



Rabbi Jeffrey Saxe Rosh Hashanah 5775/2014

When I was ten, my parents planned a multigenerational vacation for our family. We would drive east to the Sierra Nevada Mountains, three hours from our home in the Bay Area. At night we would cook our food by the fire and camp outside. The daytime hours would be spent on an eight-person raft with our guide helping us navigate the white water rapids of the Stanislaus River.

My sister and I were so excited. Splashing and crashing against the river rocks, roasting marshmallows. Going to sleep to the sounds of the Redwood forest. And that's exactly how the trip turned out, at least for us. However, we soon found out that not everyone in our family felt quite as excited about this trip as we did. My one living grandfather, Grandpa Steve, opted out entirely. He had no interest in spending time outside. My Grandma Marian hated the idea too, but she wasn't going to miss a chance to be with her grandchildren. At night, while the rest of us slept in our tents, Grandma Marian curled up in the passenger seat of the station wagon, closed the window and went to sleep. She was there, but she was trying as hard as she could stay away from nature. And my Omi Greta joined in this game too. My most vivid memory of the trip was seeing my two grandmothers bouncing down the river, wearing shower caps over their carefully combed hair.

Thinking back on it now, I realize that this early experience - my family attempting to commune with nature together - epitomizes the complicated feelings so many of us have about the natural world - meaning everything in our world that wasn't made by people: the grass and the weeds, the trees and bushes and the thorns, the butterflies and the bugs and mosquitos, the sand and lakes and sea...and the seaweed. What is our relationship, as Jews, to the earth? What does Judaism offer us about how we should see nature, and what it means for us? Rosh Hashanah traditionally marks the completion of the six days of creation. Did you know that this day is called the birthday of the world? It's a celebration we should share with all of God's creation - the animals, fish, plants, trees, rocks, land and sea. So, today is an appropriate time not only to reflect on our inner selves and our actions towards other people, but also to explore how we relate to the rest of the world God created.

The relationship in the bible between humans and the world is complicated. God places Adam & Eve in a garden paradise, telling them to master and rule it, to till it and tend it. God says to them, according to the Midrash. "Look at my works! See how beautiful they are, how excellent!"¹ The wonder and awe with which Jews have grown to see the world is all over

Scripture. The psalmist is overcome by the countless forms of life, somehow living together: “How many are the things you have made, Adonai? You have made them all with wisdom. The earth is full of your creations.”² At the same time, there is a lot of reason to fear the natural world. The creation story ends leaving humans forever vulnerable to it. God later uses rain to destroy humanity in the flood and, still later, threatens to reward and punish the people by causing the earth to provide for them or to deprive them of sustenance.

Since the ancient Jews were nomads and farmers, our texts are full of the imagery of nature. The Torah is a tree of life and a righteous person blooms like a date palm. We contemplate our place in the scope of creation, saying, “We come and go like grass.” And ancient Jewish traditions reflect the centrality of the earth to early Jewish life: the festival holidays, Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot, required Jews to journey, for days, to the Temple in Jerusalem, for ceremonies that all took place outdoors in the Temple’s huge courtyard. When the first fruits came up each year, the farmer would fill his basket with wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives and dates. He would hold them up before the High Priest and utter thanks out loud. We still say the prayers for rain that preoccupied our ancestors every season, and we are called on to constantly say blessings of thanksgiving for what we eat, see and do, because, the Talmud tells us, “It is forbidden to enjoy anything of the world without a *berachah*”.³

I look at all of this history and ask myself, how did we get from there to here - from picking our fruit to buying it, genetically altered, in the grocery store? In a few weeks, we will observe the Sukkot holiday, once one of the great Jewish harvest festivals; now a nice relic. At best, some of us might eat a few meals outside in our Sukkah and then go back indoors. It’s a chance to hang out in the back yard for a bit. Our ancestors spent *their* October nights sleeping in an open field. In the morning they would wake up and begin the hard work of gathering the harvest. They grasped the grapes, dates, and figs with their hands. Sitting here, thankfully, we can at least see the trees during the daytime. But when was the last time you slept in your back yard? How long has it been since you even sat down on the ground? It’s been almost 2000 years since we Jews spent time in the fields. After that we migrated to the cities. Today 81 percent of America lives in urban areas as well. As a people and as a country, we have lost that connection to nature that came so easily to our ancestors.

I like suburban Northern Virginia. I love my life of comfort and intellectual stimulation. I am more likely to sit on one of the cushy chairs at Starbucks than on my front lawn. Jaimee and I dream of building one of those porch rooms, so we can sit outside, but there is an understood requirement of a screen to keep a certain distance between us and nature. At best, I am somewhere between my childhood self, eager to camp outside, and my grandma Marian, who rolled up the car windows to keep the bugs out. Still, I wonder what I’m missing.

This past summer, Jaimee and I brought my childhood family vacation back for our own generation. We took the kids to the Blue Ridge Mountains with extended family. It was a great week, but the house we rented had some surprises that were unsettling for us. You would think we would have been nervous about the bears that came to our door or crossed the road in front of us, but that didn't bother us. For me, the biggest issue was the lack of internet connection or cell-phone reception. Instead of looking at the weather forecast, I would have to walk outside. But what bothered Jaimee was the lack of air conditioning. And, indeed, that was the hardest part. At the end of our first 90-degree day, as we put our three- and four-year old kids to bed upstairs and opened the windows, we shared our own prayer for rain. We needed a good thunderstorm to cool off our children and give us a peaceful night. Our prayers were answered and we listened to the whistling of the wind as it threatened to blow the shades off the windows. We explained the sounds to our children and removed the clanking shades from the walls. The kids were puzzled and unnerved. And I realized I felt something too: this storm was different to me, up in the mountains and exposed. The wind sang and hissed, and I almost felt I could see it. The windows shook. I felt like a tiny intruder in this dangerous world of earth, wind and water, my family and I the only creatures that needed a house to protect us from the elements. It was truly awesome.

The rabbi and philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel taught that this sense of awe we feel, especially at the natural world, is fundamental to attaining insight and wisdom and to being spiritually alive. It's not enough to know our small place in the world, or to be aware of the miracle of life. We have to feel overcome by it. "The world is not just here," Heschel wrote. "It shocks us into amazement." If what we see around us doesn't inspire wonder or surprise, the world becomes a market place, and everything is a tool for our own use. For Heschel, the goal of a spiritual pursuit is the ability to see everything as standing, however remotely, for something supreme.⁴ I am spiritually alive when I see this wooden podium not as a stand for my papers, but as a tiny seed that fell in the fall perhaps 75 years ago, cooled and germinated through the winter, sprouted in the spring and grew up into a tree that reached twice the height of this ceiling. I am spiritually alive, when I sit on the beach, not just enjoying the sand and the breeze, but also allowing the ocean and the sky to shock me into awareness of the divine. Encounters with the natural world can have this effect on all of us. Maybe you too have an experience you think back to where the sacred came through in nature? In conversations I've had with some of you about what makes you feel close to God, experiences with nature are probably the second most common ones cited - after moments like the birth of a child. Maintaining this sense of awe is easy for my children, who could have gone on for hours this summer at the beach, chasing the seagulls and shouting, "A bird, a bird!" But for us it takes effort to keep looking at the world with that kind of amazement, to see the real significance of what is around us - to see every thing, in Heschel's words, "as an allusion to God."

So on Rosh Hashanah, the festival celebrating the creation of the world, we pause to appreciate the animals, plants, trees, mountains, and waters that make up our world, and to remind ourselves how they can bring us closer to God. At the same time, on Rosh Hashanah, the first of the ten Days of Repentance, we must pause to reflect on the moral responsibilities that come along with that appreciation. Once we see, clearly, the divine origin of the earth and its inhabitants, we are led instinctively to acknowledge an obligation to honor and respect them. Today is a day as well, then, to evaluate how we are living up to that obligation. At the opening of this sermon, we heard the beginning of a *Midrash* from Talmudic times. The *Midrash* continues. "When God created the first human beings, God led them around the Garden of Eden and said, 'Look at my works! See how beautiful they are, how excellent! For your sake I created them all. See to it that you do not spoil and destroy my world, for if you do there will be nobody else to repair it.'"⁵

In modern times, we hear these kinds of warnings every day. However, I find this *Midrash* from the 8th Century astonishing in its forethought. How could Jewish sages living thirteen hundred years ago have foreseen that humans would someday be in a position to spoil or destroy the earth? That we would cut down whole forests, pollute bodies of water, blow the tops off mountains looking for fuel, or cause the earth's temperature to rise? How could they have imagined that we might permanently damage the earth, the home that our children and grandchildren would inherit from us? I cannot explain this *Midrash* that tells the future. I *can* say that it fits perfectly into a religious tradition that teaches us to see the earth as a wondrous creation; that declares the earth belongs to God; that reminds us of our interdependence with the earth; and that praises God, over and over, for allowing us to dwell in such a world. For this reason, the Reform Movement has taken public positions that reflect these Jewish principles, supporting national policies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions; move us towards clean, safe, renewable energy sources; and protect tropical forests, which absorb carbon. It has publicly supported the EPA's recently proposed new carbon pollution standards, which I testified in support of at a public hearing this summer. It has also called on Reform congregations to do what they can to become green in their communities, and our own TRS green team has been working hard, along with our staff, to do that. We have traveled to Richmond to advocate on green issues at the state level. We are supporting an interfaith alliance whose aim is to encourage Fairfax County to catch up - Fairfax is a leader in many areas, but we are last among DC regional jurisdictions when it comes to climate change solutions, Temple members have established Till and Tend, a social action project in which they have created seven organic vegetable gardens: one at the Temple and six in local shelters or residences for at-risk youth, and they have trained the residents to maintain them. And we are constantly working to educate our members and to improve our habits as a congregation - Look for the stylish new recycling bins that will be arriving next week for the Temple's main public areas! Beyond these important steps, our nation and our world need to agree on how to avoid spoiling and

destroying our world. As a country we are stuck, arguing about how *much* scientific consensus there is and exactly where the *most* dangers are, and we have built up too much hostility through accusations, blame and rhetoric. I don't want us to be part of that pattern. What I seek to do is to remind us that we ALL need to pay more attention to this moral and spiritual imperative. I seek to show that the Torah - which forms the basis of all the major religions in America, has a lot to say about our world. We are commanded to treat the earth with honor and respect, to bring ourselves closer to the natural world and not farther away, and to preserve God's creation for future generations. I pray that soon our nation will begin a real conversation about how we can do those things.

What will you do? Will you join us in one of these pursuits at TRS? Or examine your own life to look for more ways that you can be respectful of the earth - composting, reusing, or rethinking your established patterns? Will you try to allow more contact with nature, more opportunities to sit on your front lawn and see God in the world around you? I hope that the coming year will be one in which we all will deepen our relationship with the earth and its creatures.

An ancient Jewish text called Perek Shirah, or Chapter of Song, tells a story about King David, after he has just finished writing the Book of Psalms. So happy with himself, he turns to God and asks, "Surely, there is no creature you have made that can sing songs and praises greater than mine." At that moment a frog appears before him and says, "David, do not be so proud, for I can sing songs and praises even greater than yours." Then all the other creatures of the world begin to sing: cows, camel, serpents, snails, fish, butterflies, and trees, in chorus of praise.⁶

On this day, too, the world sings. We read in the Psalms "The heavens declare the glory of God; the sky proclaims God's handiwork⁷ ... Let the rivers clap their hands; the mountains shall sing for joy together!"⁸ On this festival holiday, the birthday of the world, let us clap our hands with the rivers. Let us sing for joy with the mountains. Let us join, with the earth, in praise.

¹Midrash Kohelet Rabbah 7:13

²Ps. 104:24

³Berachot 35rA

⁴Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Who is Man?* Chapter 5

⁵Midrash Kohelet Rabbah 7:13

⁶Everett Gendler, "A Sentient Universe" p, 59 & 60, *Ecology and the Jewish Spirit*, Ellen Bernstein, ed.

⁷Ps. 19:1 - 2

⁸Ps. 98.8