

Do Nothing: The Case for Spiritual Shmita  
Rosh Hashanah 5782: September 7th, 2021  
Written in chevruta with Rabbi Dusty Klass

We baked but did not feel fed.

We slept but did not feel rested.

We walked but we did not feel refreshed.

We fought, and feared, and cried - and no one won, and no one felt safe,  
and no one felt reassured.

Last year we experienced a forced pause - but we did not lie fallow.

Many years ago, poet Judy Brown found herself staring into a blazing fire and reflecting “on the depth of [her] struggle with overload, overwork and over-commitment.”<sup>1</sup> The poem that emerged from that reflection may be familiar to some of you - you can find it on page 225 of Mishkan T’filah, our weekly prayer book. It begins:

“What makes a fire burn  
is space between the logs,  
a breathing space.”

A breathing space. A space to recover, restore, and release.

Recover, Restore, Release.

The word for release in Hebrew is shmita.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.judysorumbrown.com/blog/breathing-space>

At its core, shmita is an agricultural mitzvah commanded of us in Leviticus 15, “When you enter the land that I assign to you, the land shall observe a sabbath of Adonai. 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, a sabbath of Adonai: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard.”<sup>2</sup>

In recent years, as many more of us have become urban and suburban dwellers who no longer work in agriculture, Jewish scholars and theologians have emphasized the spiritual dimension of shmita - not just the year-long breathing space for the land, but also for our souls.

The poem continues:

“Too much of a good thing,  
too many logs  
packed in too tight  
can douse the flames  
almost as surely  
as a pail of water would.”

Very simply, a log-packed life - a life without shmita; without release, recovery, or restoration - is stifling. When we layer meeting upon meeting, extracurricular upon extracurricular, playdate upon playdate - we stifle our

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<sup>2</sup> Leviticus 15:1-4

energy, our creativity, and our ability to actually appreciate and find meaning in the opportunities we have packed in so tightly. Perhaps even more dangerously, we lose our very selves in the struggle to keep up with our commitments.

In Einstein and the Rabbi: Searching for the Soul, author Naomi Levy highlights this danger in connection to our season of *t'shuvah*, return and repentance: "Yes," she offers: "You can repent for a sin, but when your whole life is passing you by and you're asleep, repentance can't help you. You can't even see what needs to change."<sup>3</sup>

In the first few months of pandemic, during the most complete of the shutdown periods, we experienced a forced communal pause. Some of our professional lives continued unabated, others pivoted online, and some came to a screeching halt. Across the country, theaters and restaurants closed their doors, music venues cancelled concerts, air travel and car traffic halted all but completely. Teachers and students - and parents - concluded the 2020 school year with mingled relief and grief, simultaneously grateful for a break from a new and sometimes difficult learning environment while mourning muted milestone celebrations.

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<sup>3</sup> Unspecified Rabbinic commentary quoted in Levy, p. 201

We navigated more than a full year of an attempted ‘new normal’ as we adjusted to changes in how we did everything. But we continued to **do**. We tried to find replacements and substitutes for what we had lost. And many of us succeeded. But has it really fed our souls?

Now, we are standing at the beginning of 5782, a shmita year. In our tradition, this year is the seventh year; the year we are obligated to let the land lie fallow. A chance to recover, restore, release. Similarly, we have an opportunity to commit *ourselves* to lying fallow as well. We often define shmita as ‘not doing’ - but ‘not doing’ is actually doing - intentional non-action is, in and of itself, action. To do nothing is to focus on repair and growth. To do nothing is to allow creativity to poke its head out of the soil and stretch its little leaves; to see what appears when there are no plans or deadlines.

In her book, How to do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy, Jenny Odell describes what *she* means by doing nothing: “The point... isn’t to return to work refreshed and ready to be more productive, but rather to question what we currently perceive as productive.” (xii)

How to Do Nothing is an argument **against productivity as the goal**, and an argument *for* shmita. “Just as practices like logging and large field farming decimate the land,” she writes, “an overemphasis on performance turns what was once a dense and thriving landscape of individual and

communal thought into a Monsanto farm whose 'production' slowly destroys the soil until nothing more can grow." (xix)

**When each of us 'does nothing', we all benefit.**

It's a countercultural statement. This world, in which we are called on to "see something, say something," to "speak up and speak out," and to "pull ourselves up by our bootstraps" does not celebrate or support the doing of nothing. Yet as Rabbi Levy wrote, all of our seeing and saying will be for naught if we are so overwhelmed that whenever we look up we find that "our whole life is passing us by."

Odell teaches that doing nothing offers both "a kind of deprogramming device" as well as "sustenance for those feeling too disassembled to act meaningfully." (page 22) Three years ago, I gave a sermon about mental and physical health where I used the image of a power bar as a measure of health or wellness. A fuller power bar means more energy and greater health. A depleted bar indicates the opposite. I can imagine that many of us are feeling that our power bar is pretty low right now. Doing nothing allows us to recharge.

And, the benefits of doing nothing spread beyond our individual well-being. In an article passed around recently that resonated strongly with me and many of my colleagues, Anne Helen Peterson reminded us of the way

grind culture affects not just ourselves but those around us. She described a feeling of constant utility that is incredibly hard to resist. The challenge is that when we operate from that feeling, we set impossible standards for ourselves and those around us. We do not see ourselves as beloved or worthy of rest. And yet we very much are.<sup>4</sup> When enough members of our community break free from the feeling of constant utility, we establish a standard for all of us; a standard that values rest and celebrates those who take time to replenish their souls.

So let's take this opportunity of a new year, a shmita year, to "do nothing"; to replenish our souls, to see what grows.

Judy Brown's poem concludes:

"A fire  
grows  
simply because the space is there,  
with openings  
in which the flame  
that knows just how it wants to burn  
can find its way."

When we practice shmita, we make "space between the logs" to return to who we are. What are your logs? What have you been packing in too

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<sup>4</sup> <https://annehelen.substack.com/p/youre-still-exhausted>

tightly? And what has been stifled as a result of that piling? It's possible you don't even know - that's the consequence of too many logs!

The beauty of shmita, the beauty of removing some of those logs, releasing ourselves from the load, is that we allow ourselves as the flame "that knows just how it wants to burn," the opportunity to "find its way." By making space to find our way, we rediscover (or perhaps discover for the first time!) who we are, what matters to us, and what is within us that best equips us to be of service to the world.

But rabbi, you say, I can't actually 'do nothing.'

I agree, it is scary. Doing nothing may involve loss, because we live in a culture of scarcity and we overvalue productivity. And the opportunity to 'do nothing' involves privilege; taking significant time away from work and/or other obligations requires resources that not all have at their disposal.

But you *can* 'do nothing.' You *can* practice shmita this year. And I can't tell you exactly how to do it because shmita will look different for each one of us. A few possibilities, however, could include noticing the urge to **do** something and instead choosing to sit quietly for a few minutes. You could set aside time in your day devoted to meditation or being out in nature. You could practice saying no, or cut down on your time spent mindlessly scrolling on devices.

Whatever you choose to do, it will be worth it. And it is imperative. Because if we don't find a way to 'do nothing,' we are on a path to grind ourselves into the ground, creating souls that more closely resemble O'Dell's description of Monsanto-effected farms with killer weeds and no fertile soil left. Doing nothing offers us no less than the very reignition of the spark of the Divine, a soul reinfusion, the nutrients we need to enable us to show up as our fullest selves.

What makes a fire burn  
is space between the logs,  
a breathing space.

Too much of a good thing,  
too many logs  
packed in too tight  
can douse the flames  
almost as surely  
as a pail of water would.

So building fires  
requires attention  
to the spaces in between,  
as much as to the wood.

When we are able to build  
open spaces  
in the same way  
we have learned  
to pile on the logs,  
then we can come to see how  
it is fuel, and absence of the fuel  
together, that make fire possible

We only need to lay a log  
lightly from time to time.

A fire  
grows  
simply because the space is there,  
with openings  
in which the flame  
that knows just how it wants to burn  
can find its way.