

Release from Isolation

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We've all heard many times now how unusual this New Year is. Last week we welcomed in 5782, for the first time in our 163 year history, outdoors in front of our beautiful and historic sanctuary. And here we are, 10 days later, outdoors and masked once again. But, pandemic aside, there is something particularly significant about us celebrating this New Year outside – a reconnection with nature. Rosh Hashanah 5782 was in fact quite unusual, in that it marked the beginning of the Biblical 7-year agricultural cycle, known in Hebrew as *shmita*.

Maybe we can learn something for our own lives from this practice.

The Torah commands the cycle of *shmita* in two places, first in Exodus (23:10-11) and then in Leviticus (25:3-4). In both texts, the seventh year is called as a time of rest for the earth. In Leviticus it is described as a *Shabbat Shabaton*, a “Sabbath of Complete Rest.” Just as the Jewish people are commanded to rest themselves on the seventh day, the land worked by humans for six years is given a year of rest on the seventh. This year, 5782, is that seventh year, and Rosh Hashanah marked the beginning of a sabbatical – a one year pause in agricultural labor; a Shabbat for the land.

I have seen this for myself in prior years. The commandment to leave fields fallow only applies to one place on Earth: the land of Israel. I have been in Israel during *shmita* years such as this¹, and I have pictures of large billboards spread across fallow fields in the Galilee declaring כֹּאן שומרים שמיטה! “*Shmita* is observed here.” It always excites me to see this ancient Torah commandment being put into action in the 21st Century after 2,000 years of existing only in books.

But all is not simple. The commentators note that there are differing descriptions of the commandment in the two books of Torah. While Exodus focuses on the fact that any natural growth in the field is left for the poor – a positive action - Leviticus pays attention to the negative actions, what one is not to do during this seventh year: שְׂדֵךְ לֹא תִזְרַע וְכַרְמֶךָ לֹא תִזְמַר – *saadcha lo tiz'rah v'karmecha lk tiz'mor* - you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. Rashi notes that the final phrase *lo tizmor* is translated not as “you shall not prune” but as “you shall not cut off.”

Stay with me here, because the difference is subtle. Pruning has a specific function in a vineyard: to help the plant grow stronger. But “cutting off”, as Rashi notes, includes removing thorns (Isaiah 33:12) or clearing with fire (Ps. 80:17). It does not benefit the plant, but it is

¹ From 2008 and 2015

useful to the planter. Letting the land rest during *Shmita* in this understanding, includes allowing the plant's natural growth and refraining from cutting it off from its source of nourishment.

It is good to be sensitive to our crops. But human beings can also be cut off.

A year since our last High Holidays and even before that, many of us have felt cut off. I hear it often. Isolation and separation and loneliness have been for many the defining emotions of the pandemic. We have tried to give, we have tried to be productive, we have tried to be connected. But we are exhausted. We could use a rest. Not the 'return to normal' we often talk about; but a respite from the strange new demands and constant uncertainty we are inescapably facing.

Perhaps 5782, this year of *shmita*, can offer us hope. Perhaps, like the land itself, we can rest and be renewed. Perhaps we will not be cut off any longer.

In the Mishnah, there is a section known as *Pirke Avot*, the Ethics of our Ancestors. Among the aphorisms of this book are the words of Rabbi Hillel enjoining us *אל תפּרֹשׁ מִן הַצְּבֹר* (*al tifrosh min haTzibur*) – *do not cut yourself off from the community*. Like the vine which is not to be cut, we cannot be separated from those who nurture and support us. But as the time of our isolation has dragged on, we find ourselves pruned, our connections severed, maybe we are even a little burned. This didn't begin with COVID-19, but the pandemic has made many of us feel even more isolated, even more lonely than ever before.

In his book, "Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World²", U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy³ talks about the human need for social interaction:

Quite simply, human relationship is as essential to our well-being as food and water. Just as hunger and thirst are our body's ways of telling us we need to eat and drink, loneliness is the natural signal that reminds us when we need to connect with other people.

We tend to dismiss this feeling of social isolation, as "only" psychological – but researchers are realizing the physical effects loneliness has on us. We feel it in our bodies. "Our biology is primed not just to feel better together, but to feel normal together," Murthy writes. Isolation leads us to feelings of despair. Despair leads to more isolation and we turn ever more inward. Rabbi Hillel is wise to put his commandment in the negative: *do not cut yourself off from community*. Because unlike the severed plant which has no power to reconnect itself to the source of its nutrients, we have the ability to rebuild our bonds to one another. "Togetherness,"

² Harper Wave – Digital Edition April 2020

³ Vice Admiral Vivek H. Murthy, MD, MBA is currently serving his second tenure as US Surgeon General (19th and 21st).

Dr. Murthy notes “raises optimism and creativity. When people feel they belong to one another, their lives are stronger, richer, and more joyful.”

Connecting to community may seem an impossible challenge during this era of pandemic. There are barriers to connection when we must wear masks, when we must avoid contact especially indoors. And those real barriers become amplified in our own minds making us even less willing to connect. Loneliness becomes a habit; we grow comfortable in our isolation and take our feelings of despair as normal. This is different than solitude, which can offer us a useful respite from the noise and busy-ness of normal life. While Shabbat rest and solitude can be a lovely antidote to the demands of the everyday, loneliness does not offer us rest. In fact, we need a Shabbat away from the loneliness this pandemic has brought us to.

We need a release from the status quo of isolation. We need a *shmita* – a year-long time of renewal and reconnection.

Vice Admiral Murthy wrote his book before the pandemic, but in an Author’s Note he connects it to our changed reality:

As the pandemic continues. . .it becomes ever clearer that *social* distancing is a misnomer. To be sure, we must practice *physical* distancing to stop the spread of COVID-19, but socially, we may emerge from this crisis feeling closer to friends and family members than before.

Dr. Murthy might be right, and to be sure we have talked about the need to maintain social connections even when physically distant. But loneliness is not so easily overcome. Like the overworked agricultural land, we can allow feelings of exhaustion to isolate us. We can allow the demands to produce, to put on appearances, to fill our social media with happy pictures overwhelm us. Loneliness is not so easy overcome – and seeing everyone else’s curated posts can make us feel that we are alone in feeling alone. We need some natural growth. We need to be renewed. We need a *shmita* year.

As with other institutions, since the start of the pandemic our congregation’s clergy and staff have been working on ways to keep us all connected. We moved our services online and broadcast from clergy homes. Within days the living room in my house was converted into a video and sound studio. There was more gear than even I knew how to deal with. And we loved that during that time we were able to connect in a very one-on-one way even through Zoom. When we first moved back to streaming services from the sanctuary last Spring, I was a bit startled at some of the reaction we received. Many were thrilled to see the sanctuary again, if only on their computer screens. But others let us know that they missed the intimacy of our homemade, homebound services. We found that when we put the camera closer, and remembered to look into the camera, some of those feelings of intimacy came back even when we were in the sanctuary.

Intimacy is what we may be craving; the sense of personal connection, of closeness. Many of us may have been fortunate enough to be isolating with family during this time, or podding with a small group of friends. Others have not. Some of us have lost loved ones during this time. Others have found relationships strained. But even those who are not alone can at times feel lonely. We know we can sometimes feel lonely even in a crowd. We can feel cut off from those intimate, close relations.

Our synagogue is one of those communities we can rely on. We find the meaning and the joy in our tradition, and also the closeness with those who may walk a similar path. Isolation and loneliness lead us to think that we are unloved, unlovable, different and disregarded. Connection, intimacy – even with masks or over Zoom – remind us that we are not a part from, but a part of, something bigger than ourselves. That we are seen. That we are loved. That we are valued.

The prophet Malachi has G-d speak these words to the people:

שׁוּבוּ אֵלַי וְאֶשׁוּבָה אֵלֵיכֶם – *Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts.* (Mal. 3:7) G-d returns to us, comes close to us, releases us from isolation – but asks us to move first. Returning to G-d means returning to ourselves, returning to others, returning to life. We cannot always change the circumstances of our lives, but perhaps we can use this year of *shmita* as a year of intentional return, of renewal, of reconnection.

As a plant which is cut from its roots cannot grow, so we become lost and lonely, wither in isolation when we are cut off from our source. The commandment of *shmita* reminds us not to cut ourselves off, but to allow our natural state of connectedness to regrow.

This we need during a sabbatical time of healing and renewal. To encourage ourselves to reconnect. אַל תִּפְרֹשׁ מִן הַצִּבּוֹר – *do not cut yourself off from the community.* Reconnect and recommit yourself to others. Reach out to someone you have lost contact with. Reach out to someone close to you whom you might have pushed away. Return to others so others may return to you. Make a choice to release yourself from loneness.

May this year of *shmita*, this year when the land rests and growth is natural, be a year of rest, renewal and reconnection for us as all. May we, in this year, be released from isolation and loneliness. Amen.