THE LAND DOES NOT BELONG TO YOU, YOU BELONG TO IT
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz – Temple Sholom
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Two farmers were fighting over who owned a section of a field. One farmer said, this land belongs to me, see I have planted it, watered it and cultivated it – it belongs to me. The other farmer, holding a deed in his hand with a map and a line running through the spot of land they were arguing over said. See this document and this map, it says right here in black and white this part of the land belongs to me. I have paid for it, signed for it and documented it – it belongs to me.

They went to the rabbi and explained their predicament. The rabbi said lets go out to the field and have a look. So they walked out to the field, each man filling the rabbi's ears with further argument as to why they were in the right, why the land belonged to him.

Arriving at the field the rabbi looked around, took in its natural beauty, the men continued to make their case. It belongs to me, it belongs to me.

The rabbi listened but could not come to a decision because both seemed to be right. Finally he said, "Since I cannot decide to whom this land belongs, let us ask the land." The Rabbi got down on his hands and knees he put his ear to the ground and listened. After a moment he straightened up and said, "Gentlemen, the land says that it belongs to neither of you – but that you belong to it."

It's a Jewish story, not only because of the rabbi.

It's a Jewish story because it is the essence of the Jewish view of environmentalism and *ba'al tashit* – our responsibility to care for the earth.

It's a Jewish story because this week's parasha - B'har-Behukotai which speaks of the sabbatical year and allowing the land to lay fallow every 7th year expresses the same sentiment as our land whispering rabbi when quoting God it states, "The land is Mine; you are but strangers residing with me." (Lev 25:23)

Sometimes the Torah - written so long ago - speaks in a language that seems distant and arcane, irrelevant to modern life and our present condition. This is not one of those times, though the laws of agriculture and land management do seem far removed from our modern urban existence – the message of the ancient text is as relevant today as it was then, perhaps moreso.

In its first verses God commands the Jewish people a law for all time. Just as six days a week we should labour and on the seventh day we should observe a Sabbath of rest and renewal, so too the land. For six years we can plant and harvest and work the land but in the seventh year we must let it lay fallow, gleaning only what it

naturally produces, by giving it one year out of seven to rest and renew, just as we take one day out of seven to do the same. We not only honour the land, but as with Shabbat we show respect for God and the covenant with the Jewish people.

The analogy is clear – and we know it in our own lives. If you go a full week without a day off to rest and recover you are diminished for the week ahead, do this one or two weeks in a row and you are not only worn out but cranky, inefficient and unproductive. Well I don't want to speak for you, I am those things when I don't get a day off - maybe you're not.

But of course the same is true of the land and our natural resources.

The wisdom of our Torah portion is that it doesn't only make this argument on the basis of good land management practices. This mitzvah is commanded not as a way to get bigger cucumbers, but as a way to serve God.

By affirming that the land belongs to God and that we are just visiting - how we treat the land is a direct reflection of how we feel and care about its owner. Like any visitor to a house the way you care for their precious things is a reflection of how much you care about them.

Thus, and this for me is the most powerful paradigm shift provided by this ancient and seemingly irrelevant text: **when you care for the land you are caring for God. Environmentalism is Judaism, its a form of Jewish worship; it's a form of prayer.**

Maybe you come to synagogue because the traditional melodies transport you?

Perhaps you come to shul compelled by the rubrics of prayer, the obligation to recite certain words at certain times in a certain order?

Perhaps you come to shul to hear the story of our people through the Torah find in those ancient stories modern wisdom?

Those are valid reasons but they may also be what keeps some people away from shul; too much prayer, too much God, too much Hebrew and chanting.

This teaching offers another sanctuary where you can encounter the divine. It's right outside these windows.

The child of a certain rabbi used to wander in the woods. At first his father let him wander, but over time he became concerned. The woods were dangerous. The father did not know what lurked there.

He decided to discuss the matter with his child. One day he took him aside and said, "You know, I have noticed that each day you walk into the woods. I wonder, why you go there?" The boy said to is father, " I go there to find God."

"That is a very good thing," the father replied gently. " I am glad you are searching for God. But, my child, don't you know that God is the same everywhere?"

"Yes," the boy answered, **"but I'm not."**

Our Torah tells us that to care for the earth is as much a prayer (and maybe moreso) than to say the *shema* and the *vahavtah*. Through prayer we **tell** God how we feel about our relationship, but through deeds, through care for God's natural world, plants, animals and people we **show** God how we feel.

We just celebrated Mother's Day, we know the exponential power of deeds as compared to words.

Why am I talking about the environment tonight? Beyond this week's Torah portion, which is just one of many times the Torah emphasizes our responsibility for the earth.

I'm talking about the environment tonight because – we are not talking about it enough, or seriously enough in our community. Not here at Temple Sholom, in Vancouver or around the globe.

The Baal Shem Tov wrote: "The world is full of wonders, special radiance, and marvelous secrets, but all it takes is a small hand held over the eye to hide it all." We are holding our hands over our eyes and not seeing.

Yes our mountains are beautiful, and our rivers flow freely, the sun shines brightly. But look closely, see them as they are not as you remember them to be.
The mountains were supposed to have snow on them in the winter, the rivers are meant to run much faster and fuller in the spring, and while I appreciate the mild winter, clear blue skies and warm sun we enjoyed in Feb, March and still today – this is Vancouver, the Northwest – its supposed to be raining.

I've learned we talk about the weather a lot in Vancouver – we should talk about it more when there is an absence of weather. If its not raining here something is wrong; canary in the coal mine perhaps?

This past week I was asked by two separate groups to sign on to letters of petition and redress to national and global leaders urging them to take climate change seriously before it's too late to restore the land to what it once was and should be again.

GrandparentsACT a group of concerned British Columbian Grandparents, led by our own Cornelia Oberlander and Barrie Macfadden worry about the impact of climate change on the futures of their grandchildren. Fearing that the comforts and opportunities their generation has enjoyed will not be available to their (our) grandchildren. They ask simply:

"As elders in our society, we, the undersigned, present this petition. Its message is simple. We are worried about our grandchildren. We want immediate, effective action to reduce Canada's greenhouse gas emissions. We encourage grandparents everywhere to speak up for their grandchildren, and to vote for politicians committed to making Canada a leader in the struggle to limit global climate change."

Similarly a Rabbinic Letter on the Climate Crisis has been circulated across the Jewish rabbinic world in conjunction with Pope Francis' encyclical about the Climate Crisis. It reads in part, quoting from this week's Torah portion:

"The texts of Torah instruct that one year of every seven is to be Shabbat Shabbaton – a Sabbatical Year – and Shmittah – a Year of restful Release for the Earth and its workers from being made to work, and of Release for debtors from their debts."

"The Torah warns us" – the letter continues, "that if we refuse to let the Earth rest, it will "rest" anyway, despite us and upon us – through drought and famine and exile that turn an entire people into refugees."

That sounds all too prescient to me. Record temperatures, historic draughts – it is possible that we have abused the land and as the Torah admonishes it's responding in kind? I think it is.

The letter concludes with a call for Jews to assemble and act for Climate Change:

"Our ancient earthy wisdom taught that social justice, sustainable abundance, a healthy Earth, and spiritual fulfillment are inseparable. Today we must hear that teaching in a world-wide context, drawing upon our unaccustomed ability to help shape public policy in a great nation. We call upon the Jewish people to meet God's challenge once again."

Like the prophets of old these are just words, they are powerful and inspiring but they are meaningless if they don't lead to action.

Why am I talking about Climate Change tonight? Because its time to stop talking and start doing. Our rabbis teach every person must say the entire world was created for me. If the world was created for me, it follows that I must always examine how I can rectify the world and fulfill its needs.

That is the question we must answer; what can we do, what can you do, what can you get others to do with you? Our answer will become our prayers, prayers more

powerful and honestly more important and desired by God than all the prayers in this book. We show our acceptance of Torah, our love for God and appreciation of the world around us by caring for it. Not simply words, but sacred and holy actions and deeds.

Moses stood on the shores of the parted sea, the Egyptian army closing in on him, and the Israelites wouldn't go in to the parted waters. Moses prayed to God and God yelled at Moses. "What are you crying to me for, you're there get them moving."

We are guests in a house who have broken something precious belonging to its owner. To time for saying sorry has passed; we must fix it. The land does not belong to us, we belong to it, and it is demanding an accounting for our actions. Whatever we are doing – we must do more, we must do better.