmers receive rental income and more employment opportunities, while the Israeli farmers reap kosher produce to sell in Israel. In addition, the initiative also helps lower the cost of vegetables during the shmita year in Israel and provide jobs for agronomists and

kashrut supervisors, many of whom otherwise would have been unemployed.

The disguise was a requirement by the Jordanian security services who protect the Israelis, the Jerusalem rabbinate confirmed to Tablet.

“Looking Jewish in those places isn’t the biggest blessing that you can have,” Koacher said. Prior to leaving for Jordan, the rabbis go on a shopping spree in Old City Jerusalem to procure the right clothing and accessories to mask Jewish identities.

In Jordan, Biksnapper explained, the land where the farmers harvest the crops is “heavily guarded by the local police.” The Jordanian laborers working the lands and in the greenhouses are all “vetted locals,” and the security system is “very strict.”

“They are protecting us because we constitute a clear commercial and economic interest for Jordan—you could say the king himself is indirectly responsible for our safety and well being,” said Biksnapper. “Anything coming out of the Jordanian royal palace is much more efficient than anything coming out of our own prime minister’s office. Everything is so much more orderly there—therefore I wouldn’t say it’s any more dangerous than any Arab village” in Israel or the West Bank.

“So, even if it’s scary,” he said, “we chant one of the psalms and we go out to win our bread.”

There are, however, considerable cultural differences to overcome.

“The Bedouins have their specific traditions and superstitions,” Biksnapper said. “For example, there are certain sequences of numbers that are better not to expressed vocally because they’re a bad omen. For some reason you never mention the number 10—instead you say five and five, or six and four.”

Before beginning this work, the Israelis are given a quick crash course in Bedouin culture, “on what to do, what not to do, how to behave, how to make sure you don’t get into discussions about politics, about religion,” said Ari Gallagher, who works for the Jerusalem rabbinate.



Kashrut supervisors at work in Jordan. (Photo courtesy of the Jerusalem Rabbinate)

But even with its hardships, working in Jordan is more lucrative than back home. On average, kashrut supervisors and managers who go to Jordan receive a “security bonus” of up to 250 percent on top of their regular salaries, Gallagher said.

Some argue that there are other, more traditional ways to observe shmita while still growing fruits and vegetables. “It seems a bit odd to go to so much effort,”

said Rabbi Yossi Schwerdow from Kfar Chabad, in central Israel. While there is nothing wrong with going to Jordan, he said, “there are many ways of keeping shmita without having to put your life in danger.”

One way is to temporarily sell Jewish-owned lands to non-Jews—usually Arab farmers who work the land for the duration of the year—under a technique called heter mechira.

Another way is through the so-called Otsar Beit Din method: The lands are handed over for the year to a rabbinical council, which pays laborers to produce the fruits and vegetables on its behalf. The produce is then distributed through religious co-operatives. When the collective rabbinical council, rather than individual farmers, owns and harvests the land for the year, this is deemed in compliance with shmita.

Crops may also be grown hydroponically, without soil, although this solution does not work for all produce.

Vered Ben Saadon, who runs the Tura winery in the settlement of Rehelin in the West Bank, says that during the shmita year she produces grapes using the Otsar Beit Din method. She admits that some religious Jews consider this technique not religiously observant enough. “There are still some people who cannot buy the wine, and also we cannot sell it overseas,” she said. “So, you’ve got some problems—but that’s part of being a Jew.”

According to Koacher, from the Jerusalem rabbinate, there are approximately 20,000 ultra-Orthodox Jews who consider all of the above methods non-compliant with Jewish laws. Hence the need to go to Jordan.

"We have a huge capacity of ultra-Orthodox here who do not eat things that were grown in Israel if the land is owned by an Arab [or a non-Jew], even if it's grown by heter mechira," Koacher said. "So, in order to meet the needs of this audience, we are supervising what's going on in Jordan."

Another source close to the rabbinate said he is outraged by the trips to Jordan. Speaking on the condition of anonymity, he described the trips as a "joke." "Most of the citizens of Jordan are Palestinian, who are not such good friends of ours," he said. He said the Jews doing business there are "financing terror against Jews. It's wrong." However, the vast majority of those involved in the Jordanian shmita operation are Bedouin farmers, rather than Palestinians.

Bikschnapper said such cooperation is only likely to grow in the future. "Arable land in Israel is becoming more and more scarce," he said. "We don't have a choice, we have to go back to Jordan ... I personally don't see this changing."

And Jordan presents favorable economic conditions—in other words, low wages—for Israeli businesspeople, religious or not. Biksnapper says he sees hundreds of Israelis go in and out of Jordan. "I have a friend who's been there for eight years and has a tahini factory," he said. "We provide kosher supervision there, too. The labor force is so cheap there. It's not just about shmita, it's about simple economics."