

From the Rabbi's Desk

June 2019

Chaverim,

Finally, after a long, rainy, cold spring, it seems summer is finally here. The trees are filled out with leaves, the insects are buzzing around the flowers, the warmth of the sun feels so good. Our biblical tradition is replete with nature imagery. The opening chapters of Genesis paint God as the architect, master builder of our universe and everything in it. God uses nature to impress and assert power. God floods the world in response to disappointment in humanity, parts the sea to save the Israelites, makes manna fall like rain, and uses disease to punish. God is heard speaking calmly from the non-consuming flame of the burning bush, and bellowing from the heights of Mount Sinai. The Psalmist sees God behind everything and in everything.

Adonai my God, You are grand indeed!

You are clothed in surpassing splendor –

Wrapping Yourself in light like a cloak,

Unwrapping the heavens like a curtain of smoke,

Laying the beams of Your upper chambers in the waters,

Turning Your clouds into Your chariot,

Walking about on the wings of the wind,

Making the winds Your messengers;

Flaming fire, Your ministers.

Psalm 104 (Translation from *Songs Ascending* by Rabbi Richard N. Levy, CCAR Press, 2017)

God's power is manifest in the world we see around us. We may be awed by great expanses – the sea, the desert, the mountains; or things hidden from view – tiny subatomic particles or hints of faraway worlds. Most wondrous of all is the humanity that surrounds us, our family, spouses, children, and friends.

From the biblical perspective, God was manifest in nature because the forces of nature were beyond the control and understanding of human beings. Nature was much more powerful than any power humanity could muster. In the millennia since these biblical writings, the power of humanity has grown exponentially. We now have the power to harness nature. We build dams, use fossil fuels, and even split atoms to produce electricity. We use plants, chemicals, and harness microorganisms to make drugs and do work. We fling ourselves through the skies and launch ourselves into space. But we also create waste, pile it up, bury it and burn it. We pollute water and make air unbreathable. Rather than inspiring wonder, piling up garbage inspires disgust. The world has become very small, not because of the Internet, but rather that the 4 million world's population in biblical times is now approaching 8 billion. Four million people couldn't do much damage, but 8 billion of us are becoming quite crowded and are competing for resources. Our scientists overwhelmingly agree that there is imminent danger from climate change. They also continue to warn us of a dangerous decline in worldwide biodiversity. It is clear we must change our ways but this is nothing new. Even among the biblicists' awe was a recognition that we must take responsibility for the world we have been given. God took humanity and placed it into the garden of Eden to serve it and protect it (Gen 2:15). Our awe of nature must necessarily be coupled with true stewardship. Every human being has the power to serve and protect our world. Some have the capacity to design new products and new technologies that use fewer resources and produce less waste. All of us have the capacity to reduce, reuse, repurpose and recycle.

May the awe of the nature around us inspire us to be good guardians of the gifts God has given to all humanity.

L'shalom,
Rabbi Marc