

## **RH 5783 AM: SAVING THE EARTH – Rabbi Suzanne Singer**

God makes springs pour water into the ravines;

it flows between the mountains.

<sup>11</sup> They give water to all the beasts of the field;

The wild donkeys quench their thirst.

<sup>12</sup> The birds of the sky nest by the waters;

They sing among the branches.

<sup>13</sup> God waters the mountains from the upper chambers;

The land is satisfied by the fruit of God's work.

<sup>14</sup> God makes grass grow for the cattle,

and plants for people to cultivate—

bringing forth food from the earth:

<sup>15</sup> wine that gladdens human hearts,

oil to make their faces shine,

and bread that sustains their hearts.

<sup>16</sup> The trees of God are well watered,

the cedars of Lebanon that God planted.

<sup>17</sup> There the birds make their nests;

The stork has its home in the junipers.

<sup>18</sup> The high mountains belong to the wild goats;

The crags are a refuge for the hyrax.

I mentioned last night that my High Holy Day theme is The Garden of Eden. There are few images that convey what the garden was like as well as these beautiful verses from Psalm 104.

These images give us a sense of how magnificent and interconnected the natural world really is. This morning, I would like to talk about our planet – this precious and fragile place that has nurtured life over millions of years. I want to talk not only about the damage we are doing to it, but also, about what we can do to fix it. After all, Rosh Hashana is *yom harat olam* – the day of the world’s birth -- which we can also think of as the day of the world’s rebirth.

I don’t need to offer an exhaustive list of the many ways we have hurt the environment. Right here in our very own state, we are experiencing the effects of global warming with more and more devastating fires. Just this summer, many countries in Europe were on fire. Species are disappearing. The ice caps are melting. Drought is forcing people off their land as they become climate refugees. This affects the most vulnerable, especially women and girls.

The James Webb Space Telescope has just released incredible pictures of the universe—billions of galaxies each containing billions of stars.

The pictures take our breath away. Earth is just one tiny piece of this gigantic universe. But what if we felt the same awe about our planet? Perhaps that would change how we treat Nature.

That is exactly the project of the Zohar, the medieval text that is the basis for Kabbalah, for mysticism in our tradition. The Zohar proposes, among other goals, to ignite our re-enchantment with our world.

Listen to how the Zohar interprets Psalm 104:

When God began to create the world, “there opened and flowed from it one river...Like a fountain – a water spring – filling a large reservoir, from which flow rivers and streams in every direction; so...through one slender channel, unknown, that gushing river flows forth; and from there springs and streams are conveyed, filled by it.”

Melila Hellner-Eshed, with whom I studied this summer, unpacks this. She explains: The river is a metaphor for divinity which descend into the world. God’s divinity pours forth to overflowing until it becomes like gushing rivers. Nature sparkles with divinity and, when everything works as it should, everything and everyone is satiated, there is an abundance of the divine.

“But,” the Zohar continues, “when the world dwells in Judgment, blessings are unable to descend upon the world.”

To paraphrase, when things are not as they should be, when humanity loses its connection to this divine abundance, instead of radiance there is panic. And other deadly powers take over.<sup>1</sup>

So it is OUR responsibility to ensure that the divine river continues to flow. We must reconnect with the earth, we must renew the covenant with the land, in order to bring forth abundance again.

Remember that God gave us this very job in the first chapter of Genesis. There, God blesses the human being and says, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” We are meant to be caretakers of God’s world.

A medieval commentary emphasizes this point. In it, we are warned of the consequences of not taking this responsibility seriously. God says to Adam: “Behold my works, how pleasant and how beautiful they are. And I created it all for you! Be aware and don’t ruin or destroy my world, for if you ruin it, there is no one to come and fix it up after you.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Per Melila Hellner-Eshed

<sup>2</sup> Midrash: Ecclesiastes Rabbah, 7:20

The Kabbalists, the mystics of our tradition, also place this responsibility squarely on our shoulders. Moshe Cordovero, a great Kabbalist of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, writes about the river, or the flow of divinity:

“Now this river and how it waters this garden, how it operates and its conduct, all are dependent on human beings. Through their deeds they irrigate the garden and channel water to it, they increase its plants and cause them to grow, they increase its fruits, refine it and fertilize it through the secret of their labor. And on the contrary, they are liable to dry up the spring and the source, and to cause the river to become parched and the garden to lie fallow and desolate, and to decrease its plants and to cut them down. Everything is placed in the hands of the human beings and their deeds, and no deed they do is without consequence.”<sup>3</sup>

From the very beginning, however, we have resisted. In one of the very first stories in the Torah, after murdering his brother, Cain says to God, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” In the midrash, God replies, admonishing Cain by accusing him: “You are the guardian of the world, why did you not guard it?” The fact is that we ARE our brothers’ keepers. What we do here impacts the rest of the planet.

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<sup>3</sup> R. Moshe Cordovero, *Or Yakar*, Vol. II, 181

The more fossil fuels we burn in the US, the more we contribute to climate change that impacts developing countries and the poor especially hard. The more water we use in the West to create emerald green lawns in the desert or to fashion lush golf courses, the less water is available to others for drinking and bathing. And of course, the more we destroy the environment, the more we hurt ourselves in the process.

In the West, we are facing a once-in-a-lifetime drought that is due in part to massive evaporation from global warming.

The last 20 years have been drier than any similar period over the last 1,200 years. This summer, Lake Mead—the country’s largest reservoir—recorded its lowest level since it was first filled in the 1930s, that is, 200 feet below normal. The federal government has declared the first-ever shortages in the Colorado River, triggering water cuts through much of the seven states that share water through an agreement that has been in place for nearly a century.<sup>4</sup>

We are part of the fabric of the world. It is all one interconnected system. For the mystics of our tradition, everything is God -- plants, animals, human beings. The Shema, which we recite twice a day,

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<sup>4</sup> [https://theurj-my.sharepoint.com/:w:/g/personal/shan\\_rac\\_org/EXjWAarCfgNMgHNMMMSif3IsB3fTPqDWQ0k5fgTUfkPlpsQ?rttime=4Gmh8F562kg](https://theurj-my.sharepoint.com/:w:/g/personal/shan_rac_org/EXjWAarCfgNMgHNMMMSif3IsB3fTPqDWQ0k5fgTUfkPlpsQ?rttime=4Gmh8F562kg)

reminds us of this – God is One just as we are all one.

On this score, we can learn a lot from trees. It turns out that, in the area of active interconnectedness, we have nothing over trees. In the book *Finding the Mother Tree*, Suzanne Simard describes how trees rely on each other through a vast underground network. She writes:

I was tapping into the messages that the trees were relaying back and forth through a cryptic underground fungal network. When I followed the clandestine path of the conversations, I learned that this network is pervasive through the *entire* forest floor, connecting all the trees in a constellation of tree hubs and fungal links. A crude map revealed, stunningly, that the biggest, oldest timbers are the sources of fungal connections to regenerating seedlings. Not only that, they connect to all neighbors, young and old...[which] are perceiving, communicating and responding by emitting chemical signals. *Chemicals identical to our own neuro transmitters...*

The old trees nurture the young ones and provide them with food and water just as we do with our own children...

When Mother Trees...die, they pass their wisdom to their kin, generation after generation, sharing the knowledge of what helps and what harms, who is friend or foe, and how to adapt and survive in an ever-changing landscape.<sup>5</sup>

Simard concludes this introduction with: “This is not a book about how we can save trees. This is a book about how the trees can save us.”

The good news is that we have the power to save ourselves!

The Garden of Eden is always available to us! It is that flow of divine energy which we can connect with and bring down to earth, or that we can block. This is what the Zohar teaches us about the verse from Genesis that says: “A river flows from Eden to water the Garden.”

The Zohar says: “And that river which issues and flows...comes continuously and does not cease.”<sup>6</sup> God’s flow of divinity, is always there. We just have to be tuned into it.

Or to put it in the concluding words of Suzanne Simard:

“We have the power to shift course. It’s our disconnectedness— and lost understanding about the amazing capacities of nature — that’s driving a lot of our despair...Turning to the intelligence of *nature itself* is the key.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> P. 5

<sup>6</sup> Zohar III: 290b, Idra Zuta

<sup>7</sup> P. 305



Perhaps we need to do some “al het” – some confession about the damage we have inflicted on the planet – before figuring out what we can do to save it. This was written by Shayna Han and edited by yours truly:

**A Climate Unetaneh Tokef**

On Rosh Hashanah it is written,

On Yom Kippur it is sealed:

How many will pass from the earth from extreme heat,  
how many will be created even as our children and grandchildren  
inherit a burning world;

who will live and who will die by mining minerals  
for our smart phones;

who will reach the ripeness of age;

who will be taken before their time in the Global South;

who by California wildfire and who by Kentucky floodwater;

who by weapons of war – or by everyday mass murders

and who by beast – animals in search of food whose habitats  
we have invaded

who by hunger in Madagascar and who by thirst in the increasingly  
arid deserts of Jordan and Israel;

who by famine and who by drought;

who by earthquake from fracking and who by plague of  
mosquito-borne illnesses;

who by strangling smog and who by mud slides following torrential  
rains,

who will rest as the world burns and who will wander  
as climate refugees;

who will be tranquil by inaction and who will be troubled  
by anxiety and rage;

who will be calm and who will be tormented;

who will live in worsening poverty and who on multi-million dollar yachts;  
who will be degraded and sold as a child bride and who exalted.

***But t'shuvah, t'fillah, and tzedakah can temper judgement's severe decree.***

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The California Religious Action Center is spending the next few years on climate change. The effort is called Climate Tzedek, Climate Justice. You can join at any time. Just let me know. But the first, most important action you can take to change the direction of our planet is to Vote in the coming election for people who take this threat seriously. You can also help others to vote. The Religious Action Center of the Reform movement is heading up a major campaign, called "Every Voice, Every Vote." You can be trained to canvas, to make calls, and/or to write postcards of which I have done a lot. Please go to [rac.org](http://rac.org) for more information. Let's rebuild our world from love.

[OLAM HESED YIBANEH]