

RETURNING TO THE EARTH

Rabbi Nate DeGroot

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When would you guess that the Hebrew word “teva,” meaning “nature,” first shows up in Jewish sources? Maybe the creation story, when God creates light and dark, land and sea? Or when the first humans are created in a garden, surrounded by trees? Nope. Not there. Maybe during the flood, with rainbows and doves and a whole lot of water? Not there either. Maybe in Psalms, filled as they are with lush allusions to natural objects? Still no.

Surprisingly, the first time “teva” seems to appear in Jewish writing meaning “nature,” isn’t until the 12th century CE. How could that be, for a religion that is so fundamentally rooted in the natural world?? How could it be that a religion that tells time by the celestial bodies, whose holidays make sense only in relationship to the seasonal harvests, whose sacred text was given on a mountain in the wilderness, and whose Promised Land flows with milk and honey could exist for millennia without a word for “nature”?

For our ancient ancestors, everything, including and perhaps especially nature, was seen as part of the Divine. “*Ein od milvado*,” our *Chasidim* teach us. There is nothing other than God Godself. So there was no need to distinguish between God and the natural world. Because the natural world is very simply and profoundly a manifestation of the Source of All Life, an aspect of Divine mystery made corporeal through the unbounded diversity and beauty of God’s creation, a *lavush* or garb in which God is dressed, nature can not be separated or distinguished from God. And without a clear division between the two, there was no need or even possibility for a specific word to try to contain the bountiful and majestic proliferation of the wondrous Eternal. Rather, all is one.

Taken seriously, this means that how we treat nature is also a direct reflection of how we treat God. Thus, every toxic fume that gets puffed into the air is filling God’s lungs with smoke. Every waste plant pumping harmful refuse into flowing streams overflows God’s cup. Every leaky oil line, buried deep within our planet’s water and soil, poison the veins that course through the body of the Infinite One. In the 21st century, is this not what it means to take God’s name in vain?

In the Garden of Eden, the first human (*adam*), we’re told, is created from the earth (*adamah*). We and the earth share a common root - mythically, scientifically, linguistically, spiritually. So how are we going to treat it? How are we going to treat ourselves? Our kin? Our ancestors? The Divine? And those yet to be born?

It is past time for those of us in the Jewish community to take our foundational legacy of environmentalism seriously.

As individuals we must change our own habits. As adrienne maree brown [teaches about fractals](#): “How we are at the small scale is how we are at the large scale.” Our personal choices refract into a larger reality. Plus, by acting from a place of personal transformation and empowerment, we are readying ourselves to welcome and fight for the large-scale changes around climate that we need and that are coming, priming ourselves for the systems-level changes that are on their way.

At the same time, we need to apply similar theories to our organizations. What adaptations are we making to our buildings? What changes are we making to our education? What kind of choices are we making regarding the food we serve, the plates we serve it on, and the ways we use our sprawling campuses? How are we living out Jewish earth-based values on every level of our organizations?

And finally, we need to mobilize ourselves, as a North American and global Jewish community, to join the incredible movements for climate justice that already exist. We need to show up in solidarity with frontline communities and those most impacted by the devastations of climate change, both within and outside of the Jewish community.

We need to practice solidarity with other groups, offering the wisdom of our tradition and the fierceness of our resolve, while asking how best we can support. We need to work to pass policy and vote into office climate activists and advocates from the local to the national. And, recognizing that climate justice is inextricably linked with all forms of justice, we need to show up across a diversity of movements that are all seeking to build a more whole world together.

Before the first humans leave the Garden of Eden, we're told that our relationship with the earth will be cursed. That we'll suffer from toil and sweat, and thorns and thistles will grow from the ground all the days of our lives until we return to the earth.

Traditionally, this is read as "the curse will be in effect until we die." But what if we read it differently? What if we read it as: "We will be cursed for as long as we treat the earth with contempt and disregard, for as long as we remain distant and see it as "other," for the earth will be sick because of us and we will suffer because of it. But if we "return to the earth," if we make t'shuvah with the earth, and repent and renew our sacred connection with the very substance from which we are formed, then the curse will be lifted. Not because God said so, or because our punishment will be rescinded, per se. But because we will be treating the earth better and helping to ensure a healthier and more sustainable earth for all. We will be lifting the curse we had placed upon ourselves.

In the months and years to come, it is my blessing and my hope that as individuals, organizations, and the broader Jewish community, we make a conscious and concerted effort to return to the earth, rekindling our relationship and honoring our roots and in so doing, transform the curse of our own undoing, into the blessing of our future.

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RETURNING TO THE EARTH

Genesis 2:7

YHWH God formed *adam/humanity* from the dust of the *adamah/earth*. God blew into adam's nostrils the breath of life, and adam became a living being.

בראשית ב':ז'

וַיִּצַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם עָפָר
מִן־הָאֲדָמָה וַיִּפַּח בְּאָפָיו נְשֵׁמַת חַיִּים
וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה:

1. According to this text, how was humanity formed?
2. DYK: The Hebrew words for humanity (*adam/humanity/אָדָם*) and earth (*adamah/earth/מְאָדָמָה*) come from the same linguistic root, and sound almost exactly the same.
3. If we take this text seriously (at least from a mythological/symbolic perspective), what does this tell us about our relationship to the earth? What is happening when we harm the earth?

Rashi on Genesis 2:7:2

DUST OF THE EARTH — God gathered *adam's* dust (i. e. that from which *adam* was made) from the entire earth — from its four corners — in order that wherever *adam* might die, the earth should receive *adam* for burial (Midrash Tanchuma, Pekudei 3).

רש"י על בראשית ב':ז':ב'

עפר מן האדמה. צבר עפרו מכל
האדמה מארבע רוחות, שכל מקום
שַׁיְמוֹת שָׁם תֵּהָא קוֹלְטָנוּ לְקַבְרָה.

1. This text is answering the question: “If humanity was formed from dust of the earth, what particular earth were we formed from?” What answer does this text give?
2. According to this text, *why* were we formed from dust from “the entire earth”?
3. If humanity was formed from dust coming from all corners of the earth, what does that say about our relationship to earth? What does it say about our relationship to space? What does it say about our relationship to each other?
4. Did you notice that this text gives agency to earth, when it talks about the earth “receiving” humans for burial? Do you think of earth as having agency? Does our society? What changes, if anything, if we think of the natural world as having agency and/or being “alive”?

Genesis 2:15

YHWH God took *adam* and placed *adam* in the garden of Eden, *l'ovdah/to till it u'lshomrah/and to tend it*.

בראשית ב':ט"ו

וַיִּקַּח יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם וַיִּנְחֵהוּ
בְּגִן־עֵדֶן לְעִבְדָּהּ וּלְשֹׁמְרָהּ:

1. According to the English translation of this text, what is humanity's responsibility to the earth? What are we supposed to do to it/how are we supposed to treat it?
2. All translation is interpretation and the English translation here might not capture the fullness of this text. In Hebrew, *l'ovdah/to till it/לְעִבְדָּהּ* is connected to the sacred service that the ancient Priests performed in the temple (*avodah*). It might be more accurately translated as “sacred service,” a kind of “work” that is based on holy service to the Divine. How does this understanding transform the understanding of humanity's relationship with/responsibility to the earth?

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3. *U'lshomrah*/and to tend it/וּלְשׂוּמְרָה is connected to the kind of guarding or protecting that comes with the sacred practice of observing Shabbat (*shomer shabbat*) or Jewish ritual eating laws (*shomer kashrut*). It is also connected to the practice of witnessing the separation between body and soul after a person dies (*shmirah*) and ensuring that a newlywed couple has alone time after their wedding (*shomrim*). How does these understandings transform the understanding of humanity's relationship with/responsibility to the earth?

Genesis 3:17-19

To *adam* God said, "Because you did as *havah* said and ate of the tree about which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' Cursed be the ground because of you; By toil shall you eat of it All the days of your life: Thorns and thistles shall it sprout for you. But your food shall be the grasses of the field; By the sweat of your brow Shall you get bread to eat, Until you return to the earth— For from it you were taken. For dust you are, And to dust you shall return."

בראשית ג': י"ז-י"ט

וּלְאָדָם אָמַר כִּי־שָׁמַעְתָּ לְקוֹל אִשְׁתְּךָ וַתֹּאכַל מִן־הָעֵץ אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתִיךָ לֵאמֹר לֹא תֹאכַל מִמֶּנּוּ אֲרוּרָה הָאֲדָמָה בְּעִבּוּרְךָ בְּעִצְבוֹן תֹּאכְלֶנָּה כָּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ: וְקוֹץ וְדַרְדַּר תַּצְמִיחַ לָהּ וְאָכַלְתָּ אֶת־עֵשֶׂב הַשָּׂדֶה: בְּזַעַת אַפֶּיךָ תֹאכַל לֶחֶם עַד שׁוּבְךָ אֶל־הָאֲדָמָה כִּי מִמֶּנָּה לָקַחְתָּ כִּי־עָפָר אַתָּה וְאֶל־עָפָר תָּשׁוּב:

1. This passage is God describing the curse that God has put on humanity because of their "sin" in the Garden of Eden. What is this curse in your own words?
2. According to the text, when will the curse be lifted? Under what circumstances will the curse no longer be in effect?
3. If you read "until you return to the earth" as "until you die," you read it like the tradition typically does. But that may not be the only read. How else might you interpret the idea of "returning to the earth"?

What I would like to propose is that "returning to the earth" means something more like, "until we turn our attention back to the earth, until we show the earth the sacred honor and respect it deserves, until we heal our relationship to the earth. And then "For from it you were taken. For dust you are, And to dust you shall return." might mean something like "you and the earth share a common source. You have abandoned it and forgotten it and treated it like it was separate, when really it is part of you and you are part of it. This is the season of *teshuvah*, or return/repentance (*shuvchah*/ שׁוּבָה). What would it look like if we made *teshuvah*, if we "returned to the earth" and made repentance? Would the self-inflicted curses of climate change and toil and destructive relationship to the earth be lifted if we changed the way we related to it? My hope and blessing is that we can make collective *teshuvah* with the earth, that we can return to our common source, our shared root, and in so doing ensure a livable planet for ourselves and the next generation, while also re-enlivening a piece of our heart and soul that has been disconnected.

