Earth Day at Temple Micah

Rabbi Daniel G. Zemel

April 14, 2024

It is a pleasure to welcome everyone here this morning especially our guests Laurence MacDonald and Dahlia Rockowitz.

I also want to thank Geoffrey Baron for taking the initiative to organize our Micah Global Warming response group and of course all of you who have joined this critical effort.

Two weeks ago, as I returned from my two-month sabbatical time away—on the morning of April 1 in fact, my very first day back, I spoke with Barbara Green-- who timed her call perfectly. Barbara very graciously invited me to introduce our gathering this morning. In doing so, Barbara, in her own gracious yet somewhat directive way offered suggestions as to the content of these brief remarks.

Barbara suggested that I might refer to the biblical texts on creation or ORLAH (newly planted trees which for the first three years no fruit can

be picked) or the laws of SHMITAH (the land lying fallow each seventh year).

I agree that these texts are important but I would like to take a slightly different approach for us this morning.

Our ancestors who conceived and wrote our texts were farmers and shepherds who lived in a very different world than our own. They could never have conceived of global warming.

They did however care passionately for Earth.

They knew that human beings-- *b'nai adam*—were children of the Earth—children of the soil itself. The Hebrew language itself suggests this intertwining of creation, to be a human being is to be of the earth, of the soil itself. Humanity is intertwined with the planet.

Our ancient Jewish forbearers accordingly prayed for rain in the winter and a heavy dew in the summer. They planted in the planting season and harvested in the harvest season. Our lunar calendar with the solar adjustment, giving us the nineteen year cycle that includes seven leap years is all about maintaining the agricultural cycle of the Torah-so

planting and harvest and their accompanying festivals come in their proper seasons. Their lives were connected to the earth in a way that ours are not. We are dependent on the earth but are removed from the intimate connection that enables us to make our dependence manifest and urgent in our lives.

I think about this all of the time. Our lives are, in some ways, protected from the world around us. In winter, we go from heated homes to heated cars, busses and trains to heated workplaces, museums, and theaters. In summer, we likewise go from controlled climate to controlled climate.

I sometimes worry that this physical protection from the natural world has somehow dulled or impeded our spiritual lives. I wonder if we have become spiritually guarded as well—such spiritual protection is not a good thing. Our spirits need to feel—they really need to feel—literally. We call all of this—or I call all of this the impact of modernity.

As many of you know, I am very taken with the impact of this thing we call modernity and how it impacts both how we see the world and our very selves.

At Micah, we have discussed many times, over the years, the idea of enchanted and disenchanted.

For the ancients, the world was enchanted. Modernity and the secularism, modernity has brought with it has us living in a disenchanted world, the demystification of the world strips the world of its mystery—and diminishes perhaps its magnificence. Its not that we don't appreciate mountain tops or sun rises---but they are more remote—not immanent.

The eclipse last week made the magnificent immanent.

This disenchanting of the world cannot help but inform our posture towards the natural world.

Jeremy Benstein of the University of Tel Aviv writes the following:

"From antiquity all the way through to modernity a central metaphor held sway in the Western imagination----sometimes called the Great

Chain of Being, which imagined the spiritual structure of creation as a … hierarchical order, with the more spiritual or noble at the top, and the more material or base at the base, below... God...is at the peak, followed by humans, animals, vegetables, and minerals.... It was with the Enlightenment and humanism... that the great chain was decapitated, leaving man at the top–removing the divine...making the sky for human beings literally the limit… The materialization of nature occurred…

Secularization represents the ...disenchantment of the world, because nature is no longer... divine creation, but now just a storehouse of raw materials...with no divine guidance..." (Jeremy Benstein page 18)

Ancient Jewish texts had given humans a structure designed to push us off our inevitable tendency to be anthro-centric—human self- centered. Judaism puts God at the center. This is the fallout of going from enchanted to disenchanted.

Living in a disenchanted world, we struggle to see the world as God's holy realm for us to preserve and cherish. We see the world for what

we think it is. We have put ourselves at the top of the pyramid ad in doing so, we have stripped ourselves of our own humility—so to speak. When the Psalmist sang (Psalm 24) "The Earth belongs to ADONAI and everything in it…" –the ancient understood that all creation was God's possession.

In this regard, we should always remember that classical Hebrew has no direct word for the English word "own." Ownership, as we know it, is foreign to the biblical mind set.

Our teacher, Rabbi Hoffman emphasizes this when he points out the theological underpinnings of our blessings for food.

We bless the fruit of the vine.

We bless the fruit of the tree.

We bless the fruit of the Earth.

Rabbi Hoffman teaches on this that the blessing is directed at the delivery system and that the function of the blessing is to release that which naturally belongs to God to human beings for our use. The blessing acknowledges the sacred nature of all that is and we express

gratitude for having access to it to nourish our bodies. The very words of the blessing are specific to the natural order—giving honor to the vine or the tree or the earth itself.

In short, our ancient texts give humans the responsibility to work and care for creation– we are creation's guardians.

The central rabbinic teaching on this pivotal verse has always been that we are here as God's partners to care for what God has made. The midrash states- "When God made man, God showed him the panoply of creation and said to him: 'See all My works, how beautiful they are. All I have made; I have made for you. Take care, therefore, that you do not destroy My world, for if you do, there will be no one left to mend what you have destroyed."(Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13)

We now have two very human challenges—to begin to mend what we have begun to destroy and in doing so, to e-mystify both our world and our souls.