In 1793, an event occurred in America that changed US history. The cotton gin became available to farmers, and allowed the pace of cotton processing, which had been up that point the limiting factor on cotton production, to dramatically increase. This led to changes in how cotton was grown, and the expansion of plantations as soil quickly became exhausted. Particularly important, it also caused the slave economy of the south to dramatically expand and become exponentially more cruel and ruthlessly efficient.

The effect of the cotton gin speaks to the inherent relationship between the ruthless exploitation of land to increase efficiency of production, and the ruthless exploitation of humans that follows almost inevitably.

200 years later, there is still a dominant strand in our culture that values efficiency and profit over all else. There are also a series of social movements converging to challenge that dominant value from all directions – whether it is the fight for 15 minimum wage increase, the slow food and organics movement, the climate justice movements – all of these movement are crying out that there is a greater value than immediate-term efficiency of profit.

This is not a new idea. The Torah introduces us to the patterns of nature – the cycle of the days, months, and years; the seasons of the dormancy and rebirth of the earth, the cycles of rainy and dry periods. But these aren't sufficient to structure our human relationship with and reliance on the earth's bounty: from the very beginning of Torah, we are taught of a seven-day cycle that culminates in Shabbat. The seven days don't correspond to any natural event – unlike day and night, or the monthly cycle of the moon's waxing and waning that is the basis of the Hebrew calendar.

The seventh day is described in many ways – in Exodus 16, when people are commanded not to gather manna on the 7th day, it seems like a day of rest for God, to get a break from having to provide for these needy people. Later in Exodus 20, the shabbat is clearly for humans, as we see in the ten commandments, where we are told that everyone, from householder to servant, cattle and strangers, male and female are entitled to rest on the Sabbath. The Sabbath is a great equalizer. On Shabbat, the prohibitions against acts of production force us to be mindful of what we have, force us to live in a space of being, rather than doing. While one might argue that the Sabbath exists so that we can be more productive on the 6th days of work, our tradition actually understands the rest and equality of Shabbat to be the ultimate point of creation, rather than the productivity achieved on the 6th work days. We are told that Shabbat is M'eyn Olam Haba – a taste of the world to come, and we sing in l'cha dodi, "sof ma'aseh b'machshavah t'chilah" – it was last in deed, meaning, the last of God's creations, but the first intention. The world was created for the sake of Shabbat.

And as I mentioned at the congregational meeting last night, this week's parashah, Behar, casts a macro-cosmic Sabbath in the form of the *Shmitta,* the sabbatical year. The shmitta is described in our Torah portion as a rest for the land, a Sabbath for God, and as way of having all enjoy equally the abundance of the land.

And scholars are fairly clear that the shmitta was not just about agricultural productivity, either. The ancient Israelites actually practiced a three year crop rotation system that kept the soil healthy. This dramatic agricultural ceasing every seven years cannot be said to be practical – or efficient.

Ultimately, the Shmitta serves as a powerful reminder of God's utterance in this parasha, in Chapter 25, verse 23, "The land is mine."

God says, don't think you can sell the land in perpetuity, because the land is mine.

Ownership is such an intense human concept. Think of how you feel about the things you won. Think of how it feels when our ownership – of our space, of our voices, of our things – is challenged. Challenges to ownership provoke a unique kind of outrage. Ownership is a kind of sacrament, especially in our society. As commentator Nechama Leibowitz writes about this parasha, "humanity is possessed of a strong feeling of proprietorship. It is perhaps most strongly rooted in the peasant who dwells and lives on his or her own land. The sensation of 'mine' is fraught with danger. It is to counter this sensation that the Torah emphasizes that the land is a gift from God to Israel, and in order to remind us that it is not the power and might of our own hands that have gotten us our wealth.

It's pretty clear that Torah isn't preaching against the concept of private property or private space. It's only one out of every 7 years that the notion of ownership gets challenged. What shmitta does, however, is demand that we hold that notion lightly. That we realize that while we may be entrusted as stewards of a particular plot of land, land does not – cannot – belong to us any more than people can belong to us.

But when we think we can own land, we can consume land, then we wind up depleting it, and exploiting people. Industrial chemical inputs, slave labor, poverty wages, pollution – these are all of the consequences of a culture in which ownership reigns supreme, and where the right to efficiently wrest profit from what one owns is unchecked by any greater moral force.

Parashat Behar is a relatively short parasha, usually paired in the same week with the following parasha, Bechukkotai. Bechukkotai is full of the blessings that are promised, specifically if we follow the rules of shmitta – and the threatened curses if we do not. We are threatened with the very land itself rebelling to vomit us up if we do not give it its due rest. We are seeing the results of the dominant cultural attitude of ownership as opposed to stewardship – in climate change and more and more dramatic climate events. I would venture that we are also seeing it in the populist revolt that is marking this election season.

So, we are in year one of a new shmitta cycle. That gives us a lot of time to imagine – how could we be working to challenge the dominant cultural narrative? What stories do we tell about what is ours, and are they true? Are we treating efficiency as the highest value, or are there other values we want to live by? What would it feel like to treat rest – for the land, for each other – as the ulmate point of creation?

Shabbat shalom.