

To Be Captured By the Moon - Rosh Hashana 5768

By Daniel Cotzin Burg

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Every holiday has its moment, that one liturgical or ritual detail that seems to transcend the festival itself. On Pesach, it's eating the *matzah* for the first time. On Shavuot, perhaps saying *Sh'ma* as the sun rises over Lake Michigan. The ritual beauty and strangeness of waving the lulav marks Sukkot's transcendent moment. And Rosh Hashanah? For me at least, it's not the shofar, though that is a powerful ritual too, to be sure. It's *Aleinu* bowing at *Aleinu*.

Rosenzweig puts it this way: "What distinguishes the Days of Awe from all other festivals is that here and only here does the Jew kneel. Here he does what he refused to do before the King of Persia, what no power on earth can compel him to do, and what he need not do before God on any other day of the year...."

Paradoxically, bowing on Rosh Hashanah is about demonstrating our allegiance, our utter obedience to God while simultaneously, through the infrequency of such an act, recalling the normative mode through which we encounter the Almighty: on our feet. We must bow once a year in order to know before whom we stand. But we can only move forward once we have raised our heads and our bodies, once we have used our eyes and ears, the fullness of our senses to engage the world around us. Where shall we tread? What shall we attempt to accomplish? The answer is contained within *Aleinu* itself: "*L'taken olam b'malchut Shaddai*," to repair the world in majestic Godliness. The Kabbalists envisioned a world, fractured and in need of healing. And we, said they, are partners in the continuing act of perfecting that world. And what better day to consider our role in this than Rosh Hashanah?

"The world was created in Tishrei," says the Talmud (*Rosh Hashanah 10b*), and the piyut proclaims: "*Hayom harat olam*." "On this day the world was born." Rosh Hashanah marks the birthday of the planet and whether this occurred 5,768 or 4 1/2 billion years ago is not what's important. Our relationship to that planet should be the issue that drives us. So let's go back to the beginning, the book of Genesis to explore just what kind of a relationship was intended so long ago.

In chapter two of *Bereishit*, we discover the earthly context into which *haAdam*, the first human being, was placed: verse five reads, "...when no shrub of the field was yet on earth and no grasses of the field had yet sprouted, because the Lord God had not sent rain upon the earth and there was no man to till the soil..." dot, dot, dot. Before humans even grace the pages of this creation narrative, we are told that this new organism is to be a farmer. And, indeed, just a few verses later we read:

"The Lord God took the man and placed him in the garden of Eden, to work it and to guard it."

טו וַיִּקַּח ה' אֱלֹקִים אֶת־הָאָדָם וַיִּנְחֵהוּ בְּגַן־עֵדֶן לְעֹבְדָהּ וּלְשִׁמְרָהּ:

Our first task is to work the land, to cultivate it and, to a certain extent, to control it. But there is a second mandate: to guard the land, to protect it. And if we look backward in the text now, to the moment of creation itself, we may discover that this second mandate is compelling, not just because of what God says, but because of who we are:

(בר' א:ז) וַיִּצַר ה' אֱלֹקִים אֶת־הָאָדָם עָפָר מִן־הָאֲדָמָה וַיִּפַּח בְּאַפָּיו נְשָׁמַת חַיִּים
וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה:

"...the Lord God formed man from the dust of the earth. He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being."

Looking closely at the Hebrew we notice that the man, "*HaAdam*," is taken from the earth, "*HaAdamah*." Adam from Adamah. As Rabbi Arthur Waskow has observed, the first human was truly an "earthling," a golem, formed out of earthly matter and ensouled, as it were, with God's breath. The Hebrew word for "soul," *neshama* is related to the word *neshima* or "breath." The Latin reflects a similar etymology: the word *inspiritus* means to inhale. Life is "inspiring;" When we die we are said to "expire." And our calling, then, is to cultivate the very matter from which we were taken, to use our Godgiven "spirit" (same Latin root) to work the soil, helping the shrubs and trees to grow and the grasses of the field to sprout. On this, the birthday of the world, we bow before our Creator. On this *Yom Hazikaron*, we remember also to stand. But we have learned that we must protect even as we cultivate; and we must stand ready to repair the damage which has been done. *L'taken olam b'malchut Shaddai*, to repair the world in majestic Godliness. Given the headlines and statistics, this may seem a gargantuan task, a Mission Impossible. But I would suggest to you, my friends, that if we are to have any hope of succeeding at *Tikkun Olam*, our actions must ultimately be fueled not by fear, but by hope.

How many of you saw the movie, "*An Inconvenient Truth*?" If you did, you may have been as surprised as I was. Not by the staggering statistics, the melting polar ice caps, the rise in global temperatures, the worsening hurricane seasons or the depleted rain forests. The big surprise was how the world, and particularly the United States, could have been aware of these problems and done so little to correct them. All of this is surprising until we consider the message: Nobody wants to hear that the sky is falling until it does. Dr. Jeremy Benstein of the Heschel Center for Environmental Learning and Leadership, frames it this way (*The Way Into Judaism and the Environment*, p. 13): 'In the end, people are more moved by a promise of fulfilling an ideal rather than averting a threat. Martin Luther King Jr. galvanized a people with his vision when he proclaimed 'I Have a Dream.' Environmentalists too often try to do the same things with their version, 'I have a Nightmare' and it doesn't quite work.'

And in the city, where human populations are concentrated and direct experience of the natural world is harder to come by, we must be especially vigilant. Indeed the Talmud (*masechet Sanhedrin 17b*) holds those of us living in urban environments to a higher standard. We learn that a Torah scholar may not live in a city unless certain things are available including: a charitable fund, a synagogue, a bathhouse, a *mohel* and a *schochet*. But interestingly, the list is not exhaustive. Rabbi Akiva adds that the city must also have a variety of fruits, because eating fruit, he says, promotes good eyesight. Cities are full of art, culture, great minds and great ideas, but not necessarily great produce. I remember, as a child, driving with my family each summer to the

Kenosha County fair. We would sit on the grass, look up at the blue sky and eat ear after ear of golden corn on the cob, smoked in the husk and dipped in melted butter and salt. I am not sure that this was good for the eyesight, and given the salt and butter, it was probably not so great for our bodies, but it was sure was good for the soul.

Rabbi Akiva's precondition for urban dwelling is a wonderful reminder that nature is often hard to come by in cities. The paradox of the city is that while it appeals wonderfully to the Jewish commandments aimed at establishing vibrant community, it makes more difficult the observance of that other equally important mitzvah, to be good stewards of the earth. The city becomes the focal point for a certain hubris of modernity. And this hubris is well captured in the story of a town called Chelm.

Chelm Captures the Moon (taken from "The Wise Men of Chelm retold by Yael Kliers)

Times were bad in Chelm. The little money they had had gone into building the watermill. People were poor, but they were not disheartened, they knew something would come up. And it was again Gimpel who came up with the idea that would make them rich. Gimpel had been feeling rather badly over the failure of the watermill, and for some time now had been trying to think of a way to make up for it. He realized that in order to be a complete success, his idea would have to provide something that the Chelmers could monopolize, and yet something that everyone needed. And so it was that he came up with the idea of capturing the moon.

It came about in the following way. Every month, at the rise of the new moon, the people of Chelm went out and said the traditional prayers. That month, Gimpel went with them, still trying to come up with a plan. As he looked up at the moon, he suddenly knew! They would capture the moon! It was a brilliant plan, since there was only one, and yet everyone needed it! Indeed, he thought the Poles could get along well enough without one, but since the Jews needed to bless the moon, they would have to come to Chelm to bless it. The people of Chelm would naturally charge a modest fee (fifty, sixty, at the most seventy kopecks) for this privilege, and they would be rich! Unable to contain his excitement, he related his plan to the others.

"But how will we capture it?" they asked.

"That is merely a technicality, my friends," Gimpel answered, unperturbed.

And yet, he was not quite able to answer their question, so he suggested that the Wise Men be called upon. Hearing Gimpel's wonderful plan, the Wise Men went about figuring out how to implement it. Gimpel and the Wise Men suggested that they attach all the ladders in the town and send Berel the Beadle up to fetch the moon. The plan was rejected though, for fear that Berel would fall, and then the burden of his family would fall upon the community. Finally, on the seventh night, when the moon was bright, they came up with the answer. They would place an open barrel full of water under the moon, and as soon as they saw the moon in the water, they would seal the barrel, and thus trap the moon. The whole town looked on as Gimpel came out, followed by two young men carrying a barrel full of water.

"Now watch," commanded Gimpel. Pointing upward he said, "You see the moon in the heavens?" Then pointing into the barrel, he stepped back triumphantly: "Now look, the same moon is in the barrel!" As soon as the Chelmers saw this was true they sealed the barrel, and hid it in the shul.

Two weeks later, on a dark night when the moon was no longer in the sky, the people of Chelm

gathered once more. The barrel was brought out, and carefully placed in the center of the town square. With a flourish, the seal was taken off the barrel, and the people shielded their eyes from the bright light but lo and behold! All remained dark! The people gasped in astonishment. How could this be? After all, they had all seen the moon placed in the barrel merely a fortnight before.

Gimpel was most astonished of all. "Perhaps it is in the water," he suggested, and ordered the water to be poured out. The water flowed until the barrel was empty, and Gimpel peered into it, but still no moon.

"The moon must have melted in the water," he concluded sadly. And so, although the people of Chelm captured the moon successfully, they were not made rich by their accomplishment, wondrous as it truly was.

This story illustrates the paradox: living in towns, villages or cities intensifies an already skewed perspective on our role visàvis the natural world. Couple our tremendous consumption of natural resources with our physical distance from forests, mountains and flowing rivers (the Chicago river doesn't count) and you get societies who seem to be trying to capture the moon.

And though most of us these days are much more conscientious of our ecological responsibilities, as with the citizens of Chelm, money is often a factor, especially with those citydwellers who do not have an abundance of it. To paraphrase Upton Sinclair, *It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his livelihood depends on not understanding it.* But we are learning, more and more that this is a false dichotomy. Sustainability, environmentally friendly living, though "inconvenient" to the oil and coal companies, perhaps, need not be overly taxing on our wallets. Whether installing solar panels, changing our light bulbs from incandescent to compact fluorescent or driving a hybrid, we are slowly learning that we can make up our initial investment in lower energy bills or depressed monthly gas expenditures. We don't *have* to go so far as to capture the moon just to save a few bucks.

But, the deeper truth of the Chelm story is about the relationship between human beings and the rest of the natural world. And though that relationship does not seem to be wholly equal, Peter Singer, professor of Bioethics at Princeton, suggests that it should be. In his book, *Animal Liberation*, Singer coins the phrase "*speciesism*," and goes so far as to compare the bias toward one's own species with the prejudice of men against women or whites against blacks. The Jewish tradition is sensitive to animal rights, to be sure. We are commanded to rest our beasts of burden on Shabbat, even as we ourselves are expected to rest. An ox and an ass are not to be yoked together because it places an unfair strain on the weaker animal and a mother bird is to be shooed away from her nest before taking her eggs. The Talmud, in *Masechet Berachot*, indicates that we are even to feed our animals before ourselves. These *mitzvot* indicate an extremely tolerant position with regard to the animal kingdom, but to be fair, they do not suggest that we are equal. Nowhere, to my knowledge, do our legal texts forbid Jews from owning pets or work animals, yoking an ox to a plow or eating eggs (or, for that matter, the animals themselves). It was uniquely human beings who breathed in the breath of God.

Singer may not have it entirely right, but we should be careful not to drift too far in the opposite direction as does David Gelernter of Yale University. He claims that the JudeoChristian view understands man as "emphatically *not* part of nature." "They deem every human life to be sacred," he says. "At the same time, they wipe the slate clean of nature gods, nature spirits, any and all 'duties to nature'" ("The Immorality of Environmentalism," *City Journal*, 1996). And here Gelernter loses me. He implies that because Judaism champions monotheism, rejecting the pagan

view that spirits reside in every corner of the natural world, we in turn reject an allegiance to nature itself. But it doesn't follow! BP should not avoid dumping chemicals for fear that it would anger the sea god. Our cities should not cut greenhouse gases because Zeus is saddled with an oversupply of lightning bolts or because Apollo is having trouble schlepping the sun through all that smog. Rather, it is our God, the one universal God of heaven and earth who cares! "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof," says the Psalmist (Ps. 24:1), and God doesn't like us messing with His property.

The story is told (*Bava Kama 50b*) of a particular farmer who is clearing stones from his field and throwing them into the street. A pious man sees this and rebukes him: "Worthless one! Why are you clearing stones from land which is *not* yours and leaving them on your own property? The farmer merely dismisses the man's silly reversal of the facts. Time passes, the farmer falls upon hard times and is forced to sell his field. And one day, as he is walking down the street, he slips and falls on those rocks. Only then does he understand the simple truth: that damage to the public domain is damage to our own property. The world has been entrusted to each of us and to all of us. Are we remembering to protect it?

Now, I have no doubt that this is a community of people who don't deliberately pollute our city; these are *not* issues to which most of us are blind. In fact many of us probably make a point of picking up trash when we see it or take pains to recycle plastic, paper and glass, hoping to God that those blue bags actually make it to the recycling plant at all.

But are we pushing the envelope? Are we thinking in terms of systemic change, sustainable living? How often do we throw rocks into the street without even knowing that we're doing it? I want to tell you about Robert Rajfer, one of our 7th graders, who recently did something remarkable. For his Bar Mitzvah project, Robert went to his local Costco and talked the manager into donating \$100 or 80 energysaving fluorescent lightbulbs. He then went to various neighbors, friends and relatives, selling the light bulbs and requesting donations for a Jewish environmental organization. In the end, he was successful in raising over \$800 and, in the process, convinced dozens of people to, replace their old light bulbs, thereby lowering carbon emissions up to 900%. This is what another recent Bar Mitzvah, Mitchell Fogelson, would refer to as the "*t'shuvah of global warming.*" If we could all just think a little bit like Mitchell and Robert, there is no telling what we could accomplish! The details of our environmental challenges have been well documented. We know about the reports of climate change. We know our oceans and air are polluted. Our natural resources are being depleted. Species are becoming extinct at an alarming rate. Just last week, the U.S. Geological Survey published a study which cites the effects of global warming on Arctic polar bears. The report reads, "Projected changes in future sea ice conditions, if realized, will result in loss of approximately two-thirds of the world's current polar bear population by the mid 21st Century." Thoreau once said, "Thank God men cannot fly, and lay waste the sky as well as the earth." These days, we can fly, but we've managed to inflict plenty of damage to the atmosphere from the ground. It's enough to make you cry. And in the face of the dire statistics, we may be tempted to simply throw up our hands and declare: "I have a nightmare." But our Jewish tradition will not permit us such hopelessness. There is a dream and it is humankind in sync with its natural environment. Not fear, hope. Not despair but divine inspiration.

And, as it always has, it begins with conservation (*and here, I am indebted to Rabbi Jonathan Helfand of Brooklyn College who compiled several of these resources*). In *halakha*, Jewish legal parlance, this is *bal tashchit*, avoiding unnecessary waste or destruction. The Torah's classic example is that when one is engaged in war, one may not destroy trees, even to gain a military advantage. Our tradition decries this exclaiming:

(דב' כ״ט) כִּי הָאָדָם יַעַץ הַשָּׂדֶה לָבֹא מִפְּנֵיךָ בְּמָצוֹר:

"Are trees of the field human to withdraw before you into the besieged city?" (Deu. 20:19)

But *Bal Tashchit* also applies to water and animal conservation. In *Masechet Yevamot* (11b), the Talmud states, "A man should not pour the water out of his cistern while others may require it." and there is a wonderful *midrash* (San. 108b) which affords us a different perspective on the flood story. In this version, the raven rebukes Noah, saying: "You must hate me, for you did not choose [to send a scout] from the "clean" species of which there are seven [pairs], but from a species of which there are only two. If the [heat] of the sun or the power of the cold overwhelms me, would not the world be lacking a species?" The sensitivity to how our behavior affects the animal kingdom is brought back to the observance of Rosh Hashanah, in the legal material of the *Shulkhan Arukh* (O.H. 233:6). There is a custom through which a person wearing new clothing is blessed: "May they wear out and may they be renewed" (that is, may you enjoy the pleasure of having new clothes once again). At least one authority dictates that this may not be said in the case of shoes or other garments made from animal skins since, by extension, it calls for the killing of yet another animal.

Trees, water, air, animals. So what are we to do? How do we dream big, while not getting caught up in the nightmarish details? How do we citydwellers rediscover the pulse of the natural universe? On this, the birthday of the world, how do we renew our determination to sustain this noble gift, the *adamah*, once bestowed upon the first *adam*. As Rabbi Elliot Dorff points out, we say not simply "Happy New Year," but *L'Shana Tova*, May you have a "good" year. God saw the created world and considered it "good." How can we, in good conscience, say the same?

Here at Anshe Emet, we are ready to make a concerted effort. This year, our Na'aseh social justice committee under the able leadership of Sarah Hirszen has elected to tackle the challenge of ecoJudaism in earnest. I want to tell you about four synagogue initiatives we are planning for this coming year of 5768. Each of you should have received a Na'aseh card when you came in to shul this morning. Feel free to refer to it as I tell you about these exciting projects!

On October 28th, we will be hosting *Na'aseh Yarok*, our first ever "green fair," a Sunday morning aimed at helping each of us to assess our potential for growth and improvement in the areas of sustainability and environmentally friendly living. There will be food, activities and lots of good and helpful information, and I sincerely hope that you will join us.

A second project we are exploring this year is CSA, that is: Community Supported Agriculture. Last summer, Miriam, Ellie and I were traveling in Northern Michigan. It was the peak of cherry season there and we were excited to sample the local produce. We had missed the roadside stands earlier in the day so we decided to pull into a grocery store and buy a bag. And where do you think those cherries, every single bag in that grocery store in the middle of the Michigan cherry season, were from? That's right, they were Washington cherries. Needless to say, we didn't buy any. The idea of CSA is to foster a relationship with a local farmer to provide seasonal produce to Anshe Emet families at a reasonable cost. The produce would be fresh, organic and grown in our area, reducing both the time between harvesting and consumption, and the fuel needed to transport the fruits and vegetables. Additionally, CSA allows us to get to know the process by which food arrives on our tables. Once upon a time, the rabbis of the Mishnah discussed in great detail the planting and harvesting of crops, strategies for successful agriculture and the requisite gratitude due to our Creator. We still live in agricultural societies, we just sometimes forget that we do. Our hope is that

by supporting a project like CSA, we will reclaim some of that which came so naturally to our ancestors. I cannot promise, as did Rabbi Akiva, an end to myopia (literally or figuratively), but fresh fruit in the city is still a beautiful thing.

Na'aseh was founded as a group committed to social justice. Our concern for the environment must also include concern for the poorer amongst us who often have more difficulty accessing the latest "green" technologies. To this end we are determined to find projects which address both concerns. And one such project centers around the environment *within* our homes. Believe it or not, indoor air is three times more polluted than outdoor air. Much of this is due to Volatile Organic Compounds in paints and finishes which continue to release low level toxic emissions into our homes for many years after they are dry. New low or nonVOC paints are available, but they are often less readily available to the less privileged in our society. Our hope is to help to change this through education and action. No one, rich or poor, should have to fear walking into to his or her own home.

Finally, there is one area in which environmentalism intersects worker justice and, of all things, *kashrut*. This year, and with Rabbi Siegel's able leadership, the Conservative Movement has created a wonderful new initiative called *Hekhsher Tzedek*. This new *hekhsher* will serve as a supplement to traditional certification of kosher products. Underpinning this project is our belief that both ritual and ethical commandments have an equal place at our tables and that isolating one at the expense of the other is to do a disservice to Jewish tradition and the meaning of *kashrut*.

This new certification is based on a given company's adherence to ethical standards in six separate categories: Wages and benefits, health and worker safety, training, environmental impact, product development and corporate transparency. In January, on Martin Luther King weekend, we will have the opportunity to learn with Rabbi Morris Allen, project director for *Hekhsher Tzedek*. This Na'aseh scholarinresidence weekend, an appropriate celebration of Dr. King's legacy, promises to help us dream big and to promote real, important and systemic change in an area about which so many of us care so deeply.

A favorite FarSide cartoon depicts two teenage fish in a bowl playing a game of baseball. One fish has look of dismay on his face as he realizes that he has just knocked a hole through the glass and the water is pouring out onto the floor. How easy it is to forget that the world depends on our right action. How hard it is to belief that we can have such a negative or a positive impact! How often we casually toss rocks only later to discover that we have been damaging our fragile ecosystem, throwing them into our own backyard. As the residents of Chelm never quite came to understand, we can never capture the moon or the sky or even the land, but we can remain captivated by them, their beauty and their light. The world belongs to God, but it was entrusted to us. This year let us celebrate her birthday, by helping her to heal. Let us stand tall and walk gently. Let us not forget the dust from which we were all taken and appreciate the Godbreath that flows within us. There are dangerous things in this world. Bad things, nightmarish even. But the dream, of a better tomorrow, or a brighter future and a cleaner world is enough to awaken any us from our slumber.

Shana Tova

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