

## Rosh HaShanna D'var 5758

By Josh Lesser

The day began as it usually did it on the boat; I surveyed the low ring of clouds hovering on the tips of the mountain chain that curved around the ocean like the letter C. The Waianae coast, the western part of O'ahu, Hawaii, was dramatic with the ocean meeting this massive crater rim. It was awesome to think, that though I was on a boat in the ocean, tens of thousands of years ago, I would have been inside a massive volcano caldera. Half the rim had fallen into the ocean creating the rich reef system that currently exists—home to sea life like Spotted Eagle rays, Zebra Moray eels, Galapagos sharks and some 300 resident Hawaiian Spinner Dolphins that enchant the coast. Looking out to the horizon beyond the emerald waters with schools of flying fish springing forth, I offered my silent morning blessing for the day and its wondrous creatures. I never grew bored with my sea life encounters as they awakened my sense of discovery and wonder.

Seeing the dolphins play by laying on their backs slapping their tails, or their acrobatic leaps that often resulted in seven quick spins was an instant fix to any grumpiness or cynicism. They loved to ride the wake of the boat's bow where I would take photos of their dorsal fins in order to ID them. Dolphins are pure joy the same way puppies or newborns are. We had just seen a large pod, of about 100 dolphins and it was so elating that it made me all the less prepared to lose my ocean innocence.

Certainly I am not naïve. I am aware of the pollution that our oceans are facing and of the effects of global warming on them. Our crew removed as much trash as we could with nets, but the majesty of the sea that I experienced with the Wild Dolphin Foundation overshadowed the threats. It was so full of life that it was easy to forget how endangered our seas really are. On this day though, I was confronted directly with the impact that humans are having on the sea.

I eagerly donned my snorkel gear, as I was accompanied the guesst on the boat to a favorite spot called the "Turtle Cleaning Station". On the reef there is a sports car sized rock where the giant Green Sea Turtles congregate so the fish can eat the algae and bacteria off their backs. Some days there are as many as 10 turtles at a time allowing candy colored fish to dine on their shells. The turtles were mesmerizing in a different, more gentle way than the dolphins. They were graceful and interesting. I understood why many Pacific Island cultures saw the sea turtle as the mother of Creation. Many claim that it was a Green Sea Turtle migration that led to the discovery of the Hawaiian Islands.

I made my way to the "Cleaning Station" where there were 5 turtles. At first everything was normal, but then I saw one of the turtles had white growths around its face. At first I

thought it odd that barnacles would grow on a turtle's head. Upon a second look I saw that the growths were not hard, but fleshy and soft. Another turtle turned, it too had growths almost covering its entire face, blinding one eye. I sought out the marine biologist who explained that the turtles were suffering from tumors.

The turtles had Fibropapillomas, or FP. While the growths are benign, they do have a malignant effect. They grow on the faces of the turtles blinding them or blocking their mouths so that they either starve or suffocate. The biologist explained that the turtles on the east side of the island had been identified with these tumors for years— currently 60 percent of all the green sea turtles have this condition there. But it was just being discovered more frequently on the less developed west side of O'ahu. What caused these tumors? It was devastating. I felt an alarm go off in my head.

It would be months later that I would find the book Fire in the Turtle House by Osha Gray Davidson that would ask the same question. Not only was FP prevalent in Hawaii, but Florida, Australia, Costa Rica, and Mexico. I found myself in the middle of an environmental mystery with the diseased turtles. Sea turtles have thrived in the ocean for 200 million years, now 6 out of the 7 species in the world are endangered or threatened because of hunting, pollution, rising ocean temperatures and now a global epidemic. The disappearance of such a historically resilient species is a possible central piece of a global warming and ocean conservation puzzle.

Seeing those turtles and knowing their fate turned my notions of global warming and conservation from a highly politicized debate of policies to a personal theological crisis with immediacy. Whether or not the enormity of Global Warming is accurate became irrelevant. Osha Davidson, writes about his first time encountering a sea turtle. "For a modern westerner, an intimate encounter with a wild animal is a rare gift." Recognizing this gift and the connection that I feel to these animals caused me to see the environmental concern as a spiritual issue first. Regardless of the politics of global warming, Judaism has charged us to be stewards—protectors of the planet and to do that we must be in relationship to the environment around us. It was my encounters with the ocean and its creatures that called for a response—not the daily news.

In the Jewish Creation Story, it says, in Genesis Chapter 2 v. 15, Adonai took Adam and placed [Adam] in the Garden of Eden, to till it and tend it. The Hebrew is actually L'avdah v'shomrah...which could be also translated "as to serve it and to protect it". Our relationship to creation is more than about tending but about be guarding it as the following Midrash from Kohelet Rabbah illuminates: *When the Holy One Blessed Be [God] created Adam, [God] took Adam and warned Adam about all the trees in the Garden of Eden, saying: 'See My works, see how beautiful and perfect they are, and all I created - I created for you. Beware lest you spoil and destroy my world, for if you will spoil it, there is no one to repair it after you. (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13)*

From this Jewish teaching, I saw the environment as a religious and theological issue first and a political issue second. What was ironic though is that I began my first day at the Wild Dolphin Foundation defending why the environment was a religious issue not knowing how powerfully I would come to believe it. The founder of the Wild Dolphin Foundation interrogated me on my first day. Wearing a safari hat, she looked like Sigourney Weaver's portrayal of Jane Goodall in *Gorillas in the Mist*. She began to explain my duties, but she looked at me quizzically and said, "You don't look like a rabbi, you know?"

I smiled and asked, "How many rabbis do you know?"

"Touche. I am just surprised that a religious person would want to work for an organization that supports the environment."

I was genuinely puzzled by her question. "Why are you surprised?"

"Don't religious people think that world is coming to an end soon? And if that is the case, then why care about the environment, if it will all be over soon."

"Well do you want the short answer or the sermon?"

I gave Tori the short answer, but since then I have thought a great deal about what makes the environment a religious issue and why we should look at our care of the planet as a spiritual practice to be taken in manageable steps. Not only is Al Gore right to use the word inconvenient, but the concept of caring for the planet is overwhelming. When confronted with something that affects our neighborhood like the turtles, or trees being cut down on our street, or a polluted creek in our backyard, we can begin to see how the immense task can be broken down manageably.

For some, it may be obvious that taking care of the planet has religious and spiritual motivations, but I was not always sure that out of all the causes that need a response that spending time on green activism was a high priority. My personal experience in college and in my 20s was that environmental organizations were mostly white, privileged males with a penchant for hemp in its multiple forms. It made sense to me that people who were not fighting for their everyday survival, economic wellbeing or their civil rights had time to work on issues like the environment. While I was aware of greenhouse emissions, global deforestation, endangered animals, I felt a pull to work with people, primarily on human and civil rights. I was glad that there were environmental activists, but I secretly felt it was the cause served by well-to-do white lefties.

From a religious perspective, I justified my position because I understood that the Exodus was at the core of Judaism. The narrative of a people redeemed after being oppressed, exploited and surviving attempted genocide motivated my social justice advocacy from a

spiritual place. Thus, protecting the environment seemed a less central and less urgent task than many others.

So it wasn't as if I went out of my way to pollute. Rather, I did make the many minor changes that many of us have. Though not always consistently, I recycle, eat organic foods, conserve energy in my home, but living green has not been my life goal. Sure I was a responsible citizen in greening my life some—when it was convenient, but when it came to my attention, it was low on the list of priorities and for what I thought were good reasons.

Spending the lion share of my sabbatical in Denver and Honolulu, two environmentally conscious cities gave me pause to rethink my priorities. Volunteering for the Wild Dolphin Foundation, an ocean conservation organization encouraged me to think about these questions on a regular basis. My experience with sea turtles and dolphins was profoundly joyful. Then I became aware of how they were contracting tumors and it made me rethink the spiritual importance of environmental conservation.

Living in Hawaii, I encountered the renaissance of Hawaiian culture and spirituality. Much of this renewal emphasized the importance of honoring the land. Like our text from the Jewish Creation story, the Hawaiians share the spiritual ideal that the land and the sea is sacred, a source of life. Humanity's role is to honor and protect all of creation. As an indigenous faith, there is a great emphasis on sacred lands. Vocal clashes between Native Hawaiians and developers are common and injunctions are granted to preserve sacred land.

With such a central focus on the holiness of the land, I expected that the Hawaiian people would keep these areas pristine and that preservation was a way of life. However, much of the Eden that is Hawaii has litter adorning it. This is commonly blamed on the millions of tourists that visit the islands. But the Waianae coast has the largest population of Native Hawaiians and it is not a hospitable place for tourists. Ironically it is one of the most littered areas.

One of the most sacred spots can be found there jutting into the ocean. Ka'ena Point is home to the protected nesting grounds of the albatross. I hiked the 6 miles alongside the ocean to see these nesting grounds. As I began down the trail, the first two miles shocked and then angered me. Accompanying the stunning vistas of the volcanic cliffs and churning ocean was a garbage dump—and not tourist trash. Abandoned cars, tires, rusted shopping carts, broken fishing poles, oil cans, rusted tackle boxes and hundreds of plastic shopping bags dotted the area. Sacred land! This is how the Hawaiians treat their sacred land?! What hypocrites!

When my self righteous anger settled, I thought why am I shocked? We were no different than the Hawaiians. I thought this is what happens when an indigenous people is

cut off from their spirituality. Or what happens when spirituality and reality are disconnected. Once again, this became a spiritual issue in my eyes. For many Hawaiians it is only a handful of generations that have been disconnected to the land. I began to think of our community, the Jews. We have forgotten our connection to the land living in Diaspora and in heavily urban areas. The indigenous spirituality which infuses the Torah doesn't make sense to us anymore.

While the Exodus and Receiving of Torah may be the central narratives that bind us as Jews, the land and our relationship to it is a consistent backdrop in the Torah. In his essay about land and the Bible in the Conservative Movement's Torah commentary (Etz Chayim), Benjamin Segal, the president of Melitz, the Centre for Jewish Zionist Education, notes that "the Land is almost personified. As humans must rest every seventh day, so every seventh year the Land must lie unplanted to gain its rest."

Segal continues, "Personification reaches its [height] in ...moral terms. ...[The Israelites are warned that] the Land will expel them if they misbehave." In Leviticus abusing the land and failing to allow it to rest are reasons given for possible expulsion (Leviticus 26:35). "The Land exhibits a living claim of its own, against which the Israelites had to measure and understand their presence. Otherwise, the Land would expel them to gain its respite. The Land's divinity was understood as posing a demand."

When the Israelites are exiled from the land, the loss of the land is expressed by Isaiah and Jeremiah in human terms. Zion and Jerusalem are personified as captive, oppressed women who have the possibility to be redeemed and restored to their throne. Isaiah, Chapter 51, in a reading of consolation, contains one such example of many. "Truly Adonai has comforted Zion, comforted all of her ruins. [Adonai] has restored her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the Garden of Adonai. Gladness and joy shall be found within her along with thanksgiving and the voice of song."

In our ancient tradition, Creation or the Land was seen as requiring a relationship from us. The Israelites had both ethical and emotional obligations to honor. This identification with the land may have been organic and natural to the Israelites but I believe it something that we have lost and must cultivate. The spiritual imperative is to be in relationship with nature around us lest we forget the mutual interdependence we have on each other. We need to leave our buildings and homes more regularly to reawaken our wonder at creation. If we reengage with our environment, I believe our motivations to change our behavior to be better and more responsible partners will flow naturally. When we are disconnected, like any relationship it becomes easy to take things for granted, and to ignore the needs at hand, but when we are aware of the links we are moved to respond from our soul. This is when politics becomes personal. The Sea Turtle becomes my responsibility.

On Rosh Hashanah, we find Psalm 8 designated for the New Year. It makes the spiritual connection for us. First the psalmist asks, "When I behold your heavens, which your

hands wrought, the moon and the stars that you have created, what are human beings that you should think of them?" Acknowledging God's awesome power and our humility, the psalmist then highlights the way we are God-like. "You have given us authority of the works of Your hands, everything is dependent on our power--- the sheep, the cattle, even the wild mountain beasts, birds of the skies, fish of the sea and all that travel through the ocean currents." The quality of this relationship relies on us and this we must teach to our children.

Native Hawaiian Donna Kahakui, a 43-year old FBI agent and triathlete was known for her marathon solo outrigger canoe paddles between the Hawaiian Islands to raise awareness about ocean cleanliness and reef preservation. In founding her non profit Kai Makana, she sought to expand the bearers of the message to the native children on O'ahu. Teaching them about the ancient art of building and restoring canoes, she connects them to their spiritual legacy and to the ocean by organizing clean-ups of the small islets around Honolulu. Working with children in public housing, they have restored an ancient fishing pond that had become polluted. Her goal is to empower the children to educate other Hawaiians about the spiritual value of protecting the ocean. She says, "I'm a partner to do what I can to bring others in. ... I'm a paddler. I'm not a botanist. I'm not a fishpond-restoration guru. I'm just one person who's just trying to keep talking about [conservation] and bring kids to see a place that used to be self-sustaining. And once you start cleaning a place, you care about it more. It becomes about the gift of giving. And what you get in giving is the best reward. It's really the kids who inspired me."

Starting from a relationship to the ocean, Donna creates deep connections to people and the environment. She takes a complex situation and makes it manageable and invests in future generations. What seems impossible is possible and begs the question, as Jews how are we connecting to the land and teaching our children how to be better stewards? Author Osha Davidson, in [Fire in the Turtle House](#) invokes his religious father who would offer a blessing for every occasion. After researching the Sea Turtles and the growing epidemic, he imagines a blessing his father might offer. It is a blessing that I offer all of us in this New Year: May our grandchildren be blessed with knowing an ocean full of Sea Turtles.

L'shanah Tovah!

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