

On the second day of Rosh Hashana well over one hundred of us gathered at Edith Read Sanctuary in Rye. After the nature walk with its songs and reflections and silence and plenty of schmoozing, we made our way to the beach for tashlich, the tradition of symbolically casting our sins into the water. The tide should always be in the same spot since the tide is lunar and Rosh Hashanah is lunar and we do tashlich there at the same time each year. But, this year, when we got down to the beach the water was in the wrong spot. It was too high. We fit on the sand, but barely. Was the water higher because of sea level rise? Was it higher because of Ian swirling south of us? Had the beach simply shifted through normal erosion? No way of knowing for sure. Whatever the reason, it was a clear reminder that even a small shift in nature changes our experience of the world, can even change our experience of religion. And, if our experiences change because of a small shift in nature, what will be the consequences of the major shifts we face in light of climate change?

The old joke goes that a new flood is foretold, and nothing can be done to prevent it; in three days the waters will wipe out the world. A televangelist takes to the airwaves and pleads with everyone to welcome Jesus as their savior within three days; that way, they will at least find salvation in heaven. The pope goes on TV with a similar message: “You still have three days to accept the universal faith of Catholicism.” Then a prominent rabbi gets on TV and takes a slightly different approach: “We have three days to learn how to live under water.”¹ Could Judaism offer us a way out of this climate crisis? Could it have tools to help us cope? Before we can answer these questions, we need to understand how we got here. I don’t mean a retelling of the industrial revolution and pollution – you know that. I mean looking at how Jewish theology and the civilization that came out of it contributes to our current ecological crisis.

The basic theology of our people is of a God that is – to some degree or another – apart from creation. According to the Torah, this transcendent God created the earth, created us in the divine image, and made us stewards of the Earth. Chapter two of Genesis famously says that we are לְעֹבְדָהּ וּלְשִׁמְרָה,² that we are to till and to tend, to use and to guard the earth. The midrash makes this even more explicit. That Jewish legend teaches that God showed the first humans the Garden of Eden and then explained, “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 no one else to repair it.”³

While this seems to teach a very pro-environment, pro-nature perspective, it also reinforces a clear hierarchy: God on top, then humans, and then the rest of the natural world with humans as the stewards. In a famous 1967 article in Science Magazine, historian Lynn White wrote: “Man named all the animals, thus establishing his dominance over them. God planned all of this explicitly for man’s benefit and rule: no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man’s purposes. And, although man’s body is made of clay, he is not simply part of nature: he is made in God’s image... [And therefore,] we are superior to nature, contemptuous of it, willing to use it for our slightest whim.”⁴ White saw that if Genesis commanded us לְעֹבְדָהּ

¹ Novak, William. *The Big Book of Jewish Humor*. (1981). : HarperCollins.

² Genesis 2:15

³ Midrash Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13

⁴ *The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis*. Lynn White. 1967. *Science* 155: 1203-1207.

ולשׁמֶרֶה, we got really good at the working and using piece but failed at the tending and protecting piece. In other words, the hierarchical stewardship theology of Genesis failed in providing a sustainable path to live in our world. Instead of thriving, we face environmental catastrophe.

One of my bat mitzvah students this year, Olivia Hodes, noticed another real problem in the creation story. As we read the text together, she asked how these newly created people were supposed to know how to take care of the earth. This incredibly insightful question lays bare the obvious truth that we did not know how to take care of the earth. This did not matter very much in ancient times when the human population hovered around one hundred million. We weren't big enough to cause much of a problem so we just assumed we knew what we were doing. But now, at nearly eight billion people, the failure of a theology of stewardship is clear. As Olivia pointed out – we seemingly do not know how to take care of the world. Or, perhaps worse, we know, but we refuse to do it.

So, as Olivia noted, the text sets us up to fail. But the text also set up an understanding of God that creates its own problems. Specifically, our creation stories put God outside of the earth. Dr. Mara Benjamin, Professor and Chair of Jewish Studies at Mount Holyoke College, has explored the ecological implications of a God who is “away”, who is above the earth rather than of the earth. She finds that no matter what any of us believe religiously, this idea that something can be “away” is embedded in the culture of Western Civilization. We end up applying that notion to things beside God. We throw trash “away”. We don't worry about exhaust because the tailpipe carries it “away”. We can ignore the impacts of supply chains on people and the environment because they happen far “away”. But this notion of “away” is an illusion – all of the trash, pollution, and consequences very much exist.⁵ The illusion of “away” established in the Torah and embedded in Western Civilization belies the fact that “ecologically speaking, everything that is, is ‘here’, and our ecological disaster reveals that truth ever more starkly.”⁶

Many of us can still ignore the direct consequences of the climate change caused by all this throwing “away” thanks to our geography and socio-economic status. But this is becoming more and more like seeing the rain across the lawn at Tanglewood and being grateful it's not raining on **our** picnic. It will soon be here; just ask the residents of Fort Myers. We will have to personally face the environmental consequences of our actions. We will have to face the fact that there is no “away”. The changes will force to us recognize that we are of this world, not apart from it, not “away” from it. No matter what Genesis says, no matter how embedded the notion of “away” may be in our culture, there is no “away”, we are all of the earth. And this requires a theological shift, a new way of understanding Judaism and God.

We need a theology that can help us come to grips with climate change, to work to mitigate climate disaster. By theology, I do not simply mean a conception of God, I mean a way to grasp and live with reality, something between classic religion and philosophy. We need a theology that informs a new way to understand our relationship with the world. The idea that we are stewards above the rest of creation, that creation is for our use, that theology has failed us. We

⁵ Commoner, Barry. 2020. *The Closing Circle: Nature, man, and Technology*. New York: Courier Dover Publications. First published 1972.

⁶ Benjamin, Mara H. 2022. “There Is No ‘Away:’” Ecological Fact as Jewish Theological Problem. *Religions* 13: 290.

have failed as stewards which endangers “the earth, and all that is therein”⁷ including us. Yet, within our tradition, within our sacred texts and from great thinkers we can find the seeds of a new theology, a new way to understand ourselves in relationship to the earth.

If transcendence – away-ness – has been the problem, then immanence – here-ness – may be part of the solution. For decades now, non-Orthodox Jews have been shifting away from understanding God as a transcendent, all-powerful deity, a God outside of and away from our everyday reality. Instead, we now often think of God in personal ways: we see ourselves as partners with God, seeking to make the world a better place. We experience God in the relationships that we have. We find evidence of the Divine in the beauty of a sunset or the miracle of a new flower blossom. This is not a God “away”, apart from nature. This is God right here with us, God as a part of nature, God as the spiritual force that imbues us with purpose and nature with wonder.

Now, nature as a source for wonder, wisdom, and spirituality is nothing new in Judaism. When Job goes on his whirlwind tour of the universe seeking to understand his life, God tells him “Ask now the beasts, and they shall teach you; And the birds of the air, and they shall instruct you; Or speak to the earth, and it shall educate you.”⁸ These verses place humans on par with the other creatures, they are our instructors and peers. This – and many other Biblical, Talmudic, and mystical passages – suggest that we may experience God, experience the Divine and the holy, through our experience of the natural world, a natural world of which we are a part. A natural world of which God is a part.

The great 20th century Jewish scholar and theologian, Martin Buber, taught that we experience God in our relationships. He described these I-Thou relationships as connections with others that transcend the instrumental way that we interact day-to-day. Rather than using someone, we connect with them deeply. Think of a visit with a friend when time flew, when hours disappeared, when the rest of the world melted away, that was an I-Thou connection. In that connection, according to Buber, you experienced a glimpse of the Divine. Buber teaches that we can have that experience with any part of creation. Remember a sunset when time stopped and you felt a oneness with the universe as the sky played a symphony of light and color. What a gift – what a gift – to experience our lives profoundly overlapping with others and with nature. What a joy – a joy – to feel the porousness of the borders separating us from one another and from the world. What if we behaved according to those deep connections we have with everything else, deep connections that reveal a bit of the Divine?⁹ This can be the starting place of a new theology, a new, non-hierarchical way of thinking about God and our place in the world.

When we shift from a hierarchical understanding of our place in the world, when we re-orient to a view of profound interconnection with all of nature, new possibilities open up to us. We no longer need to speak of the climate in war like terms: the battle against climate change, the war against fossil fuels, the race to save the planet, the fight against pipelines, the battle for our future. All of these confrontational approaches re-emphasize the hierarchical thinking that got us

⁷ Deuteronomy 10:14

⁸ Job 12:7-8

⁹ Benjamin, Mara H. 2022. “There Is No ‘Away:’” Ecological Fact as Jewish Theological Problem. Religions 13: 290.

here in the first place. This is not to downplay the seriousness of the problem or the need for pure advocacy. This is just to point out that the divisive rhetoric of the past and the hierarchical world view that informs it, has failed to stop global warming. Now is the time to shift from confrontation to connection. Not only as a rhetorical strategy, but as strategy for living, a way of understanding our world, in other words, connection as a theology.

A theology, a world view, based on connection allows us to shift from fighting what we hate, to saving what we love.¹⁰ The remarkable marine biologist, Ayana Elizabeth Johnson, finds inspiration for her science and environmental advocacy not only in ideas and abstractions, but primarily from her love of the ocean, its creatures, and her love of the people who live and work in and around our deep blue seas. She says, “This idea that we can be motivated by love, I think it’s just — it’s just the more delightful way to approach something that is the work of our lifetimes... for me, it’s all about how do we build the future that we want to live in, where there’s a place for us and the people and the things [and places] that we love?”¹¹

“The more delightful way to approach something...” We miss the importance of this in our fractured world with our fractured politics. Delight and love can truly motivate us when we leave behind the hierarchies of power that we have been socialized to since birth. When we shift away from hierarchy to a perspective – a theology – of profound connection, when we call these connections holy, we can stop wasting energy on confrontation and collaborate with others to save what we love.

Beyond theology and perspective, Johnson reminds us that: “We have most of the solutions we need at our fingertips for all of these climate challenges... We know how to do this stuff. We just have to do it. And so [our work now is] figuring out how we can welcome more people into this work, get people excited, help them find where they fit...” in our effort to save what we love.¹² Will this work? We cannot know if we do not try. But we do know that what we’ve done before and how we’ve thought before has failed. Perhaps this new perspective, this new theology of profound connection can support and uplift the work that must be done.

This Holiest of Days has a clear message: We. Can. Change. Let us all take this to heart. Let us commit to shifting our theology away from hierarchy and away-ness. Let us instead see our place in and profound connection to the world. Let us move beyond confrontation to engagement. Let us see the possibilities of hundreds of miraculous technologies. And then may we hold those things and people and places that we love in our hearts, may we hold them, may they fill us with love, and may that love move us to save our world.

כן יהי רצון
May the be God’s will

¹⁰ This idea comes to the sermon from the On Being interview with Ayana Elizabeth Johnson. It is, admittedly, also Rose Tico’s line from Star Wars: Episode VIII The Last Jedi. <https://youtu.be/c3d0YkK-Otk> A happy coincidence to be sure!

¹¹ <https://onbeing.org/programs/ayana-elizabeth-johnson-what-if-we-get-this-right/>

¹² Ibid.