

Shmita and Interconnectedness

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Source: Rabbi Rachel Barenblat

Our sages took some pains to ensure a Jewish calendar in which Pesach would always fall in the spring. (They were operating in a northern hemisphere context; I don't think the challenges of antipodean Judaism ever occurred to them.) In the northern hemisphere, Pesach is inextricably connected with spring. As the earth shakes off the constrictions of winter, her frozen places thawing, so we remember our shaking-off the yoke of slavery to Pharaoh. As plant life and trees are "reborn" into the warming air, we tell the story of our renewal and rebirth out of the constriction of slavery and into freedom. We retell this story in embroidered detail at our seder tables. But we also remind ourselves of it in daily prayer and in the Shabbat kiddush. Shabbat is our time to stop doing and just be: the opposite of the slavery our mythic ancestors experienced then, and the opposite of the internal constriction we may experience now. On the Jewish calendar this is a shmita year, a year of Shabbat for the earth. Just as we were freed from slavery and can now embrace holy time every seventh day, so we are called to free the earth from her labors every seventh year. But most of us don't farm. How might we reinterpret this call? Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi z"l taught that once humanity became able to see the earth from space, we ushered in an era when we could be newly-aware of our interconnections. Regardless of nationality or creed, we're all on the same planet. Ultimately the divisions between "us" and "them" are illusory. And that's true not only spiritually, but practically. If we pollute a river "there," its impact will eventually be felt "here." Maybe this shmita year's Pesach is an opportunity to rethink how we treat the earth we share. A time to redouble our efforts to clean the air and to avoid sullyng the seas. In the Pesach story, we leave the Narrow Place of slavery – emerge through the waters of the Sea of Reeds – and are born into a new paradigm of relationship with our Source. Can we take Pesach as our inspiration to forge a new paradigm of relationship with our planet, so that the earth too can experience rest and rebirth?