

The Call of the Wilderness – Kol Nidre 5780
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Congregation Emanu-El of Westchester
Rabbi Howard J. Goldsmith

The wilderness nourishes me. The sun and the dirt. The leaves and the rocks and the long hills that make me lose my breath and question if I will ever get in shape. The cold brown-grey-blue of winter. The still, humid brown-blue-green – so many greens! – of summer. The riot of autumn leaves and the bright promise of spring flowers. Each fill me up, each feed my soul. Outdoors I connect to something greater than me. Connect literally to the trees that make the air I breathe and the mosquitos that drink my blood and then get eaten by the birds who sing the songs that make me smile. And connect to something greater that perhaps I dare to call holy, or divine, or even God. Nature nourishes me.

In the rush of days between Labor Day and now I managed to sneak out on my own a few times, to be under the blue vault of the heavens, to feel the sun and a hint of fall in air – or the echo of summer. I went to the little patch of woods near my home that surround a reservoir, a simple patch of water and trees and trails. The water was lower than it used to be. I knew it hadn't rained lately so of course the water was lower. But no, I looked again and bushes and grasses and things that take more than a dry spell to grow covered some of the beaches that had not existed before.

I walked further to the end of the lake, past the place where the trail now bends around a tree that Sandy blew over, past the places where my children used to discover treasures I'd hide for them, past the marshy bit. But the marshy bit wasn't there. Before, at the end of the lake, tall reeds had grown and skunk cabbage and mosquitos too many to count had buzzed in my ears. But it had all dried up. Beneath the bridge that used to take the trail over the marsh was dirt not mud, woody plants not the swamp grass that used to inhabit those shadows. And further still, past the erstwhile marsh, a deer with great antlers walked regally where before there had been water, but now grass for the deer to nibble. With a turn of a valve, the Department of Public Works who oversees the dam, had changed the forest.

We humans have an awesome power to control the world around us. And that power is old, very old. Already in the stories of Creation which Rabbi Ross quoted last week, God grants humans dominion over the world – we can use it for our purposes. It says, “God blessed them and God said to them, “Be fertile and increase, וּמִלְאוּ אֶת-הָאָרֶץ וּכְבֹשׁוּהָ fill the earth and master it...”¹ The Torah offsets the command to “master” a few verses later. “The ETERNAL God took the man and placed him in the garden of Eden, וּלְעֲבֹדָהּ וּלְשָׂמְרָהּ to till it and tend it.”² Together these texts make clear our power to deeply impact the world: we can master it, we can use it, we can care for it. An essentially agricultural people, the ancient Israelites had countless Torah laws outlining the ways to plow and to harvest, to plant and to reap. With primitive tools, our Bronze Age ancestors already recognized the profound ways that humanity could impact the earth and wove laws to manage those impacts into their greatest spiritual work.

¹ Genesis 1:28

² Genesis 2:15

We see this wisdom plainly in the Shema. “שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל” “Hear, O Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is One!”³ Hear! Listen! Oneness! The prayer so deeply ingrained in our Jewish hearts declares the essential oneness of our world. A few chapters later, in verses inscribed on the mezuzah parchments that adorn our doorways, the Torah clearly explains the cause and effect implications of that oneness: If we follow the Torah laws that embody oneness, if we live in symbiotic relationships with one another, with God and with the earth, then we will have rains in their seasons and the earth will yield its goodness for us and the cycles of nature will proceed as they ought to. But, if we fail follow the Divine Will that embodies oneness, if we care overmuch for ourselves at others’ expense,⁴ if we treat the earth as a bottomless horn of plenty,⁵ if we disregard our future for the sake of our present,⁶ the Torah tells us that the rains will stop, that earth will yield no harvest, that enemies will descend and we will be ejected from our lands.⁷

When we fail to live in relation to the earth we spurn our profound connection to it embedded in the Hebrew language itself. In chapter two of Genesis we read, “Adonai formed אָדָם the man from אֲדָמָה the dust of the earth.”⁸ The word אֲדָמָה (*adamah*) means dirt or earth. The word אָדָם (*adam*) means human. The all but identical words illustrate the ancient Jewish understanding that we are of the earth. We can dress ourselves in jacket and tie and designer dresses, we can cover ourselves in robes and yarmulkes and tallitot, we can sleep in clean houses and use anti-bacterial soap. And, still, we are אָדָם (*adam*), people, made from אֲדָמָה (*adamah*), earth, we are creatures tied to the earth in the most fundamental ways.

Certainly, as a species on the planet, we are biologically and ecologically linked to the rest of creation. But it’s not just biological. As we impact our world, Judaism teaches how the world impacts us. Our ancient traditions center our spiritual and religious experience around nature – not only a hiking rabbi – but the very DNA of our sacred holy days. On our next festival, Sukkot, the Talmudic rabbis give hundreds of very specific instructions for building a sukkah, waving a lulav and saying specific prayers. But the Torah, the Torah for Sukkot issues terse, simple commandments with fabulously few details: Get outside! Feast! Gather nature “וּשְׂמַחְתֶּם לִפְנֵי ה’” and use nature to “celebrate before God!”⁹ Our ancient ancestors knew what we needed to raise our spirits after the rigors of Yom Kippur. We need to get outside.

The festival at the other end of our calendar, Shavuot in early summer, dramatically conveys the centrality of wilderness in Jewish faith. On Shavuot we celebrate Revelation: God revealing the Torah on Mount Sinai. God could have revealed Torah to Moses in Egypt, the greatest civilization in the ancient Near East. God could have waited until the people settled in the Land of Israel and established Jerusalem and given Torah in the eternal capital of the Jewish people. But no, God does it on a mountain top. And an ancient teaching tells us that God not only took the people to a mountain, but God specifically took us to the “אַתֶּר הַמִּדְבָּר” to the “furthest wilderness.”¹⁰ God took them to the place animals call home, the place where small desert plants

³ Deuteronomy 6:4

⁴ See Kedoshim

⁵ See Behar

⁶ See Honi HaMa’agel

⁷ See Deuteronomy 11:13-17

⁸ Genesis 2:7

⁹ Leviticus 23:40

¹⁰ Midrash Tanchuma, Shmot 14:1

grow miraculously from rocky crags; God took them to the place where eagles soar up cliffs on thermals, the place where civilization's distractions melt away. And there – in “אַתֶּר הַמִּדְבָּר” the furthest wilderness – God gave us the gift of Torah, the revelation upon which we have built our civilization.

And Torah at Sinai was just the beginning. Our tradition overflows with revelation, with the realization of religious truth, in the wilderness: Job's whirlwind tour of creation teaches us to humbly yield to mystery.¹¹ King Solomon's exhortation in Proverbs to observe the ways of the ant suggests how we might gain wisdom.¹² Rabbi Akiva's observation of water carving a stone inspires us to learn at any age.¹³ Reb Nachman's realization that all of nature prays with us suggests how our solitary prayers may ascend through the very gates of heaven.¹⁴ Rav Kook's reminder to his student that we can discover secrets of the Holy Blessed One even through a leaf on a bush tells us to avoid being wasteful.¹⁵ These are not fringe, tree hugging, Jewish stories, these are core to our tradition and – like the Torah itself – they all flow from the nature.

To experience the Jewish spirit in nature, we need not venture to the top of Bear Mountain or on a muddy path. We need not endure mosquitos or even dirt. While for some of us these things bring exhilaration and spiritual inspiration, we can all see nature around us if only we open our senses to it. The best sunsets are often heading west on Westchester Avenue as it crosses the Hutch. The gardens in our yards and parks in our towns have flowers and plants that bring riots of color in their seasons. Open the window, hear the birdsong, feel your stress go down and, if you'll allow it, a sense of wonder take the place of your anxiety.

More and more, the next generation now asks the rest of us to recognize the depth of our relationship with the earth that Jewish tradition has long embraced. They call us to own our power to sustain the planet. Rich and poor, free and oppressed, teens and young adults around the world have raised their voices. We see it locally, too. Just as Peggy Helman lends her voice to help lead our daytime worship on the High Holy Days, so too does she lead the environmental effort at her school. With a megaphone in her hand and passion in her heart, she led hundreds of students through the streets of Rye with a simple and profound message: We need to fix our environment. None of us can abdicate that responsibility.

And, as Americans, we have a greater share of that responsibility. We contribute 25% of carbon emissions¹⁶ but make up only four and quarter percent of the world's population.¹⁷ Compare that to places like Bangladesh or the Philippines who contribute very little to global warming but must already contend with its deadly effects.¹⁸ The Torah's prophecy of cause and effect, of failure to care for the earth bringing about draught and famine and political unrest, has started to come true in some corners of the world. Empirically, we can observe that those who suffer the

¹¹ Job 38:1-11, etc.

¹² Proverbs 6:6

¹³ Avot d'Rabbi Natan Chapter 6

¹⁴ Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav's Prayer for Nature

¹⁵ Unterman, Alan. *Wisdom of the Jewish Mystics*. p.80

¹⁶ “Each Country's Share of CO2 Emissions” Union of Concerned Scientists. <https://bit.ly/2Pgp7MS>

¹⁷ <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/us-population/>

¹⁸ Butler, Gavin “The Nine Countries Most Threatened by Climate Change Are All in Asia, Report Finds” Vice. June 12, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2oJrC2j>

most effects from environmental ruin, contribute least to the underlying cause. That moral math will not compute until we take responsibility in line with – or exceeding – the harm that we cause.¹⁹ Many paths can get us there: more national regulation or better free market solutions; UN treaties or local ordinances; technological innovation or old standbys. Tonight, the only path I advocate is the path of Torah and its call for our stewardship of God’s earth. We can realize the Torah’s promise of rains in their seasons and lands of plenty – if only we follow the call of our teenagers and summon the courage to live in sync with the rest of creation.

Indeed, in their call, Peggy and her generation echo the voices of our sages. Distilling the message of the creation story, the ancient rabbis taught: “When the Blessed Holy One created the first human, God took him and led him round all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said to him: “Look at My works, how beautiful and praiseworthy they are! ... Pay attention that you do not corrupt and destroy My world: if you corrupt it, אֵין מִי שְׁיַתְקֶנּוּ אַחֲרָיךְ there is no one to repair it after you.”²⁰ These rabbis did not march through the streets of Rye, they did not organize protests on Facebook and twitter. But they knew profoundly the power that humans have to make or unmake the natural world. They knew that from nature flows not only our food and drink and the air we breathe, but also spirituality and the religious truth of revelation. They knew that without the wilderness, the Jewish people would not exist. And they knew that the symbiotic relationship between humanity and the world around can bring countless blessings if only we recognize our power and commit to living in paths of peace and gentleness, respect and awe.

In our heart of hearts, we know that we אָדָם (*adam*), we humans, are אֲדָמָה (*adamah*), are made from the earth, are one with it. The teachings of Torah, the scrolls in our mezuzuahs, our sacred festivals, nature all around us, and the vision of our teenagers can inspire us to live in sync with our world, to embrace our oneness with creation. It will not always be easy but as the Torah promises, the path to oneness is “לֹא בַשָּׁמַיִם הָיָא” “it is not in the heavens”²¹ “וְלֹא-מֵעֵבֶר לַיָּם הָיָא” “and it is not across the sea.”²² “כִּי-קָרוֹב אֵלֶיךָ הַדָּבָר מֵאֵד” “No, it is very close to us.”²³ Once we commit, once we honor the deep, millennia-long Jewish relationship with the earth, once we live into those commitments, we will have followed God’s command “וּבַחַיָּת בְּחַיִּים” God’s command to “choose life” and we will reap its reward to “long endure upon אֲדָמָה (*adamah*) to long endure upon the earth.”²⁴

כֵּן יְהִי רָצוֹן
May this be God’s will

¹⁹ Tippet, Krista “The Moral Math of Climate Change” Interview with Bill McKibben. 8/5/2010

²⁰ Kohelet Rabbah 17:13:1

²¹ Deuteronomy 30:12

²² Deuteronomy 30:13

²³ Deuteronomy 30:14

²⁴ Deuteronomy 30:19-20