

The Earth as a Whole Being

By Rabbi Michele Brand Medwin, D.Min.

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Rosh Hashanah is considered the birthday of the world. We will be reading the creation story during tomorrow morning's Torah service. The creation of the world is a major theme throughout our liturgy. We recite the *Maariv Aravim* prayer that talks about God who "transforms day into night and arranges the stars." The Shabbat Kiddush says, "You made holy Shabbat our heritage as a reminder of the work of Creation." So what is our relation to the world that God created? In the second creation story we read, "There was no shrub or grasses because there was no one to till the soil." God created us, human beings, to care for the world. The shrubs and grasses could not flourish without the loving touch of human presence. And what have we done with the world God created for us? Let's take a look.

One day God was talking to Adam in *Olam Haba*, the World-to-Come, and they were reminiscing.

God said, "Adam, Remember when you first saw the Garden of Eden. It was so beautiful back then. Something doesn't seem right now. What is going on down on earth? I had a perfect no-maintenance garden plan. I created plants to grow in any type of soil, withstand drought and multiply with abandon. The nectar from the long-lasting blossoms attracts butterflies, honeybees and flocks of songbirds. I expected to see a vast garden of colors by now. But, all I see are these green rectangles.

Adam said: "I will go down and check it out."

Adam: Here is the story, God. It's that tribe, the Suburbanites. They started calling your flowers 'weeds' and went to great lengths to kill them and replace them with grass.

God Grass? But, it's so boring. It's not colorful. It doesn't attract butterflies, birds and bees; only grubs and sod worms. It's sensitive to temperatures. Do these Suburbanites really want all that grass growing there?

Adam: Apparently so, Adonai. They go to great pains to grow it and keep it green. They begin each spring by fertilizing grass and poisoning any other plant that crops up in the lawn.

God The spring rains and warm weather probably make grass grow really fast. That must make the Suburbanites happy.

Adam: Apparently not, Adonai. As soon as it grows a little, they cut it-sometimes twice a week.

God They cut it? Do they then bale it like hay?

Adam Not exactly, God. Most of them rake it up and put it in bags.

God They bag it? Why? Is it a cash crop? Do they sell it?

Adam No, Sir, just the opposite. They pay to throw it away.

God Now, let me get this straight. They fertilize grass so it will grow. And, when it does grow, they cut it off and pay to throw it away?

Adam Uh huh.

God These Suburbanites must be relieved in the summer when we cut back on the rain and turn up the heat. That surely slows the growth and saves them a lot of work.

Adam You aren't going to believe this, Adonai. When the grass stops growing so fast, they drag out hoses and pay more money to water it, so they can continue to mow it and pay to get rid of it.

God What nonsense. At least they kept some of the trees. That was a sheer stroke of genius, if I do say so myself. The trees grow leaves in the spring to provide beauty and shade in the summer. In the autumn, they fall to the ground and form a natural blanket to keep moisture in the soil and protect the trees and bushes. It's a natural cycle of life.

Adam You better sit down, God. As soon as the leaves fall, the Suburbanites rake them into great piles and pay to have them hauled away.

God No!? What do they do to protect the shrub and tree roots in the winter to keep the soil moist and loose?

Adam After throwing away the leaves, they go out and buy something which they call mulch. They haul it home and spread it around in place of the leaves.

God And where do they get this mulch?

Adam They cut down trees and grind them up to make the mulch.

God Enough! I don't want to think about this anymore. Betzalel, you're in charge of the arts. What movie have you scheduled for us tonight?

Adam: 'Dumb and Dumber', Adonai. It's a story about....

God Never mind, I think I just heard the whole story from Adam. ¹

There is a beautiful Midrash connected to the creation story. After God finishes creation, and breathes into Adam the breath of life, God gives Adam a tour of the Garden of Eden.

¹ Adapted from the essay, God and St Frances Discuss Lawns by By Kathy Gates

God said,

“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 after you.”

So simple, but so powerful a statement. If we don't care about the earth, no one else will. If we wait to act, will it be too late?

What **have** we done with the world God created for us?

- Retreating glaciers and rising seas that threaten coastal communities and ecosystems.
- Wild Fires that destroy animal habitats and homes
- Hurricanes – More of them, starting earlier in the season - much stronger, more destructive and more deadly
- Extreme rainfall causing massive flooding
- Yet, more severe droughts in other parts of the world
- Blizzards – more often, lasting longer, dumping feet of snow at one time
- Vanishing species and vanishing resources

The Torah tells us that the first man, called *A-dam* is created from the ground itself, *A-da-ma*. God tells *A-dam*, “Of every tree you are free to eat, . . . but one tree you must not eat of it.” Why? A Midrash explains. God continues, “On this earth there is wonderful abundance. Eat of it in joy. But you must restrain yourselves just a little.² When humans do not restrain themselves the abundance disappears and you must toil with hard work and sweat to obtain food.”

The story of Eden is a tale of children growing into rebellious adolescence, eating what they please and as much as they please, rejecting good advice. Fast forward to the Song of Songs. This is a variation of the Garden of Eden for grownups. “Like an apple tree among trees of the forest, so is my beloved among the youths. I delight to sit in its shade, and its fruit is sweet to my mouth. “ We have learned to love the earth, not dominate it, and in turn the earth loves us.

² Seven Days, Many Voices, From the third Day to the Song of Songs: The Eco-Torah of an Indigenous People by Rabbi Arthur Waskow.

Are we the mature adults of the Song of Songs? Do we remember the reason we were created, to care for the shrubs and the trees, and the earth as a whole? You may say, the problem is so overwhelming. What can **I** do? Maimonides teaches us to look at the world as if it were a whole being, endowed with life and a soul. When we affect one part of the world, the rest of the world is affected. Think of an individual. When part of us is injured or sick, it affects our entire body. When that part is healed, the whole body feels better. Looking at it this way, doing one little thing for the environment can add to the healing of the entire world.

The Hebrew word for spiritual is *Ruchani* – from the word *ruach*, which means wind. And the Hebrew word for material is *Gashmi*, from the word *geshem*, which means rain. Our people’s spiritual language is rooted in weather.³

Rain expressed the physical connection between Heaven and Earth. Perhaps the floods and storms are God’s way of saying, you are hurting Me and my world that I created for you.

The ancient Rabbis talk about two categories of Mitzvot –

Bein adam la-makom – Between us and God

Bein adam to chavero - Between us and other people

Maybe it is time to add a third category -

Bein adam le-olam - Between people and the world

The created world was pronounced “very good” at the end of the six days of Creation, but was not completed. The act of creation is ongoing, and we have a role to play in developing and improving the raw materials God provided for us.

We can do some of this on our own - recycle, don’t waste. If you are already doing that, you have earned some mitzvah points for the World to Come. Some work can be done on the community level. If you are already doing that, more mitzvah points. I guess we have earned mitzvah points for the beautiful garden outside our doors, thanks to the Beautification Committee. Some can be done through environmental organizations. If you already make donations to organizations such as the Nature Conservancy, The Sierra Club, or the Environmental Defense Fund. More mitzvah points. And some needs to be done on a governmental level by contacting your legislators and the EPA. Have you earned any mitzvah points here, yet?

³ From The Way Into Judaism and the Environment, Chapter 3

In the book of Job ⁴we read:

Ask the beasts, and they will teach you;
The birds of the sky, they will tell you,
The fish of the sea, they will inform you.
Or speak to the earth, it will teach you;

Paying attention to the climate changes we are experiencing reminds us, the earth is speaking to us. We have a great deal to learn from the earth if we only pay attention. The next time a flood or blizzard hits, try to really listen to what the earth is telling us. What is God trying to tell us? And ask yourself, “How will I carry out the mitvot - ***Bein adam le-olam*** - Between people and the world.”

⁴ Job 12:7