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266 West 37th Street, Suite 803 New York, NY 10018

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ECOLOGICAL DEVASTATION AND HEALTH: CLEAN AIR, CLEAN WATER, AND HEALTHCARE FOR ALL

Rabbi Arthur Waskow

These texts draw our attention to the Torah's opening chapters as a primordial framework for understanding who we are as humans and our relationship to the earth. We read the later texts as referring back to the earlier ones and ask ourselves one of the hardest, largest questions: What is our role here, and how do we fulfill it sustainably such that future generations can also play their role? *Torah translations by Everett Fox; II Chronicles is from NJPS.*

I. ADAMAH & ADAM

A. Genesis 2:5

No bush of the field was yet on earth, no plant of the field had yet sprung up, for YHWH, God, had not made it rain upon the earth, and there was no human/adam to till the soil/adamah—

וְכָל שִׁיחַ הַשָּׂדֶה טָרָם וְהָיָה בְּאֶרֶץ
וְכָל עֵשֶׂב הַשָּׂדֶה טָרָם וְצִמָּח כִּי לֹא
הָמְטִיר ה' אֶל-לֵהִיִּם עַל הָאָרֶץ
וְאָדָם אֵין לְעֹבֵד אֶת הָאֲדָמָה:

ARTHUR WASKOW: Isn't this backward to our understanding of evolution, in which vegetation came before *Homo Sapiens* (as in Genesis 1)? Why would Torah say it was necessary for the human (*adam*) to be present for shrubs of the earth (*adamah*) to grow?

The Torah continues (verses 6-7):

but a surge would well up from the ground and water all the face of the soil; and YHWH, God, formed the human, of dust from the soil, he blew into his nostrils the breath of life and the human became a living being.

(ו) וַאֲדָמָה יִצְלָה מִן הָאָרֶץ וְהִשְׁקָהּ אֶת כָּל
פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה: (ז) וַיִּצְרָה ה' אֶל-לֵהִיִּם אֶת
הָאָדָם עֹפָר מִן הָאֲדָמָה וַיִּפֹּחַ בְּאַפִּיו
נִשְׁמַת חַיִּים וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה:

A.W.: From the *adamah* (earth) comes forth *adam* (the human earthling). First this newborn loses the *-ah*, the Hebrew *hei* (ה) that is the sound of breathing. Then the Creator Breath of Life (YyyyHhhhWwwwHhhh Elohim) “blew into the newborn’s nostrils the breath of life, and the human became a living, breathing person” (Genesis 2: 5-7).

What do these two passages mean about relationship between *adam* and *adamah*?

What do they mean about the relationship between God and Breath? About the YHWH Name?

About the relationship between an individual human birth and the emergence of the human species?

II. TWO PARABLES: EDEN AND MANNA/SHABBAT

Do these two parables have any connection with each other?

A. Eden

Genesis 2:15 YHWH, God, took the human and set him in the garden of Eden, to work it and to watch it. 16 YHWH, God, commanded concerning the human, saying: From every (other) tree of the garden you may eat, yes, eat, 17 but from the Tree of the Knowing of Good and Evil—you are not to eat from it, for on the day that you eat from it, you must die, yes, die.

(טו) וַיִּקַּח ה' אֶל־הָאָדָם וַיִּנְחָלֵהוּ בְּגֶן עֵדֶן לַעֲבֹדָהּ וּלְשָׁמְרָהּ :
(טז) וַיֹּצֵא ה' אֶל־הָאָדָם
לֵאמֹר מִכָּל עֵץ הַגֶּן אָכַל תֹּאכֵל : (יז)
וּמֵעֵץ הַדַּעַת טוֹב וָרָע לֹא תֹאכַל מִמֶּנּוּ
כִּי בְיוֹם אֲכָלְךָ מִמֶּנּוּ מוֹת תָּמוּת :

A.W.: “On this earth there is wonderful abundance. Eat of it in joy. But you must restrain yourselves just a little: Of this one tree, don’t eat.”

Genesis 3:17 To Adam [God] said: Because you have hearkened to the voice of your wife and have eaten from the tree about which I commanded you, saying: You are not to eat from it! Damned be the soil on your account, with painstaking-labor shall you eat from it, all the days of your life. 18 Thorn and sting-shrub let it spring up for you, when you (seek to) eat the plants of the field! 19 By the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread, until you return to the soil, for from it you were taken. For you are dust, and to dust shall you return.

(יז) וּלְאָדָם אָמַר כִּי שָׁמַעְתָּ לְקוֹל
אִשְׁתְּךָ וַתֹּאכַל מִן הָעֵץ אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתִיךָ
לֵאמֹר לֹא תֹאכַל מִמֶּנּוּ אֶרְוֶה
הָאָדָמָה בְּעִבּוּרָךְ בְּעִצְבוֹן תֹּאכְלֶנָּה
כָּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ : (יח) וְקוֹץ וְדִרְדֵּר
תַּצְמִיחַ לְךָ וְאָכַלְתָּ אֶת עֵשֶׂב הַשָּׂדֶה :
(יט) בְּזֵעַת אַפֶּיךָ תֹאכַל לֶחֶם עַד
שׁוּבְךָ אֶל הָאָדָמָה כִּי מִמֶּנָּה לָקַחְתָּ
כִּי עָפָר אַתָּה וְאֶל עָפָר תָּשׁוּב :

A.W.: “Only by toiling every day of our lives with the sweat pouring down our faces will we find enough to eat from an earth that gives forth mostly thorns and thistles.”

B. Manna & Shabbat

Exodus 16:13b-18 (continuing through verse 35)

13 ...And at daybreak there was a layer of dew around the camp; 14 and when the layer of dew went up, here, upon the surface of the wilderness, something fine, scaly, fine as hoar-frost upon the land. 15 When the Children of Israel saw it they said each-man to his brother: *Mahn hu*/what is it? For they did not know what it was. Moshe said to them: It is the bread that YHWH has given you for eating. 16 This is the word that YHWH has commanded: Glean from it, each-man according to what he can eat, an omer per capita, according to the number of your persons, each-man, for those in his tent, you are to take. 17 The Children of Israel did thus, they gleaned, the-one-more and the-one-less, 18 but when they measured by the omer, no surplus had the-one-more, and the-one-less had no shortage; each-man had gleaned according to what he could eat.

(יג) ...וּבִבְקֹר הֵיטָה שְׁכַבַת הַטֵּל
סָבִיב לַמַּחֲנֶה : (יד) וַתֵּעַל שְׁכַבַת הַטֵּל
וְהָיָה עַל פְּנֵי הַמִּדְבָּר דֶּק מְחֻסָּפֶס דֶּק
כִּפְפֹּר עַל הָאָרֶץ : (טו) וַיֵּרְאוּ בְנֵי
יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל אָחִיו מִן
הוּא כִּי לֹא יָדְעוּ מַה הוּא וַיֹּאמְרוּ
מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הָעָם הוּא הַלֶּחֶם אֲשֶׁר נָתַן
יְקֹוֹק לָכֶם לֶאֱכֹלָה : (טז) זֶה הַדִּבָּר
אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' לָקֶטְו מִמֶּנּוּ אִישׁ לְפִי
אֲכָלוּ עֹמֶר לְגִלְגֵּלַת מִסְפַּר נַפְשֵׁיכֶם
אִישׁ לְאִשֶּׁר בְּאֵהָלוֹ תִקְחוּ : (יז) וַיַּעֲשׂוּ
כֹן בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּלְקְטוּ הַמֶּרְבָּה
וְהִמְמַעִיטוּ : (יח) וַיִּמְדּוּ בַעֲמֹר וְלֹא
הָעֲדִיף הַמֶּרְבָּה וְהִמְמַעִיט לֹא הִחְסִיר
אִישׁ לְפִי אֲכָלוּ לְקֶטְו :

A.W.: Then the Torah provides us another parable on this same theme, a story that points toward the healing of the disaster at the end of Eden. This is the parable of manna and Shabbat (Exodus 16). For in this story, as in Eden, the Great Provider showers *adam* again with almost free abundance. The only work the Israelites need to do is to walk forth every morning and gather the manna—a strange “vegetation” that is like coriander seed but far more nourishing.

No sweat, no toil, no thorns or thistles. Self-restraint is built in: Anyone who tries to gather more than enough to eat for a day finds that the extra rots and stinks. On the sixth day, enough manna falls to feed the people for another day, and it does not rot. It will meet their needs for the seventh day. On the seventh day, Shabbat, no manna falls. Self-restraint is again built in. But the two versions of self-restraint are quite different.

What was the self-restraint required in Eden? What was the self-restraint required in the wilderness when the Manna appeared? How do they differ?

III. SPIRITUAL PRACTICE & THE LAND: SHMITA AND ITS FAILURE

A. Leviticus 25:1-4, 6, 10, 23.

1 YHWH spoke to Moshe at Mount Sinai, saying:

2 Speak to the Children of Israel, and say to them:

When you enter the land that I am giving you, the land is to cease, a Sabbath-ceasing to YHWH. 3 For six years you are to sow your field, for six years you are to prune your vineyard, then you are to gather in its produce, 4 but in the seventh year there shall be a Sabbath of Sabbath-ceasing for the land, a Sabbath to YHWH: your field you are not to sow, your vineyard you are not to prune... 6 Now the Sabbath-yield of the land (is) for you, for eating, for you, for your servant and for your handmaid, for your hired-hand and for your resident-settler who sojourn with you...

10 You are to hallow the year, the fiftieth year, proclaiming freedom throughout the land and to all its inhabitants; it shall be Homebringing for you, you are to return, each-man to his holding, each-man to his clan you are to return...

23 But the land is not to be sold in-harness, for the land is mine; for you are sojourners and resident-settlers with me...

(א) וַיִּדְבֹר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה בְּהַר סִינַי
(ב) לֵאמֹר: (ב) דַּבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם כִּי תָבֹאוּ אֶל הָאָרֶץ
אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי נֹתֵן לָכֶם וְשָׁבַתָה הָאָרֶץ שְׁבַת
לַה': (ג) שֵׁשׁ שָׁנִים תִּזְרַע שְׂדֶךְ וְשֵׁשׁ
שָׁנִים תִּזְמֹר כַּרְמְךָ וְאָסַפְתָּ אֶת
תְּבוּאָתָהּ: (ד) וּבַשְּׁנָה הַשְּׁבִיעִית שְׁבַת
שְׁבָתוֹן יִהְיֶה לָאָרֶץ שְׁבַת לַה' שְׂדֶךְ לֹא
תִזְרַע וְכַרְמְךָ לֹא תִזְמֹר: ... (ו) וְהָיְתָה
שְׁבַת הָאָרֶץ לָכֶם לֶאֱכֹלָה לָךְ וּלְעַבְדְּךָ
וְלָאֻמָּתָד וְלַשְׂכִּירָד וְלִתְּוָשְׁבֶד הַגָּרִים
עִמָּךְ: ...

(י) וְקִדַּשְׁתֶּם אֶת שְׁנַת הַחֲמִשִּׁים שָׁנָה
וְקִרְאתֶם דְּרוֹר בְּאָרֶץ לְכָל יֹשְׁבֶיהָ יוֹבֵל
הוּא תִהְיֶה לָכֶם וְשָׁבַתְם אִישׁ אֶל
אֲחֻזָּתוֹ וְאִישׁ אֶל מִשְׁפַּחְתּוֹ תָּשֻׁבוּ: ...

(כג) וְהָאָרֶץ לֹא תִמָּכַר לְצִמְתָּת כִּי לִי
הָאָרֶץ כִּי גֵרִים וְתוֹשְׁבִים אֵתֶם עִמָּדִי:

Can we apply these teachings in our day? How?

B1. Excerpts from Leviticus 26:14–46, especially verses 34–35 and 43

14 But if you do not hearken to me, by not observing all these commandments...

33 And you I will scatter among the nations; I will unsheath the sword against you, so that your land becomes a desolation and your cities become a wasteland. 34 Then the land will find-acceptance regarding its Sabbaths, all the days of desolation—when you are in the land of your enemies—then the land will enjoy-cessation, and find-acceptance regarding its Sabbaths. 35 All the days of desolation it will enjoy-cessation, since it did not enjoy-cessation during its Sabbaths when you were settled on it.

(יד) וְאִם לֹא תִשְׁמָעוּ לִי וְלֹא תַעֲשׂוּ אֶת
כָּל הַמִּצְוֹת הָאֵלֶּה: ...

(לג) וְאֶתְכֶם אֲזַרֶּה בַּגּוֹיִם וְהִרִיקְתִּי
אֲחֵרֵיכֶם חֶרֶב וְהָיְתָה אֶרְצְכֶם שְׁמָמָה
וְעָרֵיכֶם יִהְיוּ חֶרֶב: (לד) אִזּוּ תִרְצָה
הָאָרֶץ אֶת שְׁבָתֶיהָ כָּל יְמֵי הַשְּׁמָמָה
וְאֵתֶם בְּאָרֶץ אֲיִבֵיכֶם אִזּוּ תִשְׁבַּת הָאָרֶץ
וְהִרְצָת אֶת שְׁבָתֶיהָ: (לה) כָּל יְמֵי
הַשְּׁמָמָה תִּשְׁבַּת אֶת אֲשֶׁר לֹא שְׁבָתָהּ
בְּשָׁבָתֶיהֶם בְּשָׁבָתְכֶם עָלֶיהָ:

B2. II Chronicles 36

20 Those who survived the sword he exiled to Babylon, and they became his and his sons' servants till the rise of the Persian kingdom, 21 in fulfillment of the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, until the land paid back its sabbaths; as long as it lay desolate it kept sabbath, till seventy years were completed.

(כ) וַיִּגַּל הַשְּׂאֲרִית מִן הַחֶרֶב אֶל בָּבֶל
וַיְהִי לוֹ וּלְבָנָיו לְעַבְדִּים עַד מֶלֶךְ
מַלְכוּת פָּרֶס: (כא) לְמַלְאוֹת דְּבַר ה'
בְּפִי יִרְמְיָהוּ עַד רִצְתָהּ הָאָרֶץ אֶת
שְׁבָתוֹתֶיהָ כָּל יְמֵי הַשְּׁמָמָה שְׁבָתָהּ
לְמַלְאוֹת שְׁבָעִים שָׁנָה:

A.W.: Through drought and famine, pestilence and plague, through an exile that today we would call a flood of refugees, our Mother Earth will indeed “rest” by failing to be fruitful. (NB Verse 23 of this chapter is the end of the entire Bible.)

Are these disasters punishments? Consequences? How do we understand them, and what impact would they have on our lives today?