

Rosh Hashanah Day 1 Drash 2021/5782
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Shana tova! This year we can add something special to that traditional greeting because this year is a special year. I'm not talking, chas v'shalom, about the recall election, or the pandemic, or even the fact that if you take the individual digits in 5782 and add them together you get 22, which is the same as the number of letters in the alef bet, and, also the number of almond blossoms on the giant menorah in the ancient temple. Coincidence? I don't think so! No, I'm not talking about any of that- I'm talking about the fact that today marks the beginning of a shmita year. So this year I am wishing you a Shana tova m'leah shmita, a new year full of shmita! What is shmita? The year of release, also called the sabbatical year, or Shvi'it, the seventh year in the repeating Jewish cycle of sevens that includes shabbat, shmita, and Yovel, the Jubilee year that comes every 50th year, at the culmination of seven cycles of seven years each. Shmita is one of Judaism's most radical and revolutionary ideas that has the potential to transform our lives and help us confront the overwhelming challenges we face as a society. At the same time, it is one of the most aspirational and least observed of Judaism's laws. Over the course of this year, Netivot hopes to offer a number of study sessions on shmita and its connections to social justice issues facing us today.

The core elements of shmita in the torah include environmental, economic, and spiritual rest and rejuvenation. During this year, we are to let the land rest, abstain from farming, and release our ownership of the land and its produce. This includes the perennial crops that grow this year, including dates, olives, pomegranates and grapes, 4 out of the seven crops, the sheva minim, that characterize Israel in the torah. All personal debts are forgiven. Some say that all Jews who have fallen into debt slavery are released on the shmita year. And at the close of the shmita year, on Sukkot of the next year, everyone gathered in Jerusalem for the Hakhel, a ceremony where the people would hear the torah read aloud and reenact the covenant at Sinai. The shmita year has all these interrelated elements, all working together in powerful ways.

The three names for the shmita year underscore different aspects of this incredible idea.

Shvi'it is the name used for this year the first time it is introduced in the Torah, in Exodus 23:10-11.

V'shesh shanim tizra et artzecha v'asafta et tvu'ata. V'hashvi'it tishm'tena un'tashta, v'achlu evyonei amecha v'yitram tochal chayat hasadeh.

“For six years you are to sow your land and to gather in its produce, but in the seventh, you are to let it go [tishm'tenah- that's the command form of shmita] and to let it be, that the needy of your people may eat, and what remains, the wildlife shall eat.”

Shvi'it means simply seventh, because this is the seventh year in a seven year cycle. This teaches us that we shouldn't think about shmita as an end in itself- it only makes sense as part of a larger cycle. It's like shabbat- we need the rest and rejuvenation we get on shabbat, but we couldn't live our lives if everyday was shabbat. In the same way, shmita depends on the six years leading up to it, and those regular years are transformed by the reset and release of shmita.

Shmita is also referred to as shabbaton, the sabbatical year. This is how shmita is described in Leviticus chapter 25, where we are told that when we enter the land of Israel, the land is to observe a shabbat for God. “V'shavta ha'aretz shabbat ladonai” I love this verse so much I have it on my tallis. Like shabbat, this year is a time for rest from our regular work, a time for study and contemplation, and especially, a time to come together in community. And as we see in the verse from Exodus, our community is not limited to our fellow human beings during this year- we are to join in community with chayot hasadeh, the animals of the field, and with the land itself, which is a living thing that must also observe shabbat.

And now let's turn to the word “Shmita”, usually translated as release or remission. This is an unusual word- it only occurs in the Torah in reference to this seventh year. It is primarily used in Deuteronomy, in connection with the release of debt.

Here is how the word shmita is used in Deuteronomy Chapter 3: 1-2

Miketz sheva shanim ta'ashev shmita. V'zeh devar hashmita. Shamot kol baal mashev yado asher yashev b're'ehu. Lo yigos et re'ehu v'et achiv ki karah shmita la'adonai.

At the end of seven years, you are to make a Release. Now this is the matter of the Release: he shall release, every possessor of a loan of his hand, what he has lent to his neighbor. He is not to oppress his neighbor or his brother, for the Release of Hashem has been proclaimed!

Releasing personal debts is a powerful part of the shmita idea, an economic reset that reduces the disparity between rich and poor. It works together with the idea that, during the shmita year, the land and the food it produced was considered hefker, ownerless, or alternatively, common property of the entire community. When you think that the land was the primary means of production at the time of the Torah, this becomes an even

more radical idea! Here's what Maimonides said about this common ownership in the Mishneh Torah:

Anyone who locks his vineyard or fences off his agricultural field in the shmita year has nullified a positive commandment. This also holds true if he gathered all of his produce into his home. Instead, he should leave everything ownerless [hefker]. Thus everyone, [rich and poor], has equal rights in every place.

Remembering debts and locking our gates: these acts maintain relationships defined by power and property, have and have not, keeping us from truly connecting with each other.

When the Torah talks about shmita, it uses the image of opening our hands. Deuteronomy Chapter 15 discusses the need to continue loaning money even as the shmita year approaches. Verses 7-8 tell us

Lo tikpotz et yadcha me'achicha ha'evyon. Ki pato'ach tiftach et yadcha lo.

You shall not clench your hand against your brother the pauper. Rather, you are to open, yes, open your hand to him.

Robert Alter explains that the verb *shamat* means “to let slip out of one’s grip.” This makes shmita a counterpoint to the idea that the land is our *achuzat olam*, our eternal holding. The word “*Achuzat*” comes from the word “*le’echoz*” to grip or grasp. It’s natural for us to hold tight to our property and our land, and to feel that the wealth we accumulate and loan to others is ours because we worked for it and earned it, not because we were gifted with it by God and good fortune. But shmita teaches us to open our hands, leaving them free to reach out to one another, and to hold each other.

Shmita might seem like an irrelevant curiosity. The release of debts was done away with by Rabbi Hillel 2,000 years ago. When he saw that no one was lending money, he instituted a *takkanah*, a legal fix, called the *Prozbul*, which transferred debts to the court during the shmita year so that they would not be canceled. Rav Kook, the first chief Rabbi of modern Israel, who loved the idea of shmita and wrote beautifully about it in his *Shabbat Ha'aretz*, did away with the requirement to let the land rest at the beginning of the 20th century by instituting a *heter mechira*, allowing a fictional sale of the land during the shmita year. He did this because Jewish farmers in Israel were so poor at the time that he worried that shmita would be too much of a hardship. While some people are beginning to observe shmita in modern Israel, and others are coming up with new practices based on shmita, halachically it has little force anymore.

On the other hand, the pandemic, with all the loss and tragedy it has brought, has also shown us that, as a society, we can make the decision to have most people stop working and rest, and to support them during that time with our communal resources. So maybe the idea of shmita isn't as crazy and impossible as it sounds.

What does all this have to do with the High Holidays?

In Leviticus, the shmita year is called shabbat shabbaton, a phrase that is only used for shmita, for shabbat, and for Yom Kippur. What is the connection between shmita and Yom Kippur? The connection is awe. Our secular Berkeley rebbe, Michael Pollen, explains the connection in his book "How to Change Your Mind." Pollen doesn't talk about shmita or Yom Kippur in his book- he's talking about psychedelics and also meditation. But one of the things he says is that when we release ourselves from the grip of our ego, from its fears, its drives, and its industry, we open ourselves up to an experience of awe.

On Yom Kippur we quiet our egos by fasting and coming together as a community to affirm a vision of a better world. During the shmita year we release the grip of our egos by letting go of our private property and coming together with each other and the world around us.

We need our egos to function in the world. We need to filter out the overwhelming complexity and beauty around us, so we can focus on what we need to do to take care of ourselves and get our work done. But every now and then we need to release ourselves from our ego's grip. When we do that, we let the immensity of the universe in, which can be a frightening experience; the Hebrew word "Yirah" carries a strong connotation of fear as well as awe. But we can also feel our connection to it, a sense of community with everything around us. Pollen talks about the common insights that can come from psychedelic trips and from meditation: "All is One!" "Love is the Answer!" These ideas sound banal and cliched, until you say them in Hebrew. The following familiar phrase doesn't exactly translate to "All is One!" and "Love is the Answer" but I think it's pretty close:

Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad- V'ahavta et Adonai elohecha
Hear O Israel, Adonai our God, Adonai is One. And You shall love Adonai Your God.

The message of shmita may seem counterproductive right now in the time of existential crises in which we find ourselves- the pandemic, the refugee crisis, the climate crisis, our political crisis- I could go on. We may feel like we need to hold tight, to bear down, to work ceaselessly to make the changes we need and to answer the urgent calls for

help all around us. But to address the root of these problems, we also need to let go. Let go of our standard operating procedures. Let go and open ourselves to awe and connection.

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur should be about connection and hope, not just recriminations and remorse. The vidui, our communal confession, is a list of the ways in which we have missed the mark. But it is significant that it is not an individual confession, not “Ashamti, I am guilty” but “Ashamnu, We are guilty”. Doing teshuva as a community can be daunting. How can we get everyone to agree on a vision and do the work to realize it? But if you carefully listen to the vidui, you can also hear the possibility and potential. Ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalnu. Nu, nu, nu? We didn’t solve the climate crisis last year. Nu? It wouldn’t kill you to get some people together this year, make a Dayenu Circle, and see what happens.

This year, let’s not beat our chests with a closed fist. As Rabbi Chai says, let’s caress our hearts with open hands. Let’s join hands and open our hearts to receive blessings: blessings of release, blessings of connection, and blessings of hope.

I was going to conclude this drash with a rousing rendition of “Let it Go!” from the musical Frozen. But I was advised that this would not go over well. So instead I will just wish you again shana tova m’leah shmita!