

Standing at the Center: Is it God or Us?
Some reflections on healing our planet.
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I want to ask you to take a moment, sit back, close your eyes and call to mind a place that you find truly inspirational. You know, a place that just take your breath away. Do you have that image? I'll wager that you have more than an image. You can probably feel it: your heart pounding a bit faster, a smile crossing your lips, a yearning in your gut to be there.

That place for me is in the Rockies outside of Denver where I grew up. My family used to come together from across the country to vacation outside Estes Park, Colorado, the gateway to Rocky Mountain National Park. I looked forward to these summer trips with great anticipation. My Uncle Chuck and I would spend the week taking progressively longer and more difficult hikes as we worked towards a final goal of scaling one of the higher peaks in the Park. Each hike would take us through forests of tall pines, green valleys filled with beautiful native flowers and grasses and usually end at some amazing, crystal clear mountain lake surrounded by tall snow capped peaks. Then, towards the end of the week came the day to ascend that tall peak. Starting in the pre-dawn darkness, flashlights in hand, we made our way up the lower trail. As we hiked, we always seemed to find the perfect place to stop, have breakfast and watch an amazingly beautiful sunrise. Continuing on I would marvel as each turn brought new sights and wonders. The oxygen became harder to come as we gained elevation. The trees seemed to shrink back towards me, until at about 10,000 feet they disappeared all together. From there, even in the middle of the summer the air was chilly and the wind served as a constant reminder that you didn't want to stop for too long. About this time, my uncle, whom I towered over, would begin to complain that he had already hiked a lot further than me—as he had to take three steps to my two. (Somehow that always seemed to make sense.) Now above timberline, the hike became a scramble over boulders and rough terrain as we made our final push to the top of the mountain. And then, finally, the peak. Exhausted, exhilarated and filled with awe we would stand on what appeared to be the top of the world. From there it seemed you could see all of creation. Every vista was more spectacular. Every way you turned another majestic miracle to try to capture and remember.

These were my first, truly spiritual and awe inspiring experiences, 'shehecheyanu moments, where I was simply grateful for the gift of being in that place at that time. I'm sure you have had such moments as well. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel labeled these experiences as moments of radical amazement. And, as ones created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in God's image, these moments, he taught, demand a response from us. He suggested that *we must consider a way of living our lives that is compatible with our experience of the grandeur and mystery of creation.*

My first such consideration occurred on the top of one of those mountains in the summer between my freshman and sophomore years of college. That summer, I worked on a new home construction site. My first day on the job, I had been introduced to the developer: a

man who was a major force in Denver at the time, responsible for several new communities sprouting up in the foothills on the western edge of the metropolitan area. He had taken me into his office and shown me scale models and blueprints for the various homes and communities that he was constructing. He then shared with me his grand vision, the belief system that was the foundation of his work and passion for building homes. If “This I believe, I believe that this planet was put here for us.” He then shared with me his great messianic vision of a world completely divided into parcels, each inhabitant living in their own home, presumably built by this man.

Standing on top of the mountain later that summer I looked down, far below, on the tourist packed town of Estes Park and that conversation reverberated in my head. An image flashed through my mind of our planet, divided up into little graph paper like squares; each one waiting for someone to come and claim it. I could hear Joni Mitchell singing, “They paved paradise, put up a parking lot, with a pink hotel, a boutique and a swinging hot spot.”

Around that time the historian Arnold Toynbee and many environmentalists in his camp had been asserting that the vision of my housing developer boss and that little town of Estes Park clogging up the entrance to my beloved Rocky Mountain National Park and other environmental hazards were the direct result of the humanity centered focus of the Bible, as exemplified by the story of creation we have read this morning. The bible was responsible for humanity’s callous exploitation of nature.

As I experienced the radical amazement of that mountain top moment, I wondered, “Was Toynbee right?”

Well, based upon the text we have read this morning, one could certainly make that argument.

28. And God blessed them, and God said to them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.

Fill it. Subdue it. Have dominion over it. And today on *Yom Harat Haolam*, the birthday of the world, we celebrate that moment when humanity was brought into being. It does, indeed, seem from what the Torah teaches us that it is all about us!

Well, not quite. This is Judaism we are talking about, after all. And where there is one opinion certainly there must be another, right? Sure enough, just a bit further on we come upon a second story of creation with a very different perspective. We read: “And the Eternal took the Adam, and put him into the garden of Eden to till it and to tend it.” (Genesis 2:15)

לְעִבְדָּהּ וּלְשָׂמְרָהּ “to till it and to tend it”

Very different from fill, subdue and dominate. To till and tend suggests kinship with creation. Rabbi Saul Berman teaches us that “[t]his becomes even clearer if we look at the Hebrew more closely. The word *Avad* means not only to till, but also, and more powerfully, to serve, in worship of the Divine. Thus, our “tilling” is more properly understood as service to God's Earth, a service that is not only a profound responsibility but a direct and critical part of our connection with and worship of God as well.

Shamar, or “tend,” means, more commonly, to guard or to watch over.

And so, in a very real sense, this story of creation notes that Adam was the first member of the LAPD because we can read this verse as, “And the Eternal took Adam and put him into the garden of Eden to *serve and protect it*.”

Here rather than domination, we have a notion of stewardship, “one that speaks of responsibility rather than of unlimited privilege. As God's stewards we find ourselves in a God-centered rather than human-centered creation

So, which is it? Is it all about us (fill, subdue and dominate) –or all about God (serve and protect)? The weight of our tradition, not surprisingly, tips heavily in favor of God. And while the answer is obvious and seemingly simplistic, the implications are most profound. You see, radical amazement is only possible when it is all about God. Placing God at the center, Rabbi Heschel taught, enables us to see the sacred in everything. The natural world becomes a source of wonder and not only a resource for our use and abuse.

The alternative has led us to the place in which we find ourselves today. When it is all about us, we create a civilization where, Heschel warned “the sense of wonder declines, and [we] will [perish] *not ... for want of information; but ... for want of appreciation*.” Simply put, our mothers were right all along, our ultimate downfall begins with our inability to say “thank you.”

“What way of living is compatible with the grandeur and mystery of creation?” A way of living that begins with expressing gratitude for the gifts of this earth. For our ancient ancestors, who worked the soil and depended upon the weather in the appropriate seasons, the language of appreciation and radical amazement in their encounter of creation came naturally. “Their lives were bound up with the richness of the land..That is why they tended the land so lovingly, that is why the cycles of their celebrations followed the seasons of the land.” (Rabbi Daniel Swartz)

Their loving regard for the earth was memorialized in the Torah, where we are instructed in minute detail concerning the care and well being of crops and livestock. The dietary laws of *kashrut* express similar respect. Agricultural laws and rules for how trees may be used in warfare recognize a great sensitivity and concern for the environment, as do our festivals and celebrations. Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot have ancient agricultural and environmental connections. The sabbatical year was ordained not to give *us* a rest, but rather, the *earth*, that it might be replenished and refreshed from six years of hard labor. The rules of sacrifice, so foreign to us today, were, in many instances concerned with expressing gratitude for that we had received from God's creation. For millennia each

morning and evening worship service has begun with a prayer offering thanks and blessing for the gift of creation. And, that we might not take for granted any part of the world around us, the rabbis created an impressive collection of blessings that we were obligated to recite upon experiencing any of nature's miracles. "Through these," we are taught, "the experience of the natural world, as well as interactions between people and nature, became sanctified. Not only the tasting of foods, but the fragrance of blossoms, the sight of mountains, the sound of thunder were to be blessed. .Such blessings showed that God was author of the wonders of nature.

And then there is Shabbat. We can say what we want about the craziness of all the rules and limitations of the traditional observance of Shabbat. But one can not question the 'greenness' of its observance. In asking us, once a week, to refrain for all manner of work, to simply appreciate and celebrate creation rather than using and manipulating it for our own means, Shabbat creates an opportunity for reconnection to our world. Shabbat is a uniquely Jewish response to the grandeur and mystery of creation; and of our responsibilities for preserving the world and its delicate ecosystems.

All of this was boiled down to a basic Jewish virtue of *ba'al tashchit*, that is, the Jewish responsibility to protect God's creation. Indeed, from its very beginning Judaism has been a green faith.

We find ourselves at a critical point in our global history. Not a day goes by that we don't hear serious concerns about our effect on the environment, global warming, consumption of fossil fuels, an enormous floating waste dump in the middle of the Pacific ocean, melting ice caps, extended droughts, powerful hurricanes, even the disappearance of bee colonies (identified most recently, by the way as Israeli acute paralysis virus—of all things). We have indeed, at our own peril, placed ourselves at the center and given ourselves permission to fill, subdue and take dominion over the earth and all that is in it.

Two millennia ago our sages taught that, "When God created the first human beings, God led them around the Garden of Eden and 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."

In this regard let me be the first, to say, "*chatati*," "I have sinned." I recently took an online inventory in order to evaluate my carbon footprint, only to discover that if everyone lived as I do, it would take 5.1 earths to sustain us.

What can we do? I am proud to say that we, as a community have already begun the process of trying to 'green up' TAS. We have replaced many of our lights with compact fluorescent bulbs, we have moved to electronic communications as a way of reducing our use of paper and we have recycling bins all over our site. This is just a beginning.

There are many actions we can take, but probably the most important thing we can do, on this birthday of the world, is to reignite a sense of radical amazement about our world. We could go along way towards beginning to heal many of the ills of our planet if we just

learned to say, *Baruch atah Adonai*, thank you God. How hard is that? That simple act, in response to the grandeur and majesty of creation, would begin to awaken in us a sense of responsibility for this miraculous world in which we live. These three simple words are magical. They awaken within us a sense of radical amazement by making us stop and pay attention to those things that we might otherwise take for granted. Try saying *Baruch atah Adonai* and then throwing trash out the window of your car. You can't. Try saying *Baruch atah Adonai* and then dumping toxics down the sewer. You can't. Let us commit ourselves to reawakening the sense of radical amazement for the day to day miracles of our lives. Hiking to the top of a majestic peak, sitting on pristine beach, catching the best wave are all moments of blessing. But we can find them closer to home as well yes, even in the wilds of Northridge, California. All we need do is open our eyes and hearts to the splendor and majesty of creation that surrounds us.

We can begin right now with a call to radical amazement. Repeat after me:

Ba-ruch a-tah A-do-nai E-lo-hei-nu Me-lech Ha-o-lam, o-seh ma-a-sei v'rei-shit.

Thank You, *Adonai*, our God, Ruler of the Universe,
for the grandeur and majesty of Creation.