

Rosh HaShanah Torah Service – 2022/5783

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This year on this 1st day of the New Year, we're entering into Torah by focusing on a passage that we see every week in our liturgy, the 2nd paragraph of the Shema. The liturgy of the Shema flows in a powerful and intentional order. We start with Shema – Listen! – be aware that however you conceive of God (and of course, there are MANY conceptions), this is a God that is all-encompassing and unified. Then, Baruch Shem Kavod - however we name or understand this God, it is held in honor and as sovereign, for all time. Then the V'Ahavta, when we are instructed to love this God and to weave awareness of God's presence into our daily lives and into the lives of future generations. And then, we come to the paragraph we're going to read today: If you love and serve God with all your heart, I will grant you rain, and you shall gather in your new grain and wine and oil. If you are lured away to serve other Gods, there will be no rain and you will soon perish from the good land that God is assigning to you.

On its face, it's a classic statement of reward & retribution – if you follow the laws, then good things will happen. If you don't, bad things will happen. Simple, right? Well, no. As we well know, it's never that simple. As we look closely into it, it's a profound statement about living in alignment – with the earth, with each other, with ourselves, with our most deeply held values, with God and God's commandments – and what are the actual and potential consequences of doing so or not doing so. What is the reciprocal relationship; what is the cause and effect?

Here's what theologian Judith Plaskow says about this paragraph:

It is not necessary to read this paragraph of the Sh'ma as a literal statement about divine reward and punishment. In a world whose survival depends partly on the human capacity to value creation and care for it wisely, it is possible to interpret the passage more naturalistically. If we are to develop an ecological consciousness, if we treat the earth with respect, if we are aware that we are embedded in a great web of life of which God is the ultimate source and sustainer, then the earth will bear fruit for us and the rain will come in its season. But if we believe that we can trample on or transcend the constraints of nature, if we forget the sacredness of all things and make idols of our own wealth and power, then "the earth will not grant its produce," and both we and our world may perish.

For us humans, we are challenged to view this web of relationships without us being at the center. Doing so is potentially transformative, and absolutely necessary. We are part of a web. We are connected, profoundly. Recalling Victoria's words from last night, ideally we see and experience the mountains as our relations – or we can at least move in that direction.

If we act as though the earth is an object, rather than our sacred partner, we reap consequences. We have the capacity to do good; we have the capacity to do harm, knowingly and unknowingly. As we enter into Torah together this morning, let it help us fully see and feel our interrelationships. Let it help us live, this day and every day, as we most deeply believe we ought to live.