

For more than 3,000 years, in spite of war, famine, population transfer, exile, expulsion, slavery, pogrom, degradation and subjugation, somehow, somehow, we as a Jewish people have managed, not only to survive, but to thrive. Historians, philosophers, theologians, Jews ourselves ask the inevitable question. How is that when we have the opportunity to assimilate and disappear so easily into the broader cultures in which we have lived have we managed such a feat? Of the many answers available, the one I put before us today comes from the great Israeli author and poet, Ahad Ha'am. Ha'am writes, "More than the Jewish people has kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept the Jewish people."

No matter what the world, history, fate, and hatred have thrown at our people, we have always had an internal strength given to us by Shabbat. And what is that strength? It is the foundational knowledge to our identity as Jewish people that every week, EVERY WEEK, we are given a day of rest and refreshment. We are told that our lives are worth the whole of existence! We are told that we are so sacred, so precious, so significant and important in our singularity, our soul and our personhood that each of us has been given an inalienable birthright of one day off every seven days. No king, no self-importance, no impatient boss has the right to take away this God-given privilege. This, according to Ahad Ha'am is the secret of Jewish surviving and thriving.

But it isn't just people who are given the gift of rest and holiness. Shabbat is a sacred gift that is also given to the earth itself with the commandment to observe the Shmita year. What is Shmita? Just as we people are given a God-granted day of rest once every seven days, so too is the very earth itself granted a God-given YEAR of rest once every seven years. Literally meaning "release," it is to be a year of restraint in which we, among other observances, allow the land to rest and lie fallow. We are allowed to harvest and consume volunteer crops but all intentional planting is absolutely prohibited as is all harvesting for profit. The land is given time to refresh and restore its own innate balance. 5782 is a Shmita year and it is calling us to action.

We know Shabbat and understand how it helps restore our humanity and repair our souls. Shmita asks us to transfer that same sense of connection and understanding to the land itself. Shmita invites us on a meditative journey - one in which we recognize our frailty and our power.

We are frail and reliant on this earth in ways that we tend only to feel in times of disaster. And we are powerful in our individual and collective capacity for impacting our world, its eco-systems and its health.

The connection between our tradition and the land is indelible and ancient. In both the first and second creation stories humanity is told to have sway over everything else in existence and to be its masters. As Tolkein would put it - We are the stewards who are responsible for the well-being of all that God has created. In this second story humanity is the original golem - a creature made of clay from the earth's "four corners." The name for humanity itself and indeed for the very first person is "Adam" coming from the Hebrew word for earth, "adamah." Upon our expulsion from Eden we are told that our fate will be to survive through the tilling and tending of the earth. When God confronts Cain, the farmer, about the murder of his brother God declares that Abel's blood cries out from the earth itself. To destroy humanity in the generation of Noah, God floods the earth so that everything requiring land to survive will die out. As the story of our ancestors unfolds, it is a story of wandering, shepherding, surviving by the grace of God and God's willingness to allow the land to produce. All three of our biblical festivals, Sukkot, Pesach, and Shavuot are tied to an agricultural cycle/season/and celebration. . It is only later, after our expulsions and exiles, that the rabbis begin attaching other meanings to these festivals to bring them into a modern life less immediately and intimately connected with the land. Deep within the wisdom of Judaism is an indelible link to earth itself. Her central sacred importance to us is clear. Her health is our health. Her wellness is our wellness.

Our Kabbalists provide us with an important framework for understanding our obligation in the face of this call for Shmita - this call to observe a Sabbath for the land. When exploring the concept of existence itself and God's act of creating existence and the cosmos, the Kabbalists note and then explore an important grammatical cue in the text of creation.

Torah begins, *Bereishit bara Elokim et hashamayim v'et Haaretz...* Often this is translated as "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth but, as our Kabbalists point out, this is an incorrect translation. *Bereishit* doesn't mean "In THE," rather, it means "In A." In A

beginning. In other words, the beginning didn't begin with the Big Bang! How could it? What happened before the Big Bang? What made the Big Bang possible? Something had to happen first in order for the rest of creation to follow. Our Kabbalistic tradition teaches that before God could create creation, God had to first tzimtzum the Divine Self meaning God had to contract the Divine Self in order to make room for something new to exist. All that existed was God. God could only create existence by tzimtzuming the Divine Presence and making space for the universe as we know and understand it. This is why Torah says "In A beginning" - there are many beginnings to every beginning. The decision to create, the plan, the need to make space for something new... these are all the beginnings before the beginning. And as Semisonic taught us, "Every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end." The new beginning of the universe was only possible because, according to the Kabbalists, God chose to contract that the Divine Self and make space for new things.

Shmita asks us to emulate God one year out of every seven. One year out of every seven we are asked to tzimtzum ourselves, to contract our needs, our impatience, our fears, our doubts, our worries. One year out of every seven we are asked to have been prepared for a year with less, to have anticipated it, to have preserved our resources and our blessings so that we can fulfill our responsibilities as God's covenantal partners and provide the land the rest it so desperately needs. Through this anticipation and preparation we are given the tools we need to build a life-practice of loving restraint as we begin to recognize daily the symbiotic relationship between us and this world we live in. We are not the center of the story of existence and the land has as much right to expect its Sabbath as we have the right to expect our weekly one.

When I was young, I loved Shel Silverstein's book, "The Giving Tree." I thought it was a book about a beautiful relationship between a boy and a tree and how they go and grow through life together. Today, as an adult, I read the book as Shel Silverstein's midrash on Shmita and our human capacity to ignore the wisdom from Torah. Instead of a beautiful relationship of symbiosis, I read a story of a humanity that is selfish and short sighted. The tree gives everything to the boy. The boy takes and takes. A relationship that begins with love and playfulness becomes one of

use and abuse as the tree is eventually stripped of everything she has so the boy can have everything he wants. He doesn't take her fruit and plant more trees. He doesn't think about the tree or about future generations who might also need branches to play on, shade to sit under, fruit to be nourished by and homes to build. No, in Silverstein's book, the boy only takes until finally at the end, as a penultimate insult, having nothing else he can take from the tree, he rests his rump on the sad stump that is all that remains in the aftermath of his greed.

When we act as the boy in the story, when we think of our short-term desires rather than our long-term needs and the needs of all that we are responsible for, we find a dire warning from Torah. Torah warns us that when we violate God's laws and bring curses onto ourselves, that the curses will also be visited on generations to come. Most of us are rightly horrified when we read the threats of ongoing generational suffering that God promises will be the result of our sins. We respond with righteous indignation and cry out, "How can anyone accept this text as holy or God as good in the face of such threats?" Amen! How indeed?! My question for us today is why is it so easy for us to hold God accountable for such unjust and unmerited suffering while ignoring that it is US who are actually responsible? The Deuteronomic Theology of Divine Reward and Punishment is not a threat but a warning. Jewish wisdom is crying out to us, teaching us, imploring us, the decisions we make today will have profound and lasting impacts on the generations to come. We must live our lives with care and caution, thinking not of what we need today but of what our grandchildren will need in the decades to come. They will need a world without super-storms and annual once-in-a-century catastrophes. They will need a world with clean water, healthy rich soil, clean air, and honey bees. They will need everything that we threaten today with our short-sighted policies and practices that are bringing unspeakable harm to the earth and everything, including ourselves, that lives upon it.

The land has sounded its shofar cry of need and the Shmita year is here to answer, "Hineini" *Here I am*. Our invitation and obligation is to think of how to live in observance of the Shmita year. Our rabbinic tradition offers wisdom with the concept of "hiddur mitzvah" which means to observe the mitzvah in the most expressive, beautiful, and expansive ways possible. We return to Shabbat as our example.

Torah commands us to remember Shabbat and to protect it. We have to remember that it's a sacred day and then we have to protect that day and, in doing so, protect ourselves. But we cannot just do the bare minimum and sit in the house with the lights out while not working. Our rabbis ask us to hiddur the mitzvah - to maximize the mitzvah of Shabbat. We're to delight in time with ourselves, our friends, and our families. We should avoid work and errands and the things that stress us daily. Music, connection, learning, friends, family, community - these are the delights of Shabbat. We work to put our souls back together after long and exhausting weeks.

So how do we, as stewards of this planet and all her creatures, how do we hiddur the mitzvah of Shmita? The first step is to emulate God's example and tzimtzum. As individuals, as a society - we have an incredible opportunity to contract ourselves to make space for other things. This is the necessary first step before new beginnings can begin. While the pandemic has not brought us a bounty of blessings, it has actually offered us an involuntary conditioning for contraction. We can recall the unexpected delights of the first two weeks of the pandemic's global shut down. People were amazed to see animals freely roaming in places where they would normally be terrified to go. The air was so clear! Dolphins could be seen swimming in the empty canals of Venice, Italy. It was wondrous! A world with less human activity for just two weeks and we suddenly looked like a set scene from Star Trek that imagines a world without pollution or poverty. In this Shmita year we have a unique opportunity to embrace the lessons of the pandemic and to think about what it could look like if humanity could somehow tzimtzum, somehow lessen our pervasive presence, noise, and impact on every inch of this planet.

One of the great challenges we face in the world right now is understanding the right way forward and out of the global ecological crisis we are facing in which whole eco-systems are thrown into chaos and destruction. In the face of these challenges that seem insurmountable, we can identify with the sentiments of Rabbi Tarfon as he is quoted in Pirkei Avot. Looking at the difficulties of the world he comments, "The day is short, the work is plentiful, the laborers are indolent, the reward is great, and the master of the house is insistent."¹ So...we can choose one of two responses.

The first is the path of cynicism in which we shrug our shoulders, declare our impotence, and continue with our lives as usual. The second path is to radically alter our entire lives - to get rid of all of our plastic containers, to only commit to buying glass, to never order in from restaurants because of the packaging, to join a commune, grow our own food, weave our own clothes and build impermanent yurt structures annually out of what we find laying around in Balboa Park. This second path will lead us back to the first path because it isn't really an answer either. Did I say there were just two path choices? Just kidding! We're Jewish - we know there's always a third, fourth or eighteenth way to choose from!

A third option is the path of the middle road and its wisdom also comes from Rabbi Tarfon. In response to our crisis and our uncertainty he teaches us, "*Lo alechah hamlachah ligmor, v'lo atah ben chorion libatel mimenah. It is not your obligation to finish the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.*"² We are not individually responsible for solving the crisis of global warming and radical climate changes. But we are responsible for being engaged and reconnecting ourselves back to the land on which we rely for our very survival. We are not responsible for addressing the global shifts leading to desertification of farmland, but we are responsible for asking our government to stop permitting the use of pesticides that wipe out pollinators and cause cancer in people who are exposed to them. We are not responsible for stopping sea level rise but we are responsible for maintaining the strong legal protections that have largely halted off-shore drilling along our California coast and that have allowed for the return of our healthy coastal eco-system. Yes - for some people it is a huge bummer that seals and sea lions have taken over the La Jolla Children's Cove but how wondrous for our children to be able to go any day of the week and see that we in San Diego chose to tzimtzum ourselves so that the sea lions and seals can have safe space to birth their pups and play their essential role in California's healthy and thriving coastal eco-system.

None of us can solve the environmental crisis on our own. But this is the beauty and wisdom of the Shmita year. We aren't asked to be heroes of epic proportion - we are only asked to tzimtzum ourselves, to contract ourselves, not to obliterate ourselves. We have a powerful invitation this year to think about ways that we can do a better contraction in order to make room for a healthier planet, healthier waters, and a healthier earth. Whether we commit to more energy efficient cars or commit to moving away from single-use plastic water bottles, it is taking important steps in the act of honoring the Shmita year and embracing the idea of contracting our impact on the world around us. Rather than thinking about how much we cannot do, Shmita invites us to realize that through restraint and small contractions, an entire universe has the ability to come into existence. Individually we are small but collectively we are so powerful. If one of us spends the extra money it costs to buy organic produce our farmers have no financial incentive to make the costly changes necessary to shift to organic production. But when the 500 households sitting together today, hearing the call of Shmita, decide to make the shift, we have the collective power to make a tremendous and positive impact.

From estuary restoration, to coastal habitat rescue, from desalination, to reforestation, from public transit to birdseed instead of bread at Tashlich, from renewable wind and solar farms to organic produce, we are already on the path of being God's partner's in restoring this beautiful floating cosmic rock we call home, our planet Earth. May we hear the call of Shmita as powerfully and profoundly as we hear the call of the Shofar and may we respond with optimism and with energy that yes - we can find ways to restrain ourselves and to tzimtzum. More than the Jewish people have kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept the Jewish people - may this be true for the planet as well, that our children will be able to look back on their own history and say, more than the Jewish people kept the Shmita year, the Shmita year kept the Jewish people. Then their children can delight in the stories of how we worked to make a thousand small changes that honored the Shmita, saved the world, and made our planet look like everything Gene Roddenberry and Star Trek taught us it could be. May this be God's will as it is ours and may we embrace our responsibility to tzimtzum that 5782 will be a year of delightful and meaningful restraint and renewal.