

Shmita and Healing, Shmita and Balance

The British ecologist [George Monbiot](#) tells a story of the reintroduction of wolves to Yellowstone National Park in 1995, after 70 years of them being gone. The numbers of deer had built up and built up, and the vegetation had been dramatically reduced. When the wolves arrived they were few in number, but they started to have the most dramatic effects. Of course the wolves killed some of the deer.

But they started radically changing the behavior of the deer. Deer started avoiding the valleys and gorges where they could be tracked most easily. In some areas where the deer left, in six years, the height of trees increased five times! What had been bare valley-sides became forests of aspen, willow and cottonwood.

Once that happened, the birds began to move in, a huge increase in songbirds. And then the beavers returned, because they liked to eat the trees and create dams. Their dams created habitat for otters, and muskrat, and fish and amphibians. Bears fed on the carrion the wolves had left, as well as the increased numbers of berries now available on the regenerated shrubs and their population began to rise.

But most amazing: The wolves changed the behavior of the rivers. They began to meander less, there was less erosion, channels narrowed, more pools formed. The reason the wolves changed the rivers is that the regenerating forests and vegetation stabilized the banks, so they collapsed less often so the rivers became more fixed in their course.

This unpredictable rewilding process unleashed by the wolves transformed not just the ecosystem of this vast park, but also its physical geography.

What is this story about? Why am I telling it to you? It's true I have been lobbying mayor Moe and the Laurel City Council for the re-introduction of wolves into Laurel. I'm convinced it will keep our deer population down and have great ecological benefits, but evidently the daycare that rents space from us is not excited about it; I'm not sure why.

No, that's not the reason. The reason is because last night, the Jewish people collectively entered the year 5782, which is a year in which we observe shmita.

Shmita--not to be confused with a *shmata*--for those who may not know, or who need a refresher, is one of the Torah's most radical ideas, the sabbatical year. It is first described in Exodus (23:11): for six years you are to sow your land and gather in its produce, and on the seventh, *you are to let it go and to let it be.*” Shmita literally means “dropping,” “release,” or to “let go”

It is described in more detail in Leviticus (Lev. 25:3) where it is called *Shabbat ha'aretz*, Shabbat for the land. The Torah says: “Six years you are to sow your field, but in the seventh there is a Shabbat Shabbaton for the land, a complete ceasing. Shabbat is described in a parallel way, “six days you may labor and do all your work, but the 7th day is a Shabbat for YHVH your God.” Exodus 20:9-10)

Judaism loves the rhythm of sevens--Shabbat is the 7th day, and today is also the first day of the 7th month; we have the 7 species, Pesach and Sukkot are 7 days long, the seven week counting period of the Omer--and shmita is the meta level of this 7 rhythm.

During the shmita year, people would be able to eat what they had stored. What the land gave of its own accord for the 7th year was for the people to eat, for the needy, the sojourner among them, their domestic animals, and even the wild animals could return and partake of what was there in the fields. All of this is to remind us that although we have property deeds and sales, that we are not the ultimate owners of land--it is not ours to use and cultivate forever, that just like we need Shabbat to rest once a week, the land needs Shabbat rest once every 7 years.

It's important to point out that shmita is not just about the land--it is also as much about reducing inequality--a problem that is really at the root of the insanity that American politics have become. At the end of the shmita year, debts were forgiven. At the end of 49 years (7 shmita cycles), landholdings reverted back to their original tribal allotments, resetting the entire land acquisition system. But exploring shmita's response to inequality is for another time.

Traditionally shmita has only applied to the Land of Israel. Today, the vast majority of Israeli farmers use a halachic loophole to sell their land to a non-Jew for for the year, although something like 125,000 acres do lay

fallow and last shmita cycle the shekel equivalent of over \$28 million was allocated by the Israeli government to support farmers in observing shmita.

But what interests me and many other thoughtful North American Jews is not what we would call halachic shmita, but it is taking the principles of shmita as a tool to think with, to be inspired by.

Because shmita is not some obscure, unworkable archaic, radical practice. In the words of leading Jewish eco-thinker, Rabbi David Seidenberg:

“The whole purpose of the covenant at Sinai is to create a society that observed shmita... The Sabbatical year was the guarantor and the ultimate fulfillment of the justice that Torah teaches us to practice in everyday life, and it was a justice that embraced not just fellow human beings, but the land and all life... In modern parlance we call it “sustainability,” but that’s just today’s buzzword. It’s called shmita in the holy tongue, “release”-- releasing each other from debts, releasing the land from work, releasing ourselves from our illusions of selfhood into the freedom of living with others and living for the sake of all life...

This is what it means to “choose life so you may live, you and your seed after you.” (Deut. 30:19) This is what it means to “increase your days and your children’s days on the earth for as long as the skies are over the land.” (end of traditional 2nd paragraph after the *shema*, Deut. 11:21). ([Shmita: The Purpose of Sinai](#))

This shmita year--5782--Judaism is inviting us, pushing us, to reflect on and to connect with this deep and ancient source of sustainability in a culture in which sustainability is an absolute existential crisis. Shmita is about restoring balance to an economic and ecological system that is so out of balance.

That is why I began with the story about the wolves. Wolves don’t know from shmita, but their reintroduction brought about a profound rebalancing and healing, a tikkun of the Yellowstone ecosystem.

Our congregational theme for this year is Hope and Healing in the Midst of COVID-19. One important level of shmita is healing--most clearly in the sense that rest is healing, letting the land rest from being worked.

I now want to offer a couple ways we can think about bringing shmita--or really shmita principles--into our individual and communal lives this year.

1) The first has to do with the land of Oseh Shalom. You may have already noticed the beautiful array of native plants along both sides of the low wall as you approach the building, or the young trees along our walkway. Oseh members planted a pollinator garden planted last spring by the playground. We've already let some of Oseh's land go wild, through letting the grasses and flowering plants grow in the back of our field. Take a walk back there next time you're here and marvel at the teeming vibrant pollinator life nourished by the flowering boneset in our fields, that is blooming right now.

This shmita year, we are taking a great further step forward in rebalancing the ecosystem on Oseh's land, partnering with the National Wildlife Federation in the Sacred Grounds Project. Through our work with Sacred Grounds, we'll be taking a more cohesive approach to the rebalancing work we've already done, and planning new ways to create habitat that supports life on our land.

With Sacred Grounds, we are partnering with the mosque up the street (the Islamic Community Center of Laurel, who we've worked with before), St. Mark's United Methodist (the African-American church in Laurel who came to our Zoom services last year) and maybe a couple of other churches.

And the amazing thing is that we are joining other congregations around the country who are doing this program, because it's a national effort (you can watch the wonderful [video](#) from NWF about this). And, our Oseh Sacred Grounds folks will be reaching out to all of us to help us learn how we can participate in these best eco-practices in our own homes as well.

Just as an aside, this is one of the fantastic things you can do when you are part of a synagogue, to work with other faith communities for this kind of higher purpose. When we come together as an Oseh community to do a program like Sacred Grounds is something that gives me the other half of our theme this year: Hope.

So, yes, we may be planting later this year--this is not halachic shmita; this is shmita as inspiration--but as we plant these native plants and encourage others to do so, we are repairing and rejuvenating the soil, perhaps this is

even better than letting the land rest. And we are listening to our land and its needs, which is also a shmita principle.

2) The second shmita principle is: rewilding. As my story about the wolves makes clear, there is a deep, rejuvenating power to wildness itself--for animals, ecosystems and **for us**. Shmita is a ceasing to control land through cultivation, a stepping back, where "landscapes that were otherwise dominated and shaped by human hands and tools were now freely open to the growth of wild plants and animal communities." (*The Hazon Shmita Sourcebook*, p. 92)

For our ancestors in Eretz Yisrael, wild foods (along with perennials) would have been a significant source of food during the shmita year.

And so this year, we'll connect with that by doing a program to learn about and eat wild edibles on land here in MD. Watch for info on that. And then a further opportunity for inviting the wild in will be our first ever Oseh camping trip this May. Watch for info on that too! And of course this year is an invitation to reconnect with wildness as a shmita principle on your own as well.

3) Third principle: rethinking work and rest. As I said earlier, the root meaning of shmita is to drop, release, let go. So we are each invited to reflect this year: What can we let go, let drop? What in our lives needs to be reassessed and released? It's an invitation into a deep reset. Our ancestors who experienced shmita, freed from the intensity of the agricultural cycle would have had dramatically more time and spaciousness in their lives--for reflection, for building community, for serving God.

For some of us, living through the pandemic has been a kind of deep reset--we have had more time, more spaciousness in our lives, dramatically fewer social obligations. But for others of us, particularly those who are parents, this has been a much less spacious time, with overseeing kids trying to learn, and a lot of difficulty keeping any boundary between work and home.

I'm sure very few of us have the possibility of taking an actual sabbatical this year. Yet shmita is that year-long Shabbat. How can we still build in that kind of sustained space for reflection? How could it be restorative, regenerative, in the way that Shabbat is? As so many of us are in an overwhelm state from pandemic fatigue--could we take more time off from

our work? What if we really make that space and don't fill it with activity? What then emerges?

One fascinating real-world expression of this shmita principle that is gaining ground is the push for the four day work week. "[Iceland has made recent headlines](#) by declaring the world's largest ever trial of a shorter working week in the public sector a resounding success. After more than 2,500 workers moved to a 35- or 36-hour workweek [with no pay cut] and declared themselves happier, healthier and less stressed, the country is now moving to make this an option for the majority of its workforce."

A leading thinker on this effort, Alex Soojung-Kim Pang, writes in [a Ted.com piece](#) that "the four-day workweek isn't just for the public sector — many private companies are discovering that by switching to four days, they can protect time for undistracted work and give people more time for leisure.

The results: Increased productivity and creativity; improved recruitment and retention; less burnout for founders and leaders; and more balanced and sustainable lives for workers — all without cutting salaries or sacrificing customer service...Many companies found they could be just as productive in four days as in five, and a few even saw employee productivity go up dramatically. What's more, revenues and profits rose because four-day weeks were cheap to implement and actually attracted new customers."

The US is notorious for its bad work culture (or really overwork culture), but maybe you could prompt your boss to try this out at your workplace. You simply start by saying, "Hey boss, you know, we just entered a shmita year and..."

Fascinatingly, this isn't just about balance for people--a Boston College study found that "[a 10% reduction in work hours would lead to a 14% decline in the global carbon footprint.](#)" It's pretty win-win.

Repairing the land, rewilding, forming a new relationship between work and rest--these are just a few of the principles of healing that shmita invites us into.

The power of Shmita is that it is what people call a "generative idea." I'm just scratching the surface here. What else might we do together around

shmita? How else could we make this crazy, radical, and profound mitzvah more real in our lives, to be the aid for healing that it was intended to be?

Let me know what you think.

May this shmita year inspire us to create a world of greater ecological balance, where the earth and people can receive the restorative rest and release they need.

Shanah tovah.