Deirdre Gabbay Parshat Yitro 5781

This week’s Torah Portion, Parshat Yitro, contains the story of the Revelation at Sinai, and the giving of the Ten Commandments. These Commandments have become a civilizational touchstone: a set of brief and iconic articles of faith and social order; a plinth of Judeo-Christian identity.

Even knowing how much richness is to be found elsewhere in the arc of Torah, and in the responses and elaboration of faith encoded in Prophets and Psalms, I am listening **in this place**, in the words of **these commandments**, for some resonance that **weaves a structural harmony** between the human being and the sustaining earth.

While I believe it is possible and valuable to undertake this project with respect to the entire Decalogue, doing so would require more time than would be appreciated in a single spoken d’var Torah!

So today I am going to focus on the Fourth Commandment: The Sabbath.

Remember the Sabbath day, to hallow it.

For six days, you are to serve, and are to make all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath for the Lord your God: you are not to make any kind of work, not you, nor your son, nor your daughter, not your servant, nor your maid, nor your beast, nor your sojourner that is within your gates.

For in six days, the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in it, and he rested on the seventh day; therefore, the Lord gave the seventh day his blessing and he hallowed it.

This commandment clearly centers the aspect of G-d as “Creator.”

In the first Commandment, we informed that the One speaking is the One who brought us up from up from Egypt and out of the house of bondage, and who seeks to distinguish us from among other nations.

In contrast, in remembering Shabbat, we are asked to remember the One who is the Creator. It is the act of Creation that is specifically invoked as the motivation for the Sabbath day.

As we “read” this Fourth Commandment, let’s to listen to the theme of the Creation story in its words, and let that melody return us to our memory of the very first story in Torah.

This is where we first encounter G-d, as the Creator of **all that is**; as **our** Creator.

Let’s let it evoke a cinematic image of the dynamic and embodied process of transforming what was once unformed and void into the totality of the material world, its realms of earth, sea, and sky, created as dwelling places for myriad of myriads of beings.

As Rabbi Shai Held pointed out in his workshop for the Jewish Climate Festival last week, the Creation narrative, in all its highly structured grandeur, is nothing less than “a hymn to biodiversity.”

G-d creates realms, and then populates them with a profusion of life: not just sprouting-growth, but **many kinds** of sprouting-growth; not just plants bearing seeds, but **many kinds of plants bearing seeds**, **many kinds of trees yielding fruit**.

“Let the waters swarm with a swarm of living beings; and let birds fly above the earth, across the dome of the heavens!”

If you’ve even visited a forest, a tide pool, or stopped to look closely at mosses growing on a rotted log, you been to G-d’s own art museum of living imagination, an animated tableau of color, pattern and form.

And the creation of each of these, G-d stopped to admire; to see that it was good. Not good in relation to its fitness to serve *adam*, but good in itself.

G-d loves them. They are G-d’s handiwork.

When G-d created adam in G-d’s own image, to “have dominion” over this world of life, what greater manifestation of likeness to the Creator could this being have than the ability to respond with ***love and affection*** for the more-than-human world?

I find it a mesmerizing form of meditation to close my eyes and enter. with my limited imagination, the ecstatic process of Creation. To attempt to unite with the process by which this magnificent diversity emerged.

The hoof, the feather; bioluminescent seas.

The horseshoe crab with its sky-blue blood.

The elephant matriarch caressing the bones of her departed grandmothers with her graceful trunk.

The Leviathan of the deep, singing his low frequency song that trembles the whole watery bubble of earth.

The One who created me loves and blesses them all.

The One who created me loved and blessed them all, before my kind drew its first breath.

I was created in the image of the one who created, and loved, and blessed each one of them.

It is the character of this aspect of G-d that is evoked in Torah when we are reminded to still our restless hands so as to keep the Sabbath holy.

(Exodus 20:21-22 states: )

“An altar of earth you are to make for Me…” But if one day you make for Me an altar of stones, you are not to build it smooth-hewn, for if you hold-high your iron-tool over it, you will have profaned it.”

*Make for me an altar of earth.*

When we keep the Sabbath, let us keep before our eyes ***this*** Creator, who stopped to admire Creation.

And when we try find the image of G-d in ourselves, let it be to open our eyes to these fine worlds that G-d knows intimately to the last detail, and to feel the love of a Creator towards them.

Let us bless them with our observation, our stillness and our care, and remember that the whole family of Creation is the treasured handiwork of G-d.

Shabbat Shalom