

What Grows When We Stop

Rabbi David Ingber's Sermon 05/08/26

My wife Arielle and our youngest son, Orr, have been living for the last couple of weeks in Connecticut. And so I've been coming home to a very quiet home, much quieter than I'm used to. There's nobody there.

And I want to say something really honest here, because why not? I've always been honest here from this pulpit. The first thing that arrives when a very, very busy life, a very, very full life becomes much emptier and less busy is not peace and it isn't rest. I think that the first thing that arrives is anxiety.

With all of my years of contemplative practice, all of my years of meditation and prayer, I check my phone. I open the refrigerator and close it and open it and close it. I find something to do.

I play guitar and play guitar and play guitar. And it took me a while to notice what I was doing, which is that I was trying to fill the silence before I had a chance to feel it. There's a verse in this week's Torah portion that is one of the most honest psukim, one of the most honest verses in all of Tanakh.

God has just commanded a radical economic and spiritual institution called shmita that means every seventh year the land will rest. We're told don't sow, don't plant, don't harvest, let everything go, let it be. If you would ask, says the Torah, intuiting our questions, if you should say, says the Torah, anticipating our anxiety, what will we eat in the seventh year? What are we going to eat? The Torah knows.

The Torah knows this question. It knows before we're going to ask it. And the very first thing that happens when someone tells you to stop producing is panic.

Panic. What are we going to eat? What will sustain me? What will nourish me? What will I be worth if I'm not working, if I'm not producing, if I'm not rabbying, if I'm not, if I'm not, if I'm not? What will sustain me? The question is not only about agriculture. It's the deepest question of our lives.

And the Torah comes to teach us dormancy does not mean death. Resting does not mean disappearing. Look at how the Torah describes what you are going to eat in the shmita year.

Listen to this. It is not the produce of the land that you will eat in the seventh year. What will you eat? You hear this? The Shabbat of the land.

You will eat the Shabbat. The actual Shabbating of the earth will be what nourishes you. You will be nourished by Shabbat itself.

This is alluded to in Rashi, the great commentator in the 11th century in France. Rashi says, From that which has ceased, you will eat. Only produce that has been released, that is hefger, ownerless, can retain its shmita character.

Food that you hoarded or controlled or you kept under lock and key, that's no longer shmita food. Shmita food is found in the nourishment gleaned from the letting go food. The letting go food nourishes you.

The Yishbitzer Rebbe, I would safely say that Roman was an Yishbitzer. We quote the Yishbitzer all the time. The Yishbitzer Rebbe says something unbelievable.

He teaches that the primary spiritual influx comes specifically from Tzimtzum. There is spirituality in Tzimtzum. In constricting, contracting, removing, removing, removing.

The addition that comes from subtraction. Here is words. That the primary influence, the primary source of nourishment and power and vitality will come itself from removal.

That in stopping there is a hidden goodness. You're damn straight it's hidden, right? That's what you're thinking. Of course it's hidden.

Stopping doesn't immediately present itself. How many of you have sat in a silent retreat? How many of you have watched other people sit in a silent retreat? Nobody ever sits in a silent retreat. It's nothing.

It's not silent. You watch other people in silence. You're thinking, wow, they're so quiet.

And your mind is on fire. It takes how long before the mind knows that it's not dying or sleeping? Like three days, right? Usually, Vayi Bayomashlishi, three days in. The first three you're like, you're going crazy.

Your whole body, all the toxins, all the busyness, all the twitching of the mind reaching for its normal things. Three days at least. I know some of you are thinking, never.

But three days, minimally. The shmita doesn't produce less food. It produces different food.

What grows in the fallow year is something that effort alone could never generate. The opposite of productivity is not emptiness. It's kabbalah to receive.

Something miraculous happens when we stop. I wrote about this years ago. I had to go back to my own words to remind me the last couple of weeks of what I said.

We get to experience the power that nature already knows called dormancy. Dormancy is that which is holding. The heartbeat that rests.

The hibernating animals. All of winter that waits and waits. There are seeds inside each and every one of us and inside this culture that cannot emerge because we do not know that dormancy does not equal death.

That resting does not mean disappearing. What keeps us from stopping is that we are terrified of resting. We are afraid of the imaginative, terrible things that we'll feel when it gets quiet.

We fear that when we stop, even for a moment, the enormity of our lives will overwhelm us. Our outspoken and unspoken fears, the ones that speed up our lives. And like a stone being thrown over a lake, we've learned to skip so we don't get too wet.

And we're terrified that if we let that stone fall, we will disappear along with it. I should pin that up for myself, right? Like a stone skipping on the water, afraid to be too wet. But we know that the stone doesn't disappear.

It comes to rest. It finds the bottom. It knows the power of shvita.

And from the bottom, something can grow that could never grow on the surface. I suspect that the British psychoanalyst Winnicott was alluding to this when he wrote an article in 1958 called The Capacity to be Alone. The Capacity to be Alone.

Winnicott's central insight is a paradox that the Torah already knew 2,000 years ago. You learn to be alone, Winnicott said, in the presence of someone. A child held by a mother who is present for that child but not intrusive.

Or father, not filling in the silence for them, allows the child to discover their own inner life. Alone together. But without that experience, Winnicott argued, a false life built on reactions to external stimuli proceeds.

A hyper-vigilance that whenever there's silence, I'm waiting and attuned. I can't relax. I can't, what he called, go on being.

Just go on being. Like, it's quiet. Nothing's happening.

That's cool. A child is always hyper-attentive and hyper-attuned to what's happening outside of itself. It's like, oh, it's silent.

Should I take care of someone? They're waiting at the edge of their seat in silence for something to be done, a list to be produced. And so Winnicott said, a false life built on reactions to external stimuli is the product of being alone together with someone who can't let you be alone together. It produces a life of skipping, a life that looks productive but maybe has no bottom.

And so the opposite of that is a life that has reality in it instead of futility. His words. So I'll be honest again.

Some nights, I'm sure, in the coming weeks in my apartment, I'm not that great at it yet. After all these years, I definitely know how to sit with quiet. That's true.

I can let the stone sink, but on some nights I can't. And maybe that's true for a lot of us. Maybe we wish that we could be more still.

Maybe the wish that we could be able to trust in dormancy, trust in what grows when we stop. Maybe even that question makes us anxious. What grows if I stop? If I stop what? What do I have to stop to allow growth to happen? So that's the question tonight.

The Shemitah is the Torah's way of saying you can practice this. We can practice letting the stone drop. We can practice seeing what grows when we lie fallow.

So that's the work here. The work here is to make Shabbat. Oh, you can't say that, Rabbi.

We can't make Shabbat. Shabbat happens. We're not the ones who make it.

It happens by itself. Wait a second. Wait.

And the children of Israel, watch over Shabbat. What is the word? To make Shabbat. Wait a second.

Make Shabbat? God makes Shabbat. How do we make Shabbat? The Torah Tzmima, a great scholar, Rabbi Baruch Epstein, wrote another amazing thing. Shabbat is supposed to be defined by what we don't do.

V'shamru means don't do this. Shabbat is here. Don't.

Don't. But says the Torah Tzmima, every single mitzvah in the Torah has a do. A thing you do.

There's an object, a lulav, a tefillin, a sukkah, a shofar, that even when you're not using them, they exist. They sit in a box or on a shelf. But Shabbat, without human observance, Saturday is just Saturday.

If you don't make Shabbat, it's just Friday night. TGIF. Without its actual observance, there is no recognizable indication that the day is Shabbat.

We don't just keep Shabbat. We create Shabbat, he says. So that the Shabbat means go make Shabbat.

Make Shabbat. The most creative thing you will do all week is stopping. The most creative thing you will do all week is make stopping happen.

What do you mean? I have to make a big meal. I'm going to have 30 people at my meal. It's a big oneg, and I'm going to do, do, do, da, da, da, Shabbat.

Rabbi Baruch Epstein writes, no. You want to be creative? Stop. Can you stop? Can you make Shabbat into an asiyah, into something that you do, that you carve, that you manufacture, that you manifest? So here's what I'm going to leave you with tonight.

It's not a big practice. It's not like a huge thing. Just one image and one invitation tonight for all of you.

The first image is the stone skipping over the lake that I had years ago in a meditation retreat, knowing myself as fast and light and impressive and moving, never touching the bottom, never resting. How are you like that stone? And this invitation, this Shabbat is tonight, tomorrow. First of all, let the stone sink.

Pick one thing that you've been gripping, one worry that you've been rehearsing, one plan that you keep trying to control in your life, and let it just be. Let it lie fallow. Don't fix it and don't solve it.

Stop reaching for it and be creative. Notice what grows when you stop. That in cessation there is a great goodness that lasts.

Dormancy does not mean death. Resting does not mean disappearing. Let the stone fall.

Trust the water and your own ability to swim. Shabbat shalom.

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