

Food For Thought (Shmita 5775)

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(2021 NOTE)

Just as the covid-19 pandemic begins (in wealthy nations) to abate, we welcome the return of the sabbatical year – a.k.a. *shmita*, meaning “radical release.”

Across the last shmita cycle (six to eight years ago), this series of Adat Shalom sermons sought to suffuse **shmita-consciousness** within our community (see examples elsewhere and more great resources at www.hazon.org/shmita). Today, shmita’s themes – like preparing for and being resilient through periodic disruptions to our normal ways of being! – are newly **resonant**, following the coronavirus’ death and dislocation.

Stepping into the new shmita year of **5782**, perhaps these messages from last time can serve as a primer -- and inspire us to make maximal modern meaning from this returning religious rite. See the full series at <https://adatshalom.net/learn/rabbi-freds-teachings/shmita/>.

Blessings, all...

How’s that early erev Rosh Hashana dinner now sitting?! It’s stewing in your belly, now as life-giving nourishment, after being tastily imbibed. Ya feeling good?! Digestion is a miracle. *Food* is a miracle.

To check that food is a theme relevant to every single one of us, please raise your hand if you didn’t eat anything today. _____. Good. (We’re not talking tonight about food insecurity, and the many not here who *would* have raised their hands – but let’s not forget them, either).

Our Erev Rosh Hashanah service is now back in our spiritual home – there’s enough room for us, here – *because* so many others enjoy staying in their home tonight, or visiting others’ homes, for holiday meals. Good for them. And good for us, who both eat *and* pray – I like it here – you?!

So: Have you ever tried to dine with a culinary stick-in-the-mud, a real anti-gastronome? Like, you suggest Thai, and they say “no, that’s like Chinese, and I had chow mein last Thursday.” Oy: Thai isn’t Chinese; chow mein isn’t Chinese; and what do 1.3 billion Chinese eat, 20 meals a week, besides noodles and veggies on Thursday?!

As I started to noodle [it won’t be the last pun!] on tonight’s sermon subject — one I think about quite often, especially if it involves chocolate, garlic, or hot sauce – I recalled that Rabbi Sid gave a sermon about food, a few Kol Nidreis ago.¹ And it was great – he explored “how we

¹ This is Rabbi Sid Schwarz, Adat Shalom’s founding rabbi. I endorse, and include here, what he called his “concrete, 3-point action plan for every one of you,” which was:

1. Change your food buying habits so as to give preference to locally grown produce and cut back on the eating of animals in favor of that which grows from the earth.

bridge the gap between our appetites and what we know to be good for ourselves and our world.” Four years ago he covered vegetarianism, conscious eating, over-consumption – key topics, all – so I don’t have to.

See, I’ve been at this for 17 years now, average three ‘big’ Hi-Ho sermons a year, and I’ve not yet narrowly duplicated a theme (at least knowingly!) – as if food for thought, once dished out, can’t be re-tasted for decades. But no, we *can* revisit; *can* hear things afresh; can enjoy a good meal similar to one a few days (or years) ago.

Though it’s been ‘only’ four years since *an* Adat Shalom clergy member gave *a* food Sermon at *a* High Holy service – sounds like a game of Clue; “it was Hazzan Rachel, in the Wheaton auditorium, with the challah” (!) – I hope you’ll trust that this *won’t* be just like the Chinese you ate last Thursday. No: Judaism has a lot to say about food. *Jews* have a *lot* to say about food!

On Yom Kippur, we fast. On Rosh Hashana, we EAT! Beyond apples in honey, we crack open pomegranates to chew their seeds — and to count ‘em (close to 613!) (some even sip pometinis ;-). Last week, in Torah School, my daughter Sara learned of a tradition to have a whole cooked fish at the Rosh Hashana table – head, eyeballs, mouth, gills intact – to celebrate the *Rosh (Head)* of the new year. This week, my wife Minna was thrilled to find at the grocery numerous fruits she’d never (not just since last year, but EVER) eaten before, for the traditional ritual of saying *shehechianu* over new fruits at the Rosh Hashana table.

Some Rosh Hashanah / food connections include brisket, chicken, gefilte fish. I was recently online with a bunch of Jewish vegetarian activists (no, really? Me?) about plans for Rosh Hashana meals, and the symbolism of foods we were choosing. The thread took place with the shared understanding that THIS Rosh Hashana – tonight, at sunset an hour ago! – we enter into a most significant year, the last in a seven-year cycle. It’s so special, it has three names: the *shvi’it*, seventh; *shnat shabbaton*, sabbatical year; and *shnat shmitta*, year of release: release from debt; release from agrarian labor for everyone; release for slaves, for good; and release for the land itself, source of our food.

One fellow wrote:² We [use] various foods mentioned in halakhic texts as *simanim* (symbols) of the year ahead we wish to have / create... leeks, pomegranate, beets, dates,

2. Try to institute a regular sacred meal at least once a week. Try to make it coincide with Shabbat if at all possible. And if you already have a tradition of a regular sacred meal, see if you can’t do it twice as often.

3. Cut back on your consumption—food, driving, clothes, consumer goods. Not because you can’t afford it but because it does not improve your life and it harms the planet. Our ancestors left a corner of their fields for the poor. The act symbolized the Jewish view that you don’t have to consume everything that is available to you. **Sharing with the poor acknowledges that wealth is determined not by what we take for ourselves but by what we give over to those who have less. I also have come to believe that simplifying our lives by cutting back on consumption is the meaning of the famous verse by the prophet Micah: “What does the Lord requires of you? Only to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with God.”**

² The following are taken, with only light adaptation, from a dialogue on the Shamayim V’Aretz Institute googlegroup (for Jewish vegan/vegetarian activists), founded by Rabbi Shmuly Yanklowitz. My thanks to Shmuly, a

[etc]. In lieu of the tradition to eat a sheep's head, we serve other "heads," like lettuce. We also make up our own *simanim*, e.g.: Greens - for a greener year, Peas - for peace."

Jessica said, "I'll be making seitan brisket again this year. My "meat-and-potatoes" father even loves it!"

Yaaqov, a long-time West Bank settler who backs greater Israel, governed by halacha – not someone I usually have much overlap with, but shmita makes unique connections! – had a great one: "**Chocolate, of course!!** ... שוקולד (*shoqolad*) is the Hebrew.... ש I set aside; it could mean "that" or "which." Then it hit me: קנר (*Quf/Lamed/Dalet*) is the root used for typing. להקליד (*lehaqlid*) means "to type"; מקלדת (*migledeth*) is "keyboard." From this, I came up with שונהיה מוקלדים בספר החיים (*she'nihyeh muqladim b'sefer hahayim*) [*the same 4 consonants in a row, sh'ko'lad*], "**May we be typed into the Book of Life!**""

A woman I admire on the *other* end of the political spectrum had the most touching entry: "I would imagine some mallow on the [shmita] seder plate. Tasked with stewarding the land differently this coming year, and studying alternative uses of perennial plants that grow locally (different mallows are widely available)...it would be powerful to celebrate a symbol of difference, and invite our communities to think about and pray for a Sabbatical from the bloodshed. A Sabbatical from fighting over the Land, and for the Land. ...Mallow is a perennial that many Palestinians harvest as a staple (prepared like a spinach), and many Israelis weed out of their gardens to make room for other crops. It's a perennial that appears widely and doesn't require much to survive. Kind of like hope. Hope that the Land can and will be stewarded differently in the future, by and for all its inhabitants."

In the Eretz, the Land of Israel tonight, religious Jews are focused on how to follow --or, which legal loopholes to use to not follow--the biblical prohibition on agricultural cultivation or commerce during this shmita year. This time around, more so than seven years ago, quite a few religious Jews seek to fulfill the mitzvah, rather than find legal ways around it. It's a major topic in all of Israel, as a curio, but also as it affects the trade balance with Jordan, and the price at the shuk. Within the religious community, and outside it³ -- among Jews in Israel, and now the Diaspora too -- this shmitta year is being taken seriously.

Regulars here, or to other communities engaged in the big shmita schmooze, know this. And they know that Shmita is a tough ritual concept to pin down: descriptions of it, including my own previous attempts,⁴ are kinda all over the map.

treasured colleague, and to those quoted here, two whose permission to cite by name I had not secured by sermon-time, plus to Jessica Adler (who cites the seitan brisket recipe at http://www.myjewishlearning.com/culture/2/Food/Ashkenazic_Cuisine/Germany/Brisket/seitan-brisket.shtml), and Yaaqov a.k.a. Esser Agaroth (see <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/author/yaaqov-ben-yehudah/>).

³ Linking the practice in Israel with the global conceptual conversation is the great work of Einat Kramer and Shmita Yisraelit (see for instance <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/israelis-want-an-israeli-shmita/>).

⁴ This refers to my 2013 Day One Rosh HaShanah sermon, <http://www.adatshalom.net/component/content/article/13-cms-pages-2/264-shmita>.

Is Shmitta a legal/halachic concern, what's cool and what isn't, one year in seven? Yes, says tradition. Is it an agricultural question, about food systems more generally? For sure. Is it economic, monetizable, touching on little questions like the value of things, or how cooperative or private our approach to money should be? Oh, yeah. And shmita touches too on ecology,⁵ social justice, personal resilience, family and community life, the spiritual realm, and much more.

Crazy. Fascinating. Potentially repellant in its multi-facetedness; easily derided for its inapplicability today; yet potentially deep and profound, modeling the interconnection of everything and everyone – proof of Torah's continuing relevance, when viewed not literally but lovingly. Shmita is kind of a microcosm of Judaism as a whole – there's a high bar of entry to the good stuff, but it's oh so worth it.

Each facet is good -- we'll nibble at each of these angles, take bite-sized pieces, throughout the year. Which brings us back to tonight's subject: food. More precisely, "Food for Thought".

Food, as the basis of shmita which is itself complex, is itself tied in with every other question, from spirituality to sustainability. Tomorrow we'll focus on resilience, and in so doing look at Marge Piercy's "To Be Of Use" – on your handout, about loving real, enduring work. One line, end of 2nd stanza comes to mind to show the interconnections – "when the harvest must come in" – in the shmita year, there is no commercial harvest, and we approach food quite differently -- all because, as in this poem, workers are to be respected, and not overtaxed. Same with the land: harvests get less sustainable, and in time our food supply threatened, with today's topsoil-degrading, oil-dependent,⁶ over-chemicalized commercial agriculture.⁷ We must release the land – shmita it! – and release the workers, too, giving them time to cultivate their own resilience and pursue their own passions. And, interconnectedly, all this is a religious precept.

⁵ Vis-à-vis sustainable agriculture and other ecological commitments, it's worth noting that Adat Shalom is ahead of the curve. Our onsite organic Mishnah Garden is sustainable, small-scale, zero-food-miles-traveled agriculture. Our new shmita fruit tree grove pushes us toward perennials, and will soon feed us, and locals in need. Our Sacred Grounds give habitat and food for our non-human neighbors, not just one year in seven, but always. Plus, our shmita-esque onegs are community-building, spiritual, not fancy but blessed in abundance, a joy to partake in. Our roof's solar panels literally *reflect* a shmita-conscious approach to energy: small-scale, local, communal, carbon-free. And many of us have put solar panels on *our* roofs, gardens in *our* yards, since seeing it at shul – furthering the shmita ideal. And other shuls are emulating our own 'best practices.' Be proud, people!

⁶ Speaking of carbon: Just yesterday, over a hundred heads of state discussed climate change, first time ever – and two days before that, five Adat Shalomers joined tens of thousands of Jews, hundreds of thousands of humans, in Manhattan, marching for sustainability. Amazing. We're part of a movement. Is this about food? You betcha: animal husbandry alone accounts for more anthropogenic greenhouse gases than all the world's cars, trucks, buses, boats, trains and planes *combined*. Is this about shmita? For sure: sufficiency (sova, enoughness), sustainability, equity – that's shmita, and that's the climate movement. Shmita activist and Jewish environmental educator extraordinaire Nati Passow, of the Jewish Farm School and Hazon, just drew the same connections with Bill McKibben – see <http://feastforward.org/>.

⁷ And what would we do if modern agriculture gave out? Dust bowl, peak oil, biblical locusts, a mighty solar flare, whatever, and we'd have no more Chilean grapes in December, no Florida oranges, Wisconsin cheese, Argentine beef, Central Valley chard... What would we eat? How would we live? More on that tomorrow, "shmita as resilience"....

Underscoring the religious and spiritual side of shmita, I'm grateful to Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin, a dear Baltimore-based colleague: she expanded an established tradition of symbolic foods at the Rosh Hashana table, into a full shmita seder, for Rosh Hashana this year (she suggests we use it *every* year, to keep shmita-consciousness and the cycle strong).⁸

Apple slices are spread across a plate to "represent the perennial foods (fruits, nuts and berries) that grow on their own during the shemittah year, and that we gratefully eat at a time when we do not plow, sow, reap or commercially harvest."

This plate, standing for the seven-year cycle, sports "six cups or bowls" for six years of work, and the "six attributes that define the essence of the shemittah year, and a life lived in goodness, sacred striving and delight."

What six edibles, each invoking an attribute, fill these bowls?

Honey—for Sova, Enoughness, Sufficiency. We need not hoard; we're happier when we are content with our lot.

Wine—for Hodaya, Gratitude, teaching us not to take our blessings for granted.

Figs—for Revaya, Abundance: Figs on the same tree "do not ripen all at once, but one by one, each in its own time. They offer abundance without surfeit." Nina Beth's seder has us "Pass around the cup for all to take from it and say: 'In this year of shemittah, may we recognize abundance and know no waste.'..."

Raisins—for Chesed, Kindness or Generosity, the drive to help one another.

Pomegranate—for Poriyut, Fertility, and the Creativity that comes out of stillness and rest.

And, Dates—for Otzar, the Commons, "Earth's shared resources, owned by none and gifted to all... The stuff of earth and society, natural and cultural, that we share now in our lifetimes, and leave behind for others. Our stories, our knowledge, our goods, our homes, our earth." Lifting up the date, Cardin has us recite: "In this shemittah year, may we know no isolation, no loneliness, no selfishness. May we recognize that we are joined in partnership to the earth, and to one another..."

Honey, fig, date: all *siman*, symbol, foods – just like matza and maror; or various fruits at Tu B'shvat; not unlike the wine or challah at a weekly Shabbat table. They're yummy, *and* they're part of our cultural inheritance – dayeinu! But being symbolic, they're also thought-provoking, even change-inducing. How so?!

With bnai mitzvah students, I often ask them about 'mitzvah': are the mitzvot either ritual or ethical, or might a seemingly arcane ritual rule actually be activist? Well, to eat matza on Pesach is a purely ritual act, just a Jew thing – and, a *just* Jew thing! Why has our people spawned generations of labor leaders and freedom riders and do-gooders, all out of proportion to

⁸ <http://www.ritualwell.org/sites/default/files/Rosh%20Hashanah%20Shemittah%20Seder.pdf>.

the population? Most grew up pointing each year to the matza, saying, “this is the bread of affliction, which our ancestors ate; [now] let all who are hungry come and eat.”

That’s why I love shmita – a seemingly arcane, impossible to implement, complicated set of ritual laws: which, when studied and discussed and creatively riffed on, re-root yet again in our *nefesh Yehudi*, our Jewish soul, that we stand for equity, and freedom – we stand with animals, and the land, and low-wage workers who need their shmita too – we stand for resilience and spirit; for sufficiency, like the figs; for peace, like the mallow; for community, like the dates; for sustainability, like shmita-consciousness itself.

There are countless ways we can connect with each other around this challenging, rewarding concept. I look forward to a year of conversation about it, and of *actions* consonant with it – words and deeds that inform the other six years, and make our whole lives more sacred and sustainable, closing the loop of the full shmita cycle.⁹

Again, Nina Beth’s shmitta seder isn’t just for *this* Rosh Hashana, but every year, for regular reflection throughout the cycle on how well we’re building up our storehouses. The storehouses that matter are not just of wheat and corn and olive oil, as in olden days, but our inner vats of these precious shmita virtues: Enoughness, Gratitude, Abundance, Kindness, Creativity, and appreciating our Shared Resources.

May we find food for thought at every turn. And may *sova* (enoughness), and spirit, and community, and all the blessings of shmita, be ours, in this year of 5775, and far, far beyond. Shanah tovah.

⁹ This time next year we’ll say that, like orange juice – “Shmita: it’s not just for year seven, anymore.”