

Wonder and Restraint: A Rabbinic Call to Environmental Action (COEJL, May 2005)



At this very moment, our Earth is hurtling through space at 18.5 miles per second while the Sun burns with an internal heat of 20 million degrees. Forests and vegetation sweep the planet's atmosphere of carbon dioxide and provide oxygen and food for countless creatures. A 40-ton humpback whale sings a symphonic cycle of songs in the depths of the sea; a tiny hummingbird flaps its wings 4,500 times per minute as it sips nectar from flowers. The million-year-old messages of our DNA repair and reproduce themselves and create a spectacular diversity of human beings on Earth.

These interwoven testaments to the God of Creation, unveiled by our senses and by the probings of science, have stirred millions of people to become mindful guardians of the biosphere.

Now our Jewish tradition must, and can, do likewise.

As rabbis of long experience, we are moved by psalms of praise and blessing — “You have gladdened me by Your deeds, O Lord; I shout for joy at Your handiwork...” (Psalm 92). We have studied the texts of Mishna and Gemara explicating the halakhic duties derived from the law of *lo tashchit*, you shall not waste (Deuteronomy 20: 19). We take to heart the curses of Deuteronomy 28, which chillingly resemble the environmental catastrophes now being predicted by an overwhelming majority of the scientific community — “The Lord will strike you . . . with scorching heat and drought, with blight and mildew...”. We are inspired by the proclamations of the kabbalists and the hasidic rebbes — “All that we see, sky, earth and its fullness, are God’s outer garment” (Rebbe Shneur Zalman, *Tanya*).

Yet we worry that the same factors of abundance and alienation in modern life that have inured people to the pleading voices of nature could inure them, as well, to these voices of Torah.

We know that within Jewish texts, law, theology, philosophy, and ritual practice are spiritual resources that could profoundly transform our people and influence a human race estranged from the essences of life. Within the Jewish tradition reside rich teachings about the unity of Creation, about boundaries and limits, about deeds and consequences, about poverty and wealth, and about individual and communal responsibility, which together form a comprehensive environmental vision and provide practical guidance for environmental balance and restoration.

Within Jewish history, moreover, the reality of annihilation, and the process by which it results from a society’s worship of false gods, have been made terribly clear.

How, then, can we help the Jewish people hear the covenantal heartbeat of Judaism and feel it racing as a pulse through our bodies? How do we turn the notion of *Tselem Elohim*, that human beings are made in the Divine image, into a living identity of stewardship and responsibility for God’s Earth?

*The awakening we seek begins with **wonder**: the wonder that turned Moses aside to regard the burning bush and realize that he was standing on “holy ground” (Exodus 3: 3-5). That vision of light is what we all see every year in the buds of spring, the spawning of new generations, the migrations of birds, mammals and fishes, the cleansing streams of atmosphere and oceans — in all of the miraculous processes by which life awakens from dormancy and recovers from stress, even from disaster, to recreate the world right before our eyes.*

Traditionally, Jews express this sense of wonder by reciting some hundred blessings a day, at all the junctures of interaction with Creation that constitute our lives. But to paraphrase the words of the Prophet Isaiah, are these the blessings that the Creator desires? To give thanks for the bounty of our meals while our industrial farming system despoils the waterways? To praise the splendor of a rainbow while driving a wasteful, polluting vehicle? To kiss the *mezuzah* on the doorpost of an oversized, energy-inefficient house that consumes enough electricity to power a *shtetl*? To give *tzedakah* while we invest our personal or institutional wealth without regard for which corporations are pouring pollutants into the soil, the water, the air?

No, says our Torah, *these* are the blessings required:

- that we unify our words and our deeds;
- that we sustain and expand our awe, not simply discharge it with a prayer;
- that we unveil revelation with all of our God-given capacities and respond, with humbled hearts, to the “signs and marvels” (Exodus 7: 3) with which God animates our world;
- that we respond to God’s summonings by declaring ourselves ready, as a people, to renew the covenant made at Mount Sinai. There, in the wilderness of life, amid “thunder and lightning, the blare of the horn and the mountain smoking” (Exodus 20: 18), our ancestors, freed from enslavement in Egypt, awoke *en masse* to the responsibilities of their freedom. And had they not, the Midrash warns, the world would have been returned “to desolation and chaos” (B. *Shabbat* 88a).

Today, the “blare of the horn” is louder than ever. As the oil economy heats the atmosphere and disrupts the climate; as the ice shelves of Antarctica, frozen for eons, melt and break off into the sea; as fisheries around the globe collapse; as our world’s ecosystems, and the systems of our own human bodies, are forced to absorb a plethora of artificial chemicals; as the Earth loses its animal songs and the ancient text of DNA gets trampled by human-propelled forces of extinction; as the entire planet groans in bondage to its human slave-drivers — the horn that summons us to covenant is blaring in our ears.

Two covenantal responsibilities apply most directly to the environmental challenges of our time. The first demands inwardness, the second, outwardness. The first fulfills the traditional Jewish role as a “holy nation,” the second, as a “light unto the nations.”

The first, in a word, is **restraint**: to practice restraint in our individual and communal lives. Judaism encourages this sensibility in many of its most fundamental metaphors and *mitzvot*. There is

the restraint embodied by *Shabbat*, our central holy day of wholeness and not-producing. There is the restraint expressed through *kashrut*, dietary consciousness, which gives us an appetite for sacredness instead of gluttony.

There is the restraint expressed as *bal tashchit*, the injunction against wanton destruction that is rooted in the Torah's responses to the environmental ravages of warfare; and as *tza'ar ba'alei chayyim*, pity for the suffering of living creatures, requiring us to treat our fellow creatures as sentient beings, not as objects for exploitation.

There is the restraint required to fulfill the demands of *kehillah* — the communal and intergenerational obligations that Judaism applies to our wealth, our private property, our decision-making, and our salvation. In the tradition of Maimonides, modesty and open-handed generosity have long been hallmarks of Jewish life.

There is the restraint implied by *sh'mirat haguf*, protection of our own bodies and by *pikuakh nefesh*, the commandment to protect life at nearly any cost. There is the restraint mandated by *s'yag l'torah*, building a "fence around the Torah," which bids us to err on the side of caution when it comes to matters of life, limb and spiritual integrity — all of which are surely endangered by the destruction of biological diversity and the degradation of the biosphere, most obviously by the catastrophes likely to be induced by global warming.

In the Jewish mystical tradition, it is God who sets the example of restraint by practicing *tsimtsum*, self-withdrawal, in order to permit the universe to emerge into being. The mystics, drawing upon the Talmud (*Chagigah* 12a), linked this creation story to the appellation *Shaddai*, usually translated to mean "Almighty," but understood by mystics as the One Who said to the infant universe, "*dai*," "enough," and thus gave form and boundary to the chaos.

Today, we who are made in the image of *Shaddai* must emulate this act of *tsimtsum* if we want our world to persist in health and abundance. Human activity is now as consequential to the Earth and its wealth of species as glaciers, volcanoes, winds and tides — so we cannot persist in the illusion that the world is inexhaustible. Human activity has split the seas, brought down manna from heaven, cured pestilence, built vast tabernacles — so we cannot continue to quake and stammer at the prospect of assuming the responsibility given to us along with our power. Instead, we must transform ourselves from nature's children to nature's guardians by learning to say "*dai*," "enough," to ourselves.

But not only to ourselves: for the second covenantal obligation that our Earth and our faith require is that we **speak out**, and **speak truth**, to the world's leaders.

We are obliged to contrast our religious and ethical values with the values of self-indulgence, domination, short-term national security, and money-worship that fuel the ravaging of the Earth.

We are obliged to oppose the political empowerment of religious fatalists who view our environmental crisis as a mark of Armageddon and a glad-tiding of redemption.

We are obliged to support policies that ease poverty and spare the planet its ravages; that protect underdeveloped countries from serving as the world's environmental dumping grounds; that tie economic development to environmental stewardship; and that enable poor people to pursue sustainable economic lives.

We are obliged to withdraw support from corporations that act parasitically rather than symbiotically with the natural world, or that tamper with fundamentals of Creation without caution, without reverence, but solely for purposes of short-term profit and petty self-interest.

We are obliged to challenge the fever of consumption that drives unsustainable economic growth.

We are obliged to challenge public officials who deify property and wealth, reducing our living planet to a commodity.

We are obliged to seek peace and pursue it — to oppose easy recourse to military violence, outside of legitimate self-defense, not only for its destruction of human life and health, but also for its shattering impact on nature and natural resources.

It is precisely in taking these kinds of prophetic stances, lifting our voices to join protest to prayer, that we renew Judaism's capacity for stirring the *rachamim*, the womb-love, of God and of the human race, thus keeping the gates open to a healthy future for our planet and its inhabitants.

"Too much singing," warns a Yiddish folksaying, "and not enough noodles!" Before we conclude this letter, we want to be realistic and careful to leave no sense of hubris or overreaching that might disconnect our message from the world of the possible and the plausible.

We know, for example, that many of our people are unaware of, or indifferent to, the teachings of Judaism that we have been expounding.

We realize, moreover, that the Jewish people number barely two percent of America's population and only fractional percentages elsewhere — and that the environmental health of the planet will ultimately depend on decisions made in the developing world, with its vast populations, where Jews have virtually no presence.

We recognize that in Israel, the one land under Jewish dominion, despite the back-to-nature idealism of Zionism and the environmental guidance and vision of Judaism, even the sincere activism of Israeli environmentalists has been unable to protect the country's environment from the overwhelming pressures of nation-building, economy-building and national defense.

Finally, we admit that Judaism, as filtered through our people's centuries of urbanization and ghettoization, has been estranged from much of the Creation-centered sensibility that saturated its early formation.

Nevertheless, we have every reason to hope that we can catalyze new levels of participation and leadership in environmental protection among the Jewish people today.

Our hope is rooted in the belief that our people, for all of their worldliness, are not so far removed from the Jewish values we seek to invoke — "for surely," as our Torah says, "this is a wise and discerning people" (Deuteronomy 4: 6) who show every evidence of retaining a covenantal sensibility even at a remove from the language and metaphors of Judaism. The environmental wisdom of our tradition does not require a conversionary experience, a renunciatory lifestyle, or a suspicious stance towards science and modernity. To the contrary, Judaism counts science, technology, and the human

capacity for innovation as among our greatest blessings and our greatest tools for partnering in Creation.

We are hopeful, too, because, notwithstanding our small numbers, Jews of conscience and integrity have overcome obstacles of discrimination and oppression to gain positions of influence within economic, intellectual, and policy-making institutions throughout the developed world. This is especially so in the United States, the world's leading economic and military power — where great prosperity has been purchased at great cost to the biosphere. American Jews therefore have an indispensable role to play in political and civic institutions, corporate boardrooms, the courts and academia, to help guide our country to lead and build alliances in response to global warming, deforestation, overfishing and other environmental crises of our generation.

Finally, we are confident that the State of Israel will serve, in a time of peace, as a tremendous asset, scientifically and spiritually, to a world confronting the demands of development with limited natural resources. And we are grateful for the fact that the modern renaissance in Jewish life has embraced Jewish festivals that connect us with nature (such as *Rosh Chodesh*, *Sukkot*, and *Tu B'Shevat*) and explored a theology that identifies God most powerfully and most intimately with our perceptions of unity and interconnection.

Being realistic also means defining policies and benchmarks of progress that the Jewish community might use in strengthening its commitment to environmental protection. Happily, these have begun to be defined through the collective Jewish effort represented by the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL, www.coejl.org), which is the organizing force behind this rabbinic letter and a founding member, with major Christian faith groups, of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment. Among the policies deserving our most immediate commitment are:

- the pursuit of low environmental impact practices in our own households, workplaces, synagogues, and other Jewish institutions (e.g., reduce, reuse, recycle, conserve energy and water);
- the encouragement of sound and positive environmental business policies through our expenditures and our investments;
- the incorporation of environmental considerations, particularly the urgency of global warming and biodiversity loss, in the formulation of political, religious and cultural Jewish communal policies, and a heightened emphasis on environmental justice and wholeness in our public policy statements and activities;
- the integration of nature-oriented activities and Creation concerns in our observances of holy days, our Jewish education for children and adults, our liturgies, and our life-cycle ceremonies.

In addition, we take special note that for individuals, families, and congregations, Shabbat presents a weekly opportunity to reawaken our sense of wonder and to practice restraint. On Shabbat, we can connect with the wonder of Creation through liturgy, outdoor experience, and reflection. We can practice **restraint** by removing ourselves from the consumption economy for one day each week and by focusing instead on the interactions with family, friends, and community that give our lives richness and meaning.

God willing, we will have time to pursue a transformation of our Jewish environmental consciousness and commitment while our Earth continues to journey through space and spin on its axis to bring evening and morning, morning and evening to innumerable creeping, crawling, climbing, swimming, walking and flying creatures. God willing, elephants will continue to bury their dead and call to each other in subsonic voices that travel for miles across the savannah, and ants will continue to herd aphids and feed on their honeydew. God willing, new species and variations of flora and fauna will continue to evolve and fill the Earth, and the good garden of Creation will continue its renewal and rebirth.

Let us rejoice that we, as children of God, have been endowed with the intelligence, reverence, scientific capacity, and faith to serve as the caretakers for such an extraordinary world! And when God declares to us —

“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” (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7: 13)

— let us respond, with unified voice: “We will do and we will hearken” (Exodus 24: 7).

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