

RH SERMON: FALTER

The pandemic we are living through, as painful as it has been, has taught us a lot of lessons. As we spend so many months stuck in our homes, we are learning to appreciate some of the simpler pleasures of life, the quieter moments which we have too few of in our crazy, busy schedules, as well as the power of relationships, and of community. How we long to hug one another in real space rather than in cyber space. How much we appreciate Zoom for at least showing us each other's faces. We are also learning to appreciate nature, that precious resource that we have abused so badly. We are seeing cleaner air, we are hearing the chirps of birds, we are taking advantage of walks in the parks. And we are discovering that this virus is not a random act of God, nor is it a punishment for any sins we have committed. It is a natural consequence of our encroaching on wetlands and cutting down forests which has forced wild animals to crowd into smaller and smaller spaces, drawing them into intimate contact with us. In other words, as a recent article in The Nation notes, our destruction of wildlife habitats has allowed many animal microbes to find their way into human bodies. To quote this piece: "The majority of pathogens that have emerged since 1940 originated in the bodies of animals and entered human populations not because they invaded us but because we invaded their habitats." ¹

¹ <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/pandemic-definition-covid/>

We were warned about this sort of problem a long time ago.

Do you know where? In our Torah!

In fact, there is a whole paragraph we are supposed to recite twice daily, that is part of the traditional Shema. It's from Deuteronomy and it reads in part:

“If, then, you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day, loving Adonai your God and serving God with all your heart and soul, I will grant the rain for your land in season, the early rain and the late. You shall gather in your new grain and wine and oil—I will also provide grass in the fields for your cattle—and thus you shall eat your fill. Take care not to be lured away to serve other gods and bow to them. For the Adonai's anger will flare up against you, and God will shut up the skies so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce; and you will soon perish from the good land that Adonai is assigning to you.”

You probably don't recognize this because the Reform movement took this out of our liturgy – and you can see why.

It sounds forbidding. Who wants to worship a God who would threaten to punish us in such a harsh way? However, there is another way to understand this prayer, and that is as a warning to care for the land, a responsibility we have not lived up to.

So maybe now is a good time to rethink our use of resources. According to environmental journalist Bill McKibben, our disregard for the earth is due to our rapacious desire for more and more wealth, which requires the exploitation of other human beings. His recently published book, *Falter: Has the Human Game Begun to Play Itself Out* is a cautionary tale about our relationship to our world.

McKibben predicts that:

“1/3 of the planet’s land is now severely degraded, with ‘persistent declining trends in productivity.’”²

“By the middle of this century the ocean may contain more plastic than fish by weight, partly because we toss away so many bottles and partly because we take far more life from the ocean than it can produce. Since 1950 we’ve wiped out perhaps 90 percent of the big fish in the ocean...”³

McKibben also decries the selfishness that has become the norm in our society, leading to extreme gaps between the rich and the poor. He writes:

² (2017 report) p. 12.

³ p. 46

“...with the rapid rise of inequality has come a rebound of truly gross poverty, the kind I’d...imagined was a relic. In 2017 the United Nations sent its special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights to tour America. After a two-week visit, this Australian expert concluded that ‘for one of the world’s wealthiest countries to have forty million people living in poverty, and over five million living in ‘Third World’ conditions is cruel and inhuman.’”⁴

This pandemic has clearly called our attention to disparities in health care and the ability to withstand economic downturns. McKibben continues: “The world’s 8 richest men possess more wealth than the bottom half of humanity. This trend...is most pronounced in the United States, where the three richest men have more wealth than the bottom 150 million taken together.”⁵

Our capacity to turn the earth’s resources into riches for ourselves is matched only by our capacity to develop new forms of existence through Artificial Intelligence – or AI. For example, a gene manipulating technology called CRISPR has the potential not only “*to fix existing humans...[but also] to alter future humans.* [According to one scientist,]

⁴ p. 84

⁵ p. 86

‘Now for the first time ever...’⁶ ‘we possess the power to *direct the evolution of our own species.*’⁷ McKibben warns that, “As intelligence explodes, and the AI gains the ability to improve itself, it will soon outstrip our ability to control it.”⁸ We are in the process of creating our own Frankenstein.

So what do we do? Of course we know that renewable energy is one answer to the environmental problem. And certainly, a fairer distribution of wealth is a response to economic disparity. But more than practical solutions, we need to change our mindset first.

McKibben tells us that: **“Societies are measured not just by the things they build, but also by the things they can bring themselves to leave alone.”**⁹

He says that, “We’re the creatures who can decide not to do something we’re capable of doing.

That’s our superpower, even if we exercise it rarely.”¹⁰

Of course, this is wisdom our own tradition has already taught us.

In Pirkei Avot, the Wisdom of the Fathers, Ben Zoma asks:

⁶ p. 142

⁷ p. 152

⁸ p. 159

⁹ p. 228

¹⁰ p. 255

“Who is wise?” “The one who is able to overcome his evil inclination.” As Rabbi Gordon Tucker asks: “If it can be done, must it be done?”

Rabbi Tucker characterizes youth as the time when we feel most adventurous, when we have unlimited energy, when we feel we can conquer all. Perhaps the human race over the past two thousand years has been living out its youth. And perhaps it is time for us to embrace maturity – a stage when we recognize our limitations, when moderation is a life-sustaining strategy.

I spoke last night about the Akedah – the story of the binding of Isaac – which we read for Rosh Hashanah and which will be chanted for you by our post B’nai Mitzvah. God tells Abraham to offer up his son Isaac as a burnt offering. And Abraham is willing to comply. As I mentioned, this story is open to a multitude of interpretations. Here is one more:

Yes, Abraham could kill his son. Sacrificing a child to please a god was practiced by other cultures at the time. And even in our own culture, don’t parents sacrifice their children in other ways, by sending them to wars, or by insisting they follow a particular career, or that they not marry someone they love?

But God says, No! God says we must restrain this impulse.

Just because we can does not mean we should.

And that is a lesson our society needs to learn as well.

Yes, billionaires can become even wealthier.

Yes, we can keep using up the resources of the earth.

Yes, we can modify human genetics to create a made-to-order person. But what kind of people are we then?

And what kind of legacy are we leaving for the next generation?

We still have time to save our planet and ourselves.

Will we heed the call?

On a holiday when we mark the birthday of the world's Creation, let us pray for the earth's survival and our ability to heal its wounds.

A prayer by Marcia Falk:

It is ours to praise
the beauty of the world

Even as we discern
the torn world.

For nothing is whole
that is not first rent

And out of the torn
we make whole again.

May we live with promise
in creation's lap,
redemption budding
on our hands.