

## **Naso 5777**

### **Of emptiness and fullness**

In 1990 I was living in London, working as a book editor in one of my many careers prior to the rabbinate. One evening I went to the pub with a friend. She introduced me to another friend - Bernadette Vallely, the head of the Women's Environmental Network. Bernadette had just secured a contract for a book about the environment for teenagers and wanted to share the writing. At that point I knew next to nothing about the environment, or, indeed, that 'the environment' was even a thing. But I knew that I could write; and so Bernadette and I settled into a routine of six months' work, because there was a deadline to meet.

I learned fast. I learned about acid rain, about the greenhouse effect, about just how much effect it can have when a lightbulb that's been left on is turned off or vice versa, about how the aluminum cans we throw away in a relatively short period of time could encircle the equator not once but a few times. I learned about forests and irradiation and dioxins. I learned about carbon footprints and water consumption and the food industry. But most of all I regained a pervasive sense of wonder. The more I researched, the more I came away stunned that I happen to be alive at all; that the planet on which all of us live is at exactly the correct distance from the sun to sustain life, that its ecosystems are so perfectly calibrated, that the particular combination of its oceans and its landmasses is - so far as we know - unique in the universe. Unique, and uniquely precious.

So it won't surprise you to hear that my heart is hurting this morning. As I contemplate the step that this nation's withdrawal from the Paris Accords represents, as I consider its implications for the 195 nations remaining, I am disappointed and frustrated - but most of all, I am bewildered. There's something here that is so obvious to me, but clearly not to others; and that in itself is a source of pain.

As ever when I'm hurting I look to the wisdom of our tradition. As it turns out, I didn't have to look far. Only last week I was teaching the Melton unit on Jewish environmental ethics, which contains a pungent little story from the Talmud (BT Bava Kamma 50b) that I want to tell you (I've expanded it somewhat from the original).

*Once upon a time there was a man. And the man had a garden, which he was rather fond of. But there were a lot of big stones in the garden. So one day he started to push the stones over his fence and on to the public land beyond it.*

*An old man came by and watched him for a bit as he tugged and sweated. And then the old man said to him, 'You're an idiot.' 'That's not very polite!' retorted the man. 'You're an idiot,' repeated the old man, 'why are you removing stones from land that doesn't belong to you and putting them on land that does?'*

*'I'm pretty clear about who the idiot is in this conversation,' thought the man with the garden, and he carried on clearing stones as he watched the old man disappear down the street, sniggering quietly to himself.*

*But a while after that he came upon hard times and had to sell his garden. He closed the gate sadly and walked on to the public land beyond it, when - crash! - he tripped over all the stones he had pushed over the fence. And as he sat there rubbing his bruises, he remembered what the old man had told him - 'why are you removing stones from ground which is not yours to ground which is yours?'*

The moral of the story is obvious, of course. It erases the human fabrication of a private domain and reminds us that in the end, everything is public. It's the same contention as underlies my own bewilderment - how can it be possible for anyone, any one nation, to think it can 'withdraw' itself from a reality that is inherently shared?

The answer, I think, has to lie in the state of mind the story attributes to the man with the garden. As ever, translations are insufficient; the word I rendered as 'idiot,' is more meaningful. *Reika!* the old man calls him. It means, empty one.

*Reika* doesn't just give us the sense that the man has nothing in his head. It also suggests an emptiness of soul, a kind of existential isolation that makes it impossible to recognize how things connect to each other. It becomes impossible to string thoughts together such that actions have consequences, or that relationships imply responsibilities, or that resources can be finite. In the misguided blankness of *reikanut*, there is nothing but the immediate gratification of hefting the stones over the fence, and there's an end to it.

This hollow rhetoric of emptiness is in striking contrast to another register of language we use of the planet. *l'adonai ha-aretz u'melo'o* says Psalm 24 - the earth and all its fullness belong to God, are of God; *melo kol ha-aretz k'vodo*, teaches Isaiah - there is no place that is empty of God's presence. If that is the case, then to be a *reika* implies a kind of wilful ignorance, a removing of oneself from the proper flow of things, from a world in which everything is interconnected, collective and common. Not only does the man's garden not belong to him; the public ground doesn't either. He is merely a steward for the true Owner - a steward who takes a little time to learn the lesson.

The first creation narrative in the Torah teaches that human beings are on the top of the pile, commanded to subdue and conquer the earth. But in the way of Torah, this narrative is immediately followed by another - one in which human beings, made of the same matter as the earth itself, are placed in the fullness of a garden and commanded *le-ovdah u'leshomrah* - to serve it and to preserve it. This attitude of respectful obligation is another thing that the *reika* doesn't seem to understand. Don't bother him, though; he's too busy moving stones - even though to do so is pointless.

This week, this morning, the tradition answers me; don't be a *reika*. Don't buy the idea that the earth 'belongs' to anyone. Instead, try to see how everything is connected; remember what you were put here to do; be respectful; be a good steward.

And that choice is still open to all of us sitting here. The truth is that no leader, no organization, no country, no agreement or lack of agreement has the power, on its own, to destroy this wonder on which we have the privilege to live, this fragile, beautiful, misty blue pearl that we had no hand in creating, though we could still destroy. I am proud that the Mayor of this city is one of the 86 mayors across the country who have committed to honor and uphold the goals of the Paris Accords. But we should not be leaving this to our leaders. Each of us is part of the whole, part of the fullness. Each of us can and should take our own personal steps to modify our impact on the planet, to consider our carbon footprint, to walk more lightly and respectfully on the earth. If you want information about that, there's plenty out there, or I'm happy to put together a list.

Human beings were created with free will, our tradition teaches. Each of us has the choice to be a *reika* if we want to. But we can choose instead to commit to fullness, to wonder, and to the service and preservation of this garden that our tradition teaches was gifted to us at the very start of things, and of which we too are a part.

Shabbat shalom.