



Torah and Western Thought: Jewish and Western Texts in Conversation

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Land and Literature: Rediscovering our Humanity

Why America Needs a Sabbatical Year

BY RABBI DR. STUART HALPERN AND RABBI DR. ARI BERGMANN

The following excerpt is adapted from Rabbi Dr. Halpern and Rabbi Dr. Bergmann's article which appeared in The Jewish Journal in December 2021.

Over the coming months, Americans will likely begin to benefit from the sweeping and historic infrastructure law. The measure's millions of beneficiaries would be wise to consider how an ancient biblical national project of renewal, observed this year in Israel, might shape the cultural impact of the changes to come.

Having left Egypt and with their sights set on the promised land, the ancient Israelites were given divine orders to observe a *shmita*, or sabbatical, year once every seven years. "Six years you shall sow your land," God instructs in the book of Exodus's 23rd chapter, "and you shall gather in its produce. And the seventh year ye shall release it from work and abandon it, and the poor among your people eat. And what they leave, the beast of the field shall eat. So you shall deal with your vineyard and your olive grove." The book of Deuteronomy adds an additional commandment during this time—the remission of debts. It is in the context of the cycle of the sabbatical year occurring every seven years, culminating in the 50th, or jubilee year, from which the Liberty Bell's inscription to "proclaim liberty throughout the land" was first articulated.

In a measure meant to mirror the commandment of the Sabbath as the week's day of rest, the sabbatical year put a pause on the country's usual agricultural endeavors and inspired a collective concentration on bridging economic and social divides. The poor were invited to enjoy the fruits planted by the wealthy, who quite literally flung open the gates in welcome. Fields were given a much-needed rest, allowing the replenishment of natural resources for the years ahead. The country's citizenry, in turn, was challenged to consider how to positively spend the extra time that had been gained by the cessation of agricultural labor and by making the fruits of the land accessible to all. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the first Chief Rabbi of British Mandate Palestine during the 1920s and early-1930s, taught that the year was to be focused on individuals utilizing this time to realize their "inner desire for goodness and justice, equality and calm, which God has planted within the nation."

In contemporary Israel, political, legal and cultural collaboration seeks to achieve ancient ideals. Since the start of the Jewish new year in the early fall, farmers, government agencies and educators have sought to balance restrictive traditional mandates with the maintenance of productivity and economic



sustainability of the country's agricultural industry. In one remarkable example, known as *otsar beit din*, or "the storage of the court," a group of farmers receive salaries and have their expenses covered (no profit is made) through sales of their produce organized by the country's rabbinical authority. Various segments of society—religious and non-religious, including students from across the country—are invited to assist in this farming process, from physically working the land to distributing its products to the poor and homebound elderly. The impact of a nationally transformative project initiated from on high is taken as an opportunity to increase societal cohesion and address economic equality.

As Americans are soon to experience their own national rejuvenation project, the sabbatical year might serve as a guide. Improved commuting time, faster shipping and shorter downloading time will no doubt improve individual lives. How the new mandates, and liberated time gained, can be leveraged for bridging societal divides remains subject to the imagination and the responsibility of those who dwell beneath the heavens.

When we all gain our own small portion of a sabbatical year—those few extra minutes or hours—the challenge will be maximizing the newfound free time for positive social change.

Ultimately, while the reform's success might officially be measured in bridges repaired, low-emission busses purchased and electric charging stations designed, its true transformative realization lies in how it inspires Americans of all affiliations to consider larger questions of national purpose. What it means to care for a land, how most sustainably to delight in its fecundity, and how greater efficiency can bridge economic and cultural divides—questions raised by the sabbatical year—prove to be both timeless and timely.

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Dante's Hell and Our Humanity

BY RABBI DR. DOV LERNER

The following excerpt is adapted from Rabbi Dr. Lerner's article which appeared in The Public Discourse in September 2021.

Dante's *Inferno* appeals to readers in almost every place and almost every age since its publication. Hell's nine circles are populated by a haunting array of sadistic wardens and their criminal prey. We read of the three-headed Cerberus slashing at the skin of the gluttonous as they roll in the dirt and rain; we meet sinners transfigured into trees as hounds tear at their leaves and feet; we meet tyrants seething in streams of blood as pugnacious centaurs prowl the banks; we see devils whipping panders, snakes striking thieves, lead-laden hypocrites, and immobilized bodies in the silent bowels of Satan's frozen lair, as he grinds the three greatest traitors of all time between his stained and jagged teeth.

These are just a few of the figures and scenes that have lent the first installment of Dante's poem its longevity. They have inspired rides on Coney Island and plotlines in Dan Brown's *Inferno*, speaking to the morbid curiosity that we each possess, albeit to varying degrees. A picture is indeed worth a thousand words. While Dante's Purgatory and Paradise are peppered with memorable personalities and episodes, none compares to the graphic feast of his gruesome hellscape.

Yet my students and I found something more profound than mere gore in Dante's textual bequest to posterity. His hell provided us something that we could never find in his Purgatory or Paradise. For us, the *Inferno's* true contribution was not its penal landscape of scorched sands and steaming pitch. On the contrary, what stirred us most was his evident concern for our humanity.

As an example of how an Orthodox Jew—a rabbi, in fact!—might read Dante's *Inferno* and find universal truth to teach, we need look no further than just inside the gates of hell. Those infamous gates are inscribed with the dark words "*Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate*": "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here."

Dante describes a starless space filled with the sound of agony. So shrill and piercing were the screams that the pilgrim of the poem turns to his guide and asks who on earth deserves such suffering. Virgil tells him that that these were the screams of miserable souls who lived without praise or infamy and remain nameless in death. These are the souls that T. S. Eliot later branded "hollow men"—those who insist on sitting on the periphery of history and embrace neutrality as a creed.

Despite having committed no evil, Dante writes, they cannot enter heaven, for they would lessen its beauty. Though they performed no good, they cannot enter hell either, for their presence would give the other residents a sense of glory for having at least really lived.

As the stream of nameless dead, with faces streaked with tears and blood, runs past the pilgrim in pursuit of a blank banner, Dante catches the eyes of one man: he who made "the great refusal." Most scholars agree that this anonymous coward is Celestine V: the first pope that Dante puts in hell, and the figure at the center of Jon M. Sweeney's *The Pope Who Quit*.

Born Pietro Angelerio, Celestine V served as pope for five months in 1294—during Dante's lifetime—and was by all accounts a real saint. He was devoted to piety and sought to rid the papacy of impropriety. On seeing the scale of apostolic corruption, however, he resigned his post in search of a what he called "a stainless conscience." For Dante, this was a crime against our common humanity, a crime that not only cost Celestine a place a heaven but left him unable even to enter hell. For Dante, walking away from a fight with evil is not an option. It is a vice disconnected from dogma and unrelated to creed, an unalloyed evil that fails to grasp the purpose of humanity.

And as my students and I studied this great refusal, we recognized an ethic that sits at the crux of one of the most pivotal shifts in the Hebrew Bible: when Moses initially resists his summons to save a nation of slaves and stand up to an evil empire. For seven days, Moses wrestled with God but caved in, in a fit of devotion, to the mission of living as a moral agent. In one of the most important moments of his life, Moses realized that when evil thrives, silence is not an option.

So, although we were a room full of Orthodox Jews having spent the first hours of our day immersed in Jewish tradition, the *Inferno* did not feel too unfamiliar. Though, to some degree, a reading of Dante's Purgatory and Paradise might well clash with our spiritual curricula—taking us deep into Christological territory—in Dante's hell, for all its terror, we felt his moral imagination and found our common humanity.

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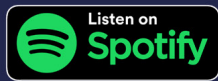
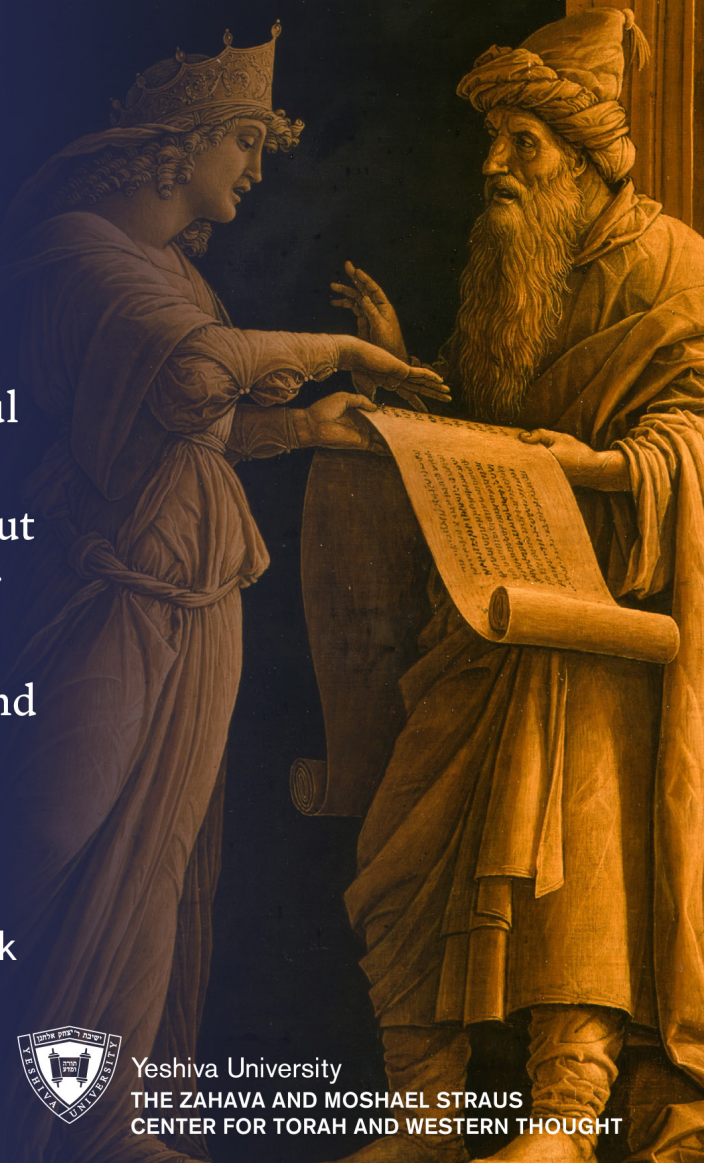
Twice Blest

A Podcast Exploring Shakespeare and the Hebrew Bible

Hosted by Dr. Shaina Trapedo

“People try to connect Macbeth to the David and Saul story because it’s the play with witches, and Saul is the only biblical king who also consults witches... But another way of looking at it is Shakespeare is giving us David in reverse... The greatness of David is he is one of the few monarchs that can show greatness and humility... He is sometimes incredibly active, and sometimes incredibly passive, and even when he’s active, he sees God’s hand.”

– Rabbi Dr. Meir Soloveichik



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