

Erev Rosh Hashana Sermon

By Reb Ezra Weinberg

September 25, 2022 / 29 Elul 5782

Have you heard of the term “palace in time,” coined by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel? He uses “palace in time” as a way of describing the essential elements of Shabbat. According to Heschel, to have a meaningful Shabbat practice, we could be in a lot of different locations in the world. It doesn’t really matter where we are. Shabbat is not place dependent, he’s saying. Rather, Shabbat is time dependent. The essential question isn’t, Are we creating space for Shabbat? But rather, Are we creating time for Shabbat? Are we creating time to rest from the hamster wheel of life? I realize that in our current modes of speech, space is now a synonym for time. “I’m creating space in my life for making more art.” That’s really talking about time, which is exactly what I am speaking about tonight. Jewish time as it relates to Or Shalom and this very moment in time.

Or Shalom, you are going through a very liminal moment in the life of your community. You are experiencing your first High Holidays without your spiritual leader of the past 15 years. You are in transition. I wonder if time feels both contracted and expanded for you at this moment. You are really in a bridge moment with me up here, between who you’ve been and who you are becoming. That has to be exciting and nerve-racking at the same time. I feel the significance of this moment in time and I hope it’s ok to name it. A leadership transition moment is always a significant moment for

a community. “Kal V’Chomer,” as the sages say. How much more the moreso, that it is happening on Rosh Hashana.

Before I get back into this moment, let’s be clear on what we mean about Jewish time. Jewish time is often measured in cycles. By cycle, I mean ritual and communal gathering moments that are identified by where we are in time. Jewish time cycles come in many different sizes. For example: birth, B’Mitzvah, marriage, divorce, death; these are some of the life-cycles that we often mark to measure one human life. All of the Jewish holidays together form the year cycle. But there are other lesser known cycles of Jewish time. Within the year cycle are smaller holiday time cycles. We’re in one now. From Tisha Ba’av, through Sukkot and Simchat Torah is a cluster—or a cycle of holidays. In the Yeshiva world, they organize their learning semesters on these smaller cycles of holidays. They call these semesters “zmas,” which literally means time.

As you may have noticed already, Jewish time is fascinating to me. I can be a little obsessed with tracking the Jewish calendar. Take the Hebrew leap year for example, which we just completed today. In our secular Gregorian calendar, we add one day every four years to the end of February. In the Hebrew calendar we add an entire month. And every year, I still wonder how the ancient rabbis devised a system of adding one month seven out of every 19 years, so that the lunar aspects of our calendar would reset and be in sync with the solar calendar. How did they figure that stuff out 2,500 years ago in a way that it would still totally work today? Living in two civilizations means living two separate calendars. To some it might feel like a burden, but to me, I feel like, timewise, I’m living in 3D. If anyone wants to learn more about all the challenges and opportunities living in Jewish time, you are invited to reach out to me.

So Jewish cycles of time come in all varieties, from the cycle of the day to the cycle of your life. But there is one cycle that bears significance on this day. It is a highly underrated cycle and yet could be the most significant cycle in the entire Jewish project. I'm talking about the seven year cycle, also called the shmita cycle. For those of you who didn't hear last year's Rosh Hashana sermon, here's just a quick description of shmita: The Torah is really into the number seven. This all started during the creation story when G-d rested on the seventh day. Our whole Shabbat cycle is based on this notion, that we rest on the seventh day, just like G-d did. We also have seven weeks between Passover and Shavuot. Seven is everywhere and it symbolizes rest, but also completion. But if Shabbat is the seventh day of rest for people, then shmita is the expanded idea in the Torah that every seven years, the land and society get a rest.

Specifically, there is no farming in the seventh year, the shmita year. In a society where most people worked in agriculture, that basically means a year off from work. Some of you work in academia. You know what a sabbatical is. Shmita is the radical idea that we don't just need rest on a weekly level, but the earth and human society require a chance to take a deep breath. We need to slow down—a lot. So, one out of every seven years, we all get a year off. But it goes further. Another aspect of shmita is financial. According to the Torah, all debts are released in the shmita year. Can you imagine? Given what I've already described, the shmita might be the single most significant social framework ever proposed in the Torah. In its essence, it serves as a corrective against human and earth exploitation. I have heard rabbis say that the entire point of the Jewish project is to achieve what shmita was trying to achieve: a human society that eradicates exploitation and cruelty.

Obviously, the idea of shmita never took the way the Torah describes. It is debatable if, in ancient Israel, the vast laws of shmita were ever the laws of the land. So, we could dismiss it as just another antiquated set of laws in the Torah. On the other hand, I do find radical social ideas in the Torah, that level out the playing field between rich and poor, to be inspiring. And, I also recognize how difficult and entrenched we are in a capitalist system that privileges overproduction and overconsumption above the dignity of human life. I'm not a believer in implementing shmita any time soon. But I do believe shmita still has value and I want to speak about two specific and related ways: time and vision.

Let's start with time. One year ago today, on Rosh Hashana, it was the first day of the shmita year. Rabbi Katie talked about it from this spot. I talked about it at my holiday pulpit. It was a hot topic in the rabbinical world. I even heard of some Jewish communities, in the spirit of shmita, running campaigns to relieve medical debt. This entire past year 5782 was a shmita year. That ended just a few minutes ago. As we are bringing in the new year 5783, we're done with shmita right? We're done with the shmita year, but we're on day one of the next shmita cycle. Remember, our calendar and Jewish time is based on cycles. The actual names of the week according to the siddur in Hebrew are: Yom Rishon shel Shabbat (day one of shabbat) and Yom Sheni shel Shabbat (day two of Shabbat). All the way until the seventh day, which is just called Shabbat.

The whole week is building to Shabbat, to the day of rest. So too in the shmita cycle: in each year we are building toward the seventh year, the year of rest, when we can cease our endless tireless lives of production and bask in what we've created. So, this is day one in the next seven year shmita cycle.

Let's talk about vision. The Torah asks, at least in the framework of shmita, that as a society, we think in seven year increments. That seems like a lot of time. When I think of the beginning of the next shmita year, starting six years from today, my 11 year old son who just started sixth grade will likely begin his senior year of high school. My nearly six year old daughter will be starting seventh grade and approaching her Bat Mitzvah. For me that feels like a long time from now. But it's not crazy to imagine life in six years either. It is far away, but not too far. Where will you be in six years, in the next shmita year?

Shmita gives us an opportunity to think about our lives, individually and communally, in seven year cycles. It gives us an opportunity to imagine the life we want for ourselves, our loved ones, and the world at large. Corporations and nonprofits often engage in strategic planning. What might it mean if we engage in our own strategic seven year plan? The shmita cycle invites all of us into a deeper process of counting our days and our lives and giving ourselves specific ways to consider the kind of life we should be living. That is visionary. We're not forced to do it. And for many people, thinking ahead is hard and often burdensome. But I'm not making this up either. Our ancient wisdom asks us to fashion our lives within these cycles of time.

So, let's bring this all home. Or Shalom, you have had one spiritual leader for the past two shmita cycles. A lot of who you are is up in the air. Who do you want to become in the next six years? What do you want to say you accomplished by the time the next shmita rolls around? What will be the next significant chapter in the story of this community that gets told? How will you stay the same? How will you be different? How will you use the next six years to build up to the community and the people you want to

become? I imagine some of you are already asking these questions. How will you invite more of you into this conversation? People in this room, people not in this room, people who've not yet stepped into this room?

I'll finish with a blessing, a blessing for time and vision. The traditional expression / greeting upon hearing that someone is pregnant is "b'sha'ah tova," may everything come in a good and appropriate time. But that expression isn't just limited to pregnancy. All of us, pregnant or not, deserve a blessing of good timing, a Sha'ah tova. Sounds a lot like Shana Tova. As we pray for a new year, let us also pray for good timing in our lives. And may we have vision to see ahead to who we want to be. And the wisdom and patience to figure out how to connect who we are now to who we want to become. B'Sha'ah Tova and Shana Tova.