

Be Prepared: Shmita, Resilience, and Cross-Training

Rabbi Fred Scherlinder Dobb, Adat Shalom, Rosh Hashanah Day One, 2014

(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...

For years, late on Yom Kippur, at Neilah – some may remember it – was this poem, ‘Guilty’, by Pablo Neruda:

I declare myself guilty
of not having
made, with these hands
they gave me,
a broom.
Why didn't I make a broom?
Why was I given hands?

What use have they been
if all I ever did was
watch the stir of the grain,
listen for the wind,
and did not gather straws
still green in the earth
for a broom --
not set the soft stalks to dry
and bind them in a gold bundle --
and did not lash a wooden stick
to the yellow skirt
till I had a broom for the paths?

So it goes.
How did my life
get by
without seeing, and learning,
and gathering and binding
the basic things?
It's too late to deny

I had the time,
the time,
yet the hands were lacking,
so how could I aim
for greatness
if I was never able
to make
a broom,
not one,
not even one?

Show of hands: who’s never made a broom, not one? _____

Who’s never foraged for nuts or berries? Built or used a block and tackle?

Face it: most of us would hardly be ‘survivors’ on reality TV; we’d be voted off that island by round two.

And what of real survivors, like in the Dust Bowl, or partisans in the forest in 1943 – how would we have fared then, we who’ve never made a broom?

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One year ago, in these seats, we introduced this ‘year of release’ (at length!). We’ve learned since of its economic, communal, and spiritual implications, straight out of Exodus, Leviticus (which warns us that either we take shmita seriously, or the land will make up its lost sabbaticals through our exile!), and Deuteronomy.

Last night, we entered it. And at shul we focused on the most basic of its many angles, the agricultural – we watched an arcane ritual turn relevant and activist before our eyes; we rooted key Jewish values in our daily bread.

A year ago, few knew of this notion of giving the earth and workers a year-long break. Now, we’re part of a global movement, inspired by tradition but not cleaving to it, lifting up key ancient values like sustainability, sufficiency, community, and resilience.

Soon after last Rosh Hashana, the seed of today’s reflection was planted, while talking with member Carol Kranowitz, about shmita. She’d recently read, and seen the film, *Defiance*, about partisans in World War Two, and had wondered: what would she (or we, specialists all, these days) do, in the forest? “We can’t all just be paper pushers,” she thought. So she went out, got her old sewing machine fixed, and promptly taught her three grandkids to sew! Now she’s an author-speaker AND seamstress.ⁱ

This conversation was at a shiva, actually – so one shmita notion, that we’re all in this together, and we hold each other, was already being practiced; while raising up a meta-shmita concept—being ready, every seventh year, for business *not* as usual. These teachings implore us to learn and grow, to survive – to be resilient, and ready for anything.

How might we, like Carol, cross-train? Will we learn to sew? Will we at last make that broom?

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Global events of late – ISIL, Ukraine, Gaza, Ebola – could make anyone anxious. Even so, we mostly enjoy mind-boggling affluence and safety – unprecedented in *Jewish* history. But sooner or later, as we know but don’t discuss much, another hurricane Sandy will hit – probably another Dust Bowl, another Great Depression – God forbid (but not unlikely), another 9/11, or worse. What would we do, then?

We’re well equipped for a future that looks much like the recent past. Are we cross-trained for other, tougher futures?

Here in Adat Shalom, we have a small advantage. Through our life-cycle and community life committees, plus informal networks, we link folks together in times of need. Through our listserv, and face-to-face, we share practical advice and information. Ours is a strong community; let’s not take that for granted. Social capital is real.

Still, we are woefully unprepared for “the big one”: the 9.8 earthquake, or asteroid, or (my money’s on) the massive solar flare;ⁱⁱ the next Ebola or influenza outbreak; the known implications of our chemical industry and fossil fuel dependence; the unknown risks of our nano-tech, our bio-tech, our IT systems and all they orchestrate.

We may not always have it as good as we do now; we likely won’t. So -- Be prepared: that’s the shmita message (one of them). Cultivate resilience. Cross-train. Learn to live as if this biblical sabbatical came every seventh year, as if business, transportation, commercial agriculture, *do* grind to a halt, and each community *is* on its own.

Adat Shalom has our Mishna Garden; new shmita orchard; lessons in grinding wheat to make bread – these are a small start toward learning to do things differently. Different, for bible-era farm-hands, was getting to sit around. Different, for white collar folks, is hands-on, tactile, makin’ stuff. Maybe *our* cross-training, our shabbat and sabbatical pastime, is farming! Shmita literally means ‘release’ – are you with me, that most of us need to be ‘released’ from our office chairs and computer screens?! This sermon is here to spring ourselves!

But freedom, release is just part of the picture. We should use that newly-free time, head-space, and heart-space, to cultivate resilience, to build community, to cross-train.

Canning and pickling: key skills in traditional societies (including the indigenous Israelite wisdom behind shmita) – we should do this, too. With Carol the author-speaker-seamstress is Mark, a medical-researcher-tomato-grower. Some of us claim similar mashups: Consultant-canners. Philanthropist-farmers. Faculty - fixer-uppers. But we can all take it further.

One key shmita question is “what *else* do we do well? How resilient are we?”

Conventional wisdom isn’t wrong: Specialization usually helps; divisions of labor tend to be more efficient. But across history, every so often, supply chains snap, bread baskets go empty. Currency becomes worthless, and specialized skill sets irrelevant. All we have then is the earth, each other, our wits, and the skill of our hands.

In *Orion* magazine (a fabulous publication!), Ana Maria Spagna had the foresight to offer “10 Skills to Hone for a Post-Oil Future”.ⁱⁱⁱ We’re not there yet, but the day will come. Cross-training off of her low-tech-low-carbon list adapts us for a globally-warmed future; and as a bonus, going “post-oil by choice,” using these skills now, marginally but meaningfully mitigates the damage.

And on her list are *good* skills! Like **RIGGING**: “Mechanical advantage doesn’t require fuel,” she writes. “A pulley or block and tackle magnifies force, so you can lift heavier loads with less effort... A grip hoist...requires no energy source but your own. You’ll appreciate the addictive magic of this fact when you’ve lifted a thousand-pound footbridge all by your 120-pound self. Believe me.”

Impressive! And we will be impressive, too, if we master pulleys, along with her other strong suggestions: blacksmithing; knot-tying; grafting; houseguest hosting; and more. She might’ve added #11, broom-making. And she might’ve titled her list, ‘shmita skills.’

Be prepared. The shmita way is “the Boy Scouts’ marching song: *Be prepared.*”^{iv} Those earnest scouts, earning merit badges, are in fact cross-training: everyone should start one-match fires; build camp sites; use a compass, a canoe, a tourniquet; tie good knots.

Some, by no means most, of our children know even basic scouting skills, much less blacksmithing or rigging. (Carol’s grandkids sew!). We train kids for the lives we hope or think they’ll lead. They now hone computer skills atop ballet, baseball, math tutoring, and music lessons. Lovely (cushy) things. But in earlier eras (of overt anti-Semitism), they’d have learned boxing. Many of our grandparents and great-parents did, of necessity.

Our people, all people, have had to be prepared to defend themselves. We celebrate the freedom, safety, & pluralism of our sheltered corner of world history. But should we groom those who follow us to thrive *only* in optimal conditions?

This is a tough line of inquiry. But Rosh HaShanah, our festival of renewal, is the right time to ask such tough questions.

America’s creative classes (most of us) outsource this nation’s defense to, mostly, those of lower-income and fewer options. Likewise, we’ve largely outsourced construction, and upkeep of home and workplace, to so-called “unskilled” (often horribly underpaid) labor. We’ve outsourced the basics.

Pablo Neruda? Forget teaching our kids to *make* a broom; some hardly know how to use one.

How should we “be prepared,” in a world where we’ve outsourced all these basics—food, water, sources of medicines—to weak supply chains, rube-goldberg like systems on a global scale, all dependent on fossil fuel, based on old data and outmoded paradigms, with little accountability, ill-prepared for disaster?!

In that world, our world, “be prepared” means “know how to do, and how to make.” Shmita calls us to hard, sacred work. In another favorite poem (middle of your handout, second stanza), “To Be Of Use”, Marge Piercy writes:

“I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart, / who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience, / who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward, / who do what has to be done, again and again. /

I want to be with people who submerge / in the task, who go into the fields to harvest / and work in a row and pass the bags along, / who are not parlor generals and field deserters / but move in a common rhythm / when the food must come in / or the fire be put out.”

Piercy celebrates workers not in it to get rich, but to help out, to be in it together. Some of the most creative shmita thinking today, which we’ll explore over time in this new year, is on cooperative economics: turning suburban communities into moshavim; sharing material goods; swapping services; teaching each other new skills; moving, with Marge, ‘in a common rhythm.’

We can't each learn all the skills needed if things really ground to a halt. But enter the power of community: among us, all together, are an abundance of skills and talents. Together, we have what it takes to tackle whatever lies ahead.

That's how, already now, we get through those tough times we all eventually face, some of us right now: when 'resilience' isn't for a hypothetical future but your very next step, one foot before the other. We hold each other; we share our strength with those in pain; and cultivate each other's resilience.

We pull together nicely, now, when needed. We could stretch still further -- to learn new, truly useful skills; and, to expand 'community' to include yet more diversity, of mind-sets, and skill-sets.

As Piercy's poem concludes, "the thing worth doing well done / has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident / Greek amphoras for wine or oil, / Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums / but you know they were made to be used. / The pitcher cries for water to carry / and a person for work that is real." Though it's one modern Jewish eco-feminist writing, she's channeling Psalm 90 – "*uma'aseh yadeinu kon'nehu*, the works of our hands, may that endure!" Our brooms; our co-ops; our gardens – may they endure.

You may have noticed that some shmita logic is 'get ready for bad stuff' – yet we've moved from sticks to carrots, from doom and gloom to positive, joyous, enduring reasons to be prepared. In that (concluding!) spirit, on the handout, Joel Pett's editorial cartoon:^v There's a crowd at a "Climate Summit";^{vi} the speaker expounds on "green jobs, energy independence, livable cities, clean water & air, healthy kids, etc"; and some angry guy in back says, "What if it's a big hoax and we create a better world for nothing?"!

So: What IF? What if we learn essential skills; build stronger relationships and networks; encourage our most generous impulses; get off the business-as-usual treadmill, in preparation for worst-case scenarios that never happen? What if we're all better off... anyway?

Really: Cross-training can be fun. Learn mechanics; save money! Grow your own; it tastes better! Knitting and quilting circles are social! Seriously: Unplug the TV, put down that mobile device, get out there and do some "work that is real", for someone else while you're at it – you'll feel better; you'll live longer; and, you'll **be prepared**.

How traditionally Jewish, yet radical, we can be, if we learn from Shmita to stretch ourselves; be resilient; and work together.

Be prepared, my friends, to be of use: our adventure is just beginning. Shana tova. And shmita tova.

ⁱ Carol was good enough to follow up by email, where she cited Nechama Tec's book, *Defiance*, to further make the point: "Tec says that among the Forest Jews, those who had arms and practical skills had high prestige. Others were placed into a less valued category disdainfully called "malbush," a Hebrew term for clothes. A survivor says: "The intelligentsia was down, we were depressed. We were not worth much, they

made fun of us that we were malbushim. We were not fit for this kind of life. We had no experience with horses, nothing. The rest, the majority of the people, were uneducated, close to the soil ..." The ones who could "do" were at the top of the heap.

Carol went on: "Well, I can do, and I can teach, so after reading "Defiance," I got busy. In order not to be considered worthless when we flee to the Forest, I took out my sewing machine, had it repaired, and invited our three granddaughters, Eden, Madeline and Leah, to come over to learn to sew. One at a time, they chose fabric they liked, cut out sewing patterns, studied the directions, and, "all by themselves," made outfits for their American Girl dolls. They worked hard, and it took a long time, and they produced lovely, lasting things. Eden made a matching outfit for herself. Passing along this sewing skill to little girls who are eager to learn was highly satisfying -- nothing finer than these one-on-one experiences. So now our granddaughters are closer to being useful in the Forest, too." (private email, 9/13/13)

ⁱⁱ Thanks to Dr. Kevin Forbes of Catholic University, and our own Dr. Steve Brody, for background on this real threat.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Orion* offers poetic takes on nature and culture, printing the most perceptive, spiritual, eloquent authors around. This is from the May/June 2013 issue.

^{iv} The reference is to Tom Lehrer's lyrics, which are amusing, but insufficiently family-friendly to be quoted at length here. Still, in his timeless jesting at the ever-earnest scouts, he has one great sarcastic High Holy Day piece of advice: "Be prepared, and be careful not to do / your good deeds, when there's no one watching you..."



^v Joel Pett, USA Today, 7 December, 2009.

^{vi} Not to be confused with the People's Climate March this past Sunday, with at least six Adat Shalomers joining tens of thousands of other Jews, out of some 400,000 total, in creating awareness and a sense of urgency around this greatest moral and social (as well as political, economic, and environmental) issue of our time.