

Our Shemita: The Green Task Force of Shir Hadash, Milwaukee, WI

<http://www.cshmilw.org/>

The forthcoming year, 5768, is a *Shemita* year, a sabbatical year during which, according to Lev. 25:2-7, Ex. 23:10, the Earth is to be given a rest, which is a Sabbath of its own, also called a "Sabbath of the Lord". Shir Hadash has decided to honor the *Shemita* year by looking at how we as Jews can give our troubled Earth a rest. Therefore we are planning a year focused on studying and confronting how Judaism addresses our relationship to nature and how we as contemporary Jews can deal with environmental problems and crises as an expression of our spirituality. We are launching our *Shemita* with these *Yamim Noraim*, Days of Awe.

It is important to note from the outset of our year-long *avodah* that Deut. 15:1-10 adds a social justice aspect to the *Shemita* by requiring that in such a sabbatical year debts are to be forgiven. Further, according to Leviticus, the Sabbath of Sabbath, the Jubilee year, Lev.25:8-24, requires that, not only should the land lay fallow another year, but that the slaves are to be freed and land alienated over the past generations are to be returned to their original tribal status. These social and economic aspects are no doubt a recognition of the fact that environmental well-being and social justice are intimately related, as we will come to recognize during this year of study and reevaluation.

There is actually a third aspect of the sabbatical notion which is seldom mentioned. During Sukkot in a *Shemita* year, the entire Torah is to read at a public gathering, Deut. 31. Facing the prospect of the difficult year ahead in which there would be no planting and only limited harvesting, the Israelites were to be reminded of the laws and right conduct pursuant to which they had earned the bounty of their harvest and the spiritual sources on which they might depend as the sabbatical year became trying. So too we are going to examine the spiritual resources we have available in Judaism to confront the daunting task ahead of changing our ways and restoring the earth.

Rosh Hashanah is also traditionally *Hayom Harat Olam*, the celebration of the Creation of the World. Expanding on this theme, we have developed a series of contemplative and practical questions for us to consider during the following days before Yom Kippur in order to launch this year of study and our own creation of a sense of a Jewish eco-kashrut. They track the days of Creation as set forth in Genesis 1 and so begin our thinking about what our Jewish heritage has to say about a relationship to the natural world, quite literally, "*Beraishit*," from the beginning. We hope that you will find them useful and give them some time day to day or at least once during this coming week.

Contemplating the Days of Creation

Day One: Being, Light, Night and Day, Evening and Morning

We Jews take as our watchword the command to “hear”: at Sinai God spoke and we heard. During creation, though, God “looked” at the light, the waters, the earth, the plants, the fish, the birds, the animals, at humanity and the whole of Creation and saw them as good, indeed the whole as very good.

Have you recently looked, simply looked at something, at the world?

When was the last time since childhood you lay on your back and watched the clouds scud by, or savored a whole sunset or sunrise, or watched a butterfly flit from flower to flower?

Have you allowed yourself recently not to think, but just to be?

Have you stopped to notice, to feel Buber’s I-Thou relationship with anything, beyond our daily I-its?

Have you looked into yourself lately? Have you honored your sensibilities, your intuitions?

Have you honored the mysteries of the world all about you?

Have you felt Heschel’s “radical amazement” at Creation?

Have you not simply passed from day to night, from morning to evening, but rather felt the rhythms of the passage from morning to evening, day to night?

Have you looked into the dark as a seer would and allowed yourself to dream before your daily activities again start apace?

Will you look into *tohu v’vehu*, the chaos, the waste all about us and have the courage to say, “Let there be light” and you, yourself, even if all alone, to begin creation again?

Day Two: The Firmament, the Atmosphere

On a frigid winter's night have you felt the cold of space envelope the earth?

On a stormy day, have you felt and contemplated the power of a gust of wind? Have you recently watched the fullness of tree branches swaying in response to an unseen wind? Have you run or biked against the wind, or felt the rush of the wind as you coasted downhill?

Have you heard the late summer crickets' love songs or a flute being practiced on the evening breeze? Have you breathed deeply and sighed at the fragrance of lilacs on a spring day, and do you recall the sweetness of ambrosia chocolate in the Fall air downtown?

Have you awakened to the hacking of an asthmatic child?

Have you curtailed a run or bike ride due to an ozone warning?

Have you written to a legislator about the renewal of the Clean Air Act, the destruction of forests and lakes due to acid rain, mercury in the fish due to unscrubbed coal plant emissions? Did you speak out about the new, huge WE Energies coal-powered power plant in Oak Creek, or simply write it off as an economic necessity?

Have you tried fans rather than air conditioners on moderate summer days?

Have you fought against the cut-back on public transit and rather for its extension into the suburbs and the exurbs? Have you taken public transit or biked to work? Do you drive three blocks to the convenience store instead of walking?

Have you done anything about global warming besides changing the light bulbs?

Would you be willing to pay a carbon tax on goods to pay for the social, environmental and security costs of obtaining cleaner and sustainable energies?

Day Three: Water, Earth, Plants and Diversity

Have you of late sat an hour and watched the waves of our great lake roll in or crash over a breakwater? Have you watched a fast running stream smooth then dance around a rock? Did you make it out to Kettle Moraine or up to the North Woods this summer? Have you ever seen the towering painted rocks of the Lake Superior shore?

Have you ever detoured from the Miller Park parking lot to the Hank Aaron trail and seen the clear depths and flowered banks of the fast running Menominee?

Do you recall kicking or prying apart a rotting log and watching the next layer of earth tumble out as seedbeds for future trees?

Do you garden; do you compost?

Have you *kvelled* at the abundance of tomatoes in late summer or savored the hint of mint, basil or sage in a breeze over the herb garden?

Do you concern yourself with the fields of corporate-grown corn and soybeans expanding obesely over the agricultural landscape of Wisconsin and America? Do you worry about the death of the family farm? Do you buy produce locally?

Did you decry the plumes of filthy water in Lake Michigan but support the widening of a road to cut a few minutes off your commute, thus creating acres more of run-off? Did you apply pesticides or phosphate fertilizers for a golf course quality lawn?

Have you enjoyed a burger or banana at the cost of tropical forest cut down for agricultural monocultures? Have you worried about the deforestation both north and south when you remodeled with hardwood floors and cabinets?

Did you think only of the convenience when new commercial development along Mequon and Port Roads destroyed more wetland? Have you in search of better schools or of a larger backyard been an unthinking part of urban sprawl?

Have you written Governor Doyle about his impending Great Lakes policy?

What single public health measure would most dramatically decrease world-wide mortality rates with all of the effects which flow from that?

Have you recently attended an Earth Day event?

Day 4: The Celestial Bodies, Time, Years, Seasons and Days

Did you go to see the Perseid showers this year on the very dark first night of Elul? Did you wake up early to see the eclipse of the moon? Have you taken your kids into the country or even up north to see the Aurora Borealis light up the night? How many years has it been since you got away from the light pollution of the city to marvel at the depth, solidity and brilliance of the Milky Way?

Have the scientific revelations of the macro- and micro-cosmos affected your belief in a God of Creation?

Do you live by industrial and commercial time, or soccer and ballet lesson time, so that you have lost touch with natural time?

Are you aware of the cycles of the moon and the Jewish months?

Do you honor Shabbat, or is that when chores get done?

Do you know and savor the seasonal underlay of the holidays, or have they become mostly a matter of history and ritual?

Do you pause for morning, afternoon and evening prayers? What if you did?

Have you worried about the diminishing enforcement of wage and hour legislation and, absent union enforcement, the tyranny of compelled overtime or part-time work without benefits?

The name, Hebrew, is said to derive from the ancient semitic word, *apiru*, nomadic wanderers or border-crossers. Does this effect your position on seasonal migrant workers or “illegal” immigration?

Have you thought what the convenience of 24/7 shopping might actually be costing us?

Day Five: Creatures of the Skies and the Seas, Fruitfulness, Plenitude and Sufficiency

Have you watched the birds play in the skies and dolphin play in a bay? Is this actually play, or are they all business, constantly seeking sustenance?

Have you snorkeled over a coral reef and wondered at its teeming beauty? Have you ever seen salmon fight upstream and over falls? Have you thrilled to the first geese heading north in late winter or marveled at their numbers at the Horican Marsh in the fall? Have you watched an eagle soar, a hawk dive, or a heron stalk and strike a fish along a Wisconsin river?

As you enjoy a salad nicoise, a sushi assortment, or a snapper dinner, do you worry about the depletion of the oceans' fisheries?

Have you ever given thought to the enormity of portions we Milwaukeeans expect at restaurants, or complained of the smaller portions at fancy restaurants? Have you ever complained that you have eaten too much? Do you worry about the continued existence, indeed inadequacy of food pantries decades after they were instituted as a temporary measure in a recession? (Don't forget to bring non-perishables for the Jewish community food pantry at Yom Kippur!)

What does species and habitat depletion really matter to you?

What will you think of during the forthcoming fast?

What is the fast that is asked of you according to Isaiah?

When is enough, enough, and what is enough?

Day Six: Wild and Domestic Animals, Wildness, Domesticity, Sufficiency and Responsibility

Thoreau said that in wildness is humanity's salvation. What about you remains wild?

Have your prayers ever sounded with or in your wild-side?

Should the "wilderness" have an innate meaningfulness for a Jew? Does it to you?

Rabbi Kook, the first chief rabbi of Israel, contended that humanity was created vegetarian, based on Gen. 1:29. What then would be the purpose of domesticated animals in the scheme of Creation?

The prefix "ec-" as in "ecology" or "economics" derives from the Greek word for household. What is the significance of the domesticated potential for Creation?

When the deer eat your tulips or a coyote, your cat, do you wonder why they are suddenly on your doorstep?

When you eat a burger or a steak, have you thought of the impact cattle-breeding has on North and South America's natural environment?

Was the scandal over the lingering deaths of cattle in the kosher slaughterhouse more than a briefly shocking read for you?

Who or what are the plural "us" in Gen. 1:26, who created humankind "in our image, in our likeness" to rule over all life forms?"

When you have read that command that humankind "master" and "rule" over nature, Gen. 1: 28, have you ever wondered whether the Israelite concept of "covenant" applies to this relationship?

What of humanity's purpose in Gen. 2:15 "to tend and to till" the Garden of Eden; does that extend beyond that primal paradise to the hard-scrabble life of the world at large beyond the mythic realm?

The great Wisconsin environmentalist, Aldo Leopold, denounced the Biblical notion of humanity's hegemony over nature as the source of our destructive carelessness. Do you see in Genesis 1 (and 2), the source of a Jewish concept of nature amenable to our precarious times?

Day Seven: Rest and ReSouling (*Shavat V'Yinafash*)

Was it humankind or the whole of creation which the God of Creation pronounced “very good”?

Is it humanity’s world or God’s world which might be holy/wholly?

German philosopher Frederick Nietzsche pronounced the “Death of God” and Romanian sociologist Mircea Eliade observed we had de-sacralized nature. Can we re-sacralize nature in a world of increasing scientism and without the death of monotheism?

Our Judaism was born of a people wandering in the wilderness. What was it (and might it still be) about the wilderness that gives birth to a sense of morality and ethics?

Do you hike or stroll on Shabbat? When you stroll, simply stroll, what do you notice? When you slow down in any way, what do you notice?

What do you do to escape thoughts and worries of work, of daily life, of family, of finances? Does it involve nature encounters? Does it involve pets, fishing, camping, water, or gardening? What is it about such escapes that make them so moving and soulful.

If it is time with your children, have you thought of the environmental world you are leaving them? What would you like to leave them, and what are you prepared to do to secure that future?

If it is your Judaism, what is it about your beliefs and practice that so effectively move you to another plane of existence, feeling and meaning?

Do your encounters with nature, as opposed to modern urban culture, entertainment culture, technological pursuits, involve similar soulfulness?

Are you willing to sacrifice any of your material, energy-intensive and time-consuming life-style for the sake of environmental security and the future livability of the world?

For more information about this meditation contact Peter Goldberg at
goldbergpeter@hotmail.com