

Rabbi Rachel Isaacs
Yom Kippur Day Sermon 5775

I remember clearly the day that I told Mel I didn't want to stay in New York City for the beginning of my rabbinate -- I wanted to move to Maine. I was walking down 5th avenue in Brooklyn, walking past my favorite bodegas with killer egg and cheese sandwiches and cheap, fabulous sushi joints, and yet I knew that it was time to go. I said to her, "I am just so exhausted all of the time. I feel like no matter how much I sleep or I rest, I never feel healthy. No matter how many times I shower, I never feel clean." And if you saw my old apartment in Brooklyn, you'd understand why. In all seriousness, my schedule was often broken into 15 or 30 minute increments, and I was just running from one thing to another, and eventually the quality of everything I did suffered. I was living the New York life, and I couldn't do it with much integrity any more. Of course, in truth, few people actually do it well, but we try and try because that is the modern, American thing to do.

Ultimately, I decided to come to Maine and take on three jobs for a calmer life. And life has been a bit more manageable. But I also realized that I brought a lot of the craziness with me. Maybe I'm programmed that way -- maybe most of us are. It is after all, the American way. If you're not programmed to the hilt and on the verge of a nervous breakdown, then well, you must just be lazy. And God knows, there is no sin greater than sloth. But sloth is a Christian sin, not a Jewish one. We love sloths. But seriously, we have come to confuse laziness with taking necessary breaks that allow us to live healthy, happy, fulfilling, and balanced lives. And the idea of seeding, sowing, and reaping constantly is not only futile, but sinful from a Jewish perspective. This year, the year 5775 is a shmeita year, a sabbatical year where we are prohibited from the harvest. In the Land of Israel, we cannot harvest, eat from, or profit from cultivated crops. Throughout the Jewish world, we are required to forgive all debts. The shemita year is a year of radical rest, justice, and equality. In Exodus 23 we first

learn about the shemita year -- and just as interesting as the content of shemita laws, is where they are found in the Torah

וְגֵר, לֹא תִלְחָץ; וְאַתֶּם, יַדְעֶתֶם אֶת-נַפְשׁ הַגֵּר--כִּי-גֵרִים
הָיִיתֶם, בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם.

י וְשֵׁשׁ שָׁנִים, תִּזְרַע אֶת-אֲרָצְךָ; וְאַסִּפְתָּ, אֶת-תְּבוּאָתָהּ.

י א וְהַשְּׁבִיעֵת תִּשְׁמְטֶנָּה וּנְטַשְׁתָּהּ, וְאָכְלוּ אֲבִיבֵי עֵמֶךָ,
וְיִתְּרָם, תֹּאכַל חַיַּת הַשָּׂדֶה; כֹּן-תַעֲשֶׂה לְכַרְמְךָ, לְזִיתְךָ.

9 A sojourner, you are not to oppress: you yourselves know well the feelings of the stranger, for strangers were you in the land of Egypt.

10 For six years you are to sow your land and to gather in its produce, 11 but in the seventh, you are to let it go [tishm'tenah] and to let it be [u'nitashta], that the needy of your people may eat, and what remains, the wildlife of the field shall eat. Do thus with your vineyard, with your olive-grove.

– Exodus 23.9-11

The Torah links the idea of oppressing the stranger with eating sabbatical year produce. Why? From a Torah perspective, the Land of Israel is holy, a vital participant our eternal covenant with God, and solely the property of God. Denying the Land rest or taking advantage of the stranger are two examples of oppressing the weak that lives *seemingly* beneath us -- and denying justice to God's special wards. We do not own the poor nor do we own the Land of Israel. They are put under our custodianship at God's discretion, and if we wrong either -- disempowered people or the Land of Israel -- our rights as a sovereign people will be revoked. Shemita is not just about sound agricultural practices -- it is about social justice and conditioning our souls. By letting go of all that we ostensibly own for a year, by releasing the control we lord over others, we remind ourselves that all the things we

think we own are actually temporary gifts bestowed by God. Before God, we are all equal, naked, dust, earth. We learn in the Talmud, A disciple came and asked R. Abbahu: ‘What is the reason for the Sabbatical year?’ ‘Now,’ said R. Abbahu, ‘Sow for six years and let go of the land in the seventh year: in order that you know that the land is God’s.’” (Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 39a) As Jews, even in a post-1948 world, we do not even own our most precious inheritance -- the Land of Israel. We are renters, and we must handle this land with care, and in accordance with the laws of our Master. We are equal, naked, dust, earth. Once every seven years we force ourselves to internalize this deep truth through ritual and law, and hopefully, act more justly toward one another as a result.

We learn more about the details of Shemita in Leviticus 25:

3 For six years you are to sow your field, for six years you are to prune your vineyard, then you are to gather in its produce, 4 but in the seventh year there shall be a Sabbath of Sabbath-ceasing for the land, a Sabbath to the Lord: your field you are not to sow, your vineyard you are not to prune,

5 the aftergrowth of your harvest you are not to harvest, the grapes of your consecrated-vines you are not to amass; a Sabbath of Sabbath-ceasing shall there be for the land!

6 Now the Sabbath-yield of the land is for you, for eating: for you, for your servant and for your handmaid, for your hired-hand and for your resident-settler who sojourn with you; 7 and for your domestic-animal and the wild-beast that are in your land shall be all its produce, to eat.

Leviticus teaches us not only that we need to provide for the poor and our employees, but it also tells us how we keep from starving during this year, which is incredibly important, and very relevant this year in

Israel. If you can't cultivate crops, how do you survive? *The New York Times* articulated the challenge well in their article about Shemita 7 years ago, "Zionism was founded on the notion of a return to the land, but a modern country cannot live on what falls to the ground." (As Farmers and Fields Rest, a Land Grows Restless, NY Times Oct. 7, 2007)

And yet, with clever and deft thinking, there is a solution. At this year's Maine Conference for Jewish Life, Grace Oedel introduced me to the solution for this problem. Obviously, God does not want us to starve. When the entire people Israel were living in the Land of Israel, we were allowed to eat perennials and not annuals during the shmeita year. That is to say that, we could not cultivate crops, but we could graze on what grew naturally every year. We may not be able to harvest cultivated wheat, but we could pick the pomegranates, dates, figs, and avocados off the trees. Just like on Shabbat when we cannot cook food, but we can eat what is prepared in advance, during the Shemita year we cannot toil for food, but we can eat food that occurs naturally or is preserved in advance of this year. We need a year to feel fully free in order to be a people worthy of serving God. One of the core sentences from our liturgy is, "asher hotzaiti etchem may'erezt mitzrayim lehiot la'hem l'elohim." God tells us, "I freed you from slavery so that I could be our God." God does not desire the coerced and desperate commitment of slaves. Love given under duress – love split between God and our work – is not worthy of the Creator of the World. One year in seven, we worship God as truly free women and men, as kings and queens. We free one another of debt and servitude -- we free ourselves -- to give God love without limitations. So we graze from the fruit trees, we feast of food preserved before the shmeita year, we purchase food from the other nations, so that we can feel true freedom one seventh of our days on this earth. Torah communicates a basic truth – while work may give our life meaning, it does

not make us free. The sabbatical year ensures that every person gets to experience true freedom for at least a fraction of her life.

We no longer live in an ancient agricultural society, nor do we live in the Land of Israel. As Diaspora Jews, we are only required to observe the financial elements of the shmeita year, which I know that most of us probably are not in a position to fulfill. However, I think that when it comes to the monetary and the agricultural facets of the shemita year, we can glean spiritual meaning from this ritual. All of us must ask and act -- Who can I free this year from servitude? What are the grudges that I am lording over the people in my life? Who can I free from pain, guilt, and other forms of subjugation and indebtedness? We all have power over other human beings – who are we keeping from being free and how can we liberate them this year? For our sake, for their sake, for the sake of God, our ultimate Creator, Parent, and Lover, we must be agents of liberation.

We also learn that we cannot cultivate incessantly. Working without intentional and prolonged breaks makes us callous, arrogant, impatient, unkind, and burnt out. What are we cultivating without break? Who have we hurt as a result of our incessant labor, and how have our fruits soured by working without stop? This is the year, this is the reminder, to step back and let us feast on God's goodness, to practice our faith in a very concrete way by eating only the low hanging, ripe fruit. Not forever, for one year in seven. We must remind ourselves that the earth, the page, the college, the firm, the business, our employees, our synagogue, our kids, our spouses, our houses are not truly ours. They are blessings from God in God's hands always. We cannot appreciate our own smallness in the universe if we attempt to control everything and everyone around us without break. Shemita is a year of pruning ourselves – not just our fields – but our egos. When we overestimate our own wealth, power, and sense of self, we pave the way to being agents of sin and hurt. Humility is a key ingredient to

righteousness. Without rest and distance, when we work ourselves to the maximum at every minute, we cannot be centered enough to be kind, considerate, or compassionate. So for one year in seven, we allow this ritual to prune our egos, to trim our senses of self – so we can be agents of kindness, love, consideration – and put Torah values into action. And if we do not fulfill this mission and obey these commandments – we end up alone, exiled, and vomited up by the Land. The Land acts by force to remind us of our own limits and boundaries. This is the year to stop sowing seeds and to eat of the fruit of the tree and the vine, and benefit from the labor of our neighbors and friends. This year, we give them the space to grow and cultivate, and take stock of the blessing they, along with our shared Parent, bestow in our lives.

Two thousand years ago we were exiled from the Land of Israel, the birthplace of Torah. Two thousand years later, most of us still live in the Diaspora, and as a result, are not obligated by the many commandments applicable only in our homeland. But Torah is a book that conveys many layers of meaning, for all Jews in every place and at every time. The practical lessons we can cull from Torah law are different than those of our brothers and sisters in Israel, but they are still essential, connect us to our Creator and to one another, and can serve as mechanisms to illuminate our world. This is the year of our communal sabbatical. Let us rest, let us observe, let us be intentionally passive so that can experience a taste of freedom. Let us allow ourselves to see the fullness of our blessings. Let us be completely aware of our capacity to be agents of liberation. Let us feel our own smallness and powerlessness. Let us feel God's protection and bounty, let us be consumed by the Divine embrace. Let us be willing, free servants and lovers of God – for this year – let us be a truly Am Segulah – a royal and majestic people.

