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WHY EARTH DAY IS A JEWISH HOLIDAY

April 22 is Earth Day. The very name makes many Jews nervous. A special day to celebrate the Earth sounds suspiciously pagan, bringing to mind images of Druids conducting fertility rites at Stonehenge or modern witches dancing to invoke nymphs in a misty forest glade. Perhaps what makes us so wary of this modern festival, first celebrated in 1970, is the idea of introducing the Earth as a “being” or moral agent with its own needs and mystical powers.

And yet, ironically, the Bible is full of references to the way in which the Earth responds to the behavior of the people who live on it. The book of Leviticus, for example, warns the Children of Israel that immorality will cause the Land of Israel to “vomit” them out (Lev. 18:24-28, 20:22).

In the shema prayer, it describes both the earthly benefits - rain, fertility and abundance - for listening to the commandments and loving God, and the costs - drought and famine - for ignoring God’s word (Deut. 11:13-21). One compelling way to read this text is to think of it as suggesting that a major way for us, as individuals and as a society, to judge our actions and policies is by their environmental consequences.

The shema warns: “Beware that your heart be deceived and you turn and serve other Gods and worship them” (Deut. 11:16). The “other Gods” need not be idols, but could just as well be the idolizing of wealth and power that often has profound negative environmental consequences. As we know, corruption and oppression frequently lead to poverty and hunger. The poorest people often pay the price of pollution, drought and deforestation.

For example, Nobel Prize winning Indian economist Amartya Sen demonstrated in his book “Poverty and Famines” that many of the major famines of the twentieth century were not caused by a lack of food, but were due to political and economic inequalities that prevented poor people from obtaining it.

Likewise, much of the deforestation of tropical rainforests is driven by a combination of political and economic insecurities, leading powerful people to liquidate invaluable natural resources, and put their personal interests above the basic interests of their people and the long-term interests of their countries. And the extreme poverty of landless peasants explains why they cut down the very forest that is the only enduring basis for their future material wellbeing.

In fact, almost every environmental challenge we face has its roots in pervasive social imbalances, from pollution and water shortages to falling bio-diversity and global warming. In a way, our natural environment is acting as a barometer of the spiritual and ethical health of our societies.

These complex challenges are not somebody else’s business. As scientists continue to demonstrate daily, we all have a stake in what happens to the land, water and air around the world. And in today’s globalized markets, we all have a responsibility for our world’s natural environment, as consumers, voters, workers and investors.

As Americans, it is our own increasing demand for material goods and for better returns on our investments that is largely driving the global economic and political system. Our own political and financial decisions have a profound impact on the Earth and the more vulnerable people who live on it.

Earth Day, then, is a time to appreciate the many gifts we receive from the Earth, from clean air and water to the many plants, animals and other organisms that fill our world. To celebrate it, take some time to consider the wondrous abundance of the good Earth that we have been given. Buy a nature book, watch a wildlife documentary with your children, or, best of all, spend some time in the outdoors.

But Earth Day is also a time to mark our personal connections to the world's many environmental challenges. So, this Earth Day, make a commitment to act on that connection – at least for one year. A good place to start is to commit to buying specific products with sound environmental and social records, such as organic food or clothing.

A bigger challenge is to commit to supporting a project working to improve life in a place suffering from poverty and environmental degradation. If you have kids, involve them in your research. Alternatively, take a quick inventory of your investments, and retirement and savings plans. Consider socially responsible investing and ask about the environmental records of the companies in which you have stock.

Whatever you do, challenge yourself to take responsibility for the real connections that you already have to the world's poorest people and most damaged environments. If Earth Day has a message beyond the celebration of nature, it is that we all need to be more attuned to what our damaged natural environment is telling us about our world's spiritual and ethical health and to commit ourselves to becoming part of the cure.

It's not only part of the Jewish tradition; it's a global human imperative.

Source: Robert Rabinowitz