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Olam Tikvateinu



A place to share Torah

Congregation Olam Tikvah

3800 Glenbrook Road

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Olam Tikvateinu

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Olam Tikvateinu

ה' חפץ למען צדקו יגדיל תורה ויגדיר

*For the sake of God's righteousness,
God desires that Torah grow and be glorified.—Isaiah 42:21*

Since *Olam Tikvateinu* began in September 2003, 17 members of the OT community have been inspired to develop and share their Torah. Their articles include a range of Jewish historical and philosophical inquiries, text interpretations and accounts of personal experience. For your easy reference, all published issues appear on our website at www.olamtikvah.org. In addition, this past March, the Adult Education committee sponsored the first session of *Olam Tikvateinu Live*, giving congregants the opportunity to meet with an author and discuss his idea in greater depth. More sessions are planned.

Please Join The Conversation

Please join our growing Jewish conversation. Speak to an author about his or her contribution. Let Adult Education Committee Chair Ken Goldwasser know which articles you would like to discuss in a group. Or contact me or Rabbi Ben-Gideon about the idea you would like to develop and share.

Olam Tikvateinu, our Olam Tikvah, our world of hope, is a place for individuals of our congregation to share their Torah. We look forward to enjoying your Torah in 5767.

Rabbi David Kalender

Submissions for Volume 4, Number 2

Please submit your article by Wednesday, February 21, 2007 for Volume 4, Number 2, to be published Nissan 5767. Articles should be typed, double spaced, in MS Word and submitted by e-mail to Lisa Friedman, Lisafriedman@cox.net. Write “Olam Tikvateinu” in the subject line. The *upper* length limit is 1500-2000 words (6-8 pages).

From the Editor's Desk

By

Cary Schwartzbach

As we begin our fourth year of publication, we sense that *Olam Tikvateinu* is becoming a fixture in OT's culture. Even more pleasing is the awareness that half of our writers are first-time contributors to our journal.

As the Jewish calendar enters the season of repentance, we are obliged to take stock of our lives. We are asked to review our past behavior and to undertake a program of rehabilitation where necessary. Put simply, we are given the opportunity to do T'shuvah, repentance.

Four conditions are necessary for T'shuvah to become a reality. First, our value system must allow us to evaluate our behavior within a Jewish framework. We must see the importance of the past, and we must possess a program for change that we pledge to follow. Finally, we must have a theology that makes T'shuvah possible. I believe that each of our four articles touches on one of these points.

In *Shakespeare, Scripture and the Great Flood*, Paul Forbes demonstrates that the major difference between the Biblical flood and the Mesopotamian version is the perceived divine motivation. In contrasting the fickleness of the gods with God's concern for justice and compassion, he demonstrates the importance of a value system.

Larry Nisenoff, in *Remembering the Six Million*, illustrates the significance of placing great value on history. By not forgetting the past, we can remake the future. In *Our Obligation to Protect the Earth*, Candace Nachman teaches us one strategy to implement change. Absent such a plan, our intentions bear no fruit.

The final requirement is a theology that "allows" for penance. In *Maftir Yonah and Divine Free Will*, I develop the concept of God's free will, a necessary ingredient for T'shuvah. Like Paul Forbes, I contrast our concept of a loving, caring and just God with the capricious pagan pantheon. I must reveal that after submitting this article, I came upon Shaye JD Cohen's, *From the Maccabees to the Mishna*, which ascribes the same theme to the book of Yonah.

We hope that the ideas developed in these pages inspire you in the upcoming Days of Awe. *L'shana Tovah Tikvateinu V'Techateimu.*

Shakespeare, Scripture and the Great Flood

By
Paul S. Forbes

The practice of plot-borrowing has been going on from time immemorial. Shakespeare, for example, often wrote a new play by taking a tale that was familiar to everyone and giving it his own special gloss. In studying the Hebrew Scriptures, I believe we can find many instances in which Bedouin legends, pagan myths and traditional stories were adapted to teach a particularly Judaic moral or monotheistic lesson. And as with Shakespeare's works, the Biblical stories have been firmly embedded in modern culture, while the older tales have been erased from the collective memory.

The Flood Story

A particularly fascinating example of plot-borrowing—or developing a parallel theme in a different way—is the Biblical story of Noah and the Great Flood. Consider the following passage:

I sent forth a dove and released it.
The dove went off, but came back to me;
No perch was visible so it circled back to me.
I sent forth a swallow and released it.
The swallow went off, but came back to me;
No perch was visible so it circled back to me.
I sent forth a raven and released it.
The raven went off, and saw the waters slither back.
It ate, it circled, it cawed, but it did not return.

The Epic of Gilgamesh, 111¹

This is not the Torah's description of what Noah did after the flood receded. It's a passage from the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the world's oldest work of written literature, dating back at least 2,000 years before the earliest estimates for the composition of the Biblical story. Here is what the comparable passage in the Torah actually says:

At the end of forty days, Noah opened the window of the ark
he had made
And sent out the raven;

It went to and fro until the waters had dried up from the earth.
Then he sent out the dove to see whether the waters
had decreased from the surface of the ground.
But the dove could not find a resting place for its foot
and returned to him to the ark,
For there was water over all the earth.
So putting out his hand he took it into the ark with him.
He waited another seven days, and again sent out the dove
from the ark.
The dove came back to him toward the evening
And there in its bill was a plucked-off olive leaf.
Then Noah knew that the waters had decreased on the earth.
He waited seven days more and sent the dove forth,
And it did not return to him any more.

Genesis 8:6-12²

The stories are remarkably similar. The only significant difference between them is the transposition of the sending of the raven and the dove. In the Sumerian story, the raven has the honor of reporting to Ziusudra, the hero of that epic, that land has reappeared. In the Noah story, that honor belongs to the dove. Perhaps this substitution was made because the raven was considered an unclean bird, *tréf* because it fed on dead bodies, while the dove was a symbol of fertility and fecundity in Biblical times. And then, like today, the dove was a reliable message-bearer.

Origins of the Flood Story

Stories of catastrophic floods can be found in the legends and literature of widely separated people around the globe.³ The earliest civilizations were riverine and repeatedly experienced alternating plagues of drought, torrential rains and flood. But the primary basis for this worldwide flood legend probably can be traced back about 10,000 years, to the ending of the Ice Age. Scientists have found evidence that during this period, oceans rose 110 feet worldwide, causing unimaginable flooding. Folk memories of this horrific deluge may well have survived in stories passed down over campfires for thousands of years.

From Pagan Saga to *Genesis*

The Gilgamesh epic had a powerful effect in the ancient Near East. The story, which relates Gilgamesh's struggle to find the

secret of immortality, has been discovered in ancient libraries throughout Mesopotamia, Syria and Canaan. When the Kingdom of Judah fell to the Babylonians and the elite were deported to Mesopotamia, the story could easily have entered into the lexicon of the exiles, including their Priests and Levites. Therefore, when the Bible was redacted, it is not hard to imagine that elements of this familiar tale would be adapted, edited and inserted into the Biblical canon.

Just as Shakespeare would take a beloved popular story and weave it into something that far exceeded the original in beauty and insight, I would suggest that the authors of the Torah took the Gilgamesh flood story—a marvelous and entertaining tale with little moral content—and transformed it into an immortal paean to God’s call to righteousness. Some examples of that transformation follow:

In the Gilgamesh tale, the gods are irritable and selfish. They decide to destroy the earth because “the uproar of mankind is intolerable and sleep is no longer possible because of this babble” (*The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 108). There is no hint of sin or wrongdoing that would merit this drastic punishment, unless being noisy qualifies as a sin worthy of divine retribution. These flawed gods, who are able to destroy the world, have not yet found a remedy for headache.

In the Torah, on the other hand, we find that

The Lord saw how great was man’s wickedness on earth,
and how every plan devised by his mind
was nothing but evil all the time.

And the Lord regretted that He had made man on earth,
and His heart was saddened.

The Lord said, “I will blot out from the earth
the men whom I created.”

Genesis 6:5-7

God regretfully decides that he must wipe out the evil in the land He has created. We see a transcendent and omnipotent God whose judgments are based on moral law. There is a stark contrast with the capricious, amoral pagan deities of the Gilgamesh epic.

After the gods decide to destroy the world in a great flood, the god Ea appears to Ziusudra in a dream and tells him how to save himself and his family by building an ark. Ziusudra (Utnapishtim in the Babylonian version) is not selected for salvation because of any personal virtue, but because Ea had sworn an oath with him.

Conversely, God chooses to save Noah because:

Noah was a righteous man; he was blameless in his age;
Noah walked with God.

Genesis 6:9

This statement reflects the belief of the Biblical writers that events are not the result of blind fate or the capriciousness of the gods. Rather, God intervenes in history to reward the righteous and to punish those who do evil.

When the flood finally recedes, the gods decide to avoid collective punishment in the future. Instead they pledge to:

Lay upon the sinner his sin,
Lay upon the transgressor his transgression,
Punish him a little when he breaks loose,
But do not drive him so hard that he perishes...

The Epic of Gilgamesh, 112

God pledges never again to destroy the world by flood and puts the rainbow in the sky as a sign of His pledge. But God also establishes His covenant with Noah who, by preceding Abraham, represents all peoples of the world and not just the Jewish people. He lays upon mankind this admonition:

Whoever sheds the blood of man,
By man shall his blood be shed;
For in His image
Did God make man.

Be fertile, then, and increase; abound on the earth and increase upon it.

Genesis 9:6-7

Torah in Modern Times

It is important to understand that when God speaks to us, He does so in the context of our own times and our own understanding. In ancient times, exacting a life for a life was considered just compensation for killing someone created in God's image. Today, however, many civilized people consider capital punishment

barbaric. Furthermore, we must balance God's admonition to multiply with our knowledge of the consequences of a population explosion in an already overcrowded world.

In short, our understanding of God must evolve as our world evolves. We cannot allow Scripture to be frozen into icy rigidity with no relevance to today's moral challenges. We are commanded to expound the Torah, which means interpreting and clarifying it so that it may grow and adapt as the times require. Judaism has survived all these generations because great Rabbis and Sages, such as the authors of the Talmud, have continued to reshape it to fit a changing world.

Whatever direction this reshaping may take, we may be certain that the great tale of Noah's righteousness in the face of evil will continue to instruct and inspire us.

Notes

¹ *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Translated by N.K. Sandars (Penguin Books: New York, 1972)

² Torah quotes are from the JPS translation. In order to visually develop the parallels, I have formatted the Torah text similarly to the Gilgamesh text.

³ Some examples of flood legends are *Deucalion and the Flood* (Greek), *Narva and the Ark* (Altaic/Central Asia), and *The Raven and the Ark* (Tlingit, Northwest Native American).

A student of comparative religion and Biblical archaeology for over 60 years, **Paul S. Forbes** has taught Biblical archaeology courses at Olam Tikvah, the Foundation for Jewish Studies and the JCC. His writings have appeared in the *Biblical Archaeology Review*, and he has made possible the acquisition of a rare, fourth-century BCE archive of Aramaic documents by the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

Maftir Yonah and Divine Free Will

By

Cary Schwartzbach

It's late afternoon on Yom Kippur, and we've just come back from break. We're physically and spiritually drained. The Torah has just been read, and the Maftir begins to chant the familiar but curious story of Yonah. The great Assyrian city of Nineveh has been sentenced to destruction for its sinful ways, and God sends the prophet to persuade its citizens to repent. Yonah demurs and attempts a nautical escape, only to encounter a squall. Recognizing himself as the object of the storm, Yonah asks to be thrown overboard and thereby successfully calms the tempest. He is then swallowed by a large fish, pleads successfully for his life and eventually makes his way to Nineveh, where his warning is heeded and the city spared. Yonah is distressed at this outcome, and God comforts him with a shade tree, only to have a worm destroy the tree.

Many questions arise in response to this tale. The foremost question is, "What is the message behind this narrative, and why do we read this Haftorah on Yom Kippur?"

Themes

In classical Jewish thought, the story of Yonah emphasizes the importance and strength of T'shuvah, or repentance, an obvious theme for the Day of Atonement. So powerful is T'shuvah that God forgives even the corrupt citizens of Nineveh, once they atone. The possibility of T'shuvah reassures us that our efforts this day are not in vain.

The church fathers read into the narrative a "renunciation of narrow Jewish parochialism." In refusing to help the Gentiles repent, Yonah models this narrow-mindedness for us, and he nearly pays with his life.

In his comments to the Haftorah in the *Etz Hayim*, however, David L. Lieber rejects the church fathers' view, noting that Yonah speaks critically only of the sinners in Nineveh and not the population-at-large. The Gentile sailors in Chapter 1 are portrayed in a positive light as they entreat their deities for deliverance from the

storm. Lieber posits that the Jewish view is only part of the message, for if the power of penance were the entire theme, the story could have ended with the salvation of Nineveh.

Lieber further notes that Yonah's complaint to God begins with his acknowledgement that God is compassionate and forgiving. It would seem that Yonah cannot make peace with his perception of divine injustice, in that God remits a well-deserved punishment. Yonah must learn that all life, even his own, is dependent on God's grace; hence the coda involving the shade tree. Our Haftorah "suggests that though repentance is important, ultimately it is God's concern for all creatures that maintains them in life."

Lieber's analysis paints the narrative with a broader brush, in that the concept of divine compassion is more encompassing than that of repentance. In fact, T'shuvah may be considered an example or category of God's mercy. I believe that the story's theme can be reduced to an even more basic theological concept, namely divine free will. The narrative seems to contain a polemic between varying opinions as to the existence of God's free will.

Ancient Theologies

Ancient theologies took various positions on the issue of divine will. In pagan and polytheistic religions, the gods were seen as capricious, tyrannical and envious. Man lived in constant dread of the gods and their power and strove to guess their desires and to appease them. As Heschel states in *The Prophets*, "the arbitrariness of the gods is accepted as sacred fact to which man clings with the fear and strength of religion." The question of divine free will is almost irrelevant in these contexts, for the gods' desires are unknowable; certainly man's good is not their concern.

In the fourth century BCE, perhaps reacting to the fickle and vacuous nature of the prevalent pantheon, Greek philosophers posited a different concept of the deity. Described by Aristotle and the Stoic writers, the deity is seen as eternal, perfect and absolutely passive. He is the Prime Mover or first cause of all motions or actions, but other than that, he does not act. To have free will, *i.e.*, the ability to "change his mind" and act within history, would be ludicrous, as any change would imply imperfection in the deity.

Somewhat earlier, the Hebrew prophets also wrestled with the capricious nature of the divine, especially as it manifests in its will, its pathos or emotion, and its actions. Their solution is radically different, however; rather than eliminate these attributes, they rechannel them. Instead of the gods willing, feeling and doing only for their selfish gains, YHWH acts for the good of the world. The universe is not eternal; He created it in time and can intervene to change the “natural course” of things. He can even “change His mind.” I believe that the author of Yonah is arguing for this Hebrew point of view by critiquing the Hellenistic one. An examination of when and where Yonah was written will help us understand whether such a debate would have been possible, and pertinent.

When Was Yonah Written

The first verse of the book identifies Yonah as the son of Amittai. As was probably intended, classical Judaism equates our protagonist with the Yonah son of Amittai who prophesied in Israel in the eighth century BCE (see II *Kings* 14:25). On linguistic and sociopolitical grounds, most scholars see a Persian influence in the writing. Coupled with the reference to Nineveh in the past (it was destroyed in 612 BCE), Yonah is typically dated to the Persian Period (mid sixth to late fourth century BCE).

I will argue for the latter days of that era. By this time, the wars between the Persians and Greeks had ceased, and there was much exchange of ideas between the cultures. If Yonah were written in this period, certainly its author could have been aware of Hellenist thought. But is there any internal proof that he was aware?

Proof in the Names

Is it a random name, or is there a reason that our protagonist is called Yonah? To Jewish commentators, he is identified with the Yonah in II *Kings*, and thus he adds some authority to the story through his connection with antiquity. To the church fathers, the meaning of the name, “dove,” is an allusion to the Jewish people. They base this on a midrashic interpretation of the use of the term “dove” in the *Song of Songs* (2:14).

I believe that a better answer lies in the name itself. Yonah in Hebrew is spelled YVNH. The Hebrew word for Greece/Hellas is

YVN (yavan). Thus, Yonah is a conflation of the term for Greece and the name of the Hebrew deity, YHVH. Yonah therefore represents those Jews who have accepted this Greek or philosophic way of understanding God within the contexts of Judaism. Yonah's name epitomizes the syncretistic (fused) nature of Hellenistic Judaism. Given Yonah's travails, we can conclude that our author's purpose is to illustrate the fallacy of that muddled theology

The Story Revisited

In this understanding of the story, we see that the author is delivering a narrative polemic against those Hellenistic Jews. Yonah, representing that movement, must be shown the error of his theology and must "repent" his way of thinking. He is therefore commanded by God to go to Nineveh (NYNVH—is there an allusion here to YVN?). From Yonah's point of view, the Prime Mover giving him marching orders would be illogical, but the orders themselves would be overwhelmingly distressing. For him to be directed to persuade the great city to repent so that they may avert a deserved decree of destruction would constitute an excellent "proof" of the existence of divine free will.

In his reaction—he tries to escape by sea to Tarshish or Tarsus—Yonah runs away to the Greek world in a mode of transportation they were famous for. Perhaps there he won't have to deal with this contradiction. God sends a storm, and all the sailors pray for deliverance. When confronted about his passivity, Yonah merely asks to be cast into the sea. He doesn't pray to God, because from his perspective, once he has been sentenced to drown, he doesn't believe that the decree can be averted (or he doesn't want to see it changed).

Yonah is saved from drowning by a large fish that eventually spits him out. He then realizes that he has no choice but to travel to Nineveh. What a delightful irony—a man has no free choice but to prove that God has free will! The psalm he offers in Chapter 2 is believed by most scholars to have been added at a later date, but even if not, it does not necessarily pose a problem. It is a poem of thanksgiving, not a prayer for salvation. Yonah goes to the great city and, as he feared, they repent and are delivered from their fate.

Yonah is terribly depressed, and he tells God so. He now knows that God is compassionate and forbearing, and this realization has him wishing for death. It seems that his whole world is turned upside down. He now sees that although the world operates according to the philosophical principles of science and motion, the Prime Mover can somehow interfere with the rules—it makes no sense to him.

Yonah still lacks metaphysical understanding, and therein lies the lesson behind the coda of the shade tree. Yonah believes that, because the natural world operates by scientific principles, it is somehow beyond the realm of God. Things happen because the rules of science predict them, and indeed he builds a booth (using those rules of science) to protect himself. (There are evidently no shade trees in this locale.) But God, by supra-naturally providing and subsequently destroying the shade tree, demonstrates that even nature and science exist due to His grace. The world may look and act as if it spins on its own, but there is an overseer. Through His compassion the world exists; through His wisdom it runs scientifically. Every moment of existence is due to His free will that it should be.

Connection to Yom Kippur

A Haftorah that argues for the existence for divine free will serves a double purpose when read late on the Day of Atonement. The concepts of atonement, penance and forbearance all hinge on that principle—at its most basic construction, a First Cause without free will cannot change the necessary process or course of events. Furthermore, much of the paradigm of the prayers during the Ten Days of Penance has been recollections of God's role in our history. Reading Yonah reassures us that our efforts are not in vain. More importantly, in a religion that values the principle of *imatio Dei*, man is reminded that he, too, possesses free will and that his actions are not predetermined. We are therefore comforted in the knowledge that change is possible. What better way to ascend the final climax of our Yom Kippur prayers.

Olam Tikvah member **Cary Schwartzbach** founded this journal. He attended modern orthodox day school and high school and spent two years in Israel in Yeshiva. Currently an orthopaedic surgeon, his first love is Jewish studies.

Remembering the Six Million

By
Larry Nisenoff

In distress I called to Adonai
Who answered by setting me free.

Psalm 118:5

A Visit to Sachsenhausen

In May 1999, I used a few hours of free time from my MBA trip to Europe to tour the Sachsenhausen concentration camp in Oranienburg, Germany, with several of my classmates. The camp originally stood in a nearby brewery, but the SS moved and operated it from 1936 to 1945. Beginning with political prisoners and later including groups that were defined by the National Socialists (Nazis) as “biologically or racially inferior,” tens of thousands of inmates were interned and exterminated there. After the war, the Russians used the camp for their own purposes until 1950.

As we approach Yom Kippur each year, and I feel the need to clear my mind and soul, this experience weighs heavily on my mind. I reflect on *Exodus 25, Zachor et asher asa lecha Amalek baderech betzetchem miMitzrayim*: “Remember what Amalek did to you on your way out of Egypt.” Our duty is to “remember,” to actively engage this monument to the horrors of the Holocaust, because we are commanded, “You will not forget in your heart.”

I share my personal thoughts and comments in hopes of helping others to acknowledge the Holocaust and to maintain our obligation to remember. Humanity must not be allowed to go this way again.

Contrasts Before Entering

My first view of Germany from the Sabena aircraft was a shocking yellow agricultural crop, marigold against the earth tones of the surrounding fields and villages. The anticipations and anxieties from the inculcation of my youth were clear in my mind, representing many contrasts. The beautiful, fertile landscape held many past secrets. From the moment I entered the camp the next day, I reflected constantly, fighting back my tears. The lovely

spring day was balanced by my awareness of meaningless, brutal death. The wrought-iron letters in the front gate—the words another deception—forever burned into my memory: “*Arbeit Macht Frei.*”

My parent’s prejudices, steeped in their World War II-era upbringing as Jewish Americans, echoed for me: I recalled my father cutting short a trip to Vienna, Austria, due to his extreme discomfort with the Aryan environs of the city. For the first time, I believe I started to understand how he must have felt. Several days before, walking through East Berlin, I passed the Jewish Culture Center and an old shul, the walls pockmarked with bullet holes. As I stood before a small Holocaust Memorial, the conspicuous stares of passersby felt sinister to me.

The camp entrance was bordered by the remnants of the original barbed wire fence, through which I located the station where Jewish men, women and children were kept before their transport to Auschwitz. This building housed a museum presenting historical information about the Nazi rise to power—The Weimar Republic, Adolph Hitler and brown-shirts—information I had studied for years. Rather than intellectually rehash my previous history lessons, I was determined to see and feel the camp and its environment. In an effort to imagine the systematic dehumanization that had occurred, I bolstered my courage and exited the building, walking through the “solitary confinement” cells. Clean now, and full of memorial plaques, religious symbols and flowers, this facility seemed far removed from what it had represented to those inmates who were forced to endure here. Stories we studied in Hebrew School and at USY functions bounced through my mind—Anne Frank, the Warsaw Ghetto—so many senseless hardships and wasteful deaths. For my Ashkenazi family, only one person remained after the slaughters. Throughout history, we, as Jews, have endured as the chosen people. Chosen for what? At what price?

Seeing and Feeling the Camp as It Would Have Been

I moved toward the monument at the center of the camp grounds. Images of the memorial at Yad Vashem, which I had seen 22 years earlier, materialized in my mind, but this place felt unset-

ting. The base of the monument supported symbolic figurines and displayed a list of countries whose citizens were sacrificed here. Fitting, due, but wholly inadequate. A small display of well-kept, multicolored flowers lay in front of the cold, hard stone. However understated, they seemed out of place with my recollection of the vivid black-and-white images presented in Holocaust documentaries like “*Night and Fog*.”

Overwhelmed with emotion, focusing on my obligation to understand whatever I could, I approached the ovens from across the yard. They stood in the open air, rusty and run down, surrounded by a yellow mesh construction barrier. How odd to be protecting individuals from the evil that engulfed millions! I tried to interpret the yellow mesh barrier as a safety net to prevent me from getting too close—so many others had perished here with no realistic hope of reprieve, while I moved about freely. Powerful contrasts of freedom and captivity reminded me that we must be careful to remember and teach our children what transpired here.

To my right was the medical experimentation facility. It presented photographs of the realities of what had been: a picture of boxes of teeth from which the Nazis extracted gold and silver fillings. A picture of a dissected human heart—the sign read that the SS guard had received three days extra leave for his marksmanship in shooting the inmate through the heart. Photographs of paper-thin human beings and severed body parts. This building housed the only room I did not visit—I did not wish to see the corpses the basement apparently held. As a tour group entered and crowded the small hallway, I found my way out of the building and moved on.

Understanding and Accepting Jewishly

I continued through the camp, toward the mass grave that apparently lay between the walking path and the outer wall. There were no headstones and no explanations in English, just a stone bench covered with pebbles. I stopped briefly at the site of the gallows at the center of the camp, signified by a single plaque set into the concrete walkway. Situated that way, the plaque seemed to be hidden, as if to de-emphasize the gallows’ centrality: every day,

all day, the gallows would have presented a relentless reminder of the deliberate Nazi design. I resolved to begin the emotionally difficult walk back to the ovens, focusing on prayer as a method of showing my respect for those who either endured here or became victims of the systematic extermination.

On the perimeter of the remnants of the crematorium, I found the spot physically closest to the ovens themselves. I set my backpack on the ground, took out a Siddur and placed my kippah on my head. Although there was no physical minyan, I felt this place called for a strong symbolic act. I offered several prayers with rapt attention, including the *Shema*, for those who could not or would not, and the *Mourner's Kaddish*. When I looked up from the Siddur, a large tour group, conversing in German, had stopped a few feet from where I stood. In a second I realized that many of them were looking toward me. Shivering, feeling on display, flooded with images of the SS demeaning Jews throughout Europe, I moved away.

On the walk through Orainenburg that morning, I had picked up a small stone to leave behind in this cemetery. Siddur in hand, I searched quickly, under the gaze of the others, for a place to leave it. No headstones, yet so many died here. There was no more representative symbol of their fate than the ovens themselves, but I could not bear the thought of placing this simple stone on such a cauldron of pure evil—as if it would be swallowed by the *Yetzer Hara*. I considered the mass grave toward the front of the camp: the map indicated that 3,000 people were buried there, and I recalled the stones gathered like a minyan on the flat bench. Stretching underneath the construction fence, I placed my stone on what I believed to be the outer wall of the building, just a few feet from the oven. I will always think of this as the boundary surrounding the missing graves of those whose lives were taken in this place.

Standing on what I felt must have been the railway entrance to the camp, another contrast struck me. My family, my two daughters especially, were home in America at this very moment, safely sleeping thousands of miles and more than half a century from the “Final Solution.” Auschwitz, Dachau, Treblinka, Sobibor, Theresienstadt, Bergen-Belsen—reciting the list of names served no purpose other

than an artificial method of avoiding further introspection. I noticed something missing from the seasonal landscape: it occurred to me there was no marigold yellow to match the picturesque agricultural images from my arrival in this foreign land that now felt more familiar. The well-kept green lawn looked similar to lawns all across the world, but the missing yellow flowers were a simple reminder that this place was not the same as other places. The calm green surface belied the malevolent foundations of the camp; perhaps the lack of bright yellow was a subtle indication of the resident horrors.

I briefly caught a glimpse of the others who had joined me on the S1 train from Berlin. They were headed toward the entrance; it was close to our agreed-upon meeting time. Among the many images flashing through my mind, none was more powerful than the irony of the train tracks on which I stood. I checked my shirt pocket for my round-trip train ticket—confirmation that I was able to enter and exit at my own discretion. Why me, when so many had been brought here against their will? *Min hametzar karati ya, va'anani bamerchavya*: “In distress I called to Adonai, who answered by setting me free” (*Psalm 118:5*).

Carrying Something Home

As I began my slow, deliberate exit from the camp, I tried to clear my head. Somehow I began to accept the warm sunshine and gentle breeze the May morning offered. I stopped to touch the oppressive, cold, damp cement walls one more time, holding back my tears.

The tears came hours and days later, as I wrestled with my belief in God, my faith as a Jew and the stark contrasts of my short visit. I carried into Sachsenhausen my parents' generation's hatred and prejudices. I carried out from the camp the painful confirmation that from one generation to another we, as Jews, must pass on the pledge at Masada, “*Never Again*.” I felt a desire to somehow provide my children with an understanding of this horror. In a world in which leaps of technology have compressed both time and space, I wonder how to raise my children with the ability to accept and remember the Holocaust and its role in history.

How lucky I am to have visited Sachsenhausen in the company of friends. The ride on the S1 train, back to Berlin and the 1990s, was filled with idle activities that kept my deep emotions in check. I visualize now the police guards and metal detectors outside the front doors of the synagogues in Berlin and Budapest, as well as the rusted ovens and the barbed wire of the camp. These images remain with me each time I enter my safe, secure synagogue in the United States, and each time I offer the Shabbat, daily and holiday prayers with my family and friends.

In the front yard of my suburban home in the United States, a single yellow dandelion closed the circle of the experience. Half a century later, as one Jew, I had come to accept what had been. With time, I might be able to use this experience as a means to move beyond the past. Not to forget, but to move on.

Each year, I relish the ability to observe the Passover Seder with my family. The celebration of freedom embodies all that I believe represents the history of the “chosen people.” Perhaps now each Passover Seder will have an even greater meaning, as my wife and I share the value of faith and freedom with our children, as Jews have done the world over for generations.

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Our Obligation To Protect The Earth

By

Candace Nachman

When God created the first human beings, God led them around the Garden of Eden and said: “Look at my works! See how beautiful they are—how excellent! For your sake I created them all. See to it that you do not spoil and destroy My world; for if you do, there will be no one else to repair it.”

Midrash Kobelet Rabbah

Thirty-six years ago, on April 22, 1976, the United States observed the first Earth Day, envisioned and organized in large part by Wisconsin Senator Gaylord Nelson. Twenty million people—2,000 colleges and universities, 10,000 elementary and high schools and 1,000 communities—mobilized for nationwide demonstrations on environmental problems. Congress adjourned for the day so members could attend Earth Day events in their districts. The response was nothing short of remarkable, and the modern American environmental movement took off.

Environmental degradation has been occurring for centuries, but people only began paying attention to it in the middle of the last century. Today it is still difficult to gain support for environmental causes. Economic and political concerns outweigh those of polluted water, species extinction, and loss of forests and mangroves. But it is increasingly important for people to understand our moral and ethical obligation to protect the earth. And while the concept of the earth as a “being” or moral agent with its own needs and mystical powers may sound pagan to some, ideas of environmental protection and consciousness are firmly rooted in Jewish thought, beginning as far back as the creation story in the Book of *Beresbit*.

We Do Not Own the Land

God created the universe, including all the flora and fauna we use for our existence. *Genesis* 2:15 states, “The Lord God took the man and placed him in the Garden of Eden, to till it and tend it.” This should be our first clue that the land is not ours. The Torah uses the word *shamra*, from the root *shomer*, to watch or to guard.

We are merely leasing this land from God. The specific type of lease we have on the earth is that of a *sho'el*, a borrower. According to the *Shulchan Aruch*, borrowers may use any part of what they borrow—but they must ensure that, at the end of the term of the lease, and at any given moment during the lease, the property is at least as valuable as it was at the beginning (*Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat* 291, 292). The modern sustainability criterion used in natural resource management and economics resembles the idea first put forth by our teachers. It requires that resource use by any generation should not exceed a level that would prevent future generations from achieving a level of well-being at least as great. Therefore, environmental protection is required so as not to destroy God's earth.

In the early days, the Israelite people were strongly connected with the land. Most of our ancestors were farmers or shepherds. They understood the importance of allowing the land to rest. Two examples of their sound environmental practices are the Sabbatical and Jubilee Years mentioned in *Leviticus* 25. The Sabbatical Year occurs every seventh year. For six years you may plow, sow, prune, harvest and reap. But in the seventh year, the land needs a complete shabbat, rest. In that year, “you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your untrimmed vines; it shall be a year of complete rest for the land” (*Leviticus* 25:4-5). At the end of seven complete sabbatical cycles, in the Jubilee, the land returns to its original owner. This is another year of complete rest for the land. Only food which is produced on its own, without human intervention, may be eaten during the Sabbatical Year and the Jubilee. The concept of returning the land to its original owner after 50 years served not only to keep different classes from forming within society, but also to reaffirm God's sovereignty over the land. Although one person may technically own the land at one point or another, human ownership is temporary: only God's ownership is permanent.

The Mishnaic and Talmudic era rabbis underlined God's role in providing us with nature's wonders. They developed blessings for seeing a rainbow or a mountain, hearing a clash of thunder or upon

experiencing a natural disaster. The Talmudic sages added the ritual of *Kiddush Levanah*, a blessing for the renewal of the moon. All this once again reaffirms Judaism's worldview as theocentric rather than anthropocentric.

The sages also seemed to realize that we exist in an intricate balance with the earth. Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai said, "Three things are of equal importance: earth, humans, and rain." Rabbi Levi ben Hiyyata said, "Without earth, there is no rain, and without rain, the earth cannot endure, and without either, humans cannot exist" (*Genesis Rabbah*, 13:3). We can see in today's world how disturbances cause major upsets. Category Four and Five storms have doubled in the last 30 years, and according to the NOAA Weather Service, this cycle of severe storms will continue for many years to come.

Transition to an Urban Culture

During Medieval and Renaissance times, the urbanization of Jews began. Many Jews were no longer involved in agriculture, and the biblical, Mishnaic and Talmudic teachings may have seemed less relevant. But the focus of caring for the environment also shifted, based on concerns about human health. A healthy environment in turn allows for healthy humans. The great sage Maimonides, who was also a physician, saw the ill effects environmental degradation could have on human health, and he proposed regulations to counter them in his *Treatise on Asthma*. Rabbi Yitzhak ben Sheshet of the early fourteenth century wrote responsa on the topic of noise pollution and its effects on urban dwellers. These same topics can be seen in environmental court cases in this country over the last century.

As urbanization became more prevalent, religious leaders looked for ways to incorporate the beauty and wonder of nature into our lives. The early Chasidic rabbis reinforced the notion that God exists everywhere in nature. Not only is He the creator and owner of the earth, but He is also present in all aspects of nature. Rabbi Schneur Zalman, the founder of the Chabad movement, used gematria to prove this point. The name of God—*Elokim*—is equivalent to *hateva*, nature. Thus, when we destroy nature, we are destroying God.

We Are Destroying Ourselves

Another group of scholars who wrote earnestly about our connections to the land and our part in protecting it were the social or

environmental Zionists. A.D. Gordon wrote, “And when you, O human, will return to Nature, that day your eyes will open, you will stare straight into the eyes of Nature and in its mirror you will see your image. You will know...that when you hid from Nature, you hid from yourself...We who have been turned away from Nature—if we desire life, we must establish a new relationship with Nature” (*Mivbar Ketavim*, 57-58). Humans are created b’tzelem elohim, in the image of God. If we believe that God is present in all of nature, then we are present in nature as well. Therefore when we destroy nature, we are destroying not only God, but also ourselves.

Humans have been destroying the earth almost since the creation of humanity. It is only within the last few centuries, however, that the problems have become severe and pronounced. We are losing earth’s greatest biological treasures just as we are beginning to appreciate their true value. Rainforests once covered 14% of the earth’s land surface; now they cover a mere 6%, and experts estimate that the last remaining rainforests could be consumed in less than 40 years. Rainforests are being destroyed because the value of rainforest land is perceived by shortsighted governments, multinational logging companies and land owners as only the value of its timber. Experts estimate that we are losing 137 plant, animal and insect species every single day due to rainforest deforestation. That equates to 50,000 species a year. As the rainforest species disappear, so do many potential cures for life-threatening diseases. Currently, 121 prescription drugs sold worldwide come from plant-derived sources. While 25% of Western pharmaceuticals are derived from rainforest ingredients, less than 1% of these tropical trees and plants have been tested by scientists (<http://www.rain-tree.com/facts.htm>).

Covering nearly 70% of the earth’s surface, the ocean faces a myriad of threats on a daily basis. Today, about four billion people live in coastal areas. This number is expected to increase to 6.4 billion in the next 20 years. Since WWII, there has been a 50% decline in coral reefs (<http://dieoff.org/page120.htm>). Coral reefs are some of the oldest and most diverse ecosystems on earth: they buffer shorelines against waves, floods and storms and support

more species per unit area than any other marine environment. Experts estimate that 25% to 30% of the world's major fish stocks are overexploited, and many U.S. fisheries are experiencing serious difficulties. Since the Pilgrims first arrived at Plymouth Rock, over half of our fresh and saltwater wetlands—more than 110 million acres—have been lost (*An Ocean Blueprint for the 21st Century: Final Report of the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy*, 2005).

God Wants Us to be Proactive

We cannot afford to sit back and do nothing to change our current, destructive path. A midrash from Parashat Noach reinforces this point:

When Noah came out of the ark, he opened his eyes and saw the whole world completely destroyed. He began crying for the world and said, 'God, how could you have done this?'... God replied, 'Oh Noah, how different you are from the way Abraham ... will be. He will argue with me on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah when I tell him that I plan their destruction... But you, Noah, when I told you I would destroy the entire world, I lingered and delayed, so that you would speak on behalf of the world. But when you knew you would be safe in the ark, the evil of the world did not touch you. You thought of no one but your family. And now you complain?' Then Noah knew that he had sinned.

Midrash Tanchuma, Parashat Noach

We hear and see the warnings—global warming, overfishing, drought and famine—yet we do not fight for change. We ensure our own well-being and safety, and then we call it a day. In this way we are no different from Noah.

The task of repairing the environment and returning it to a completely healthy state certainly cannot be achieved overnight. However, this should not be a free pass to do nothing. As Rabbi Tarfon says, "We are not obligated to complete the task; neither are we free to abstain from it" (*Pirke Avot*, 2:21). But where do we begin? In *Hilchot Teshuva*, Maimonides states the following regarding preparing for the High Holy Days:

As one approaches the Days of Awe, one should consider the entire world as if it were exactly balanced between acts of righteousness and evil. The very next action you take, therefore, can save or condemn the world.

How We Can Protect the Earth

As Jews, as Americans, and as human beings, we can and must help preserve this earth that God provided for us. We can:

- Only buy as much as we need,
- Not waste,
- Reuse and recycle the products we do buy,
- Turn off lights and appliances when we are not using them, and
- Educate ourselves on the issues by reading books and articles and watching documentaries. Then take what we learn and tell it to others.

On a larger scale, we can commit to supporting projects that work to improve life in environmentally degraded places. We can become environmentally conscious consumers—buying sustainable seafood, like wild Alaskan salmon or tilapia; avoiding overexploited fish species, like Atlantic cod, farmed or Atlantic salmon or grouper; and supporting organic farms, which use environmentally friendly production methods. We can also become environmental vegetarians, saving meat for special occasions, like Shabbat and Yom Tov. More than 70% of the grain grown in the US goes to feed livestock. If that grain were consumed directly by people, it would feed five times as many people as it does when fed to animals.

It is important to recognize that we need not go the road alone. Judaism is a religion based on community. We come together for a bris when a boy is born. We traditionally form a minyan to pray. Even in death, we assemble as a community to console the mourners. Why not make protecting the environment a communal Jewish effort as well? The mystics of Tzfat developed Tu B'Shevat Seders to celebrate the presence of God in nature. Our current month, Tishrei, begins the New Year. So we can each make a New Year's resolution to do something to help protect the environment.

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Olam Tikvateinu

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