

# Keeping Shemittah in the North of Israel

*When Ira Zimmerman, the Keren Hashviis northern coordinator, approached a farmer who was on his porch resting from the afternoon heat earlier this year, he wasn't at all sure that his suggestion to observe Shemittah would be accepted. "Although this farmer had never even heard of the mitzvah of Shemittah, after I explained the reward and the punishments to him, he agreed to come on board. As easily as that. And when I thanked him for giving me the merit, he gently corrected me, telling me that I had given him the merit." How does a man find the mettle to give up his income for a full year? In this column, we will be meeting some of these gibborei ko'ach osei Dvaro, these valiant heroes who steadfastly adhere to Hashem's word.*



Ira Zimmerman

## All Aboard

Ira Zimmerman is no newcomer to agriculture. Originally from Kibbutz Mefaltim in the south of Israel, Zimmerman moved to Bar Yochai in the north of Israel fourteen years ago. During a regular year, Zimmerman grows grapes for Or Haganuz winery in vineyards near Safsufa, close to Meron. As *Shemittah* approaches, Zimmerman segues into his alternate role as the Keren Hashviis northern coordinator. His job is twofold: to encourage farmers, many of whom aren't fully *mitzvah*-observant, to keep *Shemittah* and then to conduct surprise visits to ensure that they are keeping the laws.

About six months before the current *Shemittah*, Zimmerman began visiting farmers in the area to discuss the Seventh Year in agriculture. "Every farmer who commits to keeping *Shemittah* does so because he wants to do Hashem's Will. Not

one farmer has ever begun by asking about compensation." Which is probably a good thing, because the projected cost to support this year's farmers is \$22.5 million, versus the \$14 million that was spent on the last *Shemittah*. Add to that the Ministry of Religious Affairs' reduction of its commitment to *Shemittah*-observing farmers, which means that an additional \$7.5 million has to be raised from the private sector, and you'll understand why Zimmerman says, "We can't tell them we'll cover their losses. We can only tell them that we are trying to raise the money."

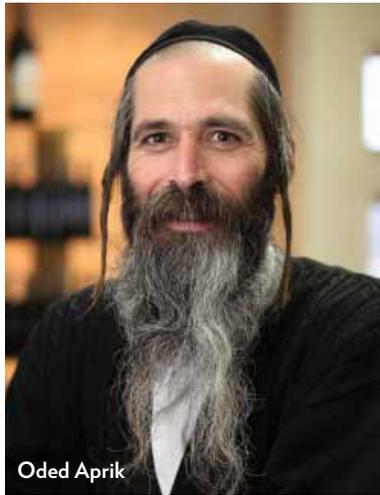
Putting down your tools isn't simply accepting that you'll have to deal with financial constraints in the coming year. "Farmers who are keeping *Shemittah* for the first time don't realize what they are committing to," says Zimmerman. "Farming is labor-intensive work. When *Shemittah* comes, farmers suddenly find themselves with very little to do. Most of the farmers aren't going to spend the year in *kollel*. At best they're used to going to *daven* and perhaps to a daily *shiuur* but not to spend hours learning. I try to prepare them, by telling them that even if they missed spending time with their own children, they can now make it up with their grandchildren," he says. "In addition, there's the chance to overhaul equipment and take care of all sorts of household chores. But the boredom eventually sets in."

## Where the Wine Flows

Or Haganuz is a community of seventy families founded in 1989 by Rabbi Mordechai Sheinberger about 3.7 miles/6 km northwest of Tzfas. Under the guidance of Rabbi Sheinberger, the community lives with the premise of *v'ahavta l'rei'acha kamocha* and engages in various businesses connected to tourism, a publishing house and of course, wine making.

Everyone knows that a good wine starts with good grapes. Grapes grown in the northern Galilee benefit from its rich soil, which includes limestone, terra rosa and basalt; the high altitude (about .5 mile/ 700–900 meters above sea level); and the cool climate. At Or Haganuz, decades of research, soil testing and harvest examination paid off to produce various wines that have distinctive identities. "But we wanted more than just good wine," says Oded Aprik, CEO of the winery. "We wanted our wine to be *mehudar*, and so last *Shemittah* we decided

that not only would the winery be keeping *Shemittah*, but once production started up again we would use only grapes from farmers who had kept *Shemittah*. Just as Hashem promised, we merited to see an increase in production. Before last *Shemittah* we were producing 40,000 bottles annually. Now, we produce 450,000 bottles annually — under the supervision of the Badatz Eidah Hachareidis — a more than twentyfold increase!”



Oded Aprik

Today, Or Haganuz winery has a kernel of thirteen farmers who keep *Shemittah* and provide the winery with the varieties of grapes needed for their various wines. “Getting the farmers to come on board wasn’t a simple undertaking,” says Aprik. “We promised them that even if their financial loss wouldn’t be covered by other organizations, we would pull through.” That meant securing a bank loan. “There were three parts to our financial plan,” says Aprik. “The bankers understood that since we were going to lose a year’s production because of the *Shemittah* year, we would need a loan to cover our losses. But they couldn’t see the business acumen in the second and third parts of our plan in which we committed to paying the farmers and the winery workers [during *Shemittah*]. It seemed crazy! Eventually, when they understood that, according to our plan, we hoped to recover over a two-year period, they agreed.” Since the winery is also a service winery, meaning that other winemakers use their facilities to make wine under their own labels, the loss of Or Haganuz is compounded. “We lose about 1.5 million shekels from these secondary contracts,” says Aprik.

“This year, we’re able to produce a run of wine,” explains Aprik, “because we harvested before Rosh Hashanah. But next year, we won’t be able to use our grapes. Since we don’t want to lose our customer base, we began our preparations for *Shemittah* in the fourth year, by producing an extra third over the usual amount of wine. This continued through the fifth and sixth years. We hope the wine will cover the two years until our post-*Shemittah* wines will be ready for market.”

### Or Haganuz Wines

There are four main series:

The Amuka Series contains six wines from six separate tracts.

The Marom Series, which is aged for 12–14 months in French oak barrels, contains four wines from separate tracts.

The flagship wines of Or Haganuz, the Namura Special Reserve and the French Blend, come from the Namura vineyard and are aged for up to two years in French oak barrels.

A Dessert Wines Series that consists of three sweet wines.

The specialty wine Elima, which is produced without sulfites for people who are sensitive to the additive.



### ‘I Shall Ordain a Blessing’

Sometimes the challenge of keeping *Shemittah* is assuaged because the farmers live the promise that Hashem gives in *Vayikra*: “*And I shall ordain a blessing*” (*Vayikra* 25:2). Rabbi Binyamin Cohen, CEO of Keren Hashviis, points out that although the *mitzvah* of *Shemittah* is Rabbinically ordained today, the special blessing of the sixth year: “*And I shall ordain a blessing*” is assured by the Torah regardless, and it is clearly visible.

Ira Zimmerman’s experiences are a perfect example. “The cool weather conditions of the Galil mean that we always harvest later than the rest of Israel — usually after Rosh Hashanah. This year, obviously, we had to harvest earlier and we therefore expected a smaller harvest. Since the picking is done by hand, I estimated that I’d need two workers and that they’d fill three 400-kilo (880 lb.) crates in their shift. I decided to bring along another three workers to prune the vines. Pruning is always done towards the end of winter when the vines are sleeping. It wakes them up, encouraging new growth. By pruning at the end of summer, I was going against all logic. Thanks to the *brachah* that Hashem sends in the sixth year, I soon realized that all five workers would have to work at picking, that I’d have to bring in another four crates, and that instead of ending their shift at 11 a.m., as they usually do, they’d have to work until 2 p.m. I had tripled my harvest.” With Hashem’s *brachah*, just as Zimmerman had a bounty harvest despite picking early, he’ll also benefit from an early pruning!

The *Zohar Hachadash* (*Noach* 96), quotes Rabbi Yitzchak: “There is no wine like the wine of the Land of Israel and better yet, the wine of the Upper Galilee.” The wines of Or Haganuz bear witness. ■



Namura vineyards at the foot of Mt. Meron.