

5782 Rosh Hashanah Day II

Shmita Challenges Our Responsibilities and Our Relationships

Hayom harat olam. Today is the world's birthday. Over and over we repeat this sentiment in our Rosh Hashanah Musaf service. *Hayom harat olam.* Happy Birthday, World! Rabbi Jonathan Sacks teaches that just as the seventh day, Shabbat, is *zecher lema'aseh bereishit*, a memorial of the creation of the world, so is the seventh month, Tishrei.. The Mishnah says that on Rosh Hashanah "All who have come into this world pass before God like sheep," an image which is powerfully echoed in the Une'tane Tokef prayer. *All* of humanity is judged. Rosh Hashanah is our most universalist holiday-- God is Sovereign over the *whole* world. We reflect on what it means to be *human*, using a Jewish lens.

The entire Torah can be viewed as a collection of teachings and stories for a wandering people, a diverse collection of tribes, about to enter a land they will call home, where they will settle and build societal structures for generations to come. The Torah discusses: What are their responsibilities and obligations to themselves? To each other? To the land they are about to enter?

Within the Torah's laws and stories, a pattern develops around the cycle of seven, beginning with the seven days of creation. Today, while the weekly seven day cycle of Shabbat is widely celebrated, and we

celebrate with joy the festivals of the seventh month (Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot), the *yearly* cycle of seven is less known.

This Rosh Ha-Shanah, we're entering a Shmita year. In Biblical Israel, every seventh year was a Shmita, which literally means "release," when the land was not actively farmed, and all debts were canceled. In the Yovel or fiftieth year, after seven Shmita cycles, seven cycles of seven, the land was redistributed, and slaves were required to go free. This system of rest and renewal fulfills on a grand social scale the ideal of Shabbat, when we rest, accept the world as it is, and let go of what we cannot control. Shmita shows the ways the Torah envisions our responsibilities and mutual obligations.

Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin wrote, "Let's face it: Shmita has a marketing problem. It comes only once every seven years. It has little name recognition. So how do we capture the power of the seventh year? As a start, we have to embed it in a story. Perhaps that is one of our first jobs this coming Shmita year: figuring out how to articulate, frame and fashion Shmita's irresistible, inspiring, integrated story."

This year, 5782, the year of Shmita, let us respond to Rabbi Cardin's challenge by exploring how Shmita may be an inspiring force in our lives. Let's explore how we might listen to the lessons of mutual responsibility Shmita is teaching. Let's begin to tell the story of Shmita.

We'll start at the beginning. Nigel Savage, the founding director of *Hazon: The Jewish Lab for Sustainability*, wrote "Shmita is central to understanding the nature of Jewishness itself. It's clear when you read the primary texts that the Torah understands shmita to be quite literally no less significant than Shabbat."

How *does* our Torah describe Shmita? The first mention of Shmita in the Torah is in Exodus 23, at Sinai, in the middle of Parashat Mishpatim's ethical code: "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. You shall do the same with your vineyards and your olive groves." According to this text, the main intention and purpose of Shmita is to support the needy, the marginalized of society.

When we get the law in Vayikra, it is framed a little bit differently: (Leviticus 25:1-7) When you enter the land that I assign to you, the **land shall observe a sabbath** of the LORD. Six years you may sow your field 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 ("shabbat shabbaton"), a sabbath of the LORD: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. You shall not reap... But you may eat whatever the land during its sabbath will produce."

Here, in Leviticus, the primary beneficiary of the Shmita year is the land itself. The land is observing a Shabbat, a sacred time, a time to cease actively creating, simply to be.

In Deuteronomy the law takes on yet another level of meaning as it includes debt remission into the practices of the 7th year, tying economic justice into the agricultural context through which Exodus and Leviticus view this law: “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 fellow.... do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kinsman. Rather, you must open your hand and lend him sufficient for whatever he needs. Beware lest you harbor the base thought, “The seventh year, the year of remission, is approaching,” so that you are mean to your needy kinsman and give him nothing. He will cry out to the LORD against you... Give to him readily and have no regrets when you do so, for in return the LORD your God will bless you... For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land, which is why I command you: open your hand to the poor and needy kinsman in your land.”

Deuteronomy is clear that debt remission is an ideal, part of the process of release, but also that it is really hard-- there is a deep concern that

people will see debt remission as a reason not to lend to people in need. The tension here is powerful, and meaningful to us today.

As Jewish tradition developed, through exiles and returns, and over the centuries, Shmita, as a law, was practiced only within the designated land of Israel. According to the Talmud (Chullin 7a), when the borders of Israel were being re-defined, upon return from the first exile period, certain cities were intentionally left out of the land of Israel so that the Shmita laws would have no effect there. In these locations, farming practices would continue without interruption during the Shmita Year. So, from the very beginning, Shmita is tied up in the land of Israel, and in what it means to be a people living in diaspora, not on our land. It shows a clear vision of mutual obligations and responsibilities--and its history also shows the tensions between how we would like to live up to those obligations and how we actually do behave. Today, Shmita provides lessons in those responsibilities and obligations.

Let's consider three ways that Shmita can challenge and be meaningful for us, even though we do not live in the land of Israel, and even though most of us are not farmers.

The first connection to Shmita is the way that it challenges us to think about our obligations to ourselves and to God. Like Shabbat, Shmita challenges us to rest and see what can grow when we stop pushing so

hard. Shmita is a leap of faith, ultimately, that we will not die from stopping, that letting ourselves lie fallow can be liberating and creative and powerful. As Rabbi David Ingber taught, “Something miraculous happens when we stop. We get to experience the power that nature knows called dormancy. Dormancy, that which is holding; the heartbeat that rests; the hibernating animals, all of winter; waiting and waiting... There are seeds inside each and every one of us, inside this culture, that cannot emerge because we do not know that dormancy does not mean death, resting does not mean disappearing. What keeps us from stopping is that we are terrified of resting... We fear that when we stop, even for a moment, the sheer enormity of our lives will overwhelm us. Can we let go of the obsession of finishing what can't be finished?”

Many of us who are not farmers think of “fallow” as the land laying bare--bare soil, without crops or other plants growing in it. In fact, that is not healthy for the soil and that is not what the Torah envisions. The Torah is clear: the land should not be planted by Jews observing the law, but perennial plants and other naturally seeding plants will grow. What might we learn, when we turn away from a grow/produce/work engine, about what naturally grows in ourselves and in our communities? What seeds are already planted in us, and just need time and space to grow?

Rabbi Jeremy Benstein wrote, “currently only academics have a sabbatical year. Why? Our ‘affluent’ society actually *decreases* leisure and family time, as more people not only choose to work to fulfill what they want to be, but feel compelled to work, in order to afford what society says they should have. Consumerism necessitates ‘producerism’ to keep both supply and demand high. Yet, as Shmita hints, people are indeed like the land.” We, too, have obligations in our relationship with ourselves. Sabbatical is an incredibly important part of living.

Here are some ways that we can make conscious changes in the coming year to make the spiritual teachings of Shmita a living reality in our practice: Take the time to form a new relationship with work and rest. Allow your land, your body, your workers, your production and consumption, to rest. How often do you experience a personal ‘fallow’ period? Take time off, and make sure that you are giving appropriate time off to those who work for you. Remember that we do not ultimately own our land, resources, or even time, and that these are Divine gifts. Commit to using the space and time created by letting go of some of the more commercially driven parts of your life to take on a new hobby or volunteer activity, to create art, to connect to the divine, to find ways to recharge and nurture the seeds already planted within.

Shmita also provides lessons about our obligations to each other. As my colleague Rabbi Louis Polisson wrote, Shmita reminds us that everything we consume is a gift from the earth. This year, I read (at the recommendation of my sibling Gabriella) the book *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*, by scientist, author, poet, and member of the Native American Potawatomi Nation Robin Wall Kimmerer-- and it profoundly changed how I think about and relate to the world. As Dr. Robin Wall Kimmerer writes, “gifts from the earth or from each other establish a particular relationship, an obligation of sorts to give, to receive, and to reciprocate.” Those who regularly garden or farm might better understand that tending to plants opens an ongoing relationship between human and plant. Each fruit or vegetable is a gift that comes not only from our efforts but from the success of a healthy, complex ecosystem. My basil plants grew *better* after I started harvesting from them! Dr. Wall Kimmerer teaches us that “from the viewpoint of a private property economy, a ‘gift’ is deemed to be ‘free’ because we obtain it free of charge, at no cost. But in a gift economy, gifts are not free. The essence of the gift is that it creates a set of relationships. The currency of a gift economy is, at its root, reciprocity.”

The Jewish approach to gifts and the earth is similar to this Indigenous Native American approach. Traditional Jewish culture speaks the language of mutual obligations.

A big part of the intention of the Shmita year, especially as it is described in Exodus and Deuteronomy, is to benefit the poor, the indebted, the economically disadvantaged members of society. It is not accidental that debt forgiveness is part of the equation; this is key to how the Torah wanted to create the possibility for a re-set. The Torah teaches that there should be some time, perhaps once every seven years, where wealth doesn't matter-- where everyone is seen as equal.

Here are some ways that we can make conscious changes in the coming year to make the socio-economic teaching of Shmita a living reality in our practice: We can commit to generous giving and lending practices, such as supporting free loan organizations like the Hebrew Free Loan Society or the Community Loan Fund of the Capital Region, seeing the value of exchange without the need for profit or monetary gain, understanding that in reciprocal relationship, "All flourishing is mutual." We can commit to a practice of debt release in our personal lives: did you lend money to a friend or family member that never got paid back? Are you still holding onto some resentment about that? What would it be like to really feel in our hearts that we have released all debts from

previous years? We can choose to purchase only what we need each month, trying to live into the value of a fair distribution of resources by giving more than our usual charitable donations and tzedakah gifts.

Finally, Shmita teaches us to think differently about our obligations to the entire world. It challenges us on our relationship to the environment, to the land we live on.

In the opening of her book, Dr. Wall Kimmerer tells a story that demonstrates how our society struggles to even imagine being in right-relationship with the more-than-human world. She writes:

“On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays at 9:35am, I am usually in a lecture hall at the university, expounding about botany and ecology - trying, in short, to explain to my students how...‘global ecosystems,’ function. One otherwise unremarkable morning I gave the students in my General Ecology class a survey. Among other things, they were asked to rate their understanding of the negative interactions between humans and the environment. Nearly every one of the two hundred students said confidently that humans and nature are a bad mix. ...Later in the survey, they were asked to rate their knowledge of positive interactions between people and land. The median response was ‘none.’

I was stunned,” writes Dr. Wall Kimmerer. “How is it possible that in twenty years of education they cannot think of any beneficial relationships between people and the environment? Perhaps the negative examples they see every day - [abandoned, polluted] brownfields, factory farms, suburban sprawl - truncated their ability to see some good between humans and the earth. As the land becomes impoverished, so too does the scope of their vision. When we talked about this after class, I realized that they could not even imagine what beneficial relations between their species and others might look like. How can we begin to move toward ecological and cultural sustainability if we cannot even imagine what the path feels like? ”

So, what does the path to sustainability feel like? Shmita offers us a path toward ecological sustainability and right-relationship with the earth. According to the discussion on Shmita in the Book of Leviticus, when the rights of the land conflict with the needs of people, the rights of the land take precedence. In the words of Rabbi David Seidenberg, “Justice can never be complete without justice for the land.”

Rabbi Jill Hammer taught, “The land is a resource that belongs to God, not a resource that belongs to us. The land requires redemption, [which] means restoration to its state of fertility and connection to God... The land has to be fallow. It needs this period of rest, which is

also a period of temporary wildness in order to be whole. Wild spaces are a delight for God, we need them, and they may save our lives.”

Here are some ways that we can make conscious changes in the coming year to make the environmental teachings of Shmita a living reality in our practice: We can support indigenous groups in their relationships to the land. We can try to re-envision the ways humanity can have a positive relationship with the land, as Dr. Wall Kimmerer challenges us to do. We can commit to eating locally sourced foods grown in season; we can commit to waste reduction, to treating the harvest as something with a special sanctity that should not be thrown away; we can support organizations which focus on land stewardship, conservation, and de-commercialization.

As we commit to spending this Shmita year challenging ourselves to explore our relationship to ourselves, to each other, to the world, and to God-- and figuring out what responsibilities and obligations those relationships require of us-- we must not forget that Shmita also challenges us to examine our relationship to Israel. Shmita has always been a legal framework based in that land-- and thinking deeply about this law requires us to ask some fundamental questions: What does Israel mean to you? What are our responsibilities, as Jews living in the diaspora, to be connected to the land from the Jordan River to the

Mediterranean sea? What are our responsibilities to the people who live there, both Jewish and nonJewish? Here are some ways that we can answer Shmita's call to re-examine and re-engage in our relationship with Israel over the coming year: We can sponsor an olive tree in the north of Israel, literally connecting to the land and those who farm it, using the program *My Tree in Israel* that we launched last week. We can participate in the Adult Educations Committee's Programmatic Theme – "Our Relationship with Israel," which will include Dr. Berk's lecture series, a Shabbaton with JTS Chancellor Emeritus Dr Arnie Eisen, and programs with perspectives ranging from historical to spiritual, using text, dialogue, movies, music, prayer, and more. We can sign up for the upcoming congregational trip to Israel, which was originally planned for this past June, but which has been postponed.

HaYom harat olam. Today is the world's birthday. Today is the day we recommit to our obligations in relationship, to ourselves, to each other, and society, to the land and natural resources we benefit from, and to the land of Israel. This Shmita year, let us challenge ourselves to explore those obligations and responsibilities in relationship more deeply. What happens when we step away from our constant focus on growth and production? What seeds are already planted within ourselves? How can we rebuild our society so wealth matters far, far less, and we see ourselves in mutual relationship with everyone? How can we build a

society where everyone benefits from the fruits of all of our labor? And how can we pursue a vision of justice that includes justice for the land? These are the challenges that Shmita asks us to consider. This year, let us explore them together, as a Congregational community, and grow in our relationships and mutual obligations.

Shanah tovah.