Deirdre Gabbay – D’var Torah Mishaptim 5775

Good morning.

This week’s portion, Mishpatim, contains the first mention in Torah of “Shmita.” The word “shmita” means “release.” Imaging relaxing and releasing your grip on whatever is in your hand. That is Shmita.

In the context of Torah, Shmita specifically refers to the mitzvah that requires the land to rest and lie fallow every seven years. It is referred to elsewhere in Torah as a Sabbath of the Land – a Shabbat Shabbaton ha-Aretz.

When we first encounter the concept in this week’s parsha, (page 472, verses 10 and 11) it is with these words:

“Six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield, but in the seventh you are to release it (tish’m’**ten**nah) and allow it to lie fallow. Let the needy among your people eat of it, and what they leave, let the wild beasts eat. You shall do the same with your vineyards and your olive groves.”

These verses appear beautifully poised in the parasha, at the meeting place of two ideas. On the one hand, they can be seen as concluding a list of injunctions that offer a “vision for a just society,” based on judicial integrity and the humane treatment of the vulnerable -- the ones perceived as “other” -- with specific mention given to one’s enemies, “the stranger,” and animals.

In keeping with those verses, our verses envision a year in which the land itself is noticed, almost as if it were among the vulnerable, and given rest. Then, concordant with the rest that is enjoined upon the land, the needy are given free access to its naturally occurring produce. “Even the beasts of the field are not forgotten.”

The verse that follows it introduces Shabbat, and states its purpose. Here, Shabbat is specifically explained as for the purpose of allowing rest for your “ox and your donkey,” and so that your “bondsman and the stranger may be refreshed.” In this context, and in the words with which it is described here, Shmita and Shabbat have a common purpose, which is kindness, a gift. Here, Shmita is a **gift** for all life, which along with Shabbat, provides food for the hungry, and rest for the weary – with special attention to ensure that the needs of the vulnerable are elevated.

On the other hand, our verses can also be seen as **beginning** a set of prescriptions which govern observance of the three pilgrimage festivals, which are described by Nahum Sarna as “rooted in the life of the soil:” Passover (the beginning of the planting season), Shavuot (the beginning of the harvest season), and Sukkot (the end of the harvest season). These pilgrimage festivals are specifically associated with the bringing of material gifts – offerings, sacrifices, first fruits – to the Temple, and to God. They are specifically described as “for Me,” for God. “None shall appear before Me empty handed.” These festivals, therefore, are part of the system of mitzvot which give **us** the opportunity to bring return gifts to God, completing and re-initiating the cycle of receiving a gift from God, using it for ends that transcend self and ego, and expressing gratitude by renewing the life of the gift through a return gift to God.

Thus, by its placement here in Mishpatim, perhaps we are invited to view Shmita as a necessary arc in a circle, perhaps even fulfilling overlapping roles. In the first arc, we are given gifts or blessings in the form of food and rest; in the second arc, these gifts are received with gratitude, used properly, and handled with reverence; in the final arc, we offer return gifts to God, their mysterious source. Shmita inhabits all three arcs in this circle – the giving of the gift of food from the Earth, the use of the food to ensure the welfare of all life, and the offering of the gift of rest to God, as embodied in the land itself. By fully taking part in this circle, we participate in its eternal renewal.

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I first became aware of Shmita – I would almost say I fell under its spell – when I started learning to leyn Torah almost exactly a year ago. My teacher Sandra suggested I learn the Torah portion that she herself had first learned. It was Parashat Behukotai – the beginning part – about the blessings and the closeness to God that we can achieve when we walk in God’s ways. Reading and reflecting on that parasha gave me a new set of metaphors and visual language through which to connect with God, and in doing so, subtly altered the focus of my longstanding environmentalist tendencies. Specifically, it called my awareness to the role of the Earth as God’s medium for bestowing blessings upon us, as “the open hand of God,” as it were, and upon the important role that Shmita plays in the renewal of that cycle. Critically - if the cycle of life ceases because we have spurned God’s laws, it can be re-started only when the land is allowed to keep its Sabbaths.

Many of you may know that this year, 5775, is Shmita year. In honor of this, I’ve taken it as a personal practice to study the laws of Shmita, and in dialogue with many others, I am trying to discover and understand the values implicit in the laws, and explore the reasons why they seem so powerful and relevant for me. I have been asking myself, how can I respond to my intuition that this obscure and enigmatic religious law is, in fact, speaking to some of the most important challenges that we face in the world today?

So first of all, what is Shmita really? What are the core concepts? There are laws around Shmita found in Torah, and others that are spring from Rabbinic interpretation. I’ll name the ones I find most central:

Every seventh year, the land is given rest. Seeds may not be planted in the seventh year, nor may farms be plowed.

The primary harvest during the seventh year is perennial crops such as fruit from trees, and plants that grow wild in nature, and it is freely available for everyone to take from according to their immediate needs.

Agricultural lands and their produce are declared ownerless, and produce cannot be harvested commercially or sold for money. The lands themselves become a commons, open to all.

Food that is picked during the seventh year has a special “sanctity” or kedushat. It cannot be wasted or used for non-food purposes. If a small amount of money changes hands as a result of the exchange of this produce, the money itself acquires “kedushat sheviit,” the sanctity of seventh year produce, and needs to be used only for the purpose of purchasing food.

Food plants can only be eaten while they are in season. They may not be picked early when they are unripe, nor may they be used when they are no longer available in the fields where an animal may find them on the ground.

Produce cannot be exported. It must be eaten locally.

Finally, debts are forgiven. If one person has loaned money to another, they must forgive the debt at the end of the Shmita year, although it is considered praiseworthy to pay it back.

In Israel, the laws of Shmita have the force of Halacha, and it is complicated. Since we are chutz b’aretz – outside the land of Israel – on some level we could say that they don’t apply to us. If you ask an observant Israeli Shmita adherent “how to you keep Shmita outside the land of Israel?” they might say something like “you make Aliyah.”

But Diaspora Jews such as me and many others sense that these laws are saying something really important about the way the world should work. In Shmita, we sense the eternal Torah in dialogue with the recyclable daily newspaper on subjects as diverse as the environmental crisis and climate change, as well as wealth inequality and shifts in economic opportunity.

We may be able to name some of the values, but we are not sure what the big picture looks like yet. But we wonder, if it might hold some sort of a key. Journalist, rabbi and social entrepreneur Micha Odenheimer, asks if Shmita could be “Judaism’s next great gift to humankind,” comparing its potential to transform the human condition to the weekly practice of Sabbath, which is found now almost everywhere on earth.

Looking at the world through the lens of Shmita, stories that we read in the daily newspaper stand out with a new clarity and resonance – a story about Croatia forgiving the debt of 5,000 of its citizens. A story from Belgium about refrigerators placed on the street where they function like our Little Free Libraries – drop off some vegetables if you have extra, or take some if you happen to need them. The “Buy Nothing” groups proliferating on Facebook which allow material possessions to flow cash-free from where they have accumulated to where they are currently needed. City Fruit, which takes the overabundant harvest of one person’s fruit tree and brings it to the local Food Bank, and along the way teaches the tree’s owner how to keep it pruned and healthy. Farmers in Turkey who planted a whole field of wheat just so they could hear the birds sing there again.

What do these stories have in common? I can’t put my finger on it exactly except to say, “Shmita.” Shmita somehow “relevates” (to borrow a term from physicist David Bohm) – it elevates certain ideas and puts them into relationship with one another in a way that creates coherence.

The commons, generous giving. An awareness of the abundance that surrounds us close at hand. An awareness of the need to ensure that it moves from where it is hiding to where it is needed. Rest. Trust. Contentment. Interdependence. Community. Common spaces. Connection to the Earth and seeing it as the outstretched hand of God. The periodic suppressing and rebalancing of the money economy. Living off six years of labor so that the seventh can be savored and enjoyed while enabling our roots to deepen. Knowing where to find the wild edibles in the world around us. Linking the health and welfare of society with the health and welfare of the land and its non-human inhabitants.

This is Shmita. And more. What can it be for each of us? For our personal circles? For our Beth Shalom community? For our neighborhood, our city, the world? What can we learn this year? How will it change us? What can we do over the next six years to bring forth a fuller vision seven years from now?

That is the challenge. I don’t have a single vision, but out of the plurality of images a complex but somehow coherent vision emerges. That’s why it’s good that there is a word for it. Shmita.

Shabbat Shalom.