

Residents of a quiet San Jose, CA, neighborhood were surprised, amused, and if they had potted plants on their lawn, a bit annoyed when 200 goats ran wild down their streets earlier this week. Once a year, as a firefighting preemptive strike, goats are brought in to clear the hillside brush. But these goats were apparently no longer willing to shelter in place. They got loose and trotted together for a few minutes, dropping evidence of their presence behind them.

Funny news stories like this one help brighten our day in normal times; they are especially welcome these days. But this scene, captured on camera, seems to be an example of something larger. Where the streets have no cars, there's room for goats.

Some might see this as the sad state of affairs around the world, with people so scarce that the wild animals are taking over. Or, it may be that even these frightening, disorienting, and deadly days of Coronavirus are a dark cloud with a silver lining.

The Torah portions this Shabbat are *Behar/Behukotai*. As we come to the end of *Sefer Vayikra*, the Book of Leviticus, we are introduced to the laws of *Shemittah*, the Sabbatical year: "When you enter the land that I assign to you, the land shall observe a Sabbath of the LORD—*v'shaveta ha-aretz Shabbat LAdonai*" (25:2). The word for Sabbatical of course shares the root letters of Shabbat, and the laws of farming work on the seven-year cycle that echoes Creation: six years of productivity, one year we let the land rest.

What does it mean to let the land rest, to allow it to lay fallow? In 5780 terms, let's consider that while we human beings battle a global pandemic, other elements of Creation may actually benefit from our greatly reduced presence. Last month, Hannah Sparks wrote for the *New York Post* (yes, the *New York Post*!) that Coronavirus is a boost to the environment in three ways. Firstly, we've seen a significant decrease in air pollution worldwide, with atmospheric nitrous oxide levels down as much as 50% in some parts of the planet. Number two, apropos the goats, animals have more room to roam. And third, growing awareness of the danger of wet markets to humans has led to new laws in China and Vietnam against consumption of wild animals. This isn't just better for us, it's better for the wild animals, for obvious reasons.

I'd suggest that thinking about *Shemittah*, the Sabbatical laws that demand rest for the earth, in these days also invite us to consider the power of the weekly Sabbatical that we call Shabbat. Notice that the verse we mentioned calls the rest that the land is to take "*Shabbat LAdonai*—a Sabbath of the LORD." In an agrarian society such as the one that existed when the Torah was written, what was a farming person, family, community or nation supposed to do if they couldn't plant or harvest? Rabbi Ovadiah Seforno, the 16th-century Italian commentator on the Torah, suggests as follows:

"So that the entire year, instead of 'serving' the soil that requires cultivation, the farmer will turn his attention to serving God. Just as the weekly Shabbat is set aside for intensive service of God, so too the *Shemittah* year."

I'm even more inspired by the teaching of the Hasidic master Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, who said that when God first told Moshe to instruct the Israelites about Shabbat back in Exodus 31, it made Moshe feel like a part of the process. That's because, according to a midrash, when Moshe saw the Israelite slaves working incessantly, without rest, he told Pharaoh that without rest, their productivity would suffer, and so would the Egyptians who relied on Israelite slave labor. When God later introduced the laws of Shabbat to Israel, Moshe felt good that he had come with the idea on his own. Maybe that's why our Shabbat morning Amidah includes the words "*Yismah Moshe bematnat helko*—Moses rejoiced at the gift in which he shared." Rabbi Levi Yitzhak went on to say: The Jewish People are now hearing

from Moshe, from whom they might have thought that Shabbat was only about a day off from work, that Shabbat is even more than that. It's about an invitation to come closer to God, to intensify our relationship with the Divine.

Indeed, Coronavirus has presented us with unprecedented challenges. We are lucky if our lives have only been inconvenienced. Thousands of livelihoods have been disrupted; thousands more lives have been lost. COVID-19 is a dark, dark cloud. It has also presented us with a challenge—do we have the capacity to seek out and find silver linings?

The second Torah portion of the week, *Behukotai*, is best known for including the *tokhehah*, a 30-verse warning of the disaster that will befall Israel if they do not follow God's laws. The promised punishments are so harsh that when they are read publicly from the Torah, they are chanted quickly and in an undertone, as if to say that if we don't say them out loud, they can't come true. But let's not forget that right before this section, there are 11 verses of unmitigated blessings if Israel does obey the commandments. "I will grant peace to the land, and you shall lie down untroubled by anyone; I will give the last respite from vicious beasts, and no sword shall cross your land." Harmless wild goats may run through your streets, but not animals that will do more to you than eat your potted plants.

Yes, the curses outnumber the blessings, but they don't need to eclipse them. *Shemittah* is a blessing for the planet and protects Creation. Shabbat is a gift to our People, welcoming us to connect with our Creator. Even the darkest clouds have silver linings. Let's keep looking for them.

Stay safe, stay well, and Shabbat Shalom!