

*Radical Rest:*  
*Applying the Ancient Practice of Shmita to Our Lives and the Modern World*  
*Rabbi Claudia Kreiman*  
*Rosh Hashanah First Day 5782*

“In the dark I rest,  
unready for the light which dawns  
day after day,  
eager to be shared.  
Black silk, shelter me.  
I need more of the night  
before I open eyes and heart  
to illumination. I must still  
grow in the dark like a root  
not ready, not ready at all.”<sup>1</sup>

Those are the words of the poet Denise Levertov, z”l. For me — and I imagine for many of you — this past year has brought new meaning to the idea of being ready, **or not ready at all**, to face our lives and our world. Whether we do **or do not** feel ready at this moment, we are all still “growing in the dark,” as Levertov writes. We are growing in the dark to prepare ourselves for the beauty and the pain of being together in the light.

Rosh Hashanah is not fully what I imagined it would be this year, but I have never been more grateful to sing, learn, pray, and grow together as a community — both in person, and through the gift of technology.

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<sup>1</sup> Levertov, Denise. “*Eye Mask*” from *Evening Train*. New Directions, 1992.

Today is the first day of the Jewish New Year, 5782. Not any year, but of a *Shmita* year. Commonly translated as the ‘Sabbatical Year,’ *shmita* literally means ‘release.’ The origin of this concept is in the Torah. This is the final year of a shared calendar cycle, when land is left fallow, debts are forgiven, and a host of other agricultural and economic adjustments are made to ensure the maintenance of an equitable, just, and healthy society.

The number seven is a big number in our Jewish tradition. And the cycle of seven is at the center of our life. Shabbat is the seventh day. God stopped on the seventh day and rested after creating the world. And we are commanded to stop and follow God’s example. There is no bigger gift given to us as Shabbat, an opportunity to stop for 25 hours in this frantic world. Shabbat is a gift that we give ourselves, the gift of stopping, of breathing, of reminding ourselves that we are Human Beings not Human Doings. Shabbat is called *Me’ein Olam Habah*, a taste of the world to come. Shabbat as an opportunity to imagine the world that could be, because if we don’t imagine the world that could be, how can we work for that world to become a reality? We need to be able to imagine and believe that it is possible to live in a just, peaceful, sustainable, beautiful world. We have to be able to have and hold that dream, and truly believe that it is possible so we can then throw ourselves into the arduous work of building that world.

Our tradition tells us that besides a weekly cycle of seven, there is an annual cycle of seven, every seven years we are called to take a year with a similar purpose of Shabbat. On a *shmita* year we might not stop working or checking our email and phones but our tradition tells us that debts are to be forgiven, agricultural lands to lie fallow,

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private land holdings to become open to the commons, and staples such as food storage and perennial harvests to be freely redistributed and accessible to all.

The first introduction of *Shmita* comes in *Parshat Mishpatim*. In the Book of Exodus. Jews receive a set of moral codes to live by, directly after the revelation at Sinai. Following several verses that focus on moral guidelines for our lives, including the treatment of the stranger and the needy, the Torah teaches us:

(י) וַיֵּשׁ שָׁנִים תִּזְרַע אֶת־אֲרָצְךָ וְאָסַפְתָּ אֶת־תְּבוּאָתָהּ: (יא) וְהִשְׁבִּיעַת תִּשְׁמְטֶנָּה וְנִטְשָׁתָּה וְאָכְלוּ אֲבִינֵי עֲמֹךָ וְיִתְּרָם תֹּאכַל תֵּיַת הַשָּׂדֶה בְּזֶמְתָּעֲשֶׂה לְכַרְמְךָ לְזִיתְךָ:

(10) Six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield;

(11) 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 eat.

You shall do the same with your vineyards and your olive groves.

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So following this exhausting, challenging, fearful year, we are given the gift of a Shmita year. We are told to rest. The concept of rest may mean something different to each of us, but I hope we can reframe our relationship to rest as something radical; something replenishing, rather than a lazy slump we fall into when we feel burnt out.

In a book called *Radical Rest: Get More Done By Doing Less*<sup>3</sup>, the author Richard Lister outlines four types of rest:

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<sup>2</sup> *Shemot* 23:10-11

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/54817984-radical-rest>

- 1) Resting to reset.
- 2) Resting to repair.
- 3) Resting to renew.
- 4) Resting for resilience.

All of these types of rest are essential for our own survival, and for the preservation of our world. In a capitalist society that prioritizes “productivity” over resting, it is easy to forget that rest *is* productive, too. Dr. Janice Gassam Asare<sup>4</sup>, a writer, professor, and practitioner of diversity, equity and inclusion, writes, “Many of us feel this constant pressure to always be in grind mode, but it’s important for us to shift that perspective and re-imagine a world that doesn’t equate our worth with how much we are performing or producing... Productivity also means inserting time for rest and relaxation.”

My invitation for us today is to think about the ways that each of us, individually and collectively, can engage in Shmita practices. What does Shmita look like in the aftermath of Covid? I want to share three Shmita principles that I invite each of us to integrate into our lives this coming year:

**Shmita Principle #1: Loosen your grip on productivity. And take more naps.**

I learned this year about something called the Nap Ministry<sup>5</sup>. Of course, as soon as I read about it, I thought about applying for that job. But now seriously... The Nap

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.drjanicegassam.com>

<sup>5</sup> <https://thenapministry.wordpress.com/?s=nap>

Ministry was founded in 2016 by Tricia Hersey<sup>6</sup> and is an organization that examines the liberating power of naps. The nap ministry sets “REST IS RESISTANCE” as a framework and practice that engages with the power of performance art, site-specific installations, and community organizing to install sacred and safe spaces for the community to rest together. They believe rest is a form of resistance and a radical tool for community healing. They even name sleep deprivation as a racial and social justice issue. The Nap Ministry calls us to Disrupt and push back against a system that views human beings as a machine. We are not machines. We are divine human beings.

Believe me, this is perhaps my own hardest challenge. As a multitasker, I enjoy making lists and completing tasks. The challenge that Shmita puts in front of me is not something I take lightly. Though the pandemic has allowed me to deepen my mindfulness practices, it also has been a time of trying to accomplish and be productive, as much as possible. I know that I am a long way from having a different relationship with my own productivity and releasing my expectations of how productive other people should be.

“Let Rest and Lie Fallow,” we are commanded. Stop. Slow down. Stay right where you are. Because our lives depend on it. That is one gift the pandemic has given us. In the new year, can we let go of the pressure to be productive, and give ourselves the gift of taking more naps? I hope so.

**Shmita Principle #2: Examine your relationship with money and strive for economic justice.**

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.triciahersey.com>

It is no secret that ordinary people around the world have suffered from the economic impacts of the pandemic. Meanwhile, billionaires have actually seen their fortunes expand. By contrast, low-income workers continue to struggle to put food on their tables. Right at home, here in Boston, even before the pandemic, intergenerational poverty rooted in systemic racism holds families down. According to “The Color of Wealth in Boston,” a 2015 report by the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, Duke University, and the New School<sup>7</sup>, the average net worth of black families in Boston was **\$8, in comparison to \$247,500 for whites.**

In the agriculture laws of Shmita, private agricultural lands are declared public and become community commons. All harvested and stored produce are declared ownerless and shared equally. When harvesting, we are commanded to only collect specifically to our immediate needs. And Shmita is not just about land and agriculture it also tells us that debts from previous years are cancelled and that generous giving and lending practices must be done without the need of profit or monetary gain.

So, how could these laws guide our year? What kind of practices can we take on to advance economic justice?

Nigel Savage, founder and outgoing CEO of Hazon, a non-profit organization leading a transformative movement weaving sustainability into the fabric of Jewish life, wrote in one of his blog posts what he is planning to do to fulfill this principle of Shmita:

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.bostonfed.org/publications/one-time-pubs/color-of-wealth.aspx>

“For this forthcoming shmita year I’ve decided, [bli neder](#), to

1. Not buy books, not buy liquor, and not buy any clothes.
2. Figure out roughly what I spend on these three things, in a normal year, and give that money to people in need. And not just write a check to an organization, but sometimes to give a solid chunk of money, not just a few shekels, but a few hundred shekels or whatever, to someone who’s really in need”<sup>8</sup>

Nigel gives us examples of action on the personal level. And, the work of economic justice extends beyond the personal. Shmita compels us to imagine a world in which we manifest, through systems and practices, the truth that there is enough wealth for everyone to have enough. If we learned from Shmita’s principles of debt forgiveness, what might be possible for the countless Boston-area families struggling to dig themselves out from under the weight of decades, or generations-old debts and poverty.

Following Nigel’s invitation, what are the two or three things that YOU can do, this Shmita year to bring us closer to fulfilling the vision of Torah of economic equality and justice? Perhaps take a few minutes during your holiday meal with your family or with a friend or on your own, to commit to a practice of Shmita this year .

### **Shmita Principle #3: Take care of the planet.**

As tropical storms, raging wildfires, and flash floods destroy states and countries all over the world, I am extremely worried about our global future. I know most of you

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<sup>8</sup> <https://hazon.org/why-does-shmita-matter-6-of-7/>

are as well. Climate change is having a catastrophic impact on our planet, and we simply cannot ignore this crisis any longer.

Taking care of land — thoughtfully and sustainably — is at the heart of Shmita. During the sabbatical year, there is no seeding or plowing of agricultural land. Primary harvests include wild edibles and perennial produce. Harvest must be eaten locally and should be gathered at full ripeness and eaten in their natural growing season. And last but not least, wild and domesticated animals must have free access to range and food.

The biblical commands of Shmita do not traditionally apply to land outside of Israel, so why and how can these principles and teachings be relevant to us?

Our teacher Rabbi Art Green writes: “We believe in Creation as an ongoing process. We bless God who renews every day the Act of Beginning.” So too do we need to become active participants in the work of Creation, rebirthing God’s world. Loving and protecting the fragile natural world in which we live is the great collective mitzvah of our era. Let us rededicate ourselves to it in this season of rebirth”<sup>9</sup>

We can start to live out this Shmita consciousness by deepening our connection and attunement to the land and to our food. Could you spend some time this year learning what wild edibles grow near your home? Is there a fruit tree in the backyard of someone you know, from which you could harvest some fruit even in the next few weeks? Could you try to eat more with the seasons by signing up for a CSA, visiting a farmers market, or the Gann Farm? I offer these suggestions not because they will be

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<sup>9</sup> 2021/5782 High Holiday Climate Change Reader - Jewish Climate action Network NYC



enough to meet the challenge of climate change; but growing our connection with this planet, our only and common home, is a necessary part of the work.

I am proud that three of our teenagers at TBZ — Lila Decter, Ezra Klauber and Sarah Mautner-Mazlen — are board members of the Jewish Youth Climate Movement<sup>10</sup>, an initiative that empowers teens to mobilize our communities to take action on climate change.

This Shmita year, I am committed to supporting these three teens in whatever ways I can as they pursue their journey as climate justice activists. I invite each of you to find one (or more) things, small or big, to fulfill the mitzvah of loving and protecting the fragile natural world in which we live. Nothing feels more urgent.

The Torah commands us to let the earth lie fallow every seventh year and to reevaluate and reset our relationship to the natural world. And though these ancient practices of Shmita might not be directly applicable to modern life in Boston, we have an opportunity to ask, what are the deep truths being passed to us by this commandment, and what does it mean to us today?

אֲשֵׁרֵי הָעָם יוֹדְעֵי תְרוּעָה יְהוָה בְּאוֹר פְּנֵיהֶם יִהְיֶה כוֹנֵן.

*Ashrei Ha'am yod'ei T'ruah*, says the Psalmist- Happy is the people that knows the sound of T'ruah- the sound of the shofar. *Adonai b'or panekha y'halekhu* – they walk in the light of your divine presence.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.jewishyouthclimatemovement.org>

What does it mean to know the sound of the *shofar*? The Hassidic Master known as *Degel Machane Ephraim* teaches that knowing the *t'ruah* means allowing our hearts to be shattered, in order to open ourselves to the light of the divine presence.

As we are about to hear the shofar, we hold the pain, the suffering, our own and the one from others. Others around us, in our communities and country and around the world. We are shattered. And my prayer is that we can open ourselves to the light of divine presence and hear the shofar as an invitation for this Shmita year as an opportunity to heal and find blessing.

Wendell Berry<sup>11</sup>, farmer, poet, and environmentalist, writes what Shmita can be in the aftermath of Covid:

### **The Peace of Wild Things**

When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.  
I come into the peace of wild things  
who do not tax their lives with forethought  
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.  
And I feel above me the day-blind stars

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/wendell-berry>

waiting with their light. For a time  
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

מִן הַמִּצָּר קָרָאתִי יְהוָה עֲנֵנִי בַּמְרָקֵב יְהוָה.

In my distress I cried to Yah, Who answers me by setting me free.

May Shmita be an invitation for us to find that spaciousness, that *merchav*, that God offers us when we feel constricted. In the aftermath of this hard pandemic year, this new year of Shmita invites us to encounter the world, God's creation and our own selves, with the openness to reset, repair, renew and build resilience. And after we rest — after we take our naps — we can rise together to build a better future with love, with hope, with prayers, and with gentleness.

**Shana Tova.**