

The Eclipse of Wonder: Abraham Joshua Heschel and Our Ecological Crisis

A sermon for Kol Nidre 5768

By Burt Jacobson

My fiancé Diane and I set aside the last Sunday in July as a day to spend together. Our plan was to drive to Marin County, and to hike on Mt. Tamalpais. It was a lovely sun-drenched morning. After I woke up, meditated and prayed, and had eaten my breakfast, I turned my cell phone on. There was a message from my brother Stuart who, with his wife Jean, were vacationing in Colorado, staying in a cabin in the mountains.

"Hi! Just calling to say I love you. This morning I was sitting on the porch looking out over the valley a few hundred feet below, and a butterfly came up and landed on my hand. I watched as the butterfly scooped out my hand with his tongue -- for about two to three minutes. Then, it flew away. Within seconds a bee flew up to me, about two feet away and, hanging in the air, wings flapping in a blur, directly facing me, looked at me for a minute or longer, turned maybe 150 degrees and looked into the window of our cabin for another minute or so, turned back to me for another minute or two and then flew off. Well, I love you. Take care . . ."

What a strange and astonishing experience! Almost as if the butterfly and the bee had been interested in finding out something about this odd human visitor to their domain. Or were each of them attempting some sort of communication with my brother? That the two encounters occurred one after the other seemed also amazing to me.

Diane and I packed our picnic lunch, drove over the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge, and headed toward Mill Valley. Forty-five minutes later we parked in the lot at the very top of Mt. Tam. After eating our lunch at a picnic table in the scorching sun, we took the short steep trail on the south side of the mountain that led directly up to the peak. The unfolding vista was awesome. Walking around the fire observation tower at the top, we could see the entire panorama spreading out before us -- San Francisco, the East Bay. . . A luminous cloud bank covered the landscape to the north, looking like a white blanket of wool. A single hawk soared slowly through the silence of the intense blue sky.

And then they appeared, or perhaps they had been there and I had not noticed them before. A host of yellow and black butterflies flitting through the air. I watched a single butterfly. I could almost see the currents of air on which it slowly flew. The creature moved close to me, just a few feet away.

“Will it land on my hand?” I wondered, thinking of my brother’s experience just a few hours before. What synchronicity that would be! But, no. It wasn’t to be.

Suddenly a second butterfly joined the first. The two creatures seemed so delighted to be together. They danced around one another in a lovely choreography for perhaps 15 seconds, as if they had become a single life-form. Were they courting, I wondered. Was this the season that butterflies mated? But wouldn’t that be Spring? And then all of a sudden the two butterflies flew straight up in the sky together, higher and higher. I hadn’t known that butterflies could fly so fast and so high! Within 30 seconds they had disappeared into the brilliant sunlight.

One Sunday morning in July. Two brothers. Two unexpected experiences with butterflies. How strange! How wonderful!

Abraham Joshua Heschel once wrote: “We may doubt anything, except that we are struck with amazement. When in doubt, we raise questions; when in wonder, we do not even know how to ask a question. Doubts may be resolved, radical amazement can never be erased. There is no answer in the world to [our] radical wonder. Under the running sea of our theories and scientific explanations lies the aboriginal abyss of radical amazement.” (Man Is Not Alone, p. 13)

Rabbi Heschel was the most renowned Jewish theologian in the United States during the 1960s and ‘70s, and I was lucky to have him as one of my teachers during the years I was studying to become a rabbi. He was a model of Jewish spirituality for me, a man who combined scholarship, prayer, spiritual searching and political activism into an integral religious life. During my years at the Seminary, he became an important social activist, addressing public issues such as health care, juvenile delinquency, the elderly, and racism. He gave himself to the cause of civil rights, marching alongside the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. He spoke out on behalf of the oppressed Jews of the Soviet Union. He was an early critic of the war in Viet Nam and he took a prophetic stand in relation to that conflict.

To my knowledge, Heschel never wrote or spoke about the environment. There was no real movement yet, and our endangered planet was not on the national agenda. In 1962 Rachel Carson published her controversial book, *The Silent Spring*, in which she informed her readers about the effect that synthetic pesticides were having on the world. Carson’s book is credited with catalyzing the modern environmental movement. The first Earth Day took place seven years later, in 1969. In those years, Heschel, together with a number of influential Christian theologians, was focusing most of his public energy and on the conflict in Viet Nam. The war ate away at his conscience, and he died brokenhearted in 1973.

As I was preparing this sermon for Kol Nidre, I came to wonder what my teacher might have said about global warming and the other frightening aspects of the environmental crisis. After all, Heschel loved the natural world. His poetry and writing are filled with a sense of the wonder and grandeur of our planet.

Rabbi Heschel began both of the major volumes that make up his religious philosophy with chapters that focus on the sense of the ineffable, radical amazement, the sublime, wonder, the sense of mystery, awe, and glory. He wrote that “The root of religion is the question what to do with the feeling for the mystery of living, what to do with awe, wonder and amazement.” (God in Search of Man, p. 162) Once asked by an interviewer what he believed to be his greatest gift, Heschel replied, “My ability to be surprised.”

Heschel knew that there was something very wrong with the way human beings were living in the modern world. In 1951, in his book on the Sabbath, he wrote that our war with nature had come to resemble a defeat: “We have fallen victims to the work of our hands; it is as if the forces we had conquered have conquered us.” (The Sabbath, p. 27) Yet he says that Judaism doesn’t teach us to reject civilization, but to surpass it by attaining some degree of independence from it. “The Sabbath is the day on which we learn the art of surpassing civilization.” (ibid.)

In 1955, eight years before Rachel Carson’s book appeared, Heschel wrote the following deeply prophetic words: “As civilization advances, the sense of wonder declines. Such decline is an alarming symptom of our state of mind. Humankind will not perish for want of information; but only for want of appreciation.” (God in Search of Man, p. 46) This then would, I believe, be Heschel’s way of understanding what is at the root of the environmental crisis: the eclipse of wonder, awe and appreciation, and its replacement by mindlessness, greed and domination.

When we are children, we marvel at the world. Everything is new and fresh to us. Everything is miraculous. But as we grow up, we see these things that first made us wonder over and over again. We ask for names of things, learn to identify them and give them a place in the world. And we learn how to manipulate and control reality. Our growing sense of ego allows us to hold our own in a difficult and sometimes fearful world.

But all this comes at a price, for in the process we learn to distance ourselves from the natural world that we are part of, and we come to mistakenly believe that life is, for the most part, ordinary. Of course, we take summer vacations in nature and enjoy the world, marveling at a beautiful sunset or the ocean waves striking the beach, or a majestic mountain vista. But when we return to our ordinary lives, we have to face the “real” world. We have so many responsibilities that must get done. There are so many things that weigh us down. Nature fades into the background. We think of the natural

world as something to be used for our benefit. Wonder and awe become rare incursions into our lives.

And this, my friends, is the fearful danger to our humanity. Without wonder, we have no reverence, and we become unconscious, using the world in an I-It fashion. What seems to be predominant now, both for individuals and for society as a whole, is a self-centered instrumental view of the world, i.e., the earth is here to serve my needs and to be used by people for human benefit. And to be used by corporations for the profit of their shareholders. This is what Martin Buber called the I-It relation.

The I-It way of using the earth gives rise to our many forms of consumption and addiction: work, money, status, love, sex, food, acquisitiveness, vanity, aging, fear of death. Driven by our fears and cravings, we drown out wonder, we lose our mindfulness, we forget why we are here. I know this one only too well. Which of those preoccupations has not taken over my consciousness at one time or another? This High Holy Day period I have been examining my penchant to overeat. What can I do to change this pattern of consumption?

It is Yom Kippur, the Day of Judgment, the day of taking account, the day of decision to change. If the earth is to survive, there are many crucial things we must do to change our ways of living. We know that we must deal both as individuals and as a society with our patterns of consumption. But will it only be fear for our future that motivates us to actually change our behavior so that we don't go back to living as we did before? We have sinned against the earth. I believe that if we are to engage in real teshuvah, if we are really going to change, we will have to allow ourselves to be enchanted once again by the reality of being alive in this miraculous world.

Heschel writes: "Wonder or radical amazement is the chief characteristic of the religious person's attitude toward history and nature. One attitude is alien to his spirit: taking things for granted, regarding events as a natural course of things. . . He knows that there are laws that regulate the course of natural processes; he is aware of the regularity and pattern of things. However, such knowledge fails to mitigate his sense of perpetual surprise at the fact that there are facts at all. . ."

The cultivation of wonder and gratitude is most certainly one of the chief purposes for spiritual practice in Judaism. Our tradition attempts to evoke the sense of wonder with daily blessings, berakhot: blessings for waking up, for the sunlight, for love, for food, for nightfall, for sleeping. And these blessings are augmented with berakhot for especially wondrous occasions: for witnessing a rainbow, for seeing lightening or hearing thunder, for seeing a tree blossoming for the first time in the Spring, for being at the ocean, for connecting with a friend we haven't seen in a long time, for watching a butterfly gliding on the wind.

One of Abraham Heschel's most important rebbes was the Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of the 18th century Hasidic movement. Heschel appreciated the Ba'al Shem's love of the earth. He wrote: "Human beings must cherish the world, said the Baal Shem. To deprecate, to deride it was presumption. Creation, all of creation, was pervaded with dignity and purpose and embodied God's meaning." (A Passion for Truth, p. 24)

As many of you know, I have long been engaged in writing a book about the Ba'al Shem Tov. A few years ago, as part of my research, I interviewed Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, the chief founder of the Jewish Renewal movement. At one point in the interview I asked Reb Zalman what aspect of the Ba'al Shem's teachings he felt was most relevant for our lives today. Zalman's answer surprised me. Taking his cue from a passage in the gospels, Zalman answered: "If the Ba'al Shem were living today, he would be concerned about the future of our earth. God so loved the world that She gave herself to it and became the Earth. Therefore, we must love and care for the earth because She is an embodiment of the Divine."

Wow! Speaking of wonder and awe, how is that for a short definition of the Jewish spiritual imperative to defend the earth? "God so loved the world that She gave herself to it and became the Earth. Therefore, we must love and care for the earth because She is an embodiment of the Divine."

I have come to have doubts about the value of the term "environmentalism." From the Ba'al Shem's point of view, the environment is not just something that surrounds us, a place we live in. We are the environment, plain and simple. Destroy the world around us and we destroy ourselves.

I have also come to believe that the old paradigm - the notion of human beings as God's stewards, as described in the Garden of Eden story - is inappropriate today. To live sustainably on the earth and to save the earth, we need a new spiritual philosophy that will enable us to understand that we are one with the earth, one with humanity, one with the animals, one with the trees. Only then will we know that when we wound the earth, we are wounding ourselves. The Torah teaches, "Love your neighbor as yourself. . . V'ahavta l'rayakha k'mokha" (Leviticus 19:18) The Torah should have also said: "Love the earth and all of her inhabitants as yourself. . . V'ahavta l'oretz v'khol toshve'hah k'mokha."

Once when Abraham Heschel was a young man living in Vilna, he and a fellow Yiddish poet entered a forest. They paused and stood in silence, and then Heschel's friend watched as Heschel took a kippah from his pocket and placed it on his head. Later, Heschel's friend, who was secular, asked him why he had put a kippah on his head in the forest. "That grove of trees was like a synagogue to me," Heschel answered.

I'd like to close tonight by paraphrasing part of a poem that Heschel wrote during those years. The poem is entitled "I Befriend the Forests":

Oh tree – you are my beloved Thou.
I love streets, and even more these fields that are mine.
But you, wondrous tree, I hold so dear.
You I hold the dearest!

You are a soul in disguise
my darling, oh tree!
You, who answer barely, quietly,
sometimes, sometimes in a dream. . .

Trees from all of the forests!
You all know me well
for we have meditated together,
out of our love, our secret love.

And whenever I sneak into the forest
I soon become so like a tree
that I call out, "Grandpa, Grandpa Oak tree!
Your grandchild has come to you."

*Rabbi Burt Jacobson was ordained at JTSA, and was one of the founders of the Jewish Renewal movement.
He was also the Founding Rabbi of Kehilla Community Synagogue in the East Bay.*