

There is a gorgeous dogwood tree in my front yard. Each spring, the tree blossoms with impossibly pink flowers. Over the course of a few weeks, the blossoms change color, moving through a series of pinks into white. Then, as quickly as they came, the blossoms disappear. The tree moves through the summer shooting out more and more vibrant green leaves, stretching its new branches further out to soak up every drop of sunlight they can.

Looking out at that tree today, I can see that it's already contracting, almost imperceptibly, pulling back its resources from those long branches, and turning toward the fall, when those leaves will yellow and droop as the tree moves toward its winter dormancy. Sometimes I look at this tree just to remind myself that I am alive, and that it is alive, and that we are both part of the miracle of Creation.

This High Holiday season we are exploring the idea of Creation, what it means to think creatively and expansively, what it means to create in this world, and what it means to be a creature, part of creation.

As it happens, this year, 5782, is also a sabbatical year, a biblically ordained period of attending to creation in particular ways.

The sabbatical year revolves around three basic commandments: first, that we release debtors from their debt obligations to re-equalize Israelite society; second, that we release from bondage all Israelites who are enslaved to other Israelites, and third, that we let all agricultural lands lay fallow for a year, only harvesting what grows without additional human intervention and making whatever grows available to the entire community.

The term "sabbatical year" in Hebrew is *shnat shabbaton*. A year of Shabbat. This is what we provide for the land. The other term used for this year in the Torah is *shmita*, release. Release is what we can provide to our fellow human beings.

The sabbatical year is an audacious, utopian vision perched on top of an even more remarkable theological proposition: that all parts of creation we can see and touch, from the land to humanity, are equally free, have equal right to rest, and cannot be permanently owned or controlled by any human. Just as humans theoretically get to experience Shabbat, so, too, does the very ground we walk on get to experience Shabbat. Just as humans should not be enslaved to unrelenting taskmasters, so, too, should the earth enjoy the freedom to rest.

Rest.

*Shmita*, sabbatical release and rest, is just a big picture, grand scale version of our weekly Shabbat. But even the weekly Shabbat is an audacious goal and a demanding command. Shabbat commemorates two ideas. First, that rest is built into the fabric of creation - God rested on the 7th day, so too must we rest. Like God, we take a break from being creative in the world - we get a day to just BE in the world, without any need to make or do. Second, that you know you are free when you are allowed to claim a day of rest. Shabbat is a gift of the Exodus from Egyptian bondage. Shabbat tells us that working is not *being*. Our work is not *us*. If we do nothing at all, make nothing, produce nothing, we are still fully and completely worthy beings.

Before this... ..I had an annual post-Yom Kippur tradition of visiting the Korean spa. Now the Korean spa is basically Disneyworld for stressed-out people. It's simply a series of saunas, each with a slightly different "mood" – the one with salt walls, the one with clay walls, the one with wooden walls, etc., There is even a sleeping room, a room where you can literally lie down on the floor in the dark for as long as you feel like, when you need to take a break in between your hot sits. I would only go once a year, when I felt like I had really, really earned the right to rest my body and mind. And invariably, after an hour or so of wandering from one reclining position to the next, I'd get restless. My mind would start to spin: what could I be working on right now? I would start making lists in my head: who do I need to call? What do I need from the store? What chores need to be done at home? Eventually, my working brain would win and it'd be time to go. Ah well.

In 2016, Tricia Hersey, a southern Black theologian, preacher, and performance artist, founded The Nap Ministry. The Nap Ministry's tagline is "Rest is Resistance." Hersey spreads her message of resistant rest through blog posts with titles like, "How can you be useless to capitalism today?" Before...all of this...Hersey installed sacred spaces for communal napping as a form of art and community healing. She names sleep deprivation a "racial and social justice issue."

You don't have to be a spa devotee or a theologian to understand that most of us are *tired*, and despite the fact that we are tired, there is no rest for the weary. We are all tired of living through [make a gesture], but, and I'm just guessing here, I think most of us were worn out before that, too.

We were worn out by what Tricia Hersey calls "grind culture." We are worn out by living in a culture of urgency. We were worn out from productivity. From work and school cultures. From worrying about money. From caring for young children or elderly parents. From caring for our own bodies as they age and change. From struggling through life in a world that wasn't built for us in so many ways. From struggling under oppressive systems – antisemitism, racism, ableism, misogyny, homophobia and transphobia. From judgment of others and judgment of ourselves. From illness or grief or even sometimes, joy. From this, that, and the other thing, also.

The first human life in Torah is named *HaAdam*, which we lazily translate as "Adam," but which means something like "the earth creature," the thing made out of *Adamah*, earth. As humans, we, along with all other living beings, are a part of the earth. Our bodies are made and sustained from the mineral and molecular building blocks of the earth, and eventually we will return into it and become part of it once again.

Although the biblical sabbatical doesn't require humans to literally do no work for a year, it does require humans to be, like the land, freed from the control of other humans. This process, *shmita*, release, involves releasing debtors from their debt obligation as well as releasing those who have become enslaved because of their debts. The slate is wiped clean, and each person is supposed to be able to go back to their ancestral land holdings to start fresh. All of the material impediments holding them back from flourishing in Israelite society were, almost magically, swept away. In the biblical vision, a freed and debt-free person could simply start

again on the land handed down to them by their ancestors. When inequality cropped up, it was the result of bad weather or maybe illness or death in the family, or maybe just unfortunate choices, and the inequality was - theoretically - easily righted. It is hard to imagine such a simple solution to our contemporary crises of wage slavery or housing and food insecurity.

So what would it look like to be released from the debts which hold us back? I don't just mean the monetary debts, although that would be a tremendous relief to many of us. I mean the soul debts. What would it look like to release ourselves from the sense that we owe something we can't pay, even to ourselves? What would it look like to stop striving to fulfill that debt – to always have in the back of our mind that we should have exercised more, learned more, worked harder, made those phone calls or showed up at those meetings.

When have you been subjected to the phrase “You owe it to yourself...” What, today, do you think you owe to yourself? Can you set that debt aside?

Yom Kippur is known as the Shabbat Shabbaton. The Sabbath of Sabbaths. On Yom Kippur, we rest from the daily grind, but we also rest from the very effort of keeping ourselves alive in these bodies. This is the only day, in our tradition, when we don't owe it to ourselves to eat, to exercise, to wear better clothes, to groom ourselves better. On Yom Kippur we are supposed to get a break from striving to even stay alive. We can't do it for much more than a day. Striving to live is encoded in our DNA, it is a biological imperative. When our minds and bodies stop striving to live it's a medical or psychiatric emergency. But for just a day – what a revelation. This is what happens when we stop. For just a moment of spaciousness. For just a moment free from striving.

What would it look like to bring this sense of spaciousness, this break from striving, to every single day of this year of release? What would it look like if we weren't terrified of giving ourselves a rest? What would it look like to fully give ourselves over, in openness, to the possibility that we don't have to constantly create, produce, earn, or fix in order to be worthy?

What if, like the trees outside, we allowed ourselves to move into a period of dormancy? It is a common misunderstanding that dormant plants are not accomplishing anything. In fact, dormancy requires a clever re-organization of internal resources, as cells fill up with minerals and hormones which prevent the water inside from freezing and destroying the cell. Dormancy requires making the choice to shut off productivity, even though it means the tree won't be able to gather any more energy through the long winter. Dormancy means redirecting attention and resources inward, rather than outward, building up the self, even when it looks like nothing is happening on the outside.

Shabbat only exists in relationship to the six days of the work week. Yom Kippur only exists in relationship to the bulk of our lives, where we are out in the world striving and failing, over and over. And the *shmita* year only exists in relationship to six years of tending our real and metaphorical fields.

We are not invited to be dormant forever. But we are invited to accept, with humility, the possibility that there are tasks we cannot finish, problems we cannot solve, productivity that cannot be forced from the earth without end. The trees know when there is energy to spare, when to send out new shoots. And they know when it is time to pull in their resources, to abandon the project of constant growth, to build up another layer of protective bark.

This is the day, and this is the exact service, where we ask God to release us from our debts, and with the words of Kol Nidre, we absolve ourselves, as a community, of our spiritual debts to the future.

As we move through this day of release, within this year of release, may we have the discernment to ask what we can release for good, and what we can release for right now. May we have the wisdom to differentiate between the striving that destabilizes and destroys us, and the striving that gives us strength to be who we are meant to be.