The Ecological Message of the Holy Days

From The Splendor of Creation: A Biblical Ecology

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Many years ago I asked my friend Jeffrey Dekro, a pretty serious guy, what was compelling to him about Judaism, and he answered very simply, "it's fun." I couldn't believe my ears. Judaism, fun? Meaningful, yes; transformative, maybe; but fun? I realized that he was talking about the holidays, but I had never had any fun on a Jewish holiday before; I had known them as solemn, mournful or boring occasions. Still, I thought he might be on to something and I began to explore for myself.

Over time, I understood that the holidays were not, as I had once thought, isolated moments that fell randomly throughout the year, commemorating historical events to which I felt no connection. The festivals marked the seasons—the joy of rain at its proper time, the ingathering of an abundant harvest and the birthing of the lambs—long before they were associated with historical significance. The holy days were bound to each other and to the world in a grand seasonal tapestry. And while we are not connected to nature in the way our ancestors were, and few of us depend on the agricultural cycle for our livelihood, the light of the holy days, the light shed by the sun and the moon on these special occasions, can capture the moods of the different seasons and connect us to nature and our souls.

While I was exploring the possibilities of the holy days of my own tradition, artist Chris Wells was teaching me about how pageantry and parades—the holy day festivities in other traditions—can capture the imagination of an entire community and move them towards an ecological vision and practice. Having participated in the festivals of many native cultures in South America, Chris decided that what the Earth needed was its own holy day and he created All Species Day. His goal was to raise the community's consciousness about the wonder and diversity of life and to engage them in its protection. Every year the folks at the All Species Project would work with the schools and community groups to generate interest in the species and habitats of the world, and every spring, the residents of Santa Fe, old and young alike, would don their home-made environmentally-friendly creature costumes, and gather together on foot, in carriages, on stilts, in wheelbarrows, on roller blades, on bicycle or horseback to proudly participate in the All Species Parade.
Chris taught me about the power of holy day festivals to pull a community together and transmit a serious ecological message within a celebratory context. Holy day celebrations, when conceived and executed sensitively, have the unique ability to change peoples' attitudes and behaviors because people participate fully with bodies, minds, hearts and souls. Participants are so subtly changed by their experience that they often don't realize that something is happening to them. Contrast this with the kind of religious moral education that too often yields a negative re-action.

When I founded the Jewish environmental organization Shomrei Adamah, Keepers of the Earth, I was convinced that the Jewish holy days offered a treasure chest of wisdom and practices that could be used in the service of Judaism's spiritual heritage and in service of the earth, and I began to explore the possibilities.

Tu B'Sh'vat, the Jewish new year of the trees, does not immediately come to mind when you think of the Jewish holy days. It was neglected for most of the twentieth century, relegated to pediatric status as a tree-planting day for children. But it is, in fact, the perfect environmental holy day, a time to celebrate nature and our soulful connection to it.

Established in rabbinic times as a day to pay taxes on the fruit trees, Tu B'Sh'vat was invigorated by the kabbalists, the mystics of Safed, in the 1600's. They created a *seder*, a ritual following a particular order, to celebrate the day. You can imagine a Tu B'Sh'vat seder as a four-course ritual meal organized around the kabbalistic four worlds of Atzilut (spirit), Briyah (thought), Yetzirah (emotion) and Assiyah (doing)—each course consisting of biblical and mystical readings about nature, garnished with fruits, wines and blessings. The more fruit you eat and the more wine you drink, the more blessings you're required to say, the more the earth is healed.

I was eager to develop a Tu B'Sh'vat ritual that could evoke the kind of mystical experience of soul and nature envisioned by the kabbalists, and at the same time lift Tu B'Sh'vat out of relative obscurity and provide it the visibility it deserves.
My desire was to create, in ecophilosopher David Abram's words, a "spell of the sensuous. " Because a "sense of place" is such a subtle but vital aspect of ecological (and I might add religious) education, I chose to set my first seder in one of Philadelphia's boathouses on the banks of the Schuylkill River. In this seder, the kabbalistic four worlds translate naturally into the elements of earth, water, air and fire and they set the stage for the ritual drama. Artists in the community decorated the space and created a virtual Garden of Eden, a garden of earthly and heavenly delights. The 200 guests at the Seder became creatures from the worlds of earth, water, air or fire and dressed accordingly. People entered the space and took their places in silence. World-by-world, we read from the seder, ate fruit and drank wine, listened to musical offerings composed by local musicians, sang, and laughed. And world-by-world, we observed stillness, contemplated our place in nature and made blessings. Integrating pageantry, art and theatre along with religious insights and ecological understandings, we created a beautiful and evocative new ritual for Tu B'Sh'vat.

According to the kabbalists, the point of the seder is to repair the world. Repair of the world begins with repair of our minds. On Tu B'Sh'vat we are asked to overcome the fundamental flaw of our consciousness (that began when Adam ate the apple): our belief that we are the Masters of Creation and that the earth belongs to us. "The earth belongs to God," sang the Psalmist. We are all part of one interwoven system and we all belong to God. The Seder provides the context for us to recognize our utter dependence on the Creator for all the fruits of Creation. Through our blessings and our humility we give back in gratitude to the Maker of all, and so participate in the process of repair.

Just as Tu B'Sh'vat offers a way for us to tune into the soul of the world and our own souls and practice *tikkun* or repair, so do many holy days in all traditions. In Jewish tradition, the holy days, particularly the "high holidays" (Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur) and the agricultural holidays, Succot, Passover and Shavuot can act as a compass to orient us to who we are and where we're going in our personal and spiritual lives at periodic intervals throughout the year. Festivals are invitations to capture the seasonal moments and celebrate them.

The Jewish year, Rosh Hashanah begins in the fall as the days are growing shorter. Flowers have peaked and gone to seed, and nature is turning inwards, preparing for winter. All the world is in a state of change. Rabbi David Zeller calls Rosh Hashanah (literally head/*rosh* of the year /*shana*)"Change Head" day, because *shana* also means "to change." The autumn welcomes the change, blows off our dead leaves and invites us go inside to change our minds (abandon the hold societal norms have on us), and return to our true being in preparation for the next round of life. The renewal in nature invites the renewal of our souls.

Sukkot, following quick on the heels of the New Year, is the harvestfest and the beginning of the rainy season; time to gather in the fruits and vegetables of the year's labors. Many Jews build flimsy little huts called sukkot to commemorate the shacks the ancient Israelites built to store their harvest (some say sukkot commemorate the journey in wilderness).

With its festive decorations—like twinkly lights and miniature pumpkins—and its unassuming posture, the sukkah has always found its way into my heart. It's a *mitzvah* to make the sukkah beautiful, and in Mt. Airy, we enjoy a friendly sukkah decorating competition. My friend Anna fancies herself a Jewish Martha Stewart and she's always concocting new Sukkot recipes using green beans, squash, potatoes and fresh herbs from her garden, and decorating her sukkah with make-shift window dressings of cheery fabrics she finds hidden away in a closet. One year I grew a garden full of gourds just to have exotic decorations for my sukkah. Now I cultivate many late blooming flowers: cleome, Mexican sunflower, zinnias, goldenrod, boltonia and asters. I collect seed pods—the best are blackberry lilies—grasses, and spent yarrow, and make lavish bouquets to hang upside down from the rafters.

In this neighborhood on the Saturday afternoon of Sukkot (Sukkot lasts eight days), you'll see hundreds of people enjoying the annual Sukkah walk, strolling, biking, and pushing carriages up and down the streets, admiring the simple beauty or each sukkah, delighting in the bounty (we all cook up a storm; my standard is sweet potato soup), and the pleasure of the company. On Sukkot, you're actually commanded to be joyful. I love this idea. It's as if we've forgotten how to be happy and must be taught. The Bible says that true joy comes by inviting all of your friends, including your long departed ancestors, and a few strangers to squeeze into your open-air hut for a big picnic or a sleepover, no matter rain or shine.

At the end of Sukkot comes Simchat Torah, and with it one of the most beautiful prayers in all of Jewish liturgy—the prayer for rain. This prayer eloquently expresses our utter dependence on God for rain and water and food and life. And this is cause for celebration. In my community everyone—old and young alike—join in the wild singing and dancing (a little schnapps helps those who are more stiff). On Simchat

Torah, more than at any other time in the calendar, I have a fleeting glimpse of God's presence in the world. I get a little giddy seeing that my community's renewal is inextricably tied to the renewal of the land, food and rains. We are indeed One.

Passover heralds the end of the winter rains, the beginning of spring, time to embrace our freedom and pay attention to the ripening grains. My most memorable Passover was a backpacking trip in the Grand Canyon with a group of science teachers about twenty-five years ago. While my companions were all enjoying the variety of rock formations, I was re-enacting the Exodus. I wanted to live the experience of liberation on a trek through the wilderness.

My new friends were eager to celebrate Passover too so I instructed them in the symbols of Passover and sent them on a scavenger hunt to discover what artifacts they might find for the seder plate. They returned laden with various skeletal remains licked clean by wolves to serve as shankbone(s), a variety of greens for *karpas*, sage for bitter herbs, and Indian paintbrush and other wildflowers for a festive centerpiece. I had brought a few pieces of *matzah* and some apples and nuts for *haroset*. As the sun set we gathered together for a homemade vegetable feast cooked over a little camp stove. We found a beautiful spot where the red canyon wall formed an overhang to protect us from any possible rain, and there, cradled in the most awesome river canyon with the full moon rising overhead, we sat and talked the night away, asking and answering questions, eating, and telling stories of our own liberation.
Passover is not just a holy day in and of itself; it is the beginning of the observance of the season of spring. It marks the start of the omer, the 49-day period between Passover and Shavuot when the Israelites watched and waited for their spring grains to sprout and grow. The ancients were understandably apprehensive about their crops at this time and they marked each day. Too much rain in spring could ruin the tender shoots of wheat and barley; no grain meant there would be no bread in the coming year.

In medieval times, the mystics who lived in cities did not till the soil, yet they still took the omer seriously, counting the days between Passover and Shavuot. They were on the lookout for the hidden energies, the subtle nuances of each day. They believed that the omer period was the time for personal transformation. Just as the vigorous trek through the empty wilderness had the effect of cleansing the Israelites so that they could receive the Torah at Mount Sinai with a pure heart, the kabbalists felt we all can purify ourselves by invoking the energies of each day of the omer in preparation for the culminating revelation on Shavuot. They developed a mystical calendar by which we could tap into the subtle qualities of the days, and so transform ourselves.

Shavuot marks the end of the Omer and with it the ripening of the wheat and God's revelation of the Torah to the people. It is time to bake two loaves of wheat bread to offer up in gratitude for the rain in its proper season, two loaves to give back to complete the cycle of life, the cycle of giving and receiving.

The last of the holidays of the Jewish year is Tisha B'Av. Although a minor holiday, it holds ecological significance for me. It falls in mid-summer, invariably during a Philadelphia heat wave—this year we're in the midst of the worst drought we've had since the 60's. Pennsylvania's primary income is from agriculture, and all of our

crops are withering. My garden is parched and so am I.   People are even selling their livestock.

These are the dog days of summer. I don't have to look at the calendar to know Tisha B'Av is coming. Tisha B'Av remembers the destruction of both of the ancient Temples (in 546 and 70 BCE), the breakdown of Judaism's center, the drying up of the wellspring of life. It is a time of profound grief and loss, of haunting mournful laments. I am always more acutely aware of our environmental vulnerability this time of year. But I pray that in the cycle of life we will overcome our harmful, self-indulgent ways, and we and the land will have the opportunity to begin again. Rosh Hashanah is just around the bend and with it the promise of life-giving rains and a new year.

Sadly, most Jewish communities—out of convenience and habit—observe the holidays indoors, cut off from the moods, smells and flavors of the particular time of year. In such a setting, the observance of the holidays invariably becomes more of a mental exercise—a remembrance of time past, rather than a celebration of time present. When the holidays are cut off from their natural context, people sense that something is wrong—they feel disconnected. Outside of their natural context, the prayers lose their meaning and flavor—they are like an empty shell. It is no wonder that Jewish leaders are perplexed as to why modern synagogue life, by and large, isn't able to capture the imagination of the masses of Jews.

The festival days were designed to orient us to the nuances of time and the cycles of nature.   When we celebrate the holidays true to their seasons, they are saturated with meaning and irresistible to child and adult alike.