Today, we enter the New Year 5782. This year is a *shmita* year. A year of resting.

In Leviticus, we are told:

כִּֽי תָבֹ֣אוּ אֶל־הָאָ֗רֶץ אֲשֶׁ֤ר אֲנִי֙ נֹתֵ֣ן לָכֶ֔ם וְשָׁבְתָ֥ה הָאָ֖רֶץ שַׁבָּ֥ת לַיהוָֽה

Ki tavo'u el ha'aretz asher ani noten lachem, v'shavtah ha'aretz shabbat l'Adonai.

"When you come to the land that I am giving you, the land will *shavat* a *shabbat* to Hashem." The land will observe a sabbath – a time of rest – to God.

In the book of Exodus, we read,

וְשֵׁ֣שׁ שָׁנִ֗ים תִּזְרַע֙ אֶת־אַרְצֶ֔ךָ וְאָסַפְתָּ֖ אֶת־תְּבוּאָתָֽהּ׃

V'shesh shanim tizra et-artzecha, v'asafta et-tvu'atah;

"Six years you shall sow your land and gather its harvest;"

וְהַשְּׁבִיעִ֗ת תִּשְׁמְטֶ֤נָּה…

*v'hashvi'it **tishm'tenah** u'n'tashtah…*

"but in the seventh year, you shall let it rest and lie fallow."

In other words, you can build an organized agricultural system to maximize your output and work the land. You can work long days,

from sunrise to sunset, but every seventh year, you must leave the land alone. You can still gather food from your fields to feed your household, but you may not plant, and you may not sell what you harvest. For an entire year.

I want you to take a moment and imagine that. Ceasing your active labor and business activities for a whole year. It seems unimaginable, doesn't it? We have been conditioned to put our noses to the grindstone, and for many of us, that means that we feel guilty about even stepping away from work for a week's vacation. Or even stepping away for a bathroom break.

This past year and a half, in which many of us have been working from home, has eroded our work-life boundaries even more than they had already been eroded by technology.

By show of hands: how many of you have replied to a work email on a day off or weekend? How many of you have put off a meal, or a bathroom break, in order to keep working? How many of you have taken a work phone call during family time?

How many of you have felt guilty about your productivity during the time you've been working from home?

How many of you have been putting in more than 40 hours a week without overtime pay?

We have a major problem in our contemporary society: burnout.

I'm quoting here from Anne Helen Petersen's book Can't Even: How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation:

> "Burnout" was first recognized as a psychological diagnosis in 1974, applied by the psychologist Herbert Freudenberger to cases of physical or mental collapse as the result of overwork.[1] Burnout is of a substantively different category than "exhaustion," although the two conditions are related. Exhaustion means going to the point where you can't go any further; burnout means reaching that point and pushing yourself to keep going, whether for days or weeks or years. When you're in the midst of burnout, the feeling of accomplishment that follows an exhausting task—passing the final! finishing the massive work project!—never comes.[1]

Burnout has become such an issue for us today because of technological shifts and the widespread adoption of specific ideas about what constitutes success in an organizational context. Our entire society has bought into the idea that success lies in profitability – of operating with as little expense as possible so as to maximize profit to investors. And so, to run a lean "efficient" business, in come ideas like productivity, optimization, time management. All of which put the onus on the employee.

Quoting again from Helen Anne Petersen:

> When I'm stressed by work, I find myself resenting the amount of sleep I need. Even though I know that sleep actually increases productivity, what I understand is that it decreases available working hours.
>
> You know who doesn't need sleep? Robots. We might say we hate the idea of turning into them, but for many millennials, we robotize ourselves willingly in hopes of gaining that elusive stability we so desperately crave. That means increasingly ignoring our own needs, including biological ones. As theorist Jonathan Crary points out, even

[1] Petersen, Anne Helen Can't Even: How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation, e-book, Mariner, 2020 ch. 1

> our "sleep" is increasingly a version of machines in "sleep mode" that's not rest so much as "a deferred or diminished condition of operation and access." In sleep mode, you're never actually off; you're just waiting to be turned back on again.
>
> We've conditioned ourselves to ignore every signal from the body saying This is too much, and we call that conditioning "grit" or "hustle."
>
> As Jia Tolentino pointed out in the New Yorker, "At the root of this is the American obsession with self-reliance, which makes it more acceptable to applaud an individual for working himself to death than to argue that an individual working himself to death is evidence of a flawed economic system." The ideology of overwork has become so pernicious, so pervasive, that we attribute its conditions to our own failures, our own ignorance of the right life hack that will suddenly make everything easier.
>
> No amount of hustle or sleeplessness can permanently bend a broken system to your benefit. Your value as a worker is always unstable.[2]

You are not a robot, or any kind of machine. You are not malfunctioning. The system is simply not built with human needs in mind. You don't need fine-tuning or optimization. You need water. And healthy food. And, most importantly, you need rest.

Petersen continues:

> This isn't a personal problem. It's a societal one—and it will not be cured by productivity apps, or a bullet journal, or face mask skin treatments, or overnight fucking oats. We gravitate toward those personal cures because they seem tenable, and promise that our lives can be recentered, and regrounded, with just a bit more discipline, a new app, a better email organization strategy, or a new approach to meal planning. But these are all merely Band-Aids on an open wound.

[2] (Petersen ch. 6)

> They might temporarily stop the bleeding, but when they fall off, and we fail at our newfound discipline, we just feel worse. Before we can start fighting what is very much a structural battle, we first need to understand it as such.[3]

It's essential to recognize that burnout is connected to systemic issues because so many of our self-care strategies rely on short-term fixes, like "retail therapy" and ordering delivery. And while these things may bring us comfort and relief, they do so at a cost – one that is only palatable because it is largely unseen.

Earlier this week, I was standing in the checkout line at Costco. There were three carts ahead of me, one of them unpersoned. I didn't pay much attention at first. But as time ticked by, I noticed that the lines on either side seemed to be moving much faster than ours, while the customer at the register was going back and forth between the cart and the conveyor belt, carrying two or three items at a time from two full carts. At first, I was annoyed. This was moving incredibly slowly (and, as I mentioned, this was just days ago – kind of a busy time for me). I thought to myself that *it would move much faster if she would put down her phone and use both hands*! But the focus with which she was consulting her phone led to a realization that she was double checking to make sure that she had every single item on her list. This was not her personal shopping. She was on the job for Instacart.

[3] (Petersen ch. 1)

For some, that point would be moot. They're still being inconvenienced by the slowness of the transaction. But even though I had places to be – namely, at home, sitting at my computer, writing this sermon – I waited, and, later, in the parking lot, helped her wrangle the empty carts as they tried their best to roll away.

The German Jewish philosopher Martin Buber's most famous book is Ich und Du, translated as I and Thou, although it would be more accurate to translate it as I and You. The book is about the relationships that a human being has with the world, and with God.

> The I of the basic word I-You is different from that of the basic word I-It. The I of the basic word I-It appears as an ego and becomes conscious of itself as a subject (of experience and use). The I of the basic word I-You appears as a person and becomes conscious of itself as subjectivity (without any dependent genitive).
>
> Egos appear by setting themselves apart from other egos.
>
> Persons appear by entering into relation to other persons…
>
> The purpose of relation is the relation itself --- touching the You. For as soon as we touch a You, we are touched by a breath of eternal life."[4]
>
> "One cannot divide one's life between an actual relationship to God and an inactual I-It relationship to the world--praying to God in truth and utilizing the world. Whoever knows the world as something to be utilized knows God the same way."[5]

[4] Buber, Martin, and Walter Kaufmann. *I and Thou*. New York: Touchstone, 1996. Print. Pp. 112-113
[5] Ibid., p. 156

Apps and services that make your life convenient typically rely on invisible labor – an I-It relationship. The other person is faceless, nameless, a utensil. The person who placed that Instacart order that filled two Costco carts probably never considered that their order simply shifted the difficulty and inconvenience onto somebody else – somebody who does not have the kind of workplace protections that the labor movement fought for.

Petersen spends a whole chapter talking about the so-called "gig economy." She points out that the contemporary work model has created a new societal classification: the precariat.

> The precariat is not the vision of the working class held by many Americans. As the theorist Guy Standing points out, the working class, at least how it's remembered, had "long- term, stable, fixed-hour jobs with established routes of advancement, subject to unionization and collective agreements, with job titles their fathers and mothers would have understood, facing local employers whose names and features they were familiar with."
>
> The precariat has almost none of those things. Uber drivers are part of the precariat. So are retail workers, Amazon warehouse employees, adjunct professors, freelance writers, Instacart grocery shoppers, corporate cleaners, MTV digital producers, in-home nursing assistants, Wal-Mart stockers, fast food servers, and people who cobble together several of these jobs to make ends meet.
>
> A precariat worker knows few of their coworkers, and those that they do know turn over quickly. They often have a college degree, or have completed several semesters toward one. Some, like the adjuncts and freelance writers, find themselves in the precariat as they continue to pursue their "passion," no matter the cost. Others find themselves there through desperation. Their economic and class status is precarious, which renders them ever vigilant for even the smallest piece of bad luck that could sink them into poverty. Above all,

> precariat workers are exhausted – and, regardless of the specifics of their job, burnt out.[6]

Even as all of this is a widespread societal problem, Petersen acknowledges that burnout is compounded by the coexisting systems of inequity in our society:

> If a white middle- class person feels exhausted reading the news, what does an undocumented person navigating the world endure? If it's tedious to deal with implicit sexism in the workplace, how about adding in some not-so-implicit racism? How does burnout work differently when you don't have access to generational wealth? How does student debt sting more when you're the first in your family to go to college?[7]

What can be done about this? For those of us who are not in the precariat class, you can lobby for these "disrupter" businesses to treat the people whose labor makes the business function as employees – eligible for benefits that could keep them from being constantly at risk.

But all of us should also listen to people like Tricia Hersey. Hersey is a graduate of Emory Theological Seminary, and calls herself the Bishop of The Nap Ministry. She sees the radical act of rest as a form of reparations for the descendants of the African slave trade.

> sleep deprivation is a justice issue because it's been traced from all the way back during slavery. Slavery was horrific, and…during those times for black people, we were human machines. And so grind culture continues today to try and attempt to make us all human machines…
>
> Poverty, healthy disparities, just going to the doctor: All these burdens America has placed on us makes it hard to get a full REM

[6] (Petersen ch. 6)
[7] (Petersen ch. 1)

> cycle of sleep. It's been hard to tell Black people that they have been socialized to believe you have to do more and work harder to equalize yourself. We're brainwashed by parents and communities not to be lazy; you have to be better. It's a disservice to paint it that way because it's not true. It's a lie. It adds to the sleep deprivation that is mental and psychological that we don't deserve rest.

She encourages people to make space for rest, to take a "sabbath" from work – and from social media.

> rest [is] a spiritual practice. Rest is productive. When you are resting, you are being productive. I'm trying to reframe rest and deprogram people around the concept that if you aren't "doing something" in the classic sense, then you're not worthy…
> To think that in this day and age, there's no time for you to at least take 10 minutes to reclaim rest and daydream and shut your eyes or debrief for a little bit longer before you go to shower, that is not true.

> I love to reimagine rest outside of a capitalist and colonized system. So I love to think of resting as something that's subversive and inventive - closing your eyes for 10 minutes, taking a longer time in the shower, daydreaming, meditating, praying. So we can find rest wherever we are because wherever our bodies are, we can find liberation because our body is a site of liberation.
>
> I'm big on daydreaming. When I talk about The Nap Ministry, it's more than naps; it's also a way of slowing down and reclaiming our time. Resting looks like daydreaming, silence, slowing down, and naps.

So I'm going to ask you all to join me, for five minutes, in the radical act of rest. Wherever you are, whether you're with us in person, in here or out in the tent, or on Zoom, I ask you to take just five minutes. If possible, go outside. Close your eyes – or open them – and take in what's around you, without a specific purpose beyond simply noticing.

[Five minutes of rest]

If that felt to you like an unbearably long time, I ask you to reflect on that.

In this new year – in this *shmita* year, I invite you – I implore you – to make space for rest. And I'll say, I need it too. Set your phone down somewhere, and then leave it there. Take a moment to *not do anything* – not reading the news, not listening to a podcast, not sitting and watching Netflix. Just take a few minutes and do *nothing*. Our bodies need it, and our souls need it.

May we work to make space for rest, and may we recognize and value rest and time for self. And through that, may we help to make this world a little more perfect.