



CONGREGATION
B'nai Torah

Giving it a Rest
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I get a lot of scam and junk email. The scams have gotten to be old hat. Some banker has 16 million dollars that could be mine if I just send them my social security number or bank account number. I just got one in Hebrew, so that was cool. Sometimes someone needs me to send them gift cards. Sometimes those requests even claim to come from me, to send myself a gift card. "Don't mind if I do!" The junk email is more plentiful. Offers to expand some part of my anatomy. Reduce the rest of my anatomy. Air purifiers. I'm on the mailing lists for both political parties, dozens of charities.

A few months ago, I started getting offers to buy land in Israel. I was familiar with the thing where you buy a plot of land in Scotland so that you can be a "Lord." In this case, the title that comes with the land might be "Friar."

The premise of these particular junk messages was that I would own land in Israel and not farm it. The idea is that this coming year, the one we entered on Rosh Hashanah, is a special year, then seventh year in the cycle, the Sabbatical year. On a simple level, it's a commandment to let the land of Israel lay fallow every seventh year, to refrain from farming, and the junk mail I received was trying to give it an additional relevance.

There's an interesting question as to whether you have to go out of your way to observe a mitzvah that would not otherwise apply.

Gee, I'm already not farming in Israel, so why pay extra for the privilege? After all, I didn't make breakfast this morning just to not eat it. I don't keep stumbling blocks lying around just to not put them in front of the blind. Following the rules of divorce, when needed, is a mitzvah, but *all the single ladies* don't have to put a ring on it just so they can fulfill the mitzvah.

But this morning, I'd like to show you that this set of commandments, that started in a world of agriculture and simple farmers, has implications for each of us, even if the thought of farming in Israel has never crossed our minds.

Shemitta tells us to refresh ourselves, to renew our energy. Shemitta tells us when it is time to let things go- to offer forgiveness.

And, as we approach the Yizkor service, the idea of Shemitta offers us wisdom into how to navigate the process of grief and mourning, how to make meaning of the losses, old and new, that we remember today.

The Mitzvah of Shemitta is surprisingly important in the Torah. It's mentioned in three out of the five books: Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy; in each case, there is a different twist or focus.

The first and simplest mention is in Exodus 23:10-12.

“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 consume.”

On their face, the verses would indicate that this is one of the many commandments in the Torah that encourages us to support those who are in need. In the days when we were primarily an agricultural society, there were multiple ways that the poor were provided for- when you harvested your crops, a tithe would go to the poor. You would leave a corner of the field for the poor to take of; if you dropped or forgot some produce, those in need could glean it. Giving tzedakah, helping those in need, is such an important mitzvah. But why wait until the 7th year? If you really wanted to help the poor, you'd farm the heck out of the land and donate.

Another answer is found in Leviticus 25:

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.

A few verses later in that same chapter, the Torah promises that in the 6th year the land will be especially fertile. And, in the next chapter, God warns that if you don't let the land rest on the sabbatical year, then it will grow desolate and “it shall observe the rest that it did not observe in your sabbath years while you were dwelling upon it.”

Some scholars have suggested that this reflects an agricultural reality. If you farm a plot of land repeatedly with the same crops, you will eventually wear it down and remove all the nutrients. There are exceptions- if you are in a river delta area (like lower Egypt or Mississippi), the land is naturally refertilized during a flood. But in most places, if you grow the same crop for too many years in a row you will end up with a dust bowl. Some ancient farmers figured out how to rotate different crops, and today we use sophisticated fertilizers, but back then, you had to let the land lay fallow or you were going to wear it out. There's an important ecological message there- leaving aside how we handle any one piece of land, the earth as a whole has resources that are limited, and if we deplete them, we will suffer the consequences. The mitzvah of Shemitta says that the earth does not belong to us. I'm not going to get ecological on you. After my sermon on Rosh Hashanah, enough have accused me of a *slide to the left*, and after last night, a *jump to the right*. This afternoon, Rabbi Gottfried and Myrtle Levin will be exploring those concepts in more depth.

I want to suggest to you, that it is not just fields that run out of essential nutrients, that need a break; the same is true for us as human beings. Our souls need to be replenished. In Leviticus, the term that is used to describe the Shemitta is Shabbat Shabbaton. The most sabbathy Sabbath, (or Sabbath McSabbathface?) Everyone needs a break; everyone needs a rest to refresh and replenish when our resources *get low*.

The rest offered to the land in the 7th year is similar to the rest that we are offered every Shabbat. It's not an accident that the 7th day and the 7th year are linked in this way. The number 7 is associated with rest, with completion and perfection. When God created the world, He worked

for 6 days and rested on the 7th. The Torah uses the word “*Vayinafash*” it is related to the word “*nefesh*,” which means soul. It implies that God was refreshed. This is theologically remarkable. Pagan religions imagine their deities getting tired and hungry. God doesn't eat, God doesn't sleep, and yet somehow, God rests- if nothing else as an inspiration to us. How do we use Shabbat to restore our spiritual selves?

Being a farmer, then and now, your time is not your own. The sun controls your daily planner. The time of the harvest is set by the wind and the rain, not by your calendar. The livestock need to be fed whether or not you feel like getting away for the weekend.

The Sabbatical year provides a break, a rest, from that constant responsibility. But I'd like to point out the sabbatical year is not just “not farming.” It's not just absence of action. There's actually an intentionality of action. It's rest with a *twist*. We read in Deuteronomy 31:10-12:

“And Moses instructed them as follows: Every seventh year, the year set for remission, at the Feast of Booths, when all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God in the place that He will choose, you shall read this Teaching aloud in the presence of all Israel) Gather the people—men, women, children, and the strangers in your communities—that they may hear and so learn to revere the LORD your God and to observe faithfully every word of this Teaching.”

The sabbatical year was a break from the daily *grind* of farming. But it was not just freedom FROM farming, it was freedom TO do things that mattered. In particular, it was freedom to study. Every segment of society could come together to hear the words of Torah. We have a lot more opportunities for study today than people did in ancient farming times, and maybe even at any other time in history. Between in person and online options, B'nai Torah and everyone else, you could be taking a class every available moment, and Jewish books and other media are more available than they have ever been. If Moses could have come through a *time warp* and seen how his five scrolls have grown, he'd be amazed!

But that experience of learning together as a community, is far more rare. The High Holidays are the closest we have to that today. The Yom Kippur sermon, right at this moment, between the rush to get in, or log in, and the rush out for Yizkor is probably the time when the most members of our congregation are doing something Jewish all at the same time. For just a few minutes, we are focused on something bigger and greater than ourselves.

The sabbatical year tells us that rest is not just about inaction. It's not just freedom FROM, it's freedom TO.

We can rest passively or actively. Some people talk about the difference between a vacation and a trip. They would say that what is most refreshing is a “vacation” sitting on the beach with a drink reading a mindless *thriller*. Being active in nature, whether it is roughing it or this new “glamping” that is in *vogue* refreshes us in a totally different way. Travel, becoming immersed in the vibrant culture of a different place and walking its streets may tire the body, but liberates the mind.

Steven Covey says it another way in his self-improvement classic called “The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that resting and refreshing is his 7th habit. He says, “we must never become too busy sawing to take time to sharpen the saw.” Taking care of your physical self, your emotional/social self, your spiritual self, your mental self, is so important. Now, the challenge of Covey’s approach is that it is utilitarian: you are sharpening the saw so you can use it. That makes sense if you live to work. You don’t sharpen the saw when you need a screwdriver, or when it is *hammer time*. We rest not so we can work, but so that we can be whole people.

This summer, I had a sabbatical. Normally rabbinic sabbaticals are measured in months. Mine was just under 5 weeks. The theory was that COVID was over, and I would have a chance to refresh myself. It didn’t quite work out that way. I have always had an overdeveloped sense of responsibility. It started when I was a kid and Smokey the Bear said, “only you can prevent forest fires.” I thought to myself, “I live in New Jersey- aren’t there firefighters closer to the scene who can take these on?” It’s hard for me to stop rabbi-ing. People will ask: Where are you a rabbi? I’ll respond: “I’m a rabbi pretty much wherever I am, but B’nai Torah is where my email comes in.”

So, on my sabbatical I didn’t really manage to disengage. But I tried to be thoughtful about how I was sharpening my saw. Some of it was downtime: sitting on a beach with a book in hand or just having a quiet Shabbat at home. Some of it was intentional time: spending time with Wendy, taking a road trip with Ezra, going to help my mom get some things in order.

I also spent three weeks in my basement office, writing a 51-page paper, with 192 footnotes, a *halachic* analysis of the Zoom minyan. Don’t read it if you are going to then operate heavy machinery. You might say, that’s not much of a vacation. Sometimes the things that are most refreshing are not the things that are most passive, but rather the things that are most active. Those three weeks I got to wrestle with sources and concepts that I don’t really have an excuse to engage with on a daily basis.

As some of you may know, Wendy has become obsessed with Peloton. I admire that she is able to find restoration in that activity. These last 18 months have been particularly tough for clergy in trying to make time and take time- part of this sermon is directed back at myself to try to make sure that I live my own personal *shemitta*.

There’s another aspect of *shemitta*, which is found in Deuteronomy 15:1-2 and applies even if you are not a farmer.

“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; he shall not dun his fellow or kinsman, for the remission proclaimed is of the LORD.”

The forgiveness of debts in the 7th year was a lifesaver in ancient times. People were not borrowing money to buy a big screen TV or take out student loans. Their crops had failed, and they needed money for seed to plant. If these plantings did not take, they were in big trouble. Once someone had accumulated debt, they would never be able to pay it back. Without the

sabbatical year, they would lose their fields and their home, and there was no *YMCA* to stay at. Lending money was a form of charity, and an important safety net for society. The Torah even anticipates that as the 7th year got closer, people would be less and less willing to lend.

Observing the Sabbatical year is a little harder to pull off today. Our society is built on a complex web of short- and long-term financial obligations. I told my mortgage company that it was the 7th year and they said something about foreclosure, so I let it drop. But even 2,000 years ago, our sages realized that full forgiveness was not so easy. The great sage Hillel created a legal fiction called a Prozbul that enabled debt to survive through the sabbatical year, because the complex economy of the Greco-roman world demanded it. Similarly, rabbis came up with many loopholes to not let the land lay fallow in Israel, so that farmers would not go bankrupt.

We can be inspired by this commandment in a narrow sense today. Our community has two wonderful programs for interest free loans. JELF for student loans and JIFLA for other types of financial pressures, to stabilize someone whose finances have started to *wobble*. But the expectation is that you will pay those loans back. At B'nai Torah Rabbi K and I have rabbi's discretionary funds. One of the things that we will do with these funds is offer financial assistance in the form of a loan. At some point, if someone is still having trouble getting back on their feet, we have the ability to forgive it.

The sabbatical year reminds us that money is not the only way to keep score. We can get so caught up in our following dollars, *where did you come from where did you go*¹, that we forget why we have them. More generally, the sabbatical year inspires us to consider what kinds of non-financial debts we need to forgive.

There are certainly plenty of people who, at least according to our own personal ledgers, "owe us"- for slights, for insults, for wrongs, for serious offenses. Even though **they** are the ones who did wrong, the red ink still runs through our own hearts and veins.

Typically, we hope that those who wronged us will come to us with contrition and repay their debt- repair the damage, ask forgiveness, and promise to do differently. That's wonderful when it happens. Maybe they will repent- from your lips to God's ears.

But things don't always happen that way, and the sabbatical year encourages us to think about forgiveness in a different way. Sometimes, we simply write off bad debt. We know that we are owed the money. WE have the evidence to *back it up*. We know that the chances of that person ever seeking our forgiveness, or trying to make right, are slim, and any attempts we make to collect are not worth the postage. We haven't truly forgiven, but we have moved on to more fruitful endeavors.

Other times, we engage in loan forgiveness. We recognize that a person is who they are, with their limitations and foibles. We know that they are not going to change, but the relationship matters to us. And we acknowledge, perhaps, that maybe we have some unpaid debts to them as well. And so, we forgive a debt, not out of anger, but out of love. What loans will you forgive this year- not in the financial sphere, but in the realm of the soul?

¹ Cotton Eye Joe

What ties together all of these threads of spirituality is that the word *Shmita* means “to let go.” We live in a world of sometimes crushing responsibility. We tend the fields. We owe and are owed. *Shemitta* says that sometimes, to be healthy, we have to loosen our grip. Don’t just do something, stand there. Just letting the land lay fallow gives us strength. And sometimes, we can engage in Hakhel, we sharpen the saw- we can actively use downtime to improve ourselves, to engage more deeply.

Shemitta is also called Shabbat Shabbaton, the Sabbath of Sabbaths, which is the same term used for Yom Kippur! Yom Kippur is also about a letting go, not just of the sins of others, but ridding ourselves of our own sins. What are the urges that we cling to? When do we just need to “give it a rest”?

As we approach the sacred Yizkor service, the laws of the sabbatical year have an added level of meaning for those of us who are remembering loved ones who have passed, or who will do so one day.

I think a lot of us who have suffered a loss do not want to make time for our grief, make time for recovery. Shiva, if done right, has the potential to be a very healing time. As much as anything else, we need to give ourselves space for our grief. We can’t dive right back in. I often talk to people who feel like they can’t afford to let business, let life sit for a few days. I respect their devotion to their work, to their patients, their students, their clients. I understand all too well. I’ll admit, in keeping with my inability to let go, I wasn’t very good at this. My father passed away 11 years ago, just a week before Passover. On one of the last days of shiva, I got a call from Eddie Dressler, asking if I could do a non-member funeral right before Passover, the day I got up from shiva, and I declined. Dressler’s called back after Yom Tov- the funeral had been held up and they wanted to know if maybe now I was available. I told Wendy “and besides, it was a non-member funeral.” (You see, our practice at B’nai Torah is that anything I do for a member, there is no expectation of a fee or donation, but when I do things in the larger community, there’s a standard fee). Then she reminded me how much we had spent on walk-up airfares to Boston in the last month, and I ended up officiating after all.

I think that funeral went ok, but, in general, I don’t know that I would want my surgery, or even my taxes, done by someone who just came from a loved one’s funeral. We seek to throw ourselves back into life. We *jump around* from task to task. And while wallowing in our grief is not good, it’s also not good to be so busy, in the *hustle* and bustle that our feelings get lost in *the shuffle*.

Part of our Jewish practice is that mourners do not attend festive events, weddings, bar mitzvah parties, or other celebrations, during the first year. Some people might find it oppressive. I already suffered a terrible loss. Why should I also be cut off from my social life?

It’s incredibly hard to be in a room where everyone else is celebrating, and you are carrying your own grief. I go to a lot of festive events in a given year. I’m always a sucker for a *hora*, but when I was mourning my father, having an excuse not to do the *electric slide* or *macarena* was

something of a relief. And I will not *whip, the nae nae, or even, I dare say, do the stanky leg,* under the best of circumstances.

Our tradition tells us that we should give ourselves the space to let the field of festivity lay fallow. Now, there are loopholes, that are used routinely, when a father of bride or groom loses their own parent in the months before the wedding. But I think we need to give ourselves permission to sit out.

On another level, the *shemitta* reminds us to make the most of the breaks in life. None of us want to go through a loss, sharpening the saw is not fun if you are the saw, but we can use that experience to inspire us to more worthy deeds. Water can rust away the steel or quench it and forge it to even greater strength. We can experience loss as something that bogs us down in the muck, or as a source of encouragement, as a driver of our *locomotion*. Our tradition gives us the resources to follow the latter course. Judaism teaches that we can honor our loved ones through prayer, study and tzedakah. There are so many in our congregation who have developed a restorative habit of daily prayer because of their experience of coming to say kaddish following a loss. So many wonderful acts of tzedakah, not only monetary donations, but acts of hands-on kindness, have been inspired by grief and loss.

The last category of *shemitta* is forgiving of debts. One of the difficult things about loss, is that those who are dear may close their chapter in the book of life but may not clear the balance in our books. We may feel that there is a debt to a parent, a spouse, a friend, that we can never repay. Now that they are gone, how can we make things even? If that debt is a debt of love and kindness, our tradition tells us that there are ways to continue repaying that debt. We can say kaddish, study and give tzedakah. We can “pay it forward” to the next generation or support causes that honor our loved ones. And if that debt is a debt of harm, Maimonides even speaks of a ritual to seek atonement from the dead. The dead are beyond our hurt and harm, but they command us to do better for the living.

We may remember a loss with anger. Perhaps our loved one was a casualty that did not need to be. We are angry that the rest of the family could have done more. The doctors should have done more. We can be angry at God- for taking this loved one from us too soon. We can even be angry at the person, with the suspicion or the knowledge that their own actions, whether voluntary or beyond their control, hastened their passing. That anger originates in a good place of love we had for that person, but love, bonded too tightly to anger, will slowly tarnish into hate, and ultimately vanish and rust away. The death of a loved one is a loss for which compensatory damages may be offered but will always fall short. Ultimately, the only way to hold on to our loved one is to forgive the part that cannot be repaid.

Or, alternatively, a loss may have cheated us of the opportunity to find closure with someone who wronged us. *We are family*, but not happily so. The compensation, or even revenge, we might have wished for in life, is now denied to us for eternity. They are at peace (or not, I suppose) but we are tormented. Memories that should keep us warm burn us and threaten to erupt in a *fireball* of rage against others who do not deserve it. Death is a form of *shemitta*, of letting go. It tells us that that debt is now uncollectable. Continuing to reflect on it, continuing to

carry that red ink, only harms us. Our Yizkor service includes a memorial prayer to be said for a parent who was hurtful. That letting go is not easy, but it is so important.

We are already 10 days into the *shemitta* year. It started at Rosh Hashanah. Unless you snuck over to Israel to do some gardening, you are already observing that most basic part of it. One down, 612 to go! But can you go further? Can you take this Yom Kippur, this Shabbat Shabbaton, not just as a break from regular activity, but as an opportunity for real reflection- to sharpen your saw? Can you commit to doing that at other times? To engage in study, in spirituality? Can you commit to a real forgiveness of debts- of letting go of the wrongs that your heart draws you to commit, and the grudges you hold in your heart against those who have wronged you?

And, as we enter the Yizkor service, can you make this a *shemitta* of your grief? Leave space, leave time for your heart to lay fallow and replenish after a loss. To let go of the anger that is associated with so many of our losses, and more than that, to allow those losses to inspire you.

Can you make this a Shabbat Shabbaton- a day of letting go, and leaning in – so, that the memories of those who we remember here today help us plant the seeds of our future joyous harvest?