

Forced to Rest: *Shmitah* and the Coronavirus

*B'har-B'hukkotai* Sermon

*Hey Vav* Shabbat

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I'd like to share with you a true story from an article by Dr. Zachary McClain, who specializes in adolescent medicine, youth living with HIV, and medical therapy for transgender youth. He writes:

“Life was so normal a few weeks ago. For me, and I imagine for many other health care workers, before the novel coronavirus etched its deadly path across the U.S., day broke to a remarkably similar routine. The alarm would go off at six-thirty; I would walk my dear-but-crazy mutt, Scrappy; swim a mile; grab a coffee; and then head into a clinic of waiting teenagers. I would greet my coworkers with hugs. And I would spend the day seeing the patients I love.

Now, mornings are stressful; I awake not knowing exactly what the day will look like. I make my own hand sanitizer; use an online calculator to see if I'll run out of toilet paper; have daily calls with the leadership team; and my morning swim ritual has given way to grueling runs. My old routine seems like so little to have to give up, but, at the end of the day, on the front lines, it's the memory of the little things that give me hope—hope that normal life will return. That, and the telemedicine visits that allow me to still connect with my patients.”

He goes on to describe his trepidation about using telemedicine, his fears that he couldn't do his job without being in the room with his patients. He writes about his fear that with telemedicine, he wouldn't be able to connect with them. And then, something happened. Dr McClain started asking his patients to show him around their rooms, or to show him something meaningful. Here's one example of one of those interactions:

“That first day, my last patient was really struggling. Like many young people right now, he was scared. His head hung down on my screen. I asked him to look up, at me, and then to look around his room and show me something that makes him happy. His eyes darted around and then fixed on something lying on the floor. He smiled before taking his laptop over to show me a simple, white poster board friends and family had made for him with inspirational quotes and musings on it. “I go here when I’m feeling bad, and it helps,” he said. “I’ll keep doing that now.”

We finished the visit. I closed my laptop. And I cried. I was so moved. I was so honored to see these young people in their own spaces. I had imagined that telemedicine would remove the human aspect of medicine, but it was exactly the opposite—it enhanced it. The more I think about it, the more I realize that our interactions with our patients are always on our terms and in our environment. A clinic isn’t probably the place where patients are most comfortable. Through telemedicine video visits, we are able to see something more personal and really special. One of the scariest things about the

pervasive sadness and pessimism of this moment is it can blind us to new kinds of connection.

I've been humbled to get a (different) glimpse into my patients' lives. I get to see what they are proud of, the people and things they love, their art, their resilience, and also, yes, a pile or two of dirty laundry."

We've all heard stories about people who had some sort of dramatic incident in their lives that forced them to make a radical change. An illness, an accident forced a person to slow down, to take some time off, to switch jobs, to relate differently to family members. As devastated as they were, they came to appreciate what this change has given them.

This week in *Parashat B'har-B'hukkotai*, we read about another example of a forced pause from everyday life, the *Shmitah* year. Every seven years, farmers in the land of Israel are told to stop farming. Let your fields lie fallow, and don't cultivate them-- at all-- for an entire year. Can you imagine? I think about what life must have been like. People's normal activities, all of the hard work they did, isn't happening. The predictability of all their routines, how they make food, how they make money-- all gone. Instead, they gather wild fruits and vegetables and grains, and live in a state where they are dependent, not on their own planning and hard work, but on what nature happens to provide. It's hard for me to imagine people doing this, routinely, for an entire year at a time.

Why do this? Well, agricultural science supports this practice-- allowing fields to sit replenishes their nutrients. When we farm the same plot of land again and again without rest, it actually depletes the soil and diminishes the harvest over time. Adding nutrients as fertilizer can help, but sometimes at the expense of environmental health in other ways. So the *Shmitah* year is a period of forced rest, something that we might not do otherwise, but, being forced to do it creates new life and possibility. It is a forced rest that creates the potential for richer growth in the future, and forces us to protect our environment for the long term.

Of course, there are other agricultural methods that achieve the same goal without these drastic measures. Farmers can rotate what they plant on any particular plot of ground, so that different nutrients are being taken out of the soil at different times, and farmers can rotate certain plots of land in and out of rotation. It's not necessary to let all the land rest all at once, and yet, by telling us to do so, the Torah is making a clear point. Sometimes, we can be more productive when we don't do anything.

And yet, *Shmitah* has the potential to create real harm. People's livelihoods can be put in jeopardy. During *Shmitah*, anyone is supposed to be able to go and take food that naturally grows on the usually cultivated fields, meaning that the poor are assured food, but what if there isn't enough food to go around when the land isn't being cultivated? That year could be a truly scary one.

In fact, in the State of Israel today, while *Shmitah* is still technically observed by many, there is not much of a practical difference if you enter a supermarket. Religious authorities have found ways to maintain the biblical restrictions, while still allowing for the cultivation, purchase, and consumption of all sorts of produce. Some of that produce is imported from nearby, and other produce is grown in specific ways that get around the restrictions. The fear of financial hardship and economic disruption has led us to create a world where we could easily forget that *Shmitah* still technically exists.

In our lives, hitting pause can be beneficial to our mental health and can help us to get a new perspective on what is important. Like *Shmitah* helps the soil to be healthier, taking a break can be good for our souls. However, just as *Shmitah* is something we resist, for good reason, we also resist taking a break from our regular lives. Most of us here, as far as I can guess, wish we didn't have to hit pause right now on so many of our regular activities. We fear the economic consequences, we suffer from social isolation and feeling "stir-crazy," and we may bristle at the disruption of our routines. And we feel the stress of not being able to fully control our lives. Just like the *Shmitah*, the virus reminds us of how much we cannot control.

But as we settle into life in isolation, we can look for the upside of pausing as well, and try to take full advantage of it. Isolation can be a time to reconnect with old friends, deepen old interests, or explore new passions. During these past couple of months, many of us here have

expanded cooking skills, artistic abilities, and spent more time with those we loved, whether in person or virtually. Or, it can be a time to stop, to reflect, and to do less, for those who have that option. We can let go, accept our lack of control over our lives, and give in to unpredictability. Even a forced pause, even one for a terrible reason, even a pause that we wish we didn't have to have, can be an opportunity. We can try to make every pause a generative one.

And the changes caused by that pause may not be only for this time. The *Shmitah* year increases agricultural productivity throughout the seven year cycle. A person taking time off from a stressful job experiences effects that can last years after returning to work. As Anthony Fauci said, we may never shake hands again, and each of our lives may be disrupted in other ways that last far into the future.

As we get close to summer, a time when many people here are facing the prospect of having plans cancelled and an open stretch of time ahead of us, I hope that we can ask ourselves how we can turn this time of sadness, of forced pausing, into a gift, even though it is a gift we perhaps wish we didn't have. I wish us a time of growth, a time of opportunity and creativity, and a time of reconnecting with who we want to be.

Shabbat Shalom.