



The Sabbatical Year 5775

Temple Isaiah – *Rabbi Zoë Klein*

The new year, which begins tonight, is the start of the sabbatical year. Every seven years we are to let the land lay fallow. Tonight begins that year. The sabbatical year is argued over by some, misunderstood or considered within too narrow a frame by others, ignored by most. Nigel Savage wrote, “The provisions of [the sabbatical year] offer wisdom in relation to a considerable number of the most critical issues of our time.” Tonight I invite you to join me, as we walk into this sabbatical year together.

When the land lays fallow
You are standing on hallowed ground.

Ground that has not recently been scraped by the blade,
Raked by the combine.
Ground upon which dead leaves and rotting apple cores
Reintegrate with mulch and manure,

Land tunneled with worms and moles
And burrowing beetles
And a tangled macramé of roots.
A nutritive hummus,

Sopping and riddled with muddy pocks,
Sluiced by storms, then baked
In sizzling sun-nectar,
Soil sucking up the scorching sky,

Communing with stars and glancing fireflies
in the cool, clear night, clothed in space,
studded with dew,
Effervescing with the dawn.



When the land lays fallow
You are standing on hallowed ground,
Crisscrossed with animal tracks,
Impressed with the footprints of the free.

Nibbled rinds, acorns and pecked plums
Bleeding syrup. Passion fruit melts blushing
Into a compost of moss and spongy oak.
Bristly antennae taste the air

Which hums and buzzes and carols and trills
And teems with sticky spores and burrs
And pollen dust and exhalations
And diamond dots of air
And tall unruly grasses.

Torah tells us that every seventh year,
In Israel, we are to let the land lay fallow,
We are to let the land have a Sabbath to the Lord
For a year, moving through its seasons,

Mama earth bearing her brown and naked shoulder
Unmolested; her clay regenerating with summery sap,
Tickled with skittering critters and
Tiny rainbows refracted through frosty glints.

Tonight begins that sabbatical year.
5775 is a sabbatical year,
In Hebrew it is called *Sh'mita*.
S'hmita in Hebrew literally means "release."



In Exodus it is written:

You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having been yourselves strangers in the Land of Egypt. Six years shall you sow your land and gather in your yield. But in the seventh year, you shall let it rest and lie fallow. Let the needy among your people eat of it, and when they leave, let the wild beasts eat. (Exod. 23:10-12)

In Leviticus it is written:

The Lord said to Moses at Mount Sinai,
Speak to the Israelites and say to them,
“When you enter the land I am going to give you,
The land itself must observe a Sabbath to the Lord.

For six years sow your fields,
And for six years prune your vineyards
And gather their crops.
But in the seventh year,

The land is to have a sabbatical rest,
A Sabbath to the Lord.
Do not reap what grows
Or harvest the grapes of your untended vines.

Whatever the land yields
During the Sabbath year
Will be food for you – for yourself,
Your male and female servants,



And the hired worker
And temporary resident

As well as for your livestock
And the wild animals in your land.” (Lev. 25:1-7)

And in Deuteronomy:

At the end of every seven years
You must cancel debts.
There need be no poor among you...
If only you fully obey the Lord. (Deut. 15:1-11)

You are standing on sacred ground
Crisscrossed with animal tracks,
Impressed with footprints of the free.

Male and female servants,
Hired and temporary residents,
Livestock and wild animals,
Unburdened by the yoke, by debt,

A giant societal reset, a reminder that
All of this abundance was never our property.
The land, the wealth, it all comes
From the lush banks of the River of Life.

It is not to be accumulated, wadding up
The arteries of the spirit.
It is to be channeled through us,
Shared with the wild and the tame.



The fortunate child
And the unfettered refuse
Are equally welcome
To the yield of your untended acres.

Dear current resident,
You are hereby summoned
To a septennial reunion of earthlings.

Dear terrestrial,
Your perfect presence is requested
At the great leveling of rich and poor,
An agrarian banquet for every beau and brute,
Beast and belle,

You are immaculately invited
To a year-long economic ceasefire.

For six years you have been sowing your fields,
Pruning your vineyards
Gathering your crops
As if the land belongs to you.

This night you step onto fallow ground,
You are asked to remember
That you belong to the land.

That you are formed of clay
And ocean salinity
And golden spirals
And lightning.



Tonight begins the sabbatical year.
We are all going on sabbatical.

What a radical vision our ancients had,
That society should lower their material standard
Together for a year, giving up the grind,
All produce free. All loans forgiven.

What a command, you shall not oppress a stranger,
You were strangers in the Land of Egypt,
You shall be stranger to any land no more.
Rather, you shall be intimate with the land.

What trust would be required in God
That the grain of the sixth year would be sufficient
To last through the seventh, and eighth as well,
When the land is replanted.

What a challenge for the twenty-first century.

The sabbatical year is not a suggestion,
It's a commandment.
How it is to be observed in first world Israel
Has been fiercely debated.

Some say the command can only be fulfilled
When all Jews are living in the land,
And until such time, like the sacrificial system,
It's not applicable.

Some create legal fictions,
Selling the land temporarily to Arabs.



There are even sabbatical robots,
Operating remotely.

The land may not literally be resting,
But at least you're not working it with your hands.
Some *kibbutzim* rotate their land,
So fields take their sabbaticals at different times.

I lived in Israel during a sabbatical year,
There were mounds of free produce
On the sides of the roads.
My orthodox landlady replaced
All the windowbox gardens
With plastic flowers and plants
Which needed no watering.

Taking utopian theory
And making it practical reality
Is no easy feat.

Our people's return to the Land of Israel
After thousands of years is a great challenge.

To move from being a people longing for a homeland
To a people with actual power and policies,
Army and enemies,
Commerce, constitution,
Imports, exports, expectations.



The least worry, perhaps, is how
To observe the biblically mandated sabbatical.

However, the sabbatical is as much
For the people who live on the land
As it is for the land itself.

And we arrive at the threshold
Of this new year depleted, despairing,
As distant from earth as we are from God,
Hovering purgatorially in digital in-betweenness.

Torah knows, we need this sabbatical.

We belong to the land,
And the land of Israel remembers us
As farmers and laborers.
It doesn't recognize these new herders of hi-tech.

Still, tonight begins the sabbatical year,
And the land – recently scraped by the blade,
Tunneled with terrorism,
Riddled with katusha pocks,

Sizzling under the scorching eye
Of a media blind at times to all but an Israel
Of ancient ruins and modern rubble –
Needs its sabbatical.

A year of reintegrating the dead and rotting cores
And all that stinking manure,
Into some nutritive generative compost.



Knesset Member Ruth Calderon of the party *Yesh Atid*
Gathered ministers, advisers and activists
To discuss the sabbatical year.
Left, right, center,
religious, and secular
Spoke of initiatives to enact the values
of *shmita*.

The environmental minister proposed
Partial moratorium on fishing in Lake Kinneret
To allow replenishment of exhausted stock.

The welfare ministry announced proposals
To raise 10,000 Israeli families
From the curse of crippling debt.

The education minister declared that learning
About the sabbatical year would be
Part of the curriculum for all schools.

How will we enter the sabbatical year?

We have been watching unfold such horrors
On the land, summer-of-rain-of-rockets,
And the so-called Islamic State
that tsunami of swords,
Knifing through the necks of the defenseless

While Iran quietly orders and organizes
Its centrifuges and uranium.

Hopelessly, we watch this poison



Seep substrata, rupturing with magma and ash,
In Syria, Congo, Nigeria, Ukraine.

It's been a violent year.
It's been a frightening year.
Flares of anti-Semitism around the world.
How do we respond?

Tonight we begin a sabbatical.
We return to that tangled macramé of our roots,
The nutritive soil of Torah and tradition,
Which tells us that sabbatical

Is not reserved only for the academic.
The year of learning, reflection, regenerating,
But for farmers, and servants,

And hired workers, rich and poor,
The elite and the untouchables,
Livestock, wild animals,
Moss, oak, tall grasses
And diamond dots of earth.

A societal reset for everyone,
For everything through which
The River of Life flows.
A return, a great return.

Tonight begins our sabbatical.

Our *shmita*, our year of release.
Release from debilitating fear,



Release from profanity,
Release from hatred, judging,
Release from being held hostage
By monsters with machetes and machine guns,
Axes to grind and youtube accounts.
Release from media mania-making,
Release from the bloated belief
That we are bigger than God,
When there are among us those
Who are no better than beasts,
Whose brutality surpasses beasts,
Because beasts don't behead and build
Bully regimes.
Release from terror,
Release from the ghosts of the past,
Release from anxiety over the future,
Release from wall-building.
Release from dishonor.

This is our sabbatical year,
Our year of release,
Release into a radical old way of thinking,
Release into compassion,
Release into mercy, into respecting the world
And all her citizens,
Release into godliness, goodness,
Inner growth.
Release into hope in the future,
Release into dignity and worth.
Release into partnership with God,
Release into Oneness,
Release into the great equalizing,



The enlightened knowing
That we belong to the land,
And to the land we will return,
A great return, every one of us
Embraced into the open arms of mama earth,
And into the heartbeat of everything.

Release from the corporate ladder
Of broken backs,
Release into the corporeal truth
That we are clumped of clay and salt
And firebolted into awareness.

Tonight begins our sabbatical.
Our year of Shabbat.

Torah tells us that God finished God's work
On the seventh day.
But, if God finished the work on the seventh day,
Doesn't that mean God worked on Shabbat?

The great commentator Rashi says yes,
In six days, God created the world.
On Shabbat, God was actively
Assessing, contemplating, integrating.

For six days a week we engage in
The creation of the outer world,
on Shabbat we engage in
The creation of the inner world. (Lamm)



For six days, we focus on having more,
On Shabbat we focus on being more. (Heschel)

For six days we are involved
In the world of existence.
On Shabbat we are involved
In the world of essence.

The seventh year will be a Sabbath to the Lord.
It is not about rest, exactly,
It is about cessation from our outer work

To focus on our inner work,
To take all of the rinds of disappointment,
The emotional storms, the nectar of new love,
The fruit of our passion,

Our bleeding syrup, the muddy mess,
Crisscrossed with experiences,
Failures and successes,
Our unruliness, our blushing,

To mulch it all up, desegregate
And amalgamate it with all of the
Crap we've collected,

All of our manure; turn it into
The regenerative nutritive hummus
That restores the fruitfulness of our hands,
The agility and fertility of our minds.

Release from our enslavements,



Addictions, exhaustion, caffeine,
Sugar, cravings,
Release into natural vitality,
And rushing energies,
Arteries unblocked.

Release from our trepidation of time,
Our fear of death.

Albert Einstein wrote: The distinction between past, present and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion.

This is our year of release,
From the illusion of
Past, present and future.

Imagine what a true *shmita* year would look like:
A new period of financial freedom.
A collective break from the race of modern life,
To focus on community, culture and spirit. (From Israeli Shmita Social Media Campaign by Eitan Kramer)

An urgent message
From our ancestors,
A shofar blast from across the millennia,
Telling us that things can be different.

Release from frippery,
Release into stewardship.

This is our sabbatical year.
There is a stage in our lives



When we strive to find our
Place in the world.

And later, should we be lucky enough
To live long past middle age,
There is a stage in our lives
When we strive to find our place
In the universe. (From: Ageing to Sageing)

What is our place in the universe?

We acquire a long-term vision of our place in the cosmos. Transcending our normally shortsighted perspective, we root ourselves in something vast, immeasurable, something so transpersonally grand and enduring, that I call it the eternity factor. (Zalman Schachter Shalomi)

This is our sabbatical,
Out time to do that substrata work
And develop a philosophy.
A vision.
A self-understanding.

A philosophy that is sustainable
And brings us happiness
When “the rivers of our lives flow more gently.” (Hindu Stages of Life)

Tonight begins the year of release,
And of relief.
Lest life conclude before it has been understood.

Tonight begins the pondering,
Release of the spirit’s indenture to society,



Release into the start of our true adult education,
Release into the fellowship of searching.

“What is the secret of the “I” with which one
has been on such intimate terms all these years,
yet which remains a stranger,
full of inexplicable quirks and irrational impulses?” (Hindu Stages of Life)

This is our sabbatical.
We look at the acreage of our experience
From treetops, the crisscrossing tracks
Laid across our hearts,
Our relationship maps,
Some areas skittery and chaotic,
Others intriguing for their repetitive patterns.
We study them.

It is the time to work on a philosophy,
And then work that philosophy into a way of life;
Transcending the senses
To find, and dwell with, the reality
That underlies this natural world. (From: Hindu Stages of Life)

Earthbound and unbounded,
We are commanded
To let the land lay fallow.
To fall in love with our hallowed
Abounding earthiness.
Our “ecological self.” (Joanna Macy)

Release into the knowing
That “the body is a magical entity,



the mind's own sensuous aspect,
and at death the body's decomposition...
can only signify the gradual reintegration
Of one's ancestors and elders
Into the living landscape,
From which all, too, are born." (David Abrams)

"Let children walk with Nature, let them see the beautiful blendings and communions of death and life, their joyous inseparable unity, as taught in woods and meadows, plains and mountains and streams of our blessed star, and they will learn that death is stingless indeed, and as beautiful as life." (John Muir)

Our people longed for her land
For thousands of years,
And now struggles with its substance.

Our soul longed for her body
For thousands of incarnations
And now struggles with its substance.

Its power and powerlessness,
Its enemies and allergens,
Its complicated constitution,
Its imports, exports, expectations.
Humiliations, and pain
Collected in pockets of our flesh.

Tonight we let our bodies take a Sabbath,
A recuperative bath,
A release from self-judgment,
Self-loathing, abuse; a release into
Gratitude. Forgiveness.



TEMPLE ISIAH

Empty the shame that we've stored in our skin.
Rinse out the regret.
Forgive our figures.

Release from mortification,
Release into affirmation,
Into appreciation.

This body brought you here,
To this gate, to this Sabbath of the Lord.

This is the integration of body and soul,
Listening to the breathing world
With spaciousness of heart and mind
That we may commune with stars,
Step into the cool, clear light
And effervesce into new understanding.

This is our sabbatical, to live
As consciously as possible,
To lay down our blades
And sharpen our lives.

This is our sabbatical to
Let some dreams disintegrate –
Those dreams that we know now
Will never be fulfilled –
And let other dreams waft in
Like pollen dust, and sticky spores,
And take root
And unfold.



This is our sabbatical,
Ordained above,
Inviting us to trust
That the yield of our life's harvest,
Exactly how we've lived it so far,
Is enough to sustain us this year
And next, when we plant again.

This is our sabbatical
To lay down our blades
And sharpen our lives
That we may soften our deaths. (From: One Year To Live, Stephen Levine)

Release from the constant stress
Over all that is unfinished,
Release into completeness,
And self-acceptance,
And nobility.

It is written: "The unwise life is one long struggle with death the intruder." (Huston Smith)

And: "Truth comes as conqueror only to those who have lost the art of receiving it as friend."
(Huston Smith)

Release into permission
To live wisely,
Unafraid of intruders.

Release into permission
To receive life's truths as friend.
Release into permission

To listen to your inner voices.



TEMPLE ISIAH

Release into the radiance
Of unconditional love.

This is our sabbatical
To synthesize.
To reconcile with our jaggedness,
To surrender some control,
And seep in the serenity
And the beauty
Refracted in rainbow glints.

This is our sabbatical
To pioneer a new peace
With ourselves,
With the land of our heritage,
With all land,
And all inhabitants,
And spill that peace-nectar
Into streams of thought
Sweetening the River of Life
Out of which everything
Evolves.

Tonight begins our sabbatical,
And it is our answer to
Blood money and bloodshed.
It is our answer to violence
And vitriol.
Tonight begins our year
To marinate in questions,
To contribute our corpus to the loam.

Dear current resident,



This is your invitation
To root yourself in something vast
And immeasurable.
To be at one with the land of our people
And all land, to merge
The subterranean self
With the Self of the Universe.

The Lord said to Moses at Mount Sinai:

In the seventh year,
The land is to have a year of sabbatical rest,
A Sabbath to the Lord.

You are now on hallowed ground.
May rain heal our land of drought.
May all our lands be filled with peace
And the footprints of the free.

Savor your sabbatical.
Your sabbatical begins
Now.