

Mending the world, renewing the sacred balance: *A Jewish perspective*

Based on an interview with Arliene Botnick

The most basic ecological teaching of Judaism is that humanity is made from the earth: *adam* (humankind) is formed out of *adamah* (earth, soil). We are connected with the Earth from the moment of our creation.

The whole of the Earth is a gift from God. As Psalm 24 says, "The Earth is God's and all that is in it." The Earth is not our possession; it belongs to God. We are not meant to dominate the Earth, but to care for it.

In the Talmud there is a story about an old man who was planting a carob tree as a king rode by.

"Old man," the king called out, "how old are you?"

The man replied, "Seventy years old, your majesty."

"How long before that tree you are planting will bear fruit?"

"About 70 years or so," the old man replied.

"Do you expect to eat the fruit of the tree you are planting?" the king asked.

"Of course not, your majesty, but I found a fruitful world because my ancestors planted for me. And so I will do for my children and grandchildren."

Similarly, a rabbinical commentary on Leviticus 19:23 teaches that:

"When you come into the land, you shall plant all manner of trees for food. Even though you will find it full of all good, do not say that we shall sit idly by and not plant by ourselves. Rather, be careful to fulfil the obligation of plant-

ing. Just as you entered and found plants that had been planted by others, you too must plant for your children."

These texts teach us that we must care for the Earth for future generations. We must look ahead and see the consequence of our actions—and not only think about our immediate benefit.

Judaism is rooted in the cycle of the seasons. We use a lunar/solar calendar and are conscious of the ebb and flow of the seasons. At the festival of *Tu B'Shevat*, we celebrate the new year of the trees with a Seder meal that reconnects us with the fruits of the Earth. We also connect the Torah—the Divine Law—with the image of the Tree of Life. Some mystics use the image of a tree rooted in heaven, drawing God's blessings down and renewing the Earth.

At the festival of *Sukkot*, we live in three-sided huts made of wood and thatch, open to the stars above. This reminds us that we must be thankful, first and foremost, not for the dwellings that we have made, but rather for the habitation of God's world.

Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav (1772-1810) taught that, "Every blade of grass has its own tune. And from the tunes of the blades of grass, a melody is composed." Creation manifests the beauty of God.

Unfortunately, we have lost sight of this sacred balance. We take the beauty and goodness of the Earth for granted. There is a

On *Tu B'Shevat*
when spring comes
An angel descends
ledger in hand
and enters each bud, each twig
each tree and all our garden flowers.
From town to town
from village to village
the angel makes a winged way
searching the valleys
inspecting the hills
flying over the desert
and returns to heaven.
And when the ledger will be full
of trees and blossoms and shrubs
when the desert is turned into
a meadow
and all our land a watered garden
the Messiah will appear.

(By Israeli poet Shin Shalom
Read at the festival of *Tu B'Shevat*)

saying that, "If the sun weren't to rise tomorrow, then we would realize how important the rising of the sun is." We take for granted the gift of the air, water and land. Creation is amazing, but it can only remain so if we act as partners with God in maintaining it.

In Judaism, we speak of "*Tikkun olam*"—our responsibility to work for the mending of the world as partners with God. We must undertake this responsibility in the land where we live, in this here and now. We are all called to renew the sacred balance that God created.∞

Arliene Botnick has been the Director of Education at the Solel Reform Jewish Synagogue in Mississauga, Ontario, for the past 17 years.



The interdependent web of all existence: *A Unitarian perspective*

By Rev. Peter Boullata and Ellen Campbell

Unlike many religious groups, Unitarians do not have a creed or a statement of belief to which adherents are expected to agree. Our source of moral and spiritual authority is individual conscience. We are committed to freedom of belief.

What holds us together is a covenant—an agreement to support one another in our own spiritual quests and to abide by agreed-upon standards and principles in terms of the way we live our lives.

Throughout Unitarian history, our way of expressing these principles has changed. What has not changed is our commitment to faith in individual conscience in its quest for Truth, democratic decision-making, and justice and equity for all.

In 1985, the Unitarian Universalist Association—the continental body of Unitarian and Universalist congregations in North America—adopted a revised set of principles. The Seventh principle, "Respect for the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part," is the "Golden Rule" by which we propose to live.

It is not enough to say that the natural world functions as a mutually-supporting system of diverse organisms that we observe from the outside. Rather, human beings are an integral part of this larger network of organisms. Humankind is neither above the natural world nor outside it. We are embedded within the delicate, interrelated web of

creation, a strand woven into the whole.

For Westerners, this world-view is quite different from the conventional way of understanding our relationship to the world around us. For many centuries, human beings in the West have viewed themselves as "the crown of creation," the pinnacle of God's creative work. In the Western tradition, humans have seen themselves at the top of a pyramid of the created order, standing above animals, plants and other life forms.

Accordingly, we have viewed culture and nature as being in opposition to one another. Little wonder that we have lived our lives in ways that ignore the Earth and its natural cycles. But to see ourselves as part of an interdependent web—this is really quite different from believing that our own human achievements are to be viewed as being at the centre of things, or that this world is an illusion; or that this world is something to be endured until we get to our true home in the afterlife.

To understand ourselves as part of this immense web, connected to a vast web of others, we have to know and understand the place where we are. In a world of dislocations and environmental disasters, one of the most saving things we can do is love the place where we are.

Our location—the particular place where we are—contains and reflects the whole. We are called to unlearn the binary oppo-

"WE AFFIRM AND PROMOTE RESPECT FOR THE INTERDEPENDENT WEB OF ALL EXISTENCE OF WHICH WE ARE A PART."
(Unitarian principle)

sitions of "self-other," "subject-object," "them-us." Instead, we must live our connectedness to the interrelated, interdependent networks that are the web of life on this planet. We love here. We act here (locally). We think globally.

Love where you are. Live where you are. We can only adequately love and belong to the Earth if we can love and belong to our neighbourhood. We can only live wisely in our chosen place when we recognize its connections to the rest of the world. We care for the Earth because we are part of it—the Earth is our home. We care for those around us because we and they are all part of the same interdependent community.∞

Rev. Peter Boullata works as a Unitarian minister in Fenton, Michigan. Ellen Campbell is a former executive director of the Canadian Unitarian Council. Currently, she is the president of the International Association for Religious Freedom. Ellen lives in Toronto.

