

**Tending the Garden, Healing the Self
Erev Rosh Hashanah
5777**

It was a surreal experience, almost supernatural in its affect. As we strolled down the gently winding path, the trees, bushes and flowers seemed to encircle us upon entering a veritable tunnel of living, vibrant green. The flora was of every variety, far more than are indigenous to the Northwest, as if we had walked into our own, private arboretum, or through some looking glass into a fairy-tale forest.

But there was more than mere beauty in this moment—*there was connection*—a bond with my wife with whom I trekked this magical sojourn; a bond with my surroundings that transcended the words to describe it; and a bond with the God who

created such myriad forms of life, instilling in me an appreciation that inspired and empowered my spirit.

This was my first visit to the Bloedel Reserve in a treasured corner of Bainbridge Island, the estate of the Bloedel family gifted to all of us.

Cindy and I enjoy hiking, from moderate ambles to more strenuous climbs. It's precious time to be together, but also to do so in ways that literally *feed our souls*, providing mooring through the constants of transition or upheaval, reminding us that we are a part of something larger than ourselves, both in this world and beyond.

The Bloedels are only some of many who valued the necessity of time spent in nature.

Perhaps the most famous conservationist, John

Muir, affirmed that: “*Between every two pine trees there is a door leading to a new way of life.*” For Muir, a walk in the forest was more than recreation—it inspired a *re-creation* of self.

Even American Presidents acknowledged the significance of securing these spaces for an expansive, fast-growing nation. Theodore Roosevelt’s efforts were realized a century ago this last August, as the National Parks Service celebrated its centennial.

And who better to laud this bounty than we who live in the Pacific Northwest, perhaps one of the last, and certainly one of the most awe-inspiring, natural frontiers remaining in our nation. It is one of the main reasons so many move here, and why so many stay.

We humans seem hard-wired to resonate with time spent in nature, a kind of reawakening of our essential, elemental selves. It is a bond often loosened or lost in the urban, concrete cocoons that separate us from one another, alienate us from the world as it really is, and obscure from us the majesty of Creation. Brain science backs this up, with many psychological maladies shown to stem from city-life lacking in green spaces. Walks in the woods are a proven remedy, actually capable of changing our brain chemistry for the better.

From a religious perspective, this integral connection to the natural world is implicit and innate. It is no coincidence that for many faith traditions, the most direct experiences with God

happen in the wilderness. Jesus struggled in the desert and the garden of Gethsemane, Buddha meditated under the Bodhi Tree, and our people found God and revelation at the foot of a sun-baked mountain. This is more than merely the recorded rejection of city life by farmers and nomads. It is a profound awareness that God's Creation renders even the loftiest of human endeavors to be miniscule by comparison.

Jewish tradition imprinted the importance of the natural world as expression of God's blessing in the first chapters of Genesis. Most acutely, humankind is commanded regarding the earth: "L'ovda u'l'shomra"...often translated as *to till and to tend or to cultivate and to protect* nature. The more subtle meaning of the Hebrew conveys

a deeper truth about our sacred stewardship of divine gift. The root “avad”, translated as *till or cultivate*, also expresses our worship of God. And the root “shamar”, translated as *tend or protect*, is used to describe our relationship to the Sabbath. Thus, our responsibilities to nature are deeply rooted in our faith.

Later, our festivals became linked to the cycles of nature in the Near East, as our agrarian ancestors sought to praise God and express thanks for God’s beneficence through offerings from the fields. And some of the greatest biblical poetry and allusion emerged from descriptions of nature’s beauty, words thought to be the most eloquent way to address God within the limits of human language. The Prophet Amos inspired us

through the oratory of Dr. King that “justice rolls down like water and righteousness like a might stream.” Song of Songs conveyed passion for a lover and God as, “Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest, so is my beloved among young men. I delight to sit in his shade, and his fruit is sweet to my taste.”

The meaning of all of this is clear: Our relationship with the natural world—our efforts to cherish and safeguard it—are nothing less than direct expressions of our regard, respect and gratitude for God. And so, too, is the converse. When we are careless or wantonly waste natural resources, we insult the Cosmic Craftsman and diminish God’s light in our lives.

Some of my best and most enduring memories of youth are rooted in my time at Camp Swig in California. More than even the immersive experience of daily Jewish living with soon-to-be-life-long-friends, the stirring grandeur of the Santa Cruz Mountains defined those halcyon days that affirmed my identity as a Jew and planted the seeds of my decision to become a rabbi.

I've spoken before on the Holidays about the transforming power and indispensable need for Shabbat, a time to put aside the work-a-day worries of the week and to embrace those people and parts of our lives that often get short shrift. In so many ways, we need this respite far more now than did our ancestors in a pastoral past free from our enslavement to schedules, stresses and

the tyranny of constant connection. We Jews, who gave this gift of a day to the world, should at the very least embrace for ourselves its healing help more authentically and more regularly.

The Sabbath's most famous modern advocate was the eminent sage Abraham Joshua Heschel. Heschel described Shabbat as a "cathedral in time." He sought to emphasize both Judaism's value system that transcended the physical, and the historic constraints that often prevented our exiled and pursued people from finding the stability of established nation or the majesty of national shrine. *But they couldn't take time from us*—that unique 24 hours spanning evening to evening that secured holiness in the temporal.

Now that we are better ensconced and far safer as modern Americans than any previous generation of Jews in any nation, perhaps we should consider expanding our Sabbath ritual to once again encompass sacred space as well as time. And the most compelling of Sabbath space is the Sanctuary of Creation, the natural world, a place we should visit as regularly and ritually as we observe the Sabbath itself. It is reclamation of the foundations of the past, an embrace of our birthright, an honoring of our heritage.

Especially with today's frenetic pace and hyper-driven passions, the only way to truly reflect on who we are and what we want—the only way to invest in our best selves and those dearest to us--is to disconnect from typical time and place,

and to create a different way of being, if only for a few hours on a Saturday afternoon. It's why the weekend Shabbaton at a Jewish camp is vitally important to Jewish education and experience.

We are *other* people in that *other* time and space.

And now for some practical suggestions:

First, a caveat: I'm not suggesting that everyone needs to take a wilderness trek up the Pacific Crest Trail or live off the grid in a tent eating freshly caught forest critters and engaging life's daily necessities *au natural*. Those who know me know that I'm not the camping type. I believe that our people spent 40 years in the desert, and that was enough of the REI life-style for anybody.

For the rest of us, I'm suggesting integrating a Shabbat walk or hike into your regular weekend

routine. For we Puget Sounders, it's like falling off a log—*literally!* All of us live within 10 minutes of beautiful vistas, gorgeous parks, stunning rivers and eminently climbable mountains. And don't even try to argue that it's gray and rainy 10 months of the year here. We invented the Winter, gortex-clad bike-ride. If we feared a little wet and cold, we'd never leave home.

If you can commit to adding this to your weekly routine, reclaiming Sabbath time *and* space for yourself and your family, you may be surprised at the impact--the profound power of taking the time and discovering the place where your best self lies, discovering those whom we love and often lose during the week, and perhaps even discovering God, not in sacred myth or rote

words, but in the teeming life force of the natural world of which we are an inextricable part.

Particularly in recent months and years, as the doom of economic struggle and the gloom of the political process have beaten us down, fostering cynicism and despair, a reminder of the simple, singular fundamentals of life and living might be the very thing we've sought and needed.

The Genesis story provides a potent metaphor for this experience through the Garden of Eden. It is the world's womb from which we came, a primal origin from which we've strayed. In our tradition, the messianic world we seek to create with God will be a return to Eden. It is a universal message also espoused by Crosby,

**Stills and Nash, whose version of Joni Mitchell's
song Woodstock reminds and inspires us:**

***We are stardust, we are golden,
We are billion year old carbon,
And we got to get ourselves back to the garden.***

**As we enter this season of renewal, repentance
and recommitment, let us get ourselves back to
the garden whose fountains nourish us, a living
and breathing home that binds us to our Creator,
rooting us in who we truly are, and who we aspire
to be. Amen.**