

Open to Nature

Yom Kippur

10 Tishrei 5775 – October 4, 2014

Temple B'nai Shalom

Braintree, Massachusetts

Rabbi Van Lanckton

Alice and I took a three-day sailing trip together 20 years ago. We sailed on a windjammer with eight other passengers from Mystic, Connecticut, to Sag Harbor, New York, to Block Island and back to Mystic.

At Block Island we moored in the Great Salt Pond, a large circular body of water enclosed by land except at the narrow entrance to the ocean. A small strip of sandy beach separates the Great Salt Pond from the ocean.

One clear, cool morning the day after we arrived, I rose just before dawn and went up on deck. I sat in a deck chair and waited.

The sky grew lighter by imperceptible degrees. Seagulls swam nearby. When one took flight, the water dripped from its feet and made a line in the otherwise glassy surface of the pond.

In the still of that morning I saw in all directions a symphony of changing colors that I could almost hear. From grey to light pink to a rainbow of colors that included red and blue and green and white and every shade of grey. The display continued for a time that I could not measure and I did not wish to measure. I wanted nothing more than to watch in wonder in all directions as the colors moved and shifted.

In one generation, at present rates of global warming, the possibility to see that sight may be lost forever as the rising ocean overflows into Great Salt Pond and obliterates it.

We see on TV and read in our papers every day the threats we all face from our warming planet. The front page of the Boston Globe on Tuesday of this week, for example, described plans for radical restructuring in Boston to prepare for the predicted seven-foot increase in sea level by 2100. The headline: "Ideas for a Hub beset by rising seas in 2100." The article included a sketch for converting some of the streets in Back Bay to canals. The proposed Clarendon Canal in place of Clarendon Street appeared in an artist's sketch.

Our planet is warming. No fair-minded person can dispute that fact. The ten warmest years on record have all happened since 1998. This August the world experienced the hottest month on record and scientists predict 2014 will be the hottest year.

Looking to our shared future as we begin 5775, we could spend our time today considering what we can do, as individuals and in group efforts, to combat this trend and solve the problems that confront us. But I have a different message for us today. Rather than an exclusive focus on the future, I am asking us first to notice where we are in this moment.

We stand between the past and the future. 5774 has ended. 5775 is beginning. The past lies behind us. The future stretches before us.

This day of Yom Kippur is a day for teshuvah, for turning. I propose that we turn from the past to the future, but that we do so with marveling eyes and open hearts, taking the time to notice the present.

We can look back and see the troubles of the past, the ways in which our collective choices have placed our planet at risk.

We can look forward and consider what each of us can do in our own way to help the planet. We can rededicate ourselves to recycling our trash. We can lower the thermometer in winter at night or when we are away from the house. My son, Sam, suggested a practice he follows every morning and evening: he turns off the water while brushing his teeth. None of these individual acts will save the planet. But all of us doing them does make a difference. Doing them also helps remind us of the issue and may inspire us to vote for candidates who will take effective government action against global warming.

But as we make that turn from past to future, I recommend that we take the time to notice the present. Enjoy nature as it is now. Get outside. Slow down. Breathe. Marvel.

Our tradition teaches that we should recite 100 blessings every day. I have distributed today a document with four of those blessings. In a moment we will take out that document and review these. We will even practice a couple.

Before we do that, I need to explain what I think we are doing when we say a blessing.

Most of our blessings begin as these four begin: “Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech ha’olam.” Before we can say those words and mean them, we need to understand what we mean by “Adonai, Eloheinu.”

The translation is easy. It’s the meaning that’s hard.

Those words translate in English to “Lord, our God.” But who is that?

Each of us might answer that question in a different way. I think in fact that we should each find our own answer. Our individual answers may be and probably will be different. We may not be ready yet with an answer. The answer may also change over time. But the question remains, and we should struggle with it.

My teacher and the founder and leader of the Rabbinical School of Hebrew College, Rabbi Art Green, provides his answer in his many books and articles and talks. I find his view persuasive.

One good formulation of that answer appears in his book Radical Judaism. Rabbi Green explains that he is not a believer in the conventional Jewish or Western sense. He does not encounter God as a Creator who exists outside or beyond the universe, who created the world as an act of personal will, and who guides and protects it.

Rather, Rabbi Green believes that every human can experience moments of an inward, mysterious sense of awesome presence, a reality deeper than the kind we ordinarily experience. The realization of such moments fills us with a sense of magnificence, of smallness, and of belonging, all at once. Our hearts well up with love for the world around us and awe at its grandeur.

For Rabbi Green, and for me, God is not an intellectual proposition but rather the ground of life itself. It is the name we give to the reality that we all can encounter in the kind of moments he describes. That reality feels more authentic and deeply perceptive of truth than any other. It was

that sense of awe that moved me to tears as I watched that sunrise from the deck of the windjammer moored in Great Salt Pond. And that sense of awe inspires us to express gratitude which, because we are Jews, we do using the Jewish form of a blessing.

That short summary will serve as an introduction to the four blessings on the document I distributed. We can say these when we witness natural beauty of all kinds.

I want to read these together so we can practice them. I have provided copies for everyone. Please take them out now.

I will read the introduction to each blessing, describing the occasion to which it applies. Then let's read the blessing aloud in Hebrew together. We'll do each one twice. We won't read the English translation, but I've provided it so we will know what we are saying.

Before we read the first one, notice that the opening six words are the same for each blessing and they are familiar to most of us. These words are the ones I just discussed: "Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech ha'olam." Please repeat that with me. "Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech ha'olam."

When you say those words, try to connect with your own conception of God. It could be the one I've described that Rabbi Green explains, but it need not be.

We don't need to practice that any more, I think. Let's turn instead to the phrase that follows each of those introductory words.

The first blessing on your document is one to be recited on seeing large-scale wonders of nature, such as mountains, hills, deserts, seas, long rivers, lightning, and the sky in its glory. The concluding phrase is "oseh ma'aseh v'reishit". That means "who makes the works of creation." Please say that with me: "oseh ma'aseh v'reishit." Again? "oseh ma'aseh v'reishit." OK, now let's practice the entire first blessing: "Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech ha'olam, oseh ma'aseh v'reishit."

Rather than recite all four of these together, let's do just the last one, the blessing for flowers and herbs. The concluding phrase is "boreh is'veh b'samim," meaning "who creates fragrant flowers and herbs." Try saying those three words with me: "boreh is'veh b'samim." Again? "boreh is'veh b'samim."

OK, now the entire blessing together: "Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech ha'olam, boreh is'veh b'samim."

Let us take these blessings with us when we leave here today. Let us carry them in our pockets or purses and take them out and read them when we encounter a sight or have an experience we want to savor. We can do this in English or in Hebrew. We can also say them aloud or silently, or say or think whatever else comes to mind upon seeing any part of creation that inspires our gratitude.

The point is to notice where we are in those moments and to savor them. This is our Jewish version of the old advice to stop and smell the roses.

I close with two appreciations of nature.

Danny Siegel wrote a poem called "Birthdays: A Rosh Hashanah Sermon." The poem imagines God being lonely before the world existed. God's first words as imagined in the poem are not "Let there be light." Rather, God says, "I'm lonely." The poem goes on:

And behold:

at the sound of these words

light and fish

and so many roses

arrayed themselves in a Versailles-garden of magnificence.

The poem then imagines the first five days of creation:

For five full days

the inspired Carpenter and Craftsman

celebrated his display

talking to the eagles,

smoothing the Rockies

and whispering fantastic mysteries to the great Norwegian tuna.

He would blow the winds

and palms and pines would sway

like great Russian ballerinas

and with a gentle push of His fingers

the Nile and the Ganges

began to flow with a new music

that soothed the shore, the reeds, and the sky.

He turned panthers on their backs

and stroked their bellies

like kittens.

The poem concludes the description of creation with the work of the sixth day, when God creates humanity:

By dawn

of the sixth extraordinary day

this piece of ground

was walking

and breathing his God-given breath

and running through the tall sweep of willows
and touching bark
and bearskin
and the feel of rubies
all day – till dusk
when it was time for Kiddush.

Henry Beston wrote a book in 1929 called The Outermost House. He described living close to nature in a remote area of Cape Cod for a full year. He ended the book with these words:

Do no dishonor to the Earth lest you dishonor the spirit of man. Hold your hands out over the Earth as over a flame. To all who love her, who open to her the doors of their veins, she gives of her strength, sustaining them with her own measureless tremor of dark life. Touch the Earth, honor the Earth, her plains, her valleys, her hills, and her seas; rest your spirit in her solitary places. For the gifts of life are the Earth's and they are given to all, and they are the songs of birds at daybreak, Orion and the Bear, and dawn seen over ocean from the beach.

In 5775, while we remain aware of the global warming threats and we take such actions as we can, let us remain alive also to the wonders of nature and offer thanks when we have the privilege to experience its beauty.

And let us say, Amen.