

Parashat Noach 5768

Al Gore has won a nobel peace prize and in part because of his efforts, environmentalism still very much in the news, I want to share a similar thought to what I presented on the second day of Sukkot this year – if you were among the much-smaller-than-this crowd who were there, consider it review!

One of the things I respect most about our long and complicated Jewish tradition is its ability to evolve. An individual Jewish person is encouraged to be flexible like a reed instead of strong like a cedar, because when the winds of change blow, a reed bends but remains planted in its soil, while a cedar will break, effectively ending its existence. So too the Jewish tradition has been compared to this same reed – it remains planted in the soil of law, custom, history, values, etc. – and its swaying to apply the appropriate expression of the Jewish tradition without it breaking or getting swept up in the newest, latest or greatest thing is a critical aspect of Jewish longevity. That and pastrami.

There are certain things that we take for granted as being typically ‘Jewish’ approaches to issues of life and living – a few of them that come to mind: Jews are pro-choice, Jews are pro-Democracy, Jews believe in heaven and hell, Jews are pro-environment, Jews believe in one God – and if you stated all of those as generalizations, you’d be mostly correct. However, except for the last one – monotheism has been a part of Judaism from the very beginning, though many of our ancient ancestors experimented otherwise, just look at the Torah’s accounts of the ways we turned back to idolatry for proof – these statements are not accurate going back not so many years. Jewish tradition as connected to the abortion issue is complex and actually fairly conservative, Jews have been at the forefront of many other political experiments other than democracy, and heaven and hell are pretty recent additions to our lexicon. Simply said, we have absorbed much from the societies in which we have lived, but we have absorbed them through our Jewish values and vision of the world – so even these ideas that never would have entered our vocabulary had we not been inspired to think deeply about them by outside agents have indeed become “Jewish ideas.”

Environmentalism is indeed much in the news and for good reason – the question for the moment is: “Are there any anti-environmental trends in Jewish thought or tradition?” The answer is a clear yes. So why talk about Jewish anti-environmentalism when clearly 99% of Jews would say they are “pro-environment”, whatever that might mean? Two reasons. First, the exception proves the rule. Second, as students of a long and storied tradition, simply cherry-picking the parts we like and ignoring the rest is spiritually and intellectually disingenuous – it drives me nuts when someone tries to make their point – even when I agree with them! – without acknowledging that conflicting and valid viewpoints exist. Our Talmudic tradition is a history of discussion and debate – not of bottom-line Jeopardy-like final answers, and we’re wise to choose to inherit that tradition.

Now – how serious is the anti-environmental Jewish position? What, in the pantheon of Jewish values, would cause us to ever have felt any differently? Some answers are posed

in a wonderful book called The Way Into Judaism and the Environment, published by Jewish Lights and written by Jeremy Benstein. Make no mistake – on the whole the book supports our concern for the environment and backs it up with many statements of support from our texts – but I thought these counter-examples were really interesting and I hope you do too. For the purposes of discussion, I'll give you the “anti” view and you tell me a good “antidote” to it.

First, much of the Torah and especially Deuteronomy is an affirmation of monotheism as opposed to paganism. Paganism was deeply rooted in nature, and contained a worship of the natural world. Once nature ceased to be an object of worship, what was left was just stuff, raw materials awaiting exploitation. (Antidote: While we are not pagans, a kabbalistic approach to Jewish thought is heavily based on the presence of divine sparks in the natural world.)

Second, it is difficult to remember that we have been a people without a land for more years than we have had sovereignty in our land. After two thousand years of exile from the land for which we care most deeply about, it was easy to absorb the value that the lands in which our ancestors live were not ones to which they were intensely, and certainly not spiritually, connected. It wasn't their land – why should they spend time thinking about how to care for it. “The book replaced the world in many senses, becoming a virtual reality that took the place of the real one outside the window.” The Land of Israel was important even though we didn't live there – everywhere else was deemed, in comparison and in reality, insignificant. (Antidote: Even though we lived and live in lands of exile, there are values that transcend the connection to Israel specifically, and Jewish social consciousness, no matter where we are, is in that category.)

Lastly, even the Jewish community that is so concerned with mitzvot ben adam l'chaveiro, between man and his fellow man, understand that energy and time for mitzvot is itself limited. We're busy fulfilling ritual mitzvot between us and God, we're busy with the “familiar acts of tzedakah and gemilut chasadim”, of charity and lovingkindness – and environmentalism, well, where does that fit exactly? It took a low place on what seemed like more immediate priorities. (Antidote: while tzedakah and gemilut chasadim might take up many places on the Jewish to-do list, without an environment in which healthy living is possible, mitzvot that are the expression of man's kindness to his fellow man would be that much more difficult to fulfill.)

Parashat Noach is an excellent time to remind ourselves of our place in the scheme of the natural world, in addition to the way it brings us closer to community and to God. By talking about the ways in which Judaism has evolved through the generations to embrace values which it has not always placed at its center reminds us of a specific strength of our tradition. And by pointing out the ways that elements of our tradition have at times stood in contrast to what is now the prevailing wisdom of the day, we reaffirm our commitment to exploring Judaism in all of its richness, searching out those precedents and values which help us to live in a way that is fully representative of and accountable to the presence of God in our lives and in our world.