

RH Day One 2021/5782- [SHMITA YEAR](#) - Rabbi Shawn Zevit

In Praise: Genesis 1,2

Hail the hand that scattered space with stars,
 Wrapped whirling world in bright blue blanket, air,
 Made worlds within worlds, elements in earth,
 Souls within skins, everyone a teeming universe,
 Every tree a system of semantics, and pushed
 Beyond probability to place consciousness
 On this cooling crust of burning rock.
 Oh praise the hand, mind, heart, soul, power or force
 That so enclosed, separated limited planets, trees, humans
 Yet breaks all bounds and borders
 To lavish on us light, love, life
 This trembling glory.

Ruth Brin, z"l of Minneapolis Kol Haneshamah Daily Prayer Book, p.433

Here in this room and on zoom- we have gathered to renew our souls from this gruelling year past- in a mikveh of light, love, and life- this trembling glory! It is such a blessing beyond words to be with you all in multiple holy spaces across countries and time zones simultaneously these Days of Awe. Blessings for a new chapter to be written by those of us from Mishkan Shalom and those who have joined us for the journey who have gathered in person and on-line.

Rosh HaShanah is the day our tradition ascribes to be "*Hayom Harat Olam*", the "Big Bang Birthday Celebration of the Cosmos". The grand Reboot, where the past is honoured and reflected on in the present, with an eye to see what needs to be forgiven

or changed so it is not continually determining the future. As Rabbi Avraham Joshua Heschel wrote, “these days, (like Shabbat) are a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord.”[\[xviii\]](#)

Since Biblical times, we as a people have taken every seventh year in the land of Israel as a "Sabbatical", beginning on the First Day of Rosh Hashanah. This seventh year was called a SHMITA (meaning release) for the land, for forgiving debts that would keep people oppressed by societal and individual circumstances and for opening up access to resources for all in need- for immigrants, those without sufficient means, domestic and wild creatures. All this to remind us that we are not the ultimate “owners” of land- we are the stewards. Land (and I would say our acquiring things) is to be left fallow, debts are forgiven, and a host of other adjustments are made to ensure the maintenance of an equitable, just, earth-connected, and healthy society. And in Deut. 31 we learn, on the seventh year: gather everyone together for a big bash, and some serious Torah study (and in our case a year of revisiting our own Statement of Principles!)

Today, I’m inviting us to think deeply about –developing resilience and creativity, moving toward sustainability and justice in all aspects of our shared lives as an activist spiritual community and as earth-beings who are part of an interwoven fabric of life itself.

Yes, the Shmita year is part of our heritage and in the Jewish year cycle, even if we missed some centuries when we could not have any title to land.

Perhaps you are already wondering- what does this have to do with the myriad of issues we are facing in our world? I asked myself the same question preparing for this day- praying for direction and clarity at times amid a fog of informational and technological overwhelm, fatigue. and a deluge of racial, ecological, and social justice

challenges here and abroad. And let's not forget the synchronicity of the UN Climate Crisis Report dropping as a lead up to this Jewish Year.

As I blew the shofar and explored Psalm 27 every morning according to our month of Elul tradition in the run up to this day, I also wondered whether the actuality of the Shmita Year with all its wisdom and earthly consciousness would be more of a distraction and an additional make-work project at such a challenging time. For so many of us who have been battered and stretched beyond capacity both personally and as a species existentially- what additional program could we possibly open on the hard-drive of our own weary souls?

I recently came across an August 22nd NY Times opinion piece by Esau McCauley, a religious studies professor at Wheaton College, Illinois and author of the book: "Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope". In it, Prof McCauley reflects on the last 18 months and what it is that "*wakes us from our slumber and changes us forever?*" He goes on to offer that pandemic times and existential and ecological threats to our existence are asking us all to clarify our priorities. to, as the Shmita release asks us- to reassess, recalibrate, and reflect on how we are living in all ways, not to relax or disengage or check-out.

"The pandemic has led to one of the largest shifts in jobs in recent memory, with millions of Americans making changes. The housing market is exploding as many people reconsider where they want to live. We are in the midst of a societal shift, an awakening to how much we want our lives to be different."

McCauley asks why this awakening now given the information behind it is not totally new? He interviewed friends, family and neighbors and cited an emergent theme. "*The pandemic has disabused us of the illusion of time as a limitless resource and of the false promise that the sacrifices we make for our careers are always worth it.*"

Then, in keeping with the very questions and themes we inhabit in these Days of Awe, he offers, "*Before the pandemic, we knew we were going to die, but we did not believe it.*"

Maybe we believed it but considered it a problem to be dealt with later. In the meantime, exercise and a reasonable diet was the tithe we paid to our fears. We believed we had time... Now, we have had to consider our collective mortality. Now we are faced with questions of meaning...Covid-19 showed us that when systems breakdown we need people, social networks that can help when life logistics become difficult."

At Mishkan Shalom we call this Covenantal Community, Tikkun and Gemilut hasadim/ Acts of Caring! And in the past year and a half we have needed our mutual support more than ever, as some of us dealt with Covid related illness or loss of work, losing Gene and Sam and Michael, and so many of our parents, relatives, friends and the suffering of humanity and the planet itself.

McCauley concludes this part by saying *"The pandemic has reminded us that life is more than what we do. It is about whom we spend our lives with... We are made for friendship, love, and community."*

The themes of the Shmita year support and enhance these ideas; they do not replace or negate them. The confluence of this earth-based justice cycle of Jewish life and the heartbreak and breakthroughs of our times does not pave over depression and isolation, or celebration and reconnection- all of which I have personally experienced this year alongside so many of you. "Shmita-year consciousness" can provide a broader container within which to continue to adapt and find resilience and meaning amid so much uncertainty.

My colleague and friend, Jewish environmental pioneer, Rabbi Fred Scherlinder Dobb, of Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation in Bethesda MD, who chairs the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, asked this past year, *"Can a rarely-practiced piece of Torah, dormant for most of the Common Era, help us weather the Novel Coronavirus crisis"* and, I would add- upheavals of our time?

"Across the liberal Jewish world, where the spirit of Torah carries greater weight than the letter of the law, Shmita is now emerging as a north-star teaching, a directional goal, a moral

and spiritual compass. Its teachings and implications address ecological sustainability, social justice, spiritual renewal, communal resilience, and more. The goal is not to restore a straight-up seventh-year sabbatical, but to embed “Shmita-consciousness” into our communal and individual lives, and thus enrich them.

There are some current applications to live into this greater consciousness and action in the [ancient teachings of Shmita](#). Perhaps as a community and each of you in your own homes and pods will find some resonance and lean into the possibilities this year holds alongside the ongoing uncertainty and stress. I have blended some of my own ideas with Rabbi Dobb’s original inspiring list:

- **The power of small and intentional communities.** With every new virulent disease, recession, natural disaster (many exacerbated by climate change), the worth of intentional communities like ours is proved again and again. So many of you have contributed time, resources, wisdom, and skills to keep our Mishkan Shalom alive without being in-person together. We have something here that is precious and that can be shared with so many more people who have never experienced that an activist, egalitarian, inclusive spiritual community is even a possibility. Let’s keep leaning in!
- **Relevance through Resilience.** With real experience and expertise in this realm, Jewish communities will have deep Torah to teach, and real roles to play, *davka*- even more so in a pandemic – even if we do so [online, or remotely](#). In the past year we have collectively begun offering daily opportunities to gather, connect and engage in the greater “Torah of Our Times” as Rabbi Yael calls it. After all, Jewish history is one long narrative of [resilience](#). Each of you counts, and as the idea of a 10-person minyan teaches us- each of us count on each other to retain and regain resilience.
- **Rampant individualism** runs amok within a climate of fear- especially fear of climate upheaval! Yet Shmita insists on a sharing economy – in resource-stressed times, everyone gleans freely from whatever sprouts on “private” property; once

crops are exhausted in the field, homeowners must open their personal pantries, and declare all their food public. The deep truth that “we’re all in this together” is rooted in our personal and communal practice. (tzedakah going for 7% this year, clothes- anything new means giving away something already owned, checking in with others re food, compost, Skittles 😊)

- **Judaism’s profound tradition of pursuing justice, redifat tzedek**, is exemplified in Shmita’s special concern that the ger (stranger-immigrant-Other), and the servant or low-wage worker, have enough to get by, as do the landless Levite and socially disadvantaged orphan and widow ([Deut. 15](#)). Such values must be front and center in a global pandemic, which tests the strongest health care systems – even as tens of millions of Americans remain un- or under-insured, and billions around the world struggle with inadequate resources. So long as some people can’t or won’t seek diagnosis and treatment, no one is safe from the spread of disease.
- Ahead of its time, the sabbatical concept saw that **the land needs regular rest, crop rotation, and regeneration time** ([Ex. 23](#)). Consonant with the best available empirical data, Shmita made religious virtue of scientific necessity – even warning of the inevitable consequences ([Lev. 26](#)) should we fall short.
- **Think long-term.** Shmita’s seven-year cycles mandate long-range planning. This is one of the reasons seven years ago, shortly after I arrived at Mishkan Shalom, we aligned our cyclical strategic review with the Shmita year. After seven such cycles, the fiftieth Jubilee year (Yovel, [Lev. 25](#)) turns Jewish time-scales truly intergenerational- just as we as a Jewish faith community in entering our 34th year have become multi-generational with baby’s being born to members, founders becoming elders and many of us holding the hands of our parents as they leave this world and deputize us with holding and/or healing and transforming their legacies.

With Shmita-consciousness, we can tackle our longest-range troubles – from finally committing to reverse the deadly juggernaut of climate change, to buckling down and properly rebooting the Israel-Larger Jewish World relationship, while challenging anti-Semitism and standing for freedom of oppression and self-determination for Palestinians and all Israelis of all backgrounds. Yes, we can.

- **Gemilut Hasadim/Acts of Caring.** The pastoral burden is real and so many of you who have lost loved ones or supported them or yourself through illness. All are called to compassion and presence – that’s we have our stellar Acts of Caring- and back-up Pastoral Care and Hineni for celebration, transition, and loss- don’t hide from help and keep finding ways of showing up while self-caring and even saying “not right now” when needed.
- **‘Shmita’ offers a chance to renew oneself** –do different things, hone new skills – to reflect, regenerate.
- **Don’t Panic! “Shmita” means “radical release,” and the release we need now is from the clutches of fear.** Many sing Reb Nachman of Bratzlav’s adapted words, *ha’ikar lo l’fached* – “the main thing is not to be afraid” – yet he actually wrote *lo hit’pached*, “don’t make yourself [overly] fearful,” or “don’t be done in by your fear.”

May we come out the other side of the year ahead stronger, wiser, and more interdependent (our people have overcome worse, before). And may the resilient wisdom of our ancestors, starting with Shmita, point the way.

So: We forgive debts. We deal with each other directly, intensely, but never through commerce.

We live *off* the land, and *with* it, not bending it to our will. What grows naturally is holy; it feeds us; but it’s not for profit.

And in later halacha, we can't hoard. Once a food is no longer available in the field, we must open our 'private' stores, to all.

We share, and release. We sustain and renew. *That's Shmita.*

I like Rabbi Arthur Waskow's idea for a modern *Shmita*: one year of ethical reflection, for every six years of rushing new products to market. From farming to pharma; from nanotech to nuclear power: our ability to put out new stuff, outstrips our wisdom – and our knowledge of their *long-term* implications.

Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructing Judaism stated in 1937: "We are not denying the physical appetites their just place in life; we are simply recognizing the need of putting them in their place." [\[xiii\]](#) [xiii](#) Mordechai M. Kaplan, *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion*, 1937, p. 169.

The deeper **SPIRITUAL PURPOSE** of this time can also be found in the text from Devarim 31:10-12 I mentioned earlier, in [הַקְהֵל](#)– *hakeil*, assembling the entire community every 7 years – young and old, native and immigrant – to hear & discuss the Torah. That seventh-year conclave is all about spiritual growth; but so's the whole Shmita cycle! Rav Kook taught that Shmita affects people spiritually, "by causing them to realize that they are not in control of everything." Giving it up (to God, at least in metaphor), is the spiritual call of Shmitah [\[xiv\]](#)

This approach to living has certainly impacted my life and I know it has for many of you. In conversation with our board leaders on retreat, with Rabbi Yael, clergy colleagues and Mishkan members, and with some of you informally at our weekly Wednesday morning on-line gathering the question of what "Shmita-year consciousness" can mean for us has been cooking already. How can we live a Jewish values-based committed and equitable life with open hearts and minds and not "otherizing" each other while we cling to being "right" at all costs? This year invites us

to clear the clutter and look at what we are holding onto that is getting in the way of this very Power of Discernment and Action in our lives.

Adina Allen writes in <http://adinaallen.com/shmita-and-the-power-of-imagination/>). “It would be impossible to observe [any meaningful version of] *Shmita* one year out of every seven and have the other six years remain unchanged. The ritual of *Shmita* creates an island in time where we live according to our highest – and most difficult to achieve – values. Then, slowly, over time, we practice integrating those values into the rest of our lives. It is only through the actual experience of what living this way feels like that the frozen ground around our well-trodden ways, habitual patterns, and hardened ideas can begin to thaw, and new ways of being can emerge. Observance of the *Shmita* year allows for endless possibilities. When we are forced to ask the question, “How else could we live?”, the door to our imagination – and to our hearts – is opened... *Shmita* ensures that we loosen the shackles of our own ideas of how life *must* be lived and invite in the freshness and hope of new possibilities.”

As I invited all of you in my September Kol Shalom newsletter article, consider:

- * *How do you want to live in the world with a deeper connection to Jewish living?*
- * *How can you renew, reconnect, and relate to your spiritual life?*
- * *How can you release and re-evaluate your consumption of resources and ownership of "stuff" ?*
- * *How can you rethink, with discipline and forgiveness, habitual physical, emotional, and thought patterns?*
- * *How can we revisit together our local and broader community's role and work in justice?*

Take a moment now, here in this room and on-line and see which of these or other questions are arising in your own heart in response to what I have offered so far?

I wish only the best for all of you, ongoing healing prayers to all of you in need- please continue to let us know through acts-of-caring or directly to Rabbi

Yael or myself, how we can be of support. As we prepare for the New Year ahead, I take inspiration from the end of the Torah, Dvarim 30:11-14, and offer my own interpretation:

The direction I am pointing you towards

Is not too confusing or complex

Nor is it beyond reach

It is not in the heavens...neither is it beyond the sea

It is accessible in your own words and in your own heart

Let us go forward in this truth together.

Shanah Tovah U'Mitukah- And let us ready ourselves now to receive the call of the Shofar and what it is meant to blast open in us to truly find our way back to the home of our souls!

SHMITA YEAR RESOURCES

<https://www.adatshalom.net/spiritual-community-123/holidays/high-holy-days/13-cms-pages-2/264-shmita>

http://www.aytzim.org/greenisrael/antifracking/381?utm_content=szevit%40comcast.net&utm_source=VerticalResponse&utm_medium=Email&utm_term=Click%20here%20to%20read%20more%2E&utm_campaign=GZA%3A%3A%20Victory%20Against%20Fracking%20in%20Israelcontent

Rav Avraham Yitzhak HaKohen Kook, the first Chief Ashkenazic Rabbi of Palestine (1919-1935), as cited by Rabbi Jonathan Neril, at <http://www.canfeinesharim.org/coreteaching14/>.

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/11VVfPAFSvNFpbPtUMAYZkPHdWmh68xxL1vhiyD8gHa4/mobilebasic>

<https://shmitaproject.org/submissions/seij-anos/> Jessie Roemer

<https://shmitaproject.org/submissions/rest-behar-behukotai/> Dorothy Richmond

<https://shmitaproject.org/submissions/fallow-field/>

<https://shmitaproject.org/submissions/shmita-harachaman-a-musical-liturgy-to-remember-the-shmita-year-at-every-meal/>

<https://hazon.org/shmita-project/overview/>

<https://hazon.org/shmita-parshat-behar-bechukotai-5781/>

<https://hazon.org/behav-bechukotai-letting-the-land-rest-by-rabbi-yonatan-neril/>

http://www.shmitainseattle.com/?fbclid=IwAR2tSbroqVz8ADuLJ7QRk6e3eVttGF0_SPP679AKWhPSyY7zsTW3JTL8o0I

See over 100 ways of taking Shmita seriously today, by Yigal Deutscher, at <http://7seedsproject.org/>.

[Shmita Workbook.pdf](#) 

<http://m.forward.com/articles/205538/as-gaza-recedes-in-the-rear-view-mirror/>

<http://www.desmog.ca/2014/09/05/what-does-climate-adaptation-actually-look-check-out-awesome-new-infographic-series-cambridge>

Dear chevra, We suggest saying these blessings when you light the candles for Rosh Hashanah, for Yom Kippur, and for every Shabbat and Festival during the Shmitah year. The reason to do this is to remain aware throughout the year of what a whole year of Shabbat Shabbaton and Shmitah means — to stay both aware and active.

Why some changes in the traditional/ conventional ways of addressing God in the brakhot? After the brakhot themselves are my explanations for these changes.

Source (Hebrew) Translation (English) Transliteration (Romanized Hebrew)

ברוך אתה יהוה
אלהינו רוח העולם
אשר קדשנו במצות

1. וְאֵנּוּ לְשִׁמְרַת הַשָּׁנָה שֶׁל שְׁמִטָּה שְׁבֵת שְׁבֵתוֹן: 1

Blessed be Yahhhh, our sacred Unity embracing us in the Inter-breath of Life, who makes us holy by connecting us with each other and all being, and teaches us to observe the profound connection of this year of Release, Shabbat Shabbaton.[1] Barukh attah YHWH [Yahhhh] Elohenu Ruaḥ ha'olam, asher q̄idshanu b'mitsvotav, vitsivanu lishmor ha'shanah shel Shmitah, Shabbat shabbaton.

ברוכה אתה יה
אלהינו רוח העולם
כי לך הארץ

כי גרים ותושבים אנחנו אמר: 2

Blessed be Yahhhh, our sacred Unity embracing us in the Interbreath of Life, for the Earth is Yours and we are but sojourners and resident-settlers with You.

Brukhah aht [Baruch atah] YHWH [Yahhhh]

Elohenu Ruah ha'olam,

ki leykh ha'arets

ki gerim v'toshavim anahnu imeykh.

ברוך אתה יה
אלהינו רוח העולם
אשר קדשנו במצות

וצונו להדליק נר של של יום טוב (או: שבת): 3

Blessed be Yahhhh, our sacred Unity embracing us in the Interbreath of Life, who makes us holy by connecting us with each other and all being, and teaches us to kindle the festival [or: Shabbat] lights.

Barukh attah [Brucha aht] YHWH [Yahhhh]

Elohenu Ruah ha'olam,

asher kidshanu b'mitsvot,

vitsivanu l'hadlik ner shel yom tov [or: Shabbat].

ברוך אתה יה
אלהינו רוח העולם
שֶׁהֵחִיָּנוּ

יְקִיָּמָנוּ

וְהִגִּיעָנוּ לְזִמְנֵי הַזֶּה:

4. Blessed be Yahhhh,

our sacred Unity embracing us in the Interbreath-of-life, the Wind of change, who has filled us with life, lifted us up, and carried us to this moment!

Barukh attah [Brucha aht] YHWH [Yahhhh]

Elohenu Ruah ha'olam,

sheh'hekhianu

v'kiymanu

vihigianu lazman hazeh!

[Rabbi Shefa Gold has created a new chant and a new midrashic translation of the "Sheh'hekhianu" prayer. See and hear it at <https://www.rabbishefagold.com/shehechiyanu/>]