

THE VALUE OF REST

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Shmita is the name for a yearlong period meant to be observed once every seven years that would provide rest to both people and land. Aspects of Shmita are practiced today in some communities (in fact, the idea of a “Sabbatical” comes from Shmita). Still, the overall sense of providing a genuine year of rest is absent.

In Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook’s [Shabbat HaAretz](#), he expounds upon his vision of how a Shmita ethic can influence the character of an entire people. As you read about his vision in the excerpts below, think about your own relationship to rest. Use the questions connected to each excerpt as an opportunity to reflect on the value of rest in your life and the possibilities that might emerge from deepening a Shmita ethic in our society.

PART 1: A WORLD WITHOUT SHMITA

Both the book of Leviticus and Rav Kook describe what a world without Shmita observance looks like. Read the quotes below and reflect on to what extent these descriptions shed any light on contemporary environmental problems.

The verse below is a prophesy of what is said will happen when the people fail to observe the laws of Shmita:

Leviticus 26:43

For the land shall be forsaken of them, making up for its *Shmita* years by being desolate of them, while they atone for their iniquity.

וְהָאָרֶץ תַּעֲזֹב מֵהֶם וְתָרַץ אֶת שְׁבִתֹתֶיהָ
בְּהִשָּׁמָה מֵהֶם וְהֵם יִרְצוּ אֶת עֲוֹנֵם יַעַן וּבִיַּעַן
בְּמִשְׁפָּטֵי מֵאֶסֶו וְאֶת חֻקֹּתַי גָּעְלָה נַפְשָׁם:

Rav Kook on what happens when the Jewish people loses spiritual awareness:

“Looking superficially at their undeveloped and wild environment made them forget their inner greatness. The yearning for a refined, godly life slipped from their hearts, as did the sense of joyful strength that one has when life is clothed in deeds. Clear, simple, pure-hearted understanding ceased, and the light of justice was dimmed. In its place came the coarse imagination of a lawless society, and the dumb, evil delusions of idolatry, with all its attendant abominations” (Rav Kook, [Shabbat HaAretz, Introduction](#))

1. How does land respond to being overworked? In what ways does land make up for the lack of rest and restoration that Shmita years were meant to protect?
2. What are you like when you are overworked? How does it impact the people around you? The community around you?
3. Can you think of a time when you looked superficially at your environment? What caused you to look more superficially? When do you look more deeply?
4. What might Rav Kook mean by “when life is clothed in deeds?”
5. What are the organizations and movements that are trying to fight lawlessness and the idolatry of environmental degradation around you? What are they doing to try to maintain an ‘undimmed’ view of justice? What challenges do they face?

PART 2: ENVISIONING A WORLD WITH SHMITA

Health

The Torah says that food growing freely during Shmita, without farming, is “for you to eat” ([Lev. 25:6](#)). The Talmud unpacks this: “for you to eat—but not for your trade” ([Avodah Zarah 62a](#)). The text below is an exegetical interpretation by Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook on what else this verse implies.

“God will bless the fruit of the land ‘for you to eat’ and not your loss. Human beings will return to a state of natural health, so that they will not need healing for sicknesses which mostly befall us when the balance of life is destroyed and our lives are distanced from the rhythms of nature; ‘for you to eat,’ but not to make medicine and not to use as bandages.” ([Shabbat HaAretz, Introduction](#))

1. Rest is necessary for not only our health, but also for the balance in our lives. How does rest impact your ability to learn, to work, and to care for the people you love?
2. What kinds of insights are you able to access when you are fully rested?

Beauty and Adornment

“The Shmita and the Jubilee will adorn her, and the land will respond to the people, with all the spiritual goodness that is within her, attuned to the joy of shmita and the Jubilee.” ([Shabbat HaAretz, Introduction](#))

1. What might it mean for land to be adorned? Have you ever been to a place that felt adorned? When you imagine an adorned land, what do you imagine it looking like?
2. Shmita and the Jubilee are both periods of rest that are described here as adornment. Do you associate rest with adornment? Why or why not?

Rav Kook associates Shmita with the following verse from Psalms:

“The pasturelands distill it;
The hills are girded with joy.
The meadows are clothed with flocks, the valleys mantled with grain;
They raise a shout, they break into song.” ([Psalms 65:13-14](#))

1. In what ways does his idea of an adorned time and land resonate with yours? In what ways do they differ?”
2. Can justice be beautiful?

Inner Life and Freedom

“Life during the shmita year is guided by the natural, inner desire for goodness and justice, equality, and calm, which God has planted within the nation. The people did not become like this by imitating something external; it is part of its nature. When this inner life starts to reveal itself in all its purity, it does not stand still. It is expansive and generous, seeking the power to act and to influence its surroundings.” ([Shabbat HaAretz, Introduction](#))

1. How does the vision of rest in this text challenge other views of rest that you have encountered?
2. What is your relationship to your inner self like in your daily life? Is it different during weekends or if you are on a vacation?
3. Do you, yourself, believe that the inner life, when given space to rest, “does not stand still,” but, rather, is “seeking the power to act and to influence its surroundings”? What have you observed or experienced that has influenced your belief?

“This freedom does not erupt like some volcano; it emerges gradually from the higher holiness. It is not a radical exception to the regular social order but flows from within it, nurtured by the life of the shorter, preceding periods until, reinforced by the revelation of our choices for good, it has the power to repair past injustices.” ([Shabbat HaAretz, Introduction](#))

1. Do you believe that rest and freedom are “a radical exception to the regular social order”? In what ways?
2. Can you imagine a world where freedom and rest flowed more readily through all of life’s activities rather than as a “radical exception”? What might some elements of that culture be?
3. How can you contribute to a culture that honors the sanctity of rest in an ongoing, unexceptional way? What obstacles do you face?

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