

This Year, Do Nothing: The Case for Spiritual Shmita

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Written in chevruta with Rabbi Leah Citrin

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Even on vacation,
I have always prided myself on filling my days to the brim.
But back in April, it came to a head.

I was with Jeff in the Outer Banks,
my very first trip to an east coast beach,
and I had a list.

We were going to bike to the lighthouse and back,
visit the Wright Brothers National Memorial,
eat at every restaurant with outdoor seating,
and compare multiple mini-golf courses.

Three days in, Jeff staged a one-man intervention.

“Dusty,” he informed me –
“this is too much. It’s stressing you out. It’s stressing me out.
We’re in the Outer Banks. On vacation.
Can’t we just...
go walk on the beach?”

--

Perhaps you are better at vacations than me,
but I am pretty sure I am in good company
when it comes to overfull days
and never ending to-do lists.

Many years ago,
poet Judy Brown found herself staring into a blazing fire
and reflecting “on the depth of [her] struggle with overload,
overwork and over-commitment”¹
and was inspired to write a poem
that may be familiar to some of you,
because it lives in our weekly prayer book!

It begins:

“What makes a fire burn
is space between the logs,
a breathing space.”

In the Jewish agricultural cycle,
this year of 5782 is a shmita year,
a chance to create space between the logs of our life -
a breathing space for our souls.

¹ <https://www.judysorumbrown.com/blog/breathing-space>

First introduced in Leviticus 15,
the mitzvah of shmita is described as follows:

“When you enter the land that I assign to you,
the land shall observe a Shabbat of Adonai.
Six years you may sow your field and six years you may
prune your vineyard....
But in the seventh year
the land shall have...complete rest,
a Shabbat of Adonai:
you shall not sow your field...”²

In recent years,
as many of us have become more urban and suburban
dwellers, Jewish scholars have developed a spiritual
understanding of shmita;
not just a year-long breathing space for the land,
but also for our souls.

The poem continues:

“Too much of a good thing,
too many logs
packed in too tight
can douse the flames
almost as surely
as a pail of water would.”

² Leviticus 15:1-4

Very simply, a log-packed life - a life without *shmita* - is stifling.

When we layer meeting upon meeting, extracurricular upon extracurricular, playdate upon playdate - we stifle our creativity, our energy, and our ability to actually appreciate and find meaning in the opportunities we have packed in so tightly. Perhaps even more dangerously, we lose our very selves in the struggle to keep up with our commitments.

During the most complete of the shutdown periods, we experienced a communal forced pause - kind of. Across the country, theaters closed their doors, music venues cancelled concerts, air travel and car traffic halted all but completely. But while morning commutes became nonexistent and calendars looked emptier, other logs piled on -

We baked but did not feel fed.

We slept but did not feel rested.

We walked but did not feel refreshed.

We reassured each other but did not feel reassured.

Instead, we experienced relentless decision-making fatigue,
ongoing anxiety around how to live
in a deeply life-threatening world,
and shifts at home and work that left far *less* space for some.
And more recently,
as we began to imagine a post pandemic world,
we rushed to fill up that space,
to make up for lost time.

We needed shmita long before this pandemic.
Now, we need it even more.

We often define shmita as ‘not doing’ -
but ‘not doing’ is actually doing -
intentional non-action is in and of itself action.

To do nothing is to focus on repair and growth,
to allow creativity to poke its head out of the soil
and stretch its little leaves;
to see what appears when there are no deadlines or plans.

This nothingness is different from the nothingness
created by the pandemic.

I am not suggesting we cancel all of our plans
and sit in our houses and bake bread - we did that already.

Rather, I am suggesting we take meaningful time to just be, to give ourselves space to rethink how we fill our days - not just in this immediate pandemic-heavy moment, but also for years to come.

In her book, How To Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy,

Jenny Odell describes what she means by doing nothing:

“The point,” she writes,
“is not to return to work refreshed
and ready to be more productive,
but rather to question
what we currently perceive as productive.”³

Odell’s work is an argument against productivity as a goal, and an argument for, essentially, shmita.

“Just as practices like logging and large field farming decimate the land,” she writes,
“an overemphasis on performance
turns what was once a dense and thriving landscape
of individual and communal thought
into a Monsanto farm whose ‘production’ slowly destroys
the soil until nothing more can grow.”⁴

³ How to Do Nothing, xii

⁴ Ibid, xix

What Torah compels us to do with our land,
Odell compels us to do with our very existence.

Shmita calls on us to resist our culture of productivity,
resist our desire to maximize our resources so much
that we end up stripping our souls of all nutrients,
and instead to sit back, have a little faith,
and see what grows in the space between.

It is a call to each of us individually,
but perhaps even more importantly to all of us as a
community.

In an article published a few weeks ago aptly titled
“You’re Still Exhausted,”
Anne Helen Peterson reminded us that
grind culture affects not just ourselves but those around us.

She described a common desire to be seen as indispensably
useful
and argues that when we operate from that desire,
we set impossible standards for ourselves and those around
us.

We are each important, yes.

But if we are each the only person who can play a given role,
when will we ever rest?

When enough members of our community
break free from this feeling of indispensable usefulness,
she says,
we create a new standard for all of us;
a standard that *values rest*
and *celebrates* those who take time to replenish their souls.⁵

Judy Brown's poem concludes:

“A fire
grows
simply because the space is there,
with openings
in which the flame
that knows just how it wants to burn
can find its way.”

The beauty of shmita,
the beauty of making “space between the logs,”
is in Judy Brown's words:
We are the flame “that knows just how it wants to burn.”
Shmita lets that flame “find its way.”

⁵ <https://annehelen.substack.com/p/youre-still-exhausted>

By making space to find our way,
we rediscover (or perhaps discover for the first time!)
who we are,
what matters to us,
and what is within us that best equips us
to be of service to the world.

Now I will admit -
the idea of doing nothing terrifies me.
As I mentioned,
I am the poster child of this culture of productivity and
usefulness.
I am almost entirely incapable of sitting still, much less
sitting still long enough to appreciate a sunset or a beautiful
beach.

Doing nothing feels scary
because as Rabbi Knight so clearly described last night,
Western culture promotes a scarcity mindset -
we are taught to believe in a constant lack,
a “not enough.”
Everything around us urges us to live as if we are constantly
on the brink of irretrievably losing time,
opportunities, money, attention... love.

But as Rabbi Knight taught us last night,
in order to take the long view,
in order to be good ancestors,
we must recognize and lean into an abundance mindset
instead.

In the biblical shmita,
the text of the Torah promises that abundance.
Leviticus reminds the Israelites that when practiced
properly,
the shmita year does actually offer abundance -
a wilder, less predictable harvest, perhaps,
but a harvest nonetheless.

When we carefully cultivate land
in the six years leading up to shmita,
and nurture our faith in the divine power of the universe
and all she has within her,
the land offers up abundance.

We must only get ourselves still enough to
recognize that abundance.

We are *adam* - human beings,
named after the substance used to create us, *adamah* -
the very soil of the earth.
Just as shmita provides rhythm and rest for the soil,
so too have we been designed to delight in rhythm and rest.

Spiritual shmita will look different for each of us,
because the soil of our souls has been growing different
crops
over the years.

Spiritual shmita will require creativity, and community,
and not a small measure of faith and trust.

But I can promise you that if we don't find a way to 'do
nothing,'
we will lose our very selves,
The beautiful bonfire of our very being
snuffed out,
gasping for oxygen
under the weight of too many logs.

To practice shmita is a return to who we are -
the chance to reignite our souls,
to invite the spark of the Divine to reinfuse our spirits,
and eventually to enable us to show up as our fullest selves.

“What makes a fire burn
is space between the logs,

...

it is fuel, and absence of the fuel
together, that make fire possible

...

A fire
grows
simply because the space is there,
with openings
in which the flame
that knows just how it wants to burn
can find its way.”

This year, I pray that we each individually,
and together in community,
make space between our logs,
space for the flame inside of us to find its way,
that we may burn ever brighter
for years to come.