



SERMON B'CHUKKOTAI:¹ EYES DOWN FOR A FULL HARVEST

Student Rabbi Gabriel Webber, Saturday 25 May 2019
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue

- 1 Dwindling food supplies; pestilence; the ground baked dry, solid as copper: these may have been warnings 4,000 years ago – but today, in our era of climate change, Extinction Rebellion and an earth that is becoming increasingly inhospitable to life, this parashah feels ever more prescient. In fact, it reads almost like a news report, with the one exception that the author of the Levitical curses we read this morning treats God as being behind the natural disasters it foretells. The pestilence, the famine, the cattle disease: all were emanations of God.
- 2 We may not be comfortable with that theology. However, attributing personhood to environmental phenomena can also have a more positive, practical application. In the last few years, judges and legislators in countries all over the world, from New Zealand to India to Ecuador, have declared rivers to be legal persons with ‘human’ rights.² They decided that rivers are deserving of protection, should be able to go to court when their rights are breached, and should be assigned dedicated guardians at public expense as if they were children in need of wardship. India even extended this protection to glaciers, jungles and the air.³ They are all, now, legal persons, just like human beings – and their trustees are ready to sue.
- 3 Erin O’Donnell, an Australian specialist in water law, supports this innovation. Whenever companies are prosecuted for polluting water sources, she says, this is normally portrayed as being about preventing harm



to humans – “an increasingly convoluted and anthropocentric argument, which obscures the needs of nature”.⁴ Instead, Dr O’Donnell argues, we should see the prevention of harm to nature as an end in itself, and recognise that while humans are dependent on nature, nature does not exist to serve us.

- 4 Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch also saw natural forces and phenomena as having courses and characteristics of their own, independent of God. Contemplating the curses in our Torah reading, he turned the parashah on its head: the threat is not that God will intervene supernaturally to wreak destruction on the Israelites – rather, the threat is that God will stop intervening supernaturally and refrain from actively saving us from destruction, a Divine service that God currently provides. Then nature will behave as nature always behaves, and humankind will be at its mercy.
- 5 “The success of Israel’s endeavours,” he said, “is independent of the ordinary laws of cause and effect which rule the physical and political world around it. All external conditions were – and still are – against its birth and continued existence. God has only to turn away the Divine Face, and by itself Israel falls to ruin. Not its downfall, its continued existence is the historical miracle of God. Its downfall would be merely the results of the given causes in the natural course of events.”⁵
- 6 Swap the word ‘world’ for ‘Israel’, and suddenly we have a universal environmental message for today. But what could cause Israel (slash ‘the world’) to be so foolish as to bring about this chain of events? Why would we give up the miraculous bounty of our providential planet, with its fertile soil, its carefully balanced ecosystems, its bees and trees and oxygen?



- 7 A 5th century collection of rabbinic writings has one answer. The midrash known as Pesikta d'Rav Kahana speaks of “a man who had a son whom he placed on his shoulder and took to the market. There, when the son saw a desirable object, he said to his father, ‘Buy it for me,’ and his father bought for him what he wanted the first time he asked, the second time, and the third. But then, the son – still riding on his father’s shoulders – saw someone whom he asked, ‘Have you seen my father?’”⁶

- 8 The French writer Guy de Maupassant detested the Eiffel Tower so much that every day he would eat in its restaurant, because it was the only place in Paris from which he could not see the tower.⁷ That was a deliberate decision. But as we sit on God’s shoulders, we are, unintentionally, living our lives in just about the one place from which it’s difficult to see God... unless, that is, we stop and consciously look down. How easy it is to forget that it’s providence on which we’re relying. Luxury and plenty are the most effective blinkers... unless we look down.

- 9 God is not even an essential ingredient of this parable. Instead of being on God’s shoulders, we could picture ourselves as being on a river’s shoulders; or on the polar ice caps’ shoulders; or on the soil’s shoulders. We rely on and are nurtured by a delicate balance of natural forces. We are all enjoying a piggy-back on nature’s shoulders, yet all too easily forget to look down, see and recognise our benefactor.

- 10 True, these days we don’t look on scarcity and environmental disaster as a Divine punishment against those afflicted. It would be obscene for us to tune into a documentary about famine-stricken parts of the world and, tucking into the dinner on our laps, happily ascribe others’ food shortages to sin on their part. That’s not how the world works, and in modern times we know it.



- 11 Yet scarcity and environmental disaster are, indisputably, the consequences of our behaviour – ours. Humankind's. We may reject a theology where our Creator will turn violently against us should we behave contemptuously, where victims are blamed for their own suffering, but there is no doubt that nature will turn against us if wronged. The granting of legal rights and legal personhood to rivers and glaciers is a powerful symbol of this: polluted rivers can now come after us in court, through their guardians, but also they can and will come after us in their own way and through their own power.
- 12 If we abandon our duty to care for the earth, whether through forgetfulness, indifference, greed, selfishness, profit, political expediency... For whatever reason we take our gifts for granted, those gifts can and will dry up. God commanded us to care for the earth: "If you ruin it, no-one will come to put it right after you."⁸ If we don't heed that command, there will be consequences. We can call those consequences punishment, call them curses, call them basic science. The end result is the same. Our earth will become as hard and unyielding and inhospitable as copper.
- 13 The curses of Leviticus 26 are nasty and chilling. The Torah contains no shortage of death and destruction – yet the sheer, protracted, almost poetic malevolence of these verses makes for deeply unpleasant reading. But their jarring nature provides a much-needed reminder to us, the readers, as we sit on nature's shoulders, enjoying the earth's bounty without recalling that we have to give something back to those who are giving us a piggy-back. The reminder is: look down. Eyes down. Eyes down for a full harvest. Kein y'hi ratzon; may this be God's will.

Check against delivery.

GW 25.05.19



¹ Leviticus 26:14-28

² Erin L O'Donnell and Julia Talbot-Jones. "Creating legal rights for rivers: lessons from Australia, New Zealand, and India" in *Ecology and Society* 23 (2018): 7-16.

³ Shyam Krishnakumar. "Could making the Ganges a 'person' save India's holiest river?", *BBC News* (5 April 2017): <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-39488527>>

⁴ O'Donnell and Talbot-Jones, *ibid*: 8.

⁵ Samson Raphael Hirsch on Leviticus 26:23-24

⁶ Pesikta d'Rav Kahana, piska 3

⁷ Roland Barthes. *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997): 1.

⁸ Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13