

Shmita - Release

Here we are again. Celebrating the Jewish New Year in a way we did not expect. Last year we were surprised to still be social distancing and cleverly creating online services or gathering outdoors. This year we are less surprised yet also deflated. In a society that measures time on digital devices, it is especially hard to fathom how long this pandemic will continue to affect our daily lives. How many more celebrations, family gatherings, and sad partings will have to take place in smaller groups than we want or through technology as our only connection? I don't know. None of us know. Yet one thing we can consistently rely on is that time will march on and our seasons and holidays will bring our focus to the series of lessons and emotions that have guided our lives and the lives of our ancestors.

Rosh Hashanah is a time for teshuvah - returning to our selves. Every year the Jewish calendar gives us an opportunity to start again, bringing our actions and beliefs back into alignment. This year the calendar gives us something else as well. According to our Torah, every 7th year is to be a Shmitah year. (Go ahead, say it with me - SHMEE-tah) Shmitah is often translated as sabbatical, yet it more literally means release. In the book of Leviticus we read that in the same way that

humans and animals are given a rest every 7 days, the land should be allowed to rest as well. Since it wouldn't make sense for plants to rest for just a day, we give the land a year of rest after 6 years of service. In the land of Israel, this means no planting or pruning for a year. Farmers plan for 6 years of work to feed their families through the Shmitah year. While few of our Kol Nefesh families are farmers, we can certainly interpret the concept of Shmitah in ways that apply to our lives in 5782.

First, if we stick with the notion of giving the land a rest, we can use this Shmitah year to commit to caring for the environment. Every day we hear news stories about how our planet has suffered at the hands of humans. Rather than lamenting the effects of climate change, we can find ways to decrease our heavy footprint and give the earth a break. What might that rest or release look like for us? Could we decrease our consumption of plastic? Do a better job of reducing, reusing, and recycling? Conserve water? Shop for locally produced items that don't require long shipping routes? Eat a more plant-based diet? Consider talking through ideas with your family and making plans to walk a little lighter on the earth during this Shmitah year.

Going beyond ideas of releasing the land, what if we take this year to bring a little Shmitah to ourselves? What if we commit to releasing what no longer serves us? Whether that be habits, activities, or relationships - surely there is something you are carrying that keeps you from being your best self. Could you set down this burden and give your body and soul a period of rest? Maybe you'll emerge from Shmitah refreshed and energized to pick it up again and continue along your way. Or maybe the perspective you will gain after a year away from that thing or relationship will enable you to give it up for good.

Sounds good, right? Yet I know our tendency is to value productivity, so it can be difficult to focus on release and rest. Let's challenge that societal expectation. We are "human beings" not "human doings" after all. We overwork ourselves and get caught up in comparisons of how long and hard we work each day and week. Who started this competition? Why do we buy into it? What if we chose to DO LESS and BE MORE?

When mindfulness meditation teacher Sylvia Boorstein coined the phrase, "Don't just do something, sit there" she was reminding us that it is actually easier to jump into doing some kind of action. The better move is often to take a moment to consider what is really happening around us and what might be the most

helpful response. Taking a beat to consider our response keeps us from spending our days in reactive mode. This isn't a suggestion NOT to do anything, but rather, to engage in a moment of stillness so you can determine what you should do.

And I'm reminded of the creation story we read this morning in Torah. G!d worked for six days, creating facets of our world each day. After working and working, G!d stopped and rested. We are taught to see this seventh day of rest as included in the cycle that we are commanded to repeat. This rest is not a break but actually a PART of the creative process. The potential for the next thing is in the stillness and quiet and enjoyment of this moment.

I'm taking this whole Shmitah concept personally. Most of you know that I finished a 5-year seminary program in January and a clinical pastoral education rotation in June. I also completed 3 years of working for a second congregation as of this summer. Taking each of these big commitments off my plate has brought tangible signs of release. Not only does my calendar look less crowded, but my mind is as well. I feel a spaciousness that permits me to take time for longer conversations and indulgences like reading fiction and watching Ted Lasso. I'm addressing health issues I'd brushed aside and feeling a lightness in my heart. Good stuff. I encourage you to find some release as well.

Last year we talked about the intensity of transition as we birthed a new world. Looking back at those words I wrote a year ago, I couldn't help but think this is the longest pregnancy ever! So, of course, I turned to Rabbi Google and asked what animal has the longest gestation period. Wanna guess? *(Pause)* Yup, it's the elephant with 680 days. 680 days! That would be like the time from March 2020 to January 2022. And for those of you who have been pregnant during the summer, that's TWO summers of sweating through pregnancy! *(Pause)* 680 days! That's a long time to grow a baby elephant! And it feels like a long time to grow into whatever is coming next for us. As we ride the ebb and flow of the seasons, I look forward to discovering where our path is leading and how we can bring more meaning to the journey together.

I wish you a Shanah Tovah u'Metukah - a good and sweet year for you and your family. May 5782 be the year we release all that no longer serves us and may we find renewal in this Shmita year.

*(Ended with Ratzo Vashov (Ebb and Flow) by Lisa B. Segal)*