

Religion and the Environment

What does it mean: to *master* and have *dominion* over the earth? These key words come from the Torah verses we read this morning, describing the sixth day of creation. The answer to this question – about the meaning of the words “mastery” and “dominion” is far from academic! Over the years it has had enormous implications for how we think about our relationship to the environment. And today, as our nation prepares to receive Pope Francis -author of an Encyclical *about* the environment, I’d like to offer a contemporary response from our own tradition.

But first, some background: in 1967, historian Lynn White argued in a now famous essay in *Science* magazine that the Bible gave humanity a mandate to *exploit* nature when it empowered adam/human to “master the earth,” and have “dominion over it.” White claimed that Western Christianity had done enormous damage by placing humankind at the center of creation. And years after this essay was written, environmentalists and theologians are still debating the merits of White’s argument.

Which is where Ellen Bernstein comes in - a well-known author and activist in the world of Jewish environmentalism. The first thing she points out is that in all the biblical commentaries over the last 2,000 years, the rabbis rarely mention the concept of “dominion.” Probably because for most of history Jews rarely “owned” their own land and therefore they weren’t in a position to dominate nature.

Rashi, however -the foremost medieval Torah commentator, is an exception to this. In his commentary Rashi explains: If a man is worthy, he *rules over* the beasts and the domestic animals. If he isn’t worthy, he becomes inferior to them. In other words, we can either recognize our responsibility to nature and rise to the occasion or we can deny our responsibility and sink to our basest instincts – dominating nature and destroying the world. The choice is ours.

However, while the choice might be ours, the instructions –says Bernstein, are clearly articulated in a later passage from the story of creation. When God takes “adam/human” and places him in the Garden of Eden, he tells him to *tend and care for it*. The problem is that we’ve failed miserably in our tending and caring for this world.

Many spiritual leaders – among them the Pope and the Dalai Lama, believe fervently that the task of religion today is to help us change our relationship with the natural world. They speak of the environmental challenges we face as a moral issue – if not *the key* moral issue of our times and see their role as helping us shift towards responsible stewardship. Making this shift, however, is our greatest challenge. It demands that we understand ourselves and guard against our own excesses and extremes; it demands a constant level of heightened awareness.

So, here is where I want to share with you an exciting initiative spearheaded by the Hebrew

College Rabbinical School. In an attempt to bring heightened awareness to this crisis, the Rabbinical School is embarking upon a social media campaign –starting this Rosh Hashanah, calling on Jews around the world to join in reviving an ancient ritual. It consists of reciting the day of Creation – called the ma’amad, each day of the week. So, today, for example - which is Tuesday or the 3rd day of creation we would read the passage about the trees and plants that were created on that day.

The ma’amad ritual stems from the time of the Second Temple, roughly defined as 530 BCE to 70 CE, when Jewish priests offered sacrifices that they believed sustained the cosmos. Townspeople would add their voice by chanting the biblical account of each day of creation. The practice became widespread for hundreds of years, but eventually fell out of use.

Today, I invite you to take a handout with this new practice of ma’amadot. Along with the passage from Genesis, a brief kavanah or intention is paired with the creation passage. The ritual is, of course, not the point. The point is heightened awareness. The point is that it should inspire us to take action.

And as we consider new rituals to bring heightened awareness of the environment, we might also want to re-examine old and beloved rituals; rituals like *tashlich* which, depending on how it is performed, might not quite match our “green” intentions. I recently learned that town officials in Somerville and Sharon are no longer allowing Jewish communities to throw breadcrumbs into the water as part of their tashlich ritual because they believe it’s neither good for the water nor the wild-life around it. And several Jewish communities outside of Sharon and Somerville are voluntarily substituting pebbles or acorns for bread in order to make their ritual ecologically friendly. While Brookline hasn’t issued any such restrictions, we might want to re-consider how– in the coming years, we symbolically rid ourselves of our sins.

Here is an idea: in his book on the Days of Awe, Agnon tells us about a very curious custom among the Jews of Kurdistan. After saying the appropriate verses for Tashlich, they all jump into the water and swim around to symbolically purify themselves of their sins. I don’t think we’re headed in that direction but next year, we might want to throw pebbles or acorns rather than bread into the Muddy River.

Of course, whether Jews throw breadcrumbs or pebbles into the water once a year when we do Tashlich won’t have much of an impact in our ecosystem – that’s for sure! But maybe this small change in how we perform the ritual will teach our children that the environment is *very much a Jewish concern*.

I used to think that it was best to keep the realms of religion and science apart since they address spheres that don’t intersect. Science deals with what the universe is made of and why it works the way it does and religion deals with questions of ultimate meaning and moral values. Today, however, I believe that while science and religion do have their own spheres, we must *actively* place them in conversation with each other, integrating science and religion to improve our lives and our world.

And so, as we read these verses from Genesis my hope is that we will respond with the urgency demanded by our environmental scientists.

And that we will draw inspiration from the Torah’s call to “stewardship” -recognizing this call as a moral issue of our times.

Shanah tova u’metukah. May this coming year be a good year, a sweet one a “green one” for all of us.