

What's Soil Got to Do with It?: A Yom Kippur Reflection on Shmita
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You may have noticed the strange crops growing in the Mitzvah Farm this season – winter rye, sudangrass which looks remarkably like corn. But where are the vegetables we usually grow for our neighbors facing food insecurity?

Last year, 5782, was Shmita or Sabbatical year, an ancient Jewish practice which still occurs every 7 years. Giving the land and those who work the land, a Sabbath of Sabbath ceasing, is the most visible sign of Shmita. The CRC Mitzvah Farm is 7 years old and our soil was exhausted, harvests diminishing.

We decided to observe Shmita by planting cover crops, creating a space of resistance to heal and restore our soil. I've been writing a lot about soil this year and more often than not, autocorrect has changed the word soil to soul.

So what's the connection? The secret is in the roots.

Leaving land fallow with cover crops allows roots to run deep, creating subterranean networks. Connected to each other through vast webs of fungi, plants and trees communicate with, nourish, and protect each other. Stronger beings in the plant world provide for those more vulnerable. Plants send most of the sugars they make into their roots, nourishing the microbiome. These

fungi and microorganisms in turn carry minerals and other micronutrients to the plants. A reciprocal gift exchange which ensures the whole ecosystem is nourished and protected. Healthy soil has a rich, diverse, and well-nourished microbiome. But what does soil have to do with soul?

Our ancestors produced everything from the land. Their entire life centered on agricultural and food production rhythms. Our holiday cycle reflects this. While I understand intellectually the impact of a fallow year on the soil, I have often pondered Shmita's meaning and purpose for individuals and the community as a whole. What did it mean to suddenly stop all the normal rhythms of life? Completely? To experience community wide vulnerability while not planting crops? To yearn deeply for those normal everyday rhythms of life? I have returned repeatedly to these words in Deuteronomy on Shmita: "When there is among you a needy person...you are not to toughen your heart, you are not to shut your hand to the needy one. ...You are to open, yes, open your hand to your community members in need.

As we all know to suddenly stop all the normal rhythms of life does not feel like Shabbat but is challenging in oh, so many unexpected ways. During these past few years, we have experienced large scale communal vulnerability, come

face to face with our deepest fears and yearnings. Our hearts have been bruised and broken during these times in so many ways. With our own soul's depletion and exhaustion, it could be tempting to protect ourselves, to allow our hearts to toughen, to clench our hands with fear, anxiety and despair.

Our ancestors knew this temptation. Frequently. In their wisdom grown from this lived experience, they created time set apart for rest and repair. Weekly Shabbat. Annual Elul and the High Holidays. Every 7 years, Shmita. They created spaces of resistance allowing our roots to run deep, individually and communally. Time and space set apart to rest, refocus, reset, and regenerate. Time to be vulnerable with ourselves and with others doing the work of teshuvah, repair. Time to release what binds us to the past and what no longer serves our flourishing in the future. Time to come home to our deepest yearnings, values, and hopes. Time to regain a sense of our best and highest selves. Individually and communally.

The Shmita Mitzvot outlined in Leviticus and Deuteronomy clearly call for care of the whole community in all ways, especially those most vulnerable. Isaiah's words in today's Haftarah call us to radical faithfulness to these values. All are to be fed, especially the hungry. Those in poverty are to be cared for

and strengthened, not oppressed. All debts are to be released. Those enslaved are freed and reparations paid for their labor. The essence of these mitzvot is living in right relationship with the whole eco-system -- earth, animal, humans alike. The community, the whole eco-system is healed. True liberation is found in rest, release and repair.

Essentially Shmita is about transformation of our soil and of our souls. By letting our land go fallow, letting roots run deep and healing the soil, our Farm will flourish bountifully nourishing the whole eco-system for years to come. Communal transformation begins with personal transformation. By going deep into our own roots, doing the hard work of teshuva and repair, we soften our hearts and open our hands to each other. By connecting our roots with each other, sharing our vulnerability and deepest yearnings, our greatest hopes can blossom into a vision rooted in our ancestor's experience of living in a radically interdependent eco-system. A vision in which the oppressed are liberated, balance and justice are restored, empathy and kindness prevail, the vulnerable are protected and all have a place at the table with enough to fill their need. A vision of a community, an eco-system, healed and liberated which begins in healing our own hearts. May our devotion this day, our holy

work of teshuva, tefillah and tzedakah this season, burst forth in a bountiful harvest nourishing the world with Love for years to come. Hineni.