

Shavout 2018 Sermon Slam
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A couple of weeks ago Stephen sent me one of the weekly commentaries he reads, about the current Torah portion. It was called the theology of meteorology. It was about the prediction, which in very general terms, states that if we are good, the rains will come as scheduled and as needed, and if we are not there will be drought, the land will be barren, and life will perish. The commentary went on to point out that this idea is also a focus of the second paragraph of the Shema.

In one sense, the idea that our actions of good and evil directly affect whether we get rain or not, feels like a very archaic way to think about our relationship with god. But increasingly as I ponder our connection to the home we call Earth, the more this idea feels like one of the more important things we could learn from our texts.

It is becoming increasingly clear that, in fact, how we chose to live our lives does in the big picture, impact whether the rains will come - or whether there will be huge hurricanes, massive snow falls or severe drought. So perhaps, in the most simplistic terms, how we choose to take care of our planet, or not, could be lumped into the bucket of whether we are conducting our lives in good or evil ways.

So, what to do? It is, of course very important to follow and try to understand the science behind climate change. But beyond that, under the heading of “we value what we know”, I think we also really need to have a relationship with our environment, to know and understand who and what lives around us. And to begin that, we do not need to trek to the Rainforests or dive down to the South Pole. We can start in our own backyards.

We live near the center of town. We don't have a very large backyard, but in our yard, we have two bird baths. I can look out the window and watch birds literally lining up for their daily or hourly baths. There can be quite a bit of competition for



time in the water. When we have had long stretches of very hot and dry weather my bird baths feel like an African Watering hole.

Everything from raccoons to bumble bees comes down for a drink. Importantly, I am constantly reminded that we are all living on this piece of land together. There are layers of life that go on all around us as we march through our day. If we pay attention we can get to know these other members of our community and perhaps begin to value their presence.

One of the things I find so interesting about Needham is that it is surrounded on three sides by the Charles River. The only way out of Needham without crossing the Charles is Wellesley. That means there are a lot of wetlands in Needham, all of it protected. Importantly for all, the wetlands act like sponges during the heavy rains, preventing even more severe flooding. If the wetlands around New Orleans had not been drained and built on, the impact from storms like Katrina would have been lessened and at least some of the horrific damage could have been avoided.

I think about wetlands when Stephen and I walk to shul. We go by the horse farm on Central Avenue. Because most of the land around the house is wetlands, it has recently been turned over to the Needham Conservation Commission. Now you can see bird houses placed all over the property. Flying about are bluebirds, swallows and redwing blackbirds. I have seen deer and once I saw a hawk swoop down and catch a snake. Every time I walk by it is different, from week to week and season to season. I do think that is how we build a relationship with a place and all that live there.

In the Shema, Stephen points out that although the first paragraph is written in the singular, the second paragraph, the one about the land, is written in the plural - a reminder perhaps, that taking care of our earth, and learning to exist together on it is not a something that can be done alone.