

## SERMON: ROSH HASHANAH EVENING

### GETTING OURSELVES BACK TO THE GARDEN

Tim and I both like TV shows about nature, and about cosmology. We watch all those PBS shows about dark matter, and quantum time. We read books about “the secret life of trees” and about the big bang. This goes way back: in high school, we would geek out together about Einstein’s Theory of Relativity and try to **imagine curved infinite space, man.**

We have both been **Star Trek** fans since we were kids. I even got to interpret Star Trek conventions into American Sign Language. When I was a little kid, being picked on at school for any number of reasons, several of my own making, I would go home, go to my room and pull out my transistor **radio** to try and contact the Enterprise and beg them to **beam me up.**

So the other night, I saw a new series on PBS called “**Ancient Skies**” I hit play. The first episode was called “**Gods and Monsters**” and I got maybe three minutes into it before I started **muttering back at the television.** The thesis of the show, as it sounded to me, **was that our ancient ancestors were complete morons who stupidly thought the universe was supernatural and controlled by deities because they didn’t know better, but that now, we, the enlightened, have shed those silly beliefs and understand the scientific truth.**

The narrator said in a deep authoritative voice, *“This is the story of how we moved from a world ruled by supernatural beings to a cosmos revealed by scientific astronomy.”*

So now **I’m yelling at the television,** and Tim goes to change channels when just as it is changing, I hear this:

***“In times when we relied on the natural world for survival, reading the skies could give our ancestors the edge.”***

“Go back,” I said as the screen went black and then Rachel Maddow’s face appeared.

“Go back.”

“But it’s Rachel”.

“Go Back.” So we did, and again...

***“In times when we relied on the natural world for survival, reading the skies could give our ancestors the edge.”***

What is wrong with that statement? So much that is annoying, but one thing seems to me very dangerous: ***the idea that we don’t rely on the natural world for survival, that we are somehow above nature.***

**We are not.**

What hubris to think we exist separate from the world around us! And even those of us who know we depend on the natural world still live our lives and go through our days as if we don’t.

Our culture tells us we are each ***sui generis***, self-Created individuals that are self-reliant, and there is valuable truth in that idea, but it is only a small part of the truth, it seems to me.

**On the High Holy Days, we take time to remember that we aren’t as self-reliant as we like to think; our lives actually depend on so much that is out of our control.** We are fragile beings that depend totally on God’s world and the creation around us to survive.

We are part of what William Logan Bryant calls, **“The Ecstatic Skin of the Earth.”** The thin crust of this planet does just support life, it is alive, and we are part of that life. We do not thrive outside of that narrow life-generating “ecstatic skin.”

We were not created to **be plunked in Eden; we were created as an integral part of Eden. We and the garden are one, and if we and this planet are to be well, “we’ve got to get ourselves back to the Garden.”**

Johann Hari, in his book **“LOST CONNECTIONS, Why you are depressed and how to find hope,”** argues that the ever higher rates of depression and anxiety in our culture is a symptom of our lost connections with one another, with larger narratives, with meaningful work, *and with nature*, and there is growing research that shows that depression decreases the more time one spends in nature.

*More on that Tomorrow Morning*

Other studies, like those of **Dr. Ming Kuo**, have found that time in nature changes us. For example, one study in **identical urban housing projects** found that the one that preserved a bit of **greenspace**, a garden, courtyard, playground reported significantly higher quality of life results, and lower incidents of violence and fewer police calls.

Studies from **Columbia and University of Pennsylvania** found that cities that add green spaces in vacant lots, a program called, “cleaning and greening,” had a startling reduction in gun assaults by 9.1%. **Gun violence went down by 9%.**

And it not only impacts our quality of life. It turns out that it has a remarkable impact on our **Immune systems**. In studies that have been replicated, researchers found that when urban dwellers spent a 3-day weekend in a natural setting, their strongest immune cells increased **50%**, and a month later, they are still elevated by around 24%.

In zoos, even when animals have nice habitats, they often don’t flourish and develop behaviors very similar to depressed and anxious humans. They pick, they pull out their hair, they isolate, they look down and don’t make eye contact. **And they seem to either become very aggressive or strangely passive.**

As entomologist E.O. Wilson wrote, *“organisms when housed in unfit habitats undergo social, psychological, and physical breakdown.”* **To this I would add “spiritual breakdown.”**

When we spend too much time without being out in nature, I believe **it deprives us of an essential nutrient of our spiritual selves.**

**Greta Thunberg**, in her address to the UN, showed passion like that of the great Hebrew prophets. She said:

*“You say you hear us and that you understand the urgency. But no matter how sad and angry I am, I do not want to believe that. Because if you really understood the situation and still kept on failing to act, then you would be evil. And that I refuse to believe.”*

Judaism teaches that we are not evil, but that we are forgetful, we get busy, we cover our eyes, and the stresses of daily life can easily take us away from our deeper values.

To me, our current inability to collectively address climate change is not about being evil, or not knowing the facts, **but it is at its core, a symptom of a spiritual disease, a disconnection from one another and the world around us. In an increasingly crowded urban world, we are less and less connected to one another and to nature.**

I believe that it is because facts and dates aren't enough to motivate us. Intellectual belief does not translate to action. **Passion, connection, love for what sustains us and anger at that which threatens it – that is what creates change.**

Of course here in **Vermont**, we are very outdoorsy. We are one of the most outdoorsy states in the US, but doing things outdoors is not the same as experiencing a deeper connection to nature. Hiking, or biking, or kayaking in nature can be transcendent, **but it can also become just another activity we can check off our to-do lists and feel successful and in control of our lives.**

Exercise and got outside – check. Now to cook dinner. Now to pay bills. **Check. Check. Check.**

**How often do we just sit in nature and let the wonder of it wash over us, fill us? How much can we tolerate sitting still to let that feeling seep in, stay with us?**

How often do we allow that capacity for wonder come to the fore, without our skeptical Western brains analyzing it and questioning it?

How often to we, **like Reb Nachman**, take time to go alone into nature just to pray and *“let all the foliage of the field - all grasses, trees, and plants - awake at our coming, to send the powers of their life into the words of our prayer so that our prayer and speech are made whole through the life and spirit of all growing things, which are made as one by their transcendent Source.”*

**Our tradition teaches us the world around us is the greatest of all miracles, the greatest gift of a creator given to us for us to tend and care.** It is the experience of the **wonder** of nature that motivates most of the **psalms** and many of our prayers.

מה-גִּדְלוֹ מֵעֲשִׂיָּהּ יְהוָה מְאֹד עֲמִקּוֹ מִתְּשֻׁבְתֵיךְ:

“How great are your works, how profound your designs,” the Psalmist exclaims, and:

מֵאַתְּ יְהוָה הַיְתָה זֹאת הַיּוֹם נִפְלְאוֹת בְּעֵינֵינוּ: זֶה-הַיּוֹם עָשָׂה יְהוָה נִגְלָה וְנִשְׁמְחָה בּוֹ:

“This is the LORD’s doing; it is wondrous in our sight. This is the day that the LORD has made— let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

One of the greatest modern Jewish thinkers, **Abraham Joshua Heschel** wrote,

*Wonder or radical amazement is the chief characteristic of the religious man’s attitude toward history and nature. One attitude is alien to his spirit: taking things for granted, regarding events as a natural course to things. To find an approximate cause of a phenomenon is no answer to his ultimate wonder. He knows that there are laws that regulate the course of natural processes; he is aware of the regularity and pattern of things. However, such knowledge fails to mitigate his sense of perpetual surprise at the fact that there are facts at all.*

Abraham Joshua Heschel taught that wonder, that awe at nature, at creation, has the power to unlock in us a sense of **indebtedness**. He believed that radical amazement calls to our souls and tells us that *something is asked of us* - He wrote:

*The soul is endowed with a sense of indebtedness, and wonder, awe, and fear unlock that sense of indebtedness. Wonder is the state of our being asked. In spite of our pride, in spite of our acquisitiveness, we are driven by an awareness that something is asked of us; that we are asked to wonder, to revere, to think and to live in a way that is compatible with the grandeur and mystery of living. (God in Search of Man, 112).*

What is being asked of us? The Prophet Micah answered: *To do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God.*

If we remember that climate change and climate collapse is profoundly an issue of justice, as Greta Thunberg so powerfully expressed, then Micah’s answer stands. On Yom Kippur, Pablo Bose will lead a discussion about that. But if we believe that humans are partners with God in creating a just world, what we call Tikkun Olam, then surely “fixing the World” includes acting on the environment.

I am a rabbi, so I am not going to outline an activist plan today. But I do want to urge you, in this new year, to stop, to go out into nature, and let it seep in, and try to get out of your head, and off your task list, and just let the wonder of this world, the wonder of this body fill you, fill you until you can't help but be full of thanks and gratitude.

***Teshuvah, repentance, begins with humility, gratitude, and wonder that we are here at all.***

The Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Chassidism taught: ***“The world is full of wonders and miracles, but man takes his little hand and covers his eyes and sees nothing.”***

**Repentance doesn't begin with beating ourselves up**, but with uncovering our eyes and seeing the divine all around us, remembering we were created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of the Divine, and that we were created good, very good.

As we begin this High Holy Day and this new year, let us take the time to pray, to get “back to the garden,” to let the stresses and alienation of modern life subside, and remember who we are: **fragile creatures on this living skin of the earth, gifted with the ability to look up at the beauty all around us and be filled with wonder.**

Wonder, not fear, is the root of a spiritual life, and wonder, not fear, can motivate us to protect this garden that gives us life.

Ken y'hi Ratzon.