

Religion for Earth conference Sept 19, 2014, Climate Weekend, Union Theological Seminary
by Rabbi Ellen Bernstein

The temple I worshipped in as a child was the Temple of nature.

My love for nature inspired me to study environmental science in college, and then to teach ecology, but the science was too remote to inspire my students to care for the earth; and so I created a curriculum using the stories, the flesh and blood experiences, of nature writers like Annie Dillard and Lewis Thomas, and I brought my students into the wilderness--and watched their hearts soften and begin to care. From this, I learned a profound lesson: that love and experience precedes caring and action.

It was then that I found my way back to my birth-religion, Judaism. I began reading the weekly Bible portion, and it resonated as the most profound nature writing. I found--to my complete surprise--the Bible had its own language for speaking ecology. Numerous truths jumped out at me.

1. Every creation: from the water, air, and land, to the swarming and flying and walking creatures have inherent value and integrity. God saw each as good.

2 The earth is a living sentient being; the land and the seas are generative and bring forth life.

3. Our identity as humans stems from earth. "God formed the *adam* /human from the *adamah* /soil, breathed into him the breath of life and the human became a living soul." The Hebrew belies our kinship to earth: *adam* /human and *adamah* /land derive from the same root.

4 The biblical God is not just the triumphal God of the Israelites, but is also the Creator God of every place, of the plants and the animals, of the whole Universe.

5. The Sabbath is our day to stop--to refrain from working and using the natural world, to remember that God--not us--is master of the universe, and to sing wild, joyous praise for the magnificent creation, acknowledging our humble place within it.

6. We are called to *la'avod*, serve, and *l'shmor*, keep the land: to serve the land as we would serve God, and to keep it free from corruption. The Bible even legislates a year of release for the land, a sabbatical, every seventh year, when no hand works the land and the land enjoys complete rest. We are about to enter such a year.

7. We are indelibly connected to the land; when we behave in accord with God's law, the rain falls in its season and a fecund, verdant earth bears fruit in abundance, and the ecological patterns of the universe sustain us. And if we neglect the law, the rains stop, the land dries up, and all creatures suffer famine, drought and every disaster.

The Bible's sense of justice plays out in nature and the land, and it is woven into the richly textured cloth of Biblical consciousness. When Adam and Eve pluck the apple from the tree, the earth is cursed on their account. When Cain kills Abel, he is cursed from the ground, and the land becomes impotent. When the people of Noah's generation behave corruptly, the earth becomes corrupted, and God floods the world in a great act of purification.

The consequences of murder, idolatry and arrogance are not simply expressed in the land, they are magnified in the land. In the Bible's integrated world you can not commit an unjust act in isolation. Every act has an effect on the people, creatures and habitats of the earth. This is the Bible's version of ecology: it is even more profound than our secular ecology; it is founded in ethics.

Given how little attention our western religious traditions have paid to ecological concerns, one might think that the idea of land and earth is trivial in the bible. But the problem is not with the Bible, but our reading of it. The word *eretz*--land or earth--is cited over a thousand times in the Bible. Land matters, soil matters; water matters, air matters, creatures matter. The land is not merely a stage upon which the theatre of the grand narrative of God and the people unfolds. Ultimately inflictions against the earth are inflictions against God. *Maqom*, the word for place in Hebrew is one of God's names. Land, or Place, is a gift from God in the Bible and the gift is conditional. If we do not care for the gift, we lose it.

While clearly the Bible doesn't speak the language of global warming, it provides the deepest understanding of the ramifications of our insatiable greed and desire for power. In such an intricately interconnected world, the heavens mirror our collective lives on earth. Climate extremism mirrors human extremism--extreme greed, extreme exploitation, extreme hubris.

So what can we do here in our precious time together ?

I want to share 3 projects which might serve as conversation starters.

First, Cal DeWitt, an Evangelical Christian and biology professor at University of Wisconsin led a successful faith-based effort to defeat proposals to undermine the Endangered Species Act in 1996. Cal gleefully recounts about how, on the day of his press conference, he was driven to the U.S. Secretary of the Interior's office with a cougar and 2 trainers; they were whisked up an elevator to the press room. As Cal and the cougar proceed to the podium, the trainer whispered---don't pet the cougar on the head! Cal takes his place; cougar jumps up on the commode beside him. Cal delivers his urgent message, proclaiming Noah's arc as the first endangered species act. Then, Cal reached over. . . and pet the cougar on the head. . . and the cougar turned. . . and licked Cal's hand, as the tv cameras rolled. Cal and the cougar were all over the nightly news; and for the moment the Endangered Species Act rests secure.

Second are the gardens, farms and orchards which are sprouting on the grounds of many Jewish and religious institutions today. The educators at my synagogue in Northampton, have in the past year, revamped the curriculum so that Jewish learning is integrated with our

small farm. Rooted in the sabbatical year idea of *hefker* or ownerless property, our apple, plum, pear, peach, and paw paw trees are planted street side. In time, their low hanging fruits will be plucked by to all who are hungry and want to eat. The trees quietly sequester carbon, while families learn to grow food, and the synagogue community grows more robust and alive.

Finally, since it is incumbent on our religious institutions to provide inspiration on the long slow path to right livelihood, I want to remind us all of the importance of celebrating our beautiful world. For Earth Day 1990 Shomrei Adamah, created an All Species Parade to honor Creation. We spent a year working with after-school programs in Philadelphia to teach kids about biodiversity, ecology and habitat. Students chose a favorite creature, learned about it, made costumes and props, wrote songs and designed floats, and came on Earth Day, embodied as their species. They came on bicycles, roller blades, stilts; they came with baby carriages, with wheelbarrows full of seedlings. All materials were recyclable. All vehicles were powered by muscle. . . One thousand kids participated and 30,000 people bore witness to the parade of species.

The creation is a gift from the Creator. It is a biblical imperative to hold creation in reverence and live ethically in community with the land; we have been asleep to this message. I invite us all to use this weekend and the opportunity of the Jewish new year which is upon us, to remove the veil from before our eyes. The Shofar cries *Tekia!* May this be the season that we

all Wake up.