Tu B’Shvat 5777 FINAL

Shabbat Shalom!

Today’s Torah portion is Beshalach. As our story picks up, we find that we have finally been thrust out of Egypt and into the wilderness, where Pharaoh’s army is consumed once and for all by the sea. Safe from pursuit, we find ourselves at the beginning of our long journey, a journey into the Promised Land.

Today is also Tu B’Shvat, the New Year of Trees. Tu B’Shvat is from another time in Jewish history, a time long after the Exodus, perhaps? -- a time when the people of our story are settled deeply in the Land. They are Tu B’Shvat observers - They scrupulously tithe the produce of their land, including the fruit from their trees, according to the laws in Torah. These settled ones embody their ***relationship*** with God through their adherence to the mitzvot, including those that apply to the produce of the land. For them, Tu B’Shvat is a date that enables them to distinguish the fruit of one year from the next, so that each year, the correct tithes can be collected, tithes which support the poor and the landless, which bring people together in the Holy City to celebrate with food in joyful company with one another, and which maintain the Temple cult, which is the locus of connection between the people and the Divine source of all abundance.

Today I want to tell a new story about the meaning of “leaving Egypt.” This story comes by way of Dr. Jeremy Benstein, founder and Director of the Heschel Center for Sustainability in Tel Aviv.

The story in today’s Torah portion has the Hebrews departing from Egypt, beginning a long journey through the wilderness, en route to the Promised Land. Let’s ask: What is the meaning of “Egypt,” here, and what is the meaning of the “Promised Land”? What does Egypt represent in terms of the relationship between human beings and the land - or the Earth?

The story of the Israel’s descent into Egypt begins with Pharaoh’s dream of the seven years of abundance followed by seven years of drought. In this story, after seven years of extraordinary plenty, the land experiences a total collapse of productivity leading to devastating famine. At first the Egyptians are able to use their wealth to buy back the grain they produced, which has been amassed by Pharaoh; as the famine wears on, their wealth is exhausted, and are in turn must sell their livestock, including their draught animals which they use to plow their fields, for food. Finally, the people of Egypt are forced into complete subjugation, selling themselves and their land to Pharaoh for bread.

Pharaoh, aided Joseph, made a choice. He could have provided affordable relief aid to his starving people. But instead he used the **productivity of the land** to exploit, debase, and enslave them.

Jeremy Benstein calls this model of using the productivity of the Earth for exploitation “the anti-model which Torah’s vision is meant to negate.” And the path to negating it leads through the wilderness, straight through today’s parsha.

For how does God begin to condition a complete paradigm shift among people who have only known scarcity, slavery and exploitation? People who have, day in and day out, been occupied with amassing a minimum quantity of straw with which to make the endless supply of bricks needed for Pharaoh to contain the wealth he has amassed and needs to hoard from his enslaved people?

The answer is, through manna. Through manna, God begins to teach the people that food is a gift from God. Manna cannot be amassed or hoarded, or it will turn to maggots. The quantity is always sufficient just for each person to meet his or her needs, and indeed there is enough for a double portion once every seven days, so the people are able to enjoy a day of rest.

Throughout their wanderings in the wilderness, manna, and the lessons that it taught, about food as a gift, about not amassing it or needing to form a market around its bounty, and most importantly about the idea of ***sufficiency***, accompanied them. Manna accompanied them every step of the journey, until they entered the Promised Land, and as the Book of Joshua tells us, “On that same day that they ate of the produce of the Land, the manna ceased. The Israelites got no more manna; that year they ate of the yield of the land of Canaan.” (Joshua 5:12)

Let me say one last word about manna and sufficiency, for you Indiana Jones types out there. In today’s parsha we also learn that if one day you find the Ark of the Covenant, and open in, inside it you will find, along with the tablets of the law, a carefully sealed jar of manna, so important was it, apparently, for God to teach us what an “omer” of manna looks like, the basic unit of human sufficiency. An important lesson, perhaps, for our time, in which we have a well-formed idea of what constitutes poverty, but no corresponding concept of “enough.”

So we have crossed the wilderness and along the way, been schooled in the idea of food as a gift from God, and in understanding of the difference between needs and wants. Notice, next, that when we enter the Promised Land, we are commanded to do so as gatherers. “When you enter the land that I assign to you, the land shall observe a Sabbath of the Lord.” (This is a Shmita year.) (Lev. 25:2) Immediately upon entering the land, there is to be no agriculture, produce may not be stockpiled, there is to be no market for food, there are to be no fences, no privately held food beyond what a person needs, and of course, no debts.

Only after being conditioned by the experience of eating manna in the wilderness are the people ready to enter the Promised Land. This is a people that has been transformed. ***Egypt***, and the exploitation it represents, is completely erased. Each person begins their new life debt free, and in a “gift” relationship with the Promised Land. We are thrust into a relationship with the Land of vulnerable “gatherers,” and enjoined to return to that relationship for one out of every seven years for all time, as a condition for remaining on the Land we have been given.

At this point in my story, I am going to introduce a contrasting voice - I have become fascinated with the project of listening to our tradition as it resonates in sympathy with the voice of Indigenous North Americans, in describing their relationship with the Land from which they have been only incompletely severed.

My guide in understanding that voice is Robin Wall Kimmerer, a Native American woman and a distinguished professor of botany, who wrote a beautiful and profound book called *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*.

Here’s the story - I have had the privilege of studying Mishna with Rabbi Adam Rubin for the past two years. We have been reading Mishna Zera’im, which, since its title suggests it is about **“seeds,”** I thought might contain some early teachings about Jews and the land. Rabbi Rubin and I skipped the first tractate, which is Brachot, which seemed to have little to do with the land, and dove right into Peah, and Leket, which expound on the laws found in Torah: “And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not wholly reap the corner (pe’ah) of your field, neither shall you gather the gleaning (leket) of your harvest.” (Lev 19:9-10) And “When you reap the harvest of your field, and have forgotten (ve-shakhahta) a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back and fetch it; it shall be for the stranger, for the fatherless, and for the widow.” (Deut 24:19)

I admit it - I began this study of Mishna with an agenda, to listen for a particular voice. And at first I did not hear the voice I was listening for. The Mishna clearly cares deeply that the produce of the Earth be distributed to ensure that the vulnerable do not go hungry, and the scrupulous attention to the collection of tithes for the support of the both the poor and Temple cult became evident in our study of Tractate Damai. It was clearly not to be used to exploit the vulnerable! Rather they were to be given access to the land to sustain themselves for all time.

But it was not until I began reading ***Braiding Sweetgrass*** that a different voice began to speak to me from within both Mishna and Torah.

The essence of Kimmerer’s point of view is that we are in a real and embodied relationship with the more than human world, and that this relationship has the potential to be reciprocal, loving, and **mutually beneficial**. I believe that Judaism also grows out of that realization, and that when we look for it, we can find in Torah echoes of the fundamental rules that have for millennia governed the Indigenous person’s behavior with regard to relationship and reciprocity with the Earth.

I have been using Kimmerer’s story about “Being Indigenous,” to help me understand what instruction Torah might be offering us in “Become Indigenous,” to our world here and now, before it is too late, and in repairing our relationship with the Earth and with God.

There are many concrete examples in her book of specific practices of Indigenous People which cultivate the emotional awareness that conditions the higher level behaviors of people towards the Earth and its inhabitants. Crucially, Native People regard the non-human inhabitants of the world as **beings** who possess their own intelligence and purpose. Native Americans greet these beings by name, introduce themselves, and consider themselves all as one family. They call them “Thou,” if you will (to inject a little Buber here.) Does Judaism do this, or even allow it? While we certainly channel all of our worship toward God, it is impossible to read through the book of Psalms, take for example Psalm 148, without coming away with a sense that every element of the universe is surely alive and resonating with love and praise for its Creator.

A cornerstone of this respectful relationship is certainly the expression of gratitude. The very expression of gratitude, in human relationships, rekindles the urge of the giver to give. The gratitude of the lips and the heart is without a doubt embedded in the Jewish spirit. Those Brachot which Rabbi Rubin and I skipped over are precisely that.

Gratitude of the lips is important, but it is not enough. In the Indigenous mindset, gratitude blossoms into reciprocity and an exchange of gifts of love between the Indigenous person and the more than human world. A community of gatherers, they follow some simple rules, “do not take the first or the last.” “Take only what you need.” “Leave some for others.” “Never take more than half.” “Use what you take respectfully, never waste.” They even leave return gifts in exchange for what they take - maybe a pinch of tobacco, for example.

Here was where I began to hear the strings of Torah beginning to vibrate.

Kimmerer had written, “Cautionary stories of the consequences of taking too much are ubiquitous in Native cultures, but it’s hard to recall a single one in English. Perhaps this helps to explain why we seem to be caught in a trap of overconsumption, which is as destructive to ourselves as to those we consume.”

What was it that began resonating here? Peah, Leket and Shikikaha, these laws all place limits on what we may take from the field for our own purposes or use. In some ways they are decidedly different from the laws that apply to gatherers: our laws apply specifically to an agricultural society, with plowed fields, but even so to my ear they contain resonances of an ethic of restraint, of leaving for others, which may have originated prior to agriculture, and while Torah designates that these gifts are for the poor and the vulnerable, the truth is, left out in the field, they are also available to the wildlife, to birds and insects. And we know that God is not indifferent to those beings.

We know that for one year out of every seven, agriculture was abandoned by our ancestors; this is what the Shmita year required. One year out of every seven the Jews were commanded to live precisely as gatherers. And in the laws describing Shmita, the animals, both the wildlife and the domestic animals, are mentioned as entitled to the unfenced produce of the Earth, along with the poor and the vulnerable.

Perhaps the purpose of Shmita year, in addition to its stated purpose of letting the land rest and observe a Sabbath of the Lord, is to continually refresh and recondition us people to these laws of restraint, known best to gatherers, which perpetually reinforce that the productivity of the Earth is not to be exploited in itself, lest it cease to be productive, nor to be used to exploit the vulnerable.

Perhaps with continued attention to these laws, it is still possible for us to learn how to become Indigenous. Perhaps this lesson of how we are to “enter the Promised Land” is both very old, and also very new to us, and perhaps we are only just beginning to hear these resonances as the whole Earth begins to speak to us of its need.

Perhaps this is the great challenge of our time. We know how to colonize a landscape and to exploit it. But can we learn to enter into a loving and mutually beneficial relationship with it?

What would this require? Kimmerer’s people are asking the same thing. Having been severed from their landscape, having lost many of their teachings, Indigenous people are also returning to their traditional sources of wisdom to help them reestablish this bond.

What is needed now is that we should enter into an age of Reciprocity, in which we give, and give, and give some more back to the Earth from which we have taken so much for so long. It is no longer enough to express gratitude with our words alone. It is time for us to gather up our sacred teachings, unroll the portable homeland of our Torah scrolls once and for all across the wounded landscape, wherever that landscape may be, and enter with whole hearts into the age of Restoration.

We must do this with our hands, and with our stories.

Naturalist E.O. Wilson writes, “There can be no purpose more inspiring than to bring the age of restoration, reweaving the wondrous diversity of life that still surrounds us.” Joanna Macy speaks of the Great Turning, the “essential adventure of our time; the shift from the Industrial Growth Society to a life sustaining civilization.” “Action on behalf of life transforms. Because the relationship between the self and the world is reciprocal, it is not a question of first getting enlightened or saved and then acting. As we work to heal the earth, the earth heals us.”

Our second task is to write the stories of our time. Kimmerer writes, to us, “As the world changes, an immigrant culture must write its own new stories of relationship to place, but tempered by the wisdom of those who were old on this land long before we came.” She cautions against leaving the task of guiding and shaping our relationship to the Earth to science, against “the scientific worldview, the illusion of dominance and control, the separation of knowledge from responsibility.” “I dream,” she says, “of a world guided by a lens of stories rooted in the revelations of science and framed with an indigenous worldview - stories in which matter and spirit are both given voice.”

I’d like to conclude with a Mishna about a tree, not from Zera’im, but from Pirkei Avot.

Rabbi Ya’akov says: One, who while walking along the way, reviewing his Torah studies, breaks off from his study and says, “How beautiful is that tree! How beautiful is that plowed field!” Scripture regards him as if he has forfeited his soul. (Pirkei Avot 3:7)

How can we reconcile the Judaism which this Mishna seems to reflect, a Judaism which appears to reject an appreciation for nature in favor of Torah study, with a Judaism that teaches us to deepen our connection to God through our relationship with the living landscape?

Turning again to Dr. Jeremy Benstein, “traditional Jewish teaching has focused on mitzvot bein adam l-chavero, the (ethical) commandments concerning our duties to our fellow human beings, and *mitzvot bein adam le-Makom*, the (primarily ritual) commandments which help express our relationship to God.

What is needed today is a new, third category: *mitzvot bein adam le-olamo*, the mitzvot, and the concomitant sense of commandedness, which can inform and define our place in the World, and our responsibility to it.”

In interpreting our Mishna, Benstein reveals a Zionist approach to the text which has remained as *torah she-be’al peh*, an oral teaching that has defied all efforts to trace it to a written source. He writes that the force of our Mishna hinges on the words “break off” - on the idea of a breaking off of Torah study in order to experience Nature. … As Jews, whether in the Diaspora or in the Land of Israel, we cannot mafsik mi-mishnato, turn our backs on the texts, or cease to define ourselves in terms of them; an exclusively nature-based identity is not a Jewish identity. But neither can we afford any longer to accept the dichotomizing of the world and of our own souls.”

So please join me! Take up the study of Torah and the Earth, but make sure to do it outdoors, where you will surely encounter that beautiful tree. And make the practice of mitzvot bein adam l’olamo an integral part of your practice of Judaism.

And what better day to start than today, on Tu B’Shvat? Join us after lunch for some practical wisdom and guidance on the why and how of care of the forests of the Pacific Northwest with our guest, Jan Keller. And tomorrow, join us at Magnuson Park at 2 PM to plant actual trees. And of course, join the wonderful group of Beth Shalomniks and friends, called Ahavah v’Avodah HaAdamah, (Love and Service of the Earth), which is our growing Earth Care group.

For it is surely true that the person who walks by the way, engaged in Torah thoughts, and who mimshikh be-mishnato, “continues that study,” seeing in the beautiful (cultivated fruit) tree, and the plowed field, an embodiment of God’s love for us, and feels called upon to return the favor - that will be a great tikkun - a tikkun ha’olam, of the world, and of ourselves.

Shabbat Shalom.

References:

Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants by Robin Wall Kimmerer (Milkweed Editions)

For Seven’s Sake - A Sabbatical Epic by Dr. Jeremy Benstein (The Heschel Center and linked from this blog under “Articles”)

The Way Into Judaism and the Environment by Jeremy Benstein, Ph.D. (Jewish Lights Publishing)

Torah of the Earth: Exploring 4,000 Years of Ecology in Jewish Thought Vol. 1, ed. Arthur Waskow (Nature vs. Torah by Jeremy Benstein) (Jewish Lights)