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*Dvar Torah for Parshat Behar*

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# For You Are All Migrants With Me: Sabbaticals & Strangers from South Africa to Arizona

Leah Mundell '90 | BronfmanTorah | Behar 2016

*Editor's note: The dvar sent yesterday was missing the last 3 paragraphs.  
Enjoy this version in full!*

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Immigrants at a family celebration in Arizona. (From Leah Mundell's exhibition featuring the stories of global migrants)

The academical sabbatical remains the greatest perk of university employment, one that is available to very few other workers in the American economy. It seems

an experience of incredible privilege, and yet we learn in this week's Torah portion that the ideal of sabbatical, a year in which the land rested and people had to do things differently, was a mitzvah that applied to everyone.

It has now been almost a year since my family returned from a year-long sabbatical in South Africa, and though life has largely returned to "normal," we are still reveling in the insights and experiences that a year of reflection provided for us. In this week's par'sha, Behar, we learn important details about the rules of sh'mita, the Shabbat for the land, the original sabbatical year.

Many of us understand and experience weekly Shabbat rest as a radical rejection of consumerism and competition, a day to focus on relationships rather than productivity. The sh'mita takes Shabbat a step farther, dictating a year of rest for the land:

**And the Lord spoke to Moshe on Mount Sinai, "Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: When you come into the land that I give you, the land shall observe a Shabbat of the Lord. For six years you may sow your field and for six years you may prune your vineyard, and you may gather in its crop. But on the seventh year, a complete rest shall there be for the land, a Shabbat for the Lord (Lev. 25:2-4).**

דבר אל-בני ישראל, ואמרת אליהם, כי תבאו אל-הארץ, אשר אני נתן לכם--ושבתה הארץ, שבת  
ליהוה. שש שנים תזרע שדה, ושש שנים תזמר כרמך; ואספת, את-תבואתה. ובשנה השביעית, שבת  
שבתון יהיה לארץ--שבת, ליהוה:

Many have reflected on the environmental and economic implications of the sh'mita, but I'd like to focus on its social consequences. In verse 6, we read:

**But you may eat whatever the land, during its Shabbat, will produce- you, your male and female servants, the hired workers and those who live with you (toshavim hagarim imach). And for your animal and for the wild beast that is in your land, shall all its crop be to eat.**

והיתה שבת הארץ לכם, לאכלה--לה, ולעבדך ולאמתך; ולשכירך, ולתושבך, הגרים, עמך. ולבהמתך--  
-ולחיה, אשר בארץך : תהיה כל-תבואתה, לאכל

That is, during the seventh year, everyone participates in the land's sabbatical, including the "toshavim," those who reside in an area, no matter where they might be from originally. There is an understanding here that there will be always be those residing with us who are not part of the same community in some way or another. And yet we all participate together in the mitzvah of allowing the land to rest.

Later in the par'shah, the Torah anticipates the question many of us may have about the feasibility of this plan.

**And should you ask: What will we eat in the seventh year, if we may neither sow nor gather in our crops? I will ordain my blessings for you in the sixth year and it will yield a crop sufficient for three years. And you shall sow the eighth year, and eat of the produce, the old store; until the ninth year, until her produce come in, you shall eat the old store. And the land shall not be sold in perpetuity; for the land is Mine; for you are strangers and settlers (gerim v'toshavim) with Me (Lev. 25:20-23).**

וכי תאמרו, מה-נאכל בשנה השביעית: הן לא נזרע, ולא נאסף את-תבואתנו. וצויתי את-ברכתי לכם, בשנה השניית; ועשת, את-תבואה, לשלש, השנים. וזרעם, את השנה השמינית, ואכלתם, מן-תבואה לשר; עד

הַשָּׁנָה הַתְּשִׁיעִית, עַד-בּוֹא תְּבוֹאָתָהּ--תֹּאכְלוּ, וְיִשָּׂן. וְהָאָרֶץ, לֹא תִמְכַּר לְצַמְחַת--כִּי-לִי, הָאָרֶץ: כִּי-גֵרִים וְתוֹשָׁבִים אַתֶּם, עַמִּדִי.

Migrant women in Cape Town, South Africa. (From Leah Mundell's exhibition, "Global Migrants - Women at Work")

Once again we hear of these “toshavim,” these others who reside among us. But this time, we are the toshavim. God admonishes those of us who might think we own our own land that, in fact, all of us are merely sojourners on earth that ultimately belongs to God. And if we should think that “toshavim” (residents) are superior to “gerim” (strangers), the text sets us straight by showing that these are insignificant distinctions before God’s ultimate possession of creation. And perhaps our fears of scarcity, our worries that we won’t have enough to share, are actually based in our own misguided attempts to draw these distinctions.

Our family’s sabbatical year was all about the opportunity to be strangers. We often think of our moments of rest as time to turn inward, to treasure the familiar. But the beauty of Shabbat and of sh’mita is that they also give us the time to open ourselves up to engaging with the stranger. One of the greatest joys of our time in Cape Town was approaching everyone we met with the expectation that we could learn from them. Everyone knew more about this society than we did and everyone had the potential to open a window of understanding for us.

We were temporary strangers in South Africa by choice, but my work with the refugee and migrant community in Cape Town revealed a host of challenges for those who have become strangers out of necessity. South Africa is moving toward an Arizona-style enforcement-focused immigration policy that belies its history since the end of apartheid as a haven for refugees fleeing poverty and violence in other parts of Africa. The migrant women’s network with which I worked in Cape

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Town seeks to build connections across nationality and culture for those who share this experience as strangers.

Returning to Flagstaff, I looked for ways to bring the sabbatical experience into my life and my work here. An invitation to apply for an Alumni Venture Fund grant set me thinking about the possibility of bringing to Arizona a photo exhibit on which I had collaborated, documenting the work of the migrant Women's Platform in Cape Town. The exhibit project has become a way for "residents and strangers" to encounter one another on multiple levels. My Northern Arizona University students spent the semester interviewing migrant leaders in Flagstaff. They collaborated with photojournalism students to profile their interview participants and put together a powerful photo exhibit, displayed with the exhibit from Cape Town, that allows viewers to draw connections across global experiences of migration.

At the opening of the exhibit, students led a panel discussion among the interview participants, who reflected on their commitment to what we might call cultural citizenship, the right to have rights. And these migrant leaders sent a powerful message to the students in the audience, that they must not squander their right to vote when so many in this country cannot.

In the fall, the exhibit will travel from its current home in a popular coffee shop to an exhibit space at NAU and then to local congregations. My students will work with migrant participants to develop a discussion guide for the exhibit and will train other students to help lead discussions in those congregations. I hope that the ripples from this small AVF grant will be felt as far as the Arizona state legislature, where our representatives will hear from those congregations about the impacts of anti-immigrant legislation on our community.

Perhaps those discussions in congregations and across our community will draw on the lessons we learn this week from the original sabbatical. We are all "toshavim and gerim" on this earth. If we use our times of rest and renewal to encounter one another, we may find that in fact we do have enough to share.

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Continue the conversation. Send Leah your thoughts: [leahmundell@gmail.com](mailto:leahmundell@gmail.com)



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