

Earth and the Jewish Festivals: In and Beyond the Shmita Year
*By Rabbi Arthur Waskow **

What are the most effective ways for the Jewish community, especially in the coming Shmita year, to draw on its ancient commitment to make a peaceful relationship between *adamah* and *adam* -- Earth and Human earthling?

I believe that one of the most effective is to draw in new activist ways on the authentic wisdom and teaching of the spiral of the yearly festivals.

To begin with, the festivals are themselves keyed to the rhythm, the dance, of Sun, Moon, and Earth. The festivals are the offspring of a love affair between the Jewish people and Earth. Many of them have taken on meanings that are political, historical, and individually spiritual, but the spirituality of their rootedness in Earth remains. So for each of them we can find an aspect of the festival that points toward a way of celebrating that actually protects earth from the danger into which human action has plunged it. As the two parents who have given birth to the festivals suffer from the choking of their interbreathing life, human beings who turn to help and heal their parents. When they get sick, the festivals themselves, must be turned to helping, healing Earth as well as the humans who are despoiling it.

Secondly, many of the festivals make up the fiber of what it means to be Jewish, especially in American society. Where in many Jewish communities of the past, Yiddish or Judezhmo (often called Ladino) or another Jewishly inflected languages made up the rich culture of what it meant to be Jewish, in America it is often celebration of the Jewish festivals that carries a great deal of that energy. So to use the festivals for the universalist purpose of protecting Earth means that we strengthen Jewish culture, even as we pursue a universal good that is taught by Jewish culture to be a Jewish and a universal good.

Third, since Jewish culture draws deeply on the festivals, reframing the festivals so that they act to protect the earth from which they sprang is more likely to involve broader and broader elements of the Jewish community in the struggle to protect and heal Earth. That is important. For the Jewish community and all the other religious and spiritual communities of America, are crucially important to turning away from exploiting and dominating Earth toward a society that accords with Earth and all its life forms.

In the past, deep social change in America has often been possible when the faith communities put their energy behind social change. When they are weak or sleepy in an

effort to uplift Society, the job often takes a great deal longer. Those faith communities are the source of spiritual authenticity. If they – we – won't change, neither will the country. Or the planet.

Let's be clear: This will not be easy. There are at least two reasons why there is inertia in the Jewish community to this kind of profound change – spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and activist-political.

(1) Within our community, the very freedom for Jews to join the society has led to islands of wealth, power, and privilege that see no profit in transforming the status quo. They try to block any Jewish (or other) efforts at deep change. In this arena, we have become little different from any other "mainstream" American community.

(2) In another arena, we are unusual. Both our values and our interests have pointed an unusual proportion of us to pursuing social justice. But I emphasize social justice. For two thousand years, we have been severed not only from the land that was ours, but almost any other land – where we might be easily expelled. That history and reality impelled us to focus on building a decent society, internal and external. It was hard for Rabbinic Judaism to grow an emotional or policy attachment to any land, despite the clear land-centeredness of the Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible. The Tanakh continues as treasury of practices and values of an Earth-based people mostly made up of shepherds and farmers, but it has been an up-hill struggle to get modern Jews to draw on that treasury – like the very Shmita we are here to affirm.

Even where a large chunk of the Jewish people reestablished connection to the geography of the ancient land of Israel, it did so heavily colored by the ethic of industrialism, post-industrial computerism, and strong commitment to military. None of those has encouraged an Earth-focused culture. Some islands of Eco-Jewish thought and practice did emerge, but in a sea of other concerns.

Nevertheless, the worsening climate and extinction crises have sent some Jews back to exploring that ancient biblical treasury. The Jewish habit of making midrash – reinterpreting that treasury – made rabbinic Judaism possible. Now we need to create another macro-midrash beyond Rabbinic Judaism – and one of its key elements must be to reintegrate Adamah, Earth, into a socially concerned Judaism. So in America, where the First Amendment encouraged religious experiment and protected the Jewish presence, including direct access to land and to making land policy, there emerged a strong current of eco-Judaism.

Now let me sketch – only sketch – how to apply this basic theory of change to just two of the festivals -- Sukkot and Pesach -- with just a sketch of what would be possible.

On Sukkot, the earthy harvest festival, Jews celebrate by building temporary, vulnerable, open-to-Earth huts with leafy, leaky roofs; by waving in the seven directions of the universe the Four Species branches of palm, willow, and myrtle, and a lemony etrog (citron); and by chanting prayers called "Hosha Na – Please save" Earth from locusts, droughts, invasive worms, and other plagues.

Meanwhile, some world-spanning banks invest hundreds of billions of dollars in corporations that burn Earth, destroy communities, and kill people. What would happen if groups of Jews walked into offices and branches of those banks waving the branches, singing songs of sacred Earth, chanting prayers to save us from burning fossil fuels, demanding that the banks invest instead in planet-healing renewable energy – Moving Our Money to Protect Our Planet (MOM-POP)?

In the United States, every two years Sukkot comes just a few weeks before a general election. (That is not an accident; American elections were timed to follow the harvest, so that farmers would have time to think, decide, and vote.) What would it mean if American Jews added to the practices of Sukkot the commitment to "Share Sukkot: Green and Grow the Vote"? What would it mean if we focused on voter turn-out in communities where turn-out is low -- our own youth, the poor, and those racially marginalized? What if we emphasized among ourselves and shared with other communities the values of Sukkot as issues to be addressed in voting?

What are those values? Sukkot is about the harvest. What does that teach about feeding the hungry? The Hoshanor "Save us, Save Earth" prayers – what do they teach us about saving Earth and harvest from CO2 and methane, from "forever plastics" and carcinogenic chemicals?

Traditionally, the offering of 70 bulls during Sukkot was connected to prayer for the prosperity of all the "70 nations of the world." And we pray, "*Ufros alenu sukkat shlomekha* – Spread over all of us the sukkah of shalom." What if we were to hear the truth that it is the very vulnerability of the sukkah, not the seeming impregnability of a fortress, that -- when shared with others – makes for peace? Together, these two teachings make the foundation of a loving and respectful "foreign" policy.

On the Shabat before Pesach, we read as Haftarah an outcry from the last of the ancient Hebrew Prophets (Malachi 3): that warns "A day is coming that burns like a furnace" and promises that for those who revere My Name" -- the Name YHWH that is "only" a

Breath, the Interbreath of Life – the solar rays of a “sun of justice” will be the remedy. Then Malachi concludes, “I will send you the Prophet Elijah to turn the hearts of the parents to the children and the hearts of the children to the parents, lest the Breath of Life come as a Hurricane of Destruction and smite Earth with utter desolation.”

At the synagogue celebration of B’Mitzvah, what would happen if the young persons growing into more responsibility, together with their families, integrated into their celebration? What if the adults and youngsters present on that day said aloud they would take on the mission of Elijah, and named one act to save Earth that they would commit to doing?

Let us in fear, hope, and the trembling that infuses both of them reexamine our celebrations of Pesach. What does it mean for the American Jewish community to celebrate the Festival of Freedom in a society that is still caught in the history of slavery and racism? We began with memories of a Freedom Seder that took some partial account of this reality by weaving other struggles for freedom -- especially the Black American struggle – with the ancient celebration of liberation from slavery to Pharaoh. In America, the triumphant observance of that freedom is for Jews the crowning achievement of that ancient struggle. For Jews! -- but for Blacks? For the Indigenous Peoples? For brown-skinned Spanish-speakers? For Muslims? For the rural “old Americans,” forgotten and left with dwindling life-spans to die of alcohol and drugs and despair?

We conventionally see Pesach as a demand for social – and only social – justice. What would it mean for us to integrate eco-justice into the meaning of Pesach? What would it mean to explore the connection between Pharaoh’s enslaving Israelites and enslaving Egyptians and Pharaoh’s bringing Plagues upon Earth and the Egyptian people? What are our own Corporate Carbon Pharaohs doing to the low-income, Black, brown, and rural and small-town neighborhoods where coal dust and gas-refinery fumes make for cancer and asthma epidemics while the same Corporate Carbon Pharaohs choke the planet with global scorching?

What would Pesach become if “*Lo dayenu* - NOT enough for us” – were as important as “Dayenu”? What would it mean for every Seder community to spend one day of Passover in action on the streets -- embodying, not only remembering, the freedom journey? For as the traditional Haggadah says: In every generation, every human being must act as if we, not our forebears only, move from slavery to freedom!

In short, what would it mean if large parts of the Jewish community, working with other communities to heal sufferings that afflict all peoples, were to reenergize the powerful

rituals that were themselves originally crystals of life, and point them toward seeking justice, compassion, healing, and peace?

I have asked "what would it mean?" up till now from the "outside" of spiritual experience – adopting spiritual practice to meet a "political" need. Suppose we ask what would its *meaning* be, from the inside out? That is, what is the spiritual truth of a reconfiguring of these rituals into activist change?

Often I hear people contrasting spirituality and politics: spirituality as an individual's experience of awe toward something fuller than the self -- beyond self and society -- contrasted with politics as filled with fearful defenses against being overwhelmed by something in society bigger than one's self.

I think this is a misperception. I suggest we think of spirituality as both an individual and a social/ political possibility. As a single person, I can feel awe at the astonishing complexity and grandeur of my community and of the universe, of each of which I am a sacred and a necessary part. (The "sacred and necessary" does not permit me to oppress or be oppressed.) If I can experience and affirm this role, the expression of it is my individual "spirituality."

As a society, the same: With our unique Jewish culture, if we affirm the unique cultures of other communities within the One and affirm for each its own reach toward the One – its own pursuit of its own spirituality -- we can together strive toward a "communal spirituality." That striving is the society's "politics."

The goal of that striving is not a God Who is Adonai or Melekh, Lord or King. It is a theology of Ecology as world-view, social and cultural as well as biological – not a world-view grounded in Hierarchy and Subjugation. We each in our own culture need to look inward as well as beyond ourselves to encourage the language and symbols and behaviors that call forth that response.

At our best, this is how "ritual" and "politics" fit together. How "*adam*" and "*adamah*" fit together.

* Rabbi Arthur O. Waskow directs The Shalom Center <theshalomcenter.org>, a prophetic voice in the Jewish, multireligious, and American worlds for eco/ social justice, peace, and the healing of our wounded planet into an Earth of Neighborhoods. He is the author of 27 books on public policy and religious life, including the original *Freedom Seder*, *Seasons of Our Joy*, and *Dancing in God's Earthquake: The Coming Transformation of Religion*. He has been arrested about 26 times in protests against US racism, Soviet antisemitism, US treatment of refugees, US wars against Vietnam and Iraq, and governmental and corporate inaction about global scorching.

•