

## D'var

Genesis 1:1-6:8

When I was writing this, the first thing David told me *not* to do was summarize the parsha. And so of course, I wrote a d'var where that was required from the start. Basically, God takes six days to create all of creation, the oceans, the mountains, the sun, the moon, the stars, animals, plants, everything. And then he creates Adam and Eve, plopping them naked into a beautiful garden, tempting them only with the fruit of a forbidden tree. When Eve eats the fruit of that tree, she is banished from the garden with the gates clanging shut behind her. Eve, the mother of mankind, was made to wander in the wilderness and earn her bread by the sweat of her brow. In order to eat, she was required to subdue the wilderness into which she was cast, a tradition that continued for many generations.

But this is not the only origin story of a woman and her garden. In Indigenous Potawatomi tradition, the world began when Skywoman fell from the heavens and onto the full formed Earth below. The geese caught her, suspending her above the dark waters. But they knew they could not hold her alone, so they called on the other water animals who, one by one, dove to the bottom of the ocean to pick up the mud that would one day form Turtle Island. Like any good guest, Skywoman had not come empty-handed. When she toppled down, she brought with her the Tree of Life, scattering fruits and seeds of all kind across the land. Wild grasses, flowers, trees, and medicines spread everywhere, as the animals came to live with her on what we know as Earth.

Both of these stories are the fundamental tenets of their respective religious traditions. But beyond that, the similarities between these two stories end as soon as they begin. In one, there is the story of a people whose relationship with the living world was shaped by Skywoman, who created a garden for the well-being of all. In the other, the garden is shut off. As Professor Robin Wall Kimmerer writes in *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teaching of Plants*, “One story leads to the generous embrace of the living world, the other to banishment.”

I think it can be easy to say, “so what.” The science is clear, evolution is real, and at least I feel very confident in my knowledge of how the world was created. And, to be frank, I know we’re living far from the world of Eden or the stewardship of Turtle Island. We’re on a planet driving towards unprecedented rates of global warming, mass extinction, intense natural disasters, and food insecurity that serves only to exacerbate the existing divides between us. If we continue on our current path, we will have 140 million climate refugees by 2050, over a hundred times that of the Syrian refugee crisis. 150 million more people will die from air pollution alone, a number that can be hard to grasp, but equivalent to twenty-five Holocausts. Much of the Global South will live in permanent drought as wildfires burn and water is undrinkable. Imagery once confined to the pages of science fiction is becoming very real.

And so what is the role of religion in all of this? Although we may each hold different cosmologies, or even not think about the story of Genesis on the daily, we are inevitably shaped by their them, no matter how distant they are from our everyday consciousness. And thus far, our origin story hasn’t taught us very much about how to live in right relationship with the Earth. Joanna Macy, a Buddhist scholar and author of *Spiritual Ecology*, writes “Revitalizing the soul of the world depends on a conscious, engaged relationship between human beings and Earth.” In a time where science provides a what, religion can provide a how and a why, even if we have to grapple with it a bit to get there.

Looking once more to B'reishit, there is a clear and early call for responsibility towards the Earth. The Torah says, "And God took us and put us in the Garden of Eden, to tend it and guard it." Clearly, that responsibility became quite fraught upon leaving the garden, but the sentiment has always been the same: as Jews, we are called into responsibility for our shared home. Yet the words "tend" and "guard" don't provide many guidelines for the ways in which we engage with our natural environment. For some of us, to tend might mean to cultivate, and for others, to subdue. Does guard simply mean to conserve the land for the sake of its own beauty? Or does it mean to protect for our own use?

In Deuteronomy, we begin to get some answers to this question of engagement. We are told that in times of war, we cannot cut down the trees of a captured city. We may consume the fruit of the trees, and only if one is unable to bear fruit may we take an ax to it. *Bal tashchit*, you may not wantonly destroy, a mitzvah that lies at the heart of our obligation. But we live in a country whose existence is predicated upon the arrival of outsiders to a strange land who did more than simply consume the fruit of the trees. And now we live in a time of intense metabolic rift, a fissure in the interdependent process of social metabolism. Ecological crisis is thriving under a relationship with nature where degradation and subsequent repair is the norm, not the exception. Extractive projects and strip mining continue throughout our state despite the lack of coal in our mountains so long as afterwards, the ravished landscape is seeded with grass once more. Nowhere in Torah does it say "you shall destroy so long as you rebuild as best possible." So while, upon first glance, *bal tashchit* appears to be the bare minimum, we have utterly failed in our ability to embody it, finding justification at every corner and hurting communities across the world in the process. In doing so, we have not simply split open our surrounding landscape and destroyed our waterways, but we have lost in ourselves a capacity for love.

Even at in its simplest commandments of "tending," "guarding," and "not destroying," Torah calls us into a righteous existence where we rejoice in the harmony of the world, knowing that it is not simply the prevention of loss that brings peace but the shepherding of justice and love. Reiner Maria Rilke wrote in his letters to a young soldier that, "As bees gather honey, so do we reap the sweetness from everything and build God." So no matter what our conception of God or Torah or any other cosmology, let us find the courage to meet our responsibility to rebuild the divinity of our shared home.

But the question remains: what can we really do? I could talk about courage and responsibility all day, but the reality is that simply being cognizant of our own courage and responsibility will not be enough to meet our dramatic planetary timeline. Once we've begun to the process of healing our society to care for the soul of the world and experiencing nature to revitalize our collective capacity for empathy, what next? Before Rosh Hashanah, we were reminded *arevim*, that we are responsible for each other. Right now, that responsibility means looking beyond "not destroying." Joanna Macy says, "Of all the dangers we face, from climate change to nuclear war, none is so great as the deadening of our response." And for too long, our response has been silence, or complacency, or compartmentalization. Climate change is not just about science, it's about the underlying systems of our society. Confronting them must be tantamount in our response.

For decades we knew that climate change, caused by the burning of oil, coal, and natural gas, was a serious threat that could endanger the lives of billions if nothing was done. But instead of action, energy executives paid out politicians to maintain their own wealth as global warming steadily increased. Disinformation spread across radio waves and into school classrooms as solutions waned and promises of colonies on Mars or market fixes prevailed.

But, there is a world to rebuild if we only have the courage to see it. This is a world where communities in the Gulf South and California and Appalachia don't have to fend for themselves in times of hurricane, fire, and flood. It's a world where wealth inequality is not skyrocketing, working multiple jobs is not the norm necessary for survival, and access to prosperity is a prerequisite. It's a Kentucky where health care

and education are treated as human rights, a Kentucky working actively to combat anti-Semitism, homophobia, and racism. This moment of great crisis is pregnant with opportunity. Only together will we ensure that our water and air are clean once again and that the places we call home are here to stay. This is what it means to “tend” and “guard” in this new year.

So where does this leave us? With recycling and organic food, yes, but with an obligation for much more. As Jews and as citizens of the Global North, it is not enough for us to just think about climate change or hold a global perspective. We must actively engage with our friends, neighbors, and even family members about our beliefs, bringing them into a shared vision of society. We must consider the implications of climate and justice when donate money or show up to the ballot box. This is my generation’s New Deal, Great Society, moon shot, Civil Rights Movement.

And so, in the week after Simchat Torah and the start of a new cycle, let us not be protectors of the status quo and remain asleep to the immense tides of social change. Let us have the strength to see, to act, and to take responsibility for each other and our home. Each day may we reap the sweetness of rebuilding our shared garden. May this be our blessing, and let us say, Amen.