

Shmita: This Story Is Not Over Yet
Rabbi Dara Frimmer
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On Aug 23, I heard the best apology.

CNN's Anderson Cooper called out Dr. Anthony Fauci for predicting, earlier that morning, that if a majority of Americans get vaccinated, the U.S. could have control over Covid-19 by this FALL.

"No, Anderson," he said in his gravelly, New York accent, "I have to apologize."

"I meant to say the SPRING of 2022. I didn't mean the Fall. I misspoke...my bad."

I love that: "My bad." It reminds me of the section, in US magazine, "Stars — They're Just Like Us!" My bad (ha!) I hear you, Dr. Fauci. Some days, we just get it wrong.

Sadly, even the most amusing apology can't obviate the sobering reality of our Covid pandemic, now extended until Spring of 2022.

2 full years. Not 2 weeks. Or 2 months. 2 years.

We had already stretched our patience and tolerance beyond what we thought was needed. We agreed to be resilient. Flexible. Adaptable. But with every new finish line we reached, the line kept moving further away.

Like way away.

And here we are, on the precipice of a New Year, wondering if we can endure ANOTHER 6 months of uncertainty.

Actually, the Torah has a model for surviving not just 6 months, but sometimes YEARS of uncertainty: It's called Shmita.

Shmita, more widely known as the sabbatical year was, and still is, a year of rest and release. Spiritual and economic. Which helps not just people, but the land, to reset and re-calibrate and recover. Shmita helps us to return to ourselves, and to rediscover who we are and who we hope to be.

Just as the Torah calls for Jews to work six days and rest on the seventh, a day we call Shabbat, Shmita commands us to work the land six years and let it rest in the seventh.

As it says in Exodus: For six years you are to sow your land and to gather in its produce, but in the seventh, you are to let it go and to let it be, that the needy people may eat, and what remains, the wildlife shall eat... (Exodus 23:10-11)

It is only at the conclusion of the 7th, as the 8th year begins, that you are once again permitted to plant new seeds. You are permitted to reap, harvest and glean from whatever remains after a year of rest: The wild vines. The unchecked growth. Whatever was not consumed by animals...it's yours to take.

To observe the commandment of Shmita is an ancient exercise in faith that we will not only survive a disruption to our preferred routine but that we will reap blessings for having released our hold. For letting go.

Point of Interest: Do you know how long it takes for wheat to grow from seed?

No? Me neither. "Alexa, how long does it take..."

I'm just messing with those of you watching from home. The answer is 7-8 months. (Unless you're playing Minecraft. Then it's about 60 minutes.)

As it turns out, to fully observe Shmita, we need to have not just ONE year of faith that there will be enough to sustain us, it's more like TWO. 2 years before we might feel confident again that we are back in control.

So I'm happy to announce that THIS YEAR, 5782, marks the beginning of a Shmita year. This is the moment we didn't know we'd been waiting for.

In a period of time, when our faith is stretched and we feel depleted. When we are asked to hold on just a few more months. This is the perfect year to glean wisdom from the practice of Shmita.

Lesson #1: Embrace Disruption

According to the Torah, Shmita is not just an agricultural rest, it is an economic reset. In the Shmita year, all debts are to be forgiven. If you got in over your head. If you can't break out of the cycle of poverty. You get a chance to restart.

Luckily, God does not wait for us to wake up and acknowledge how far afield we have gone.

Rather, since Revelation at Mt. Sinai, God commanded that every 7 years, we would rest, reset and redistribute resources. In other words, we would make economic disruption and societal reorganization, a spiritual practice. So, with apologies to President Biden, the White House was not the first to embrace upheaval and ask us to build back better.

Rather than see the time between now and the "end" of Covid as a wasteland of deferred vacations, a graveyard of emails apologizing for changing plans, or a time we are simply

tolerating until we arrive at the real finish line, in 5782, THIS can be the space for disruption and reinvention. We can be actors rather than ones who are acted upon.

Lesson #2: Widen the Lens

With apologies to those in the industry, the rabbi is about to use a movie metaphor: Shmita can teach us to widen the lens so that we see we are NOT the sole actor in the story of our lives.

In the book of Deuteronomy, God says to the Israelites: Be careful when you come into the land that I God am giving to you. In the euphoria of arrival and your quick successes, the defeat of your enemies, the fertility of your flocks, the rain watering your fields...you'll soon forget My role in bringing you here.

You'll get haughty. You'll remember yourselves as the Lead Actor. You'll look around and say aloud "I alone did THIS." And you'll be wrong.

God's fear was that as we retold the story of our lives, we would forget all that God did for us (let alone the support we received from family and friends) and convince ourselves that we alone were responsible for what we see before us.

In truth, this is not about God's ego. This is about the damage we do to ourselves when we believe it is only thanks to our individual strength, fortitude and wisdom that we achieve success. Because when things don't go the way we want, we sometimes shoulder the responsibility and forget to look for help. We forget that we are inextricably linked to family, friends, community, and, according to the Torah, God.

So, every so often, God wants us to step back in order to see the bigger picture.

That forced-step-back is called Shmita.

If we allow it, Shmita enters our lives every 7 years, and demands we release our grip from what we think we own, what we think we control, and what we think we have earned...and instead surrender:

The land and its produce? Belong to God
 Our money given out on loan? God's.
 All of our material successes? You guessed it, God's.

In 5782, we can make the choice to shift the focus from one of individual accomplishment, acquisition and entrepreneurship, to one of community, faith, and collective responsibility, which provides a FAR more sustainable model than the trope of the "self-made man" - for us and for future generations.

As Esau McCaulley writes: “The pandemic has reminded us that life is more than what we do. It is about whom we spend our lives with. We cannot hug a career or laugh with a promotion. We are made for friendship, love and community.” (*We Weren't Happy Before the Pandemic, Either* - The New York Times, Aug. 21, 2021)

Returning to the world as it was is NOT our goal. Rather, it's time to build the world as we want it to be, not just for ourselves, our families and loved ones, but for others, as well. We still have time.

Rather than sigh and say, “It's not over yet,” with a tone of resignation, what if we said, “It's not over yet!” with the resolve of an Israelite connected to a 7 year-cycle of rebirth and reorganization?

The additional months before us are an opportunity not an obstacle.

This. Story. Is. Not. Over. Yet.

Shana Tova.