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One Word From My Favorite Book

I'm always curious about what people are reading. On the subway I am often caught looking at other people, not because of the interesting clothing choices of many a New Yorker, but because I'm trying to look at the back of their book. I think I do this is for a few reasons, one being that I am always looking for a good book to read, and the other is that I think it gives insight into the person reading it. A brief glimpse at what they care about.

My roommate has a tattered book that has been reread dozens of times; obviously a prized

possession. I'm not typically one of those people who has reread their favorite novel enough for it to get dog-eared, and you can ask my fiancé – I hate watching the same movie twice. And yet, I can't get enough of the Torah. This is my tattered book, the one with dog ears and highlights. There is just so much within each page, so many little things you don't notice on the first read, or sometimes even the twentieth. Take today's parashah for example.

Here we are, it's the second day of Rosh Hashanah and once again I'm reading the story of creation. We all know the drill, God says let there be light, yada yada yada 7 days later the world in all its

glory is formed and God takes a day off to relax and admire his creation.

We have repeatedly heard the story of Adam and Eve. God says its bad for Adam to be alone and creates woman. Adam is overjoyed with Eve, they play in the garden together, but then one day, it all goes awry when they eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil and the two are banned forever from the garden.

I know this story, we all know this story, and yet, every year, I reread it, to see how it will talk to me this year. Well, this year it didn't just speak to me, it lectured me.

In Genesis 1:28-31 it reads:

And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." And God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit, You shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And

it was so. And God saw everything that He had made, and behold, it was very good.

And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Now, most translations of verse 28 say that man is told to have dominion over the world, or subdue the world. However the Hebrew says: “*Vayivarech otam eloheim, yavomer lahem, p’ru urvu umel’oh et ha aretz* – And God blessed them and said to them be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth – *v’chevshuhu*. I recognized the Hebrew word *v’chevshuhu* from elsewhere, I once saw it on the side of a jar, a jar of strawberry preserves. I checked my dictionaries

and realized that this word does not simply mean that we were told to rule over the world, it means that we are commanded by God, the second commandment in the whole Torah, to preserve the earth.

God saw all God's creations and said they were good. And God put us in charge of them, to protect them.

The Midrash supports this idea, in Kohelet Rabbah 7:13 we are taught that:

After finishing the work of creation, God lifted Adam high above the Garden of Eden, "Look at what I have created!" God said, "See how beautiful it is, how excellent! I

have created all this for your sake, and for the sake of those who come after you. Think about what I have said, and be careful not to destroy My world. For if you do, there will be no one to repair it after you.”

So, I was feeling a little guilty at this point, now I’m pretty good about recycling, and I’ve changed my light bulbs to those spiral environmentally friendly kind, hey, I even turn off the water when I’m brushing my teeth . . .most of the time. But there is so much more I can do. I began to think that I have been taking the earth for granted. I think about global warming and greenhouse gasses and

wonder why we don't cut down on the burning of fossil fuels, the over farming of fish and the pollution in the water that fills them with mercury and PCBs and wonder why my home state of Indiana has used looser dumping laws to entice industries to move to the area. I think of mad cow and wonder why we would feed meat to these gentle herbivores in the first place, I think of the polar ice caps melting and the raising rate of asthma due to air pollution, I think of the fact that I cannot swim in the East river by my house and I wonder why I have not raised my voice. The first commandment in the Torah is to be fruitful and multiply. With the world population what it is, we, as the human race, can check that off

the list; But the second commandment, to protect and rule over the earth, the way a parent protects and controls their child, we have failed. *Al chet shealtanu lifanecha* for the sin of despoliation of the earth, Oh God, please forgive us.

The Jewish principle for environmental protection is called *Baal tashchit* and teaches us not to destroy or waste. The idea comes from, not the story of creation, but the rules of battle. In Deuteronomy 20:19-20 God tells us,

When you are in war against a city, and you have to besiege it a long time in order to capture it, you must not destroy its trees,

wielding the ax against them. You may eat of them, but you must not cut them down.

Are the trees of the field human to withdraw before you into the besieged city?

Here, we are taught, even in times of war we are not allowed to harm the trees. The trees are not like people, they cannot run away, we are told. They cannot protect themselves and so it is up to us to protect them. And yet, our forests are shrinking.

Flooding, which has taken many lives this summer as well as last summer has caused more damage than in the past because there is less foliage to soak up these showers. We don't blink when the "clean air act" is passed even though it allows more pollutants to be

poured into the air while previously protected national parks are taken off the protected list and are allowed to be forested for lumber because we refuse to take lumber from Canada because it had the audacity to say it would not send troops to a war it did not think was founded. All of this resulting in more air pollution and less trees to clean our air.

But I digress, we all know these things, even if we choose to ignore them. What I am trying to teach is what our religion teaches, that protecting the world is not political for us as Jews. The environment is not a blue, red, or green issue for us. It is our duty and the name for this duty is *Baal Tashchitt*, and the

idea is derived from the Torah law that forbids cutting down trees in times of war.

The Talmud expands upon this idea ruling that *baal tashchit* also prohibits the killing of animals for convenience (Hullin 7b), wasting fuel (Shabbat 67b), and there is even a minority opinion that classifies the eating of extravagant foods when one can eat simpler ones as a violation of this precept (Shabbat 140b).

Maimonides, one of the greatest Jewish scholars to ever live, wrote about this law as cited in the Torah and Talmud. In his Mishneh Torah in the chapter on Laws of Kings and Wars he writes:

It is forbidden to cut down fruit-bearing trees outside a besieged city, nor may a

water channel be deflected from them so that they wither. Whoever cuts down a fruit-bearing tree is flogged. This penalty is imposed not only for cutting it down during a siege; whenever a fruit-yielding tree is cut down with destructive intent, flogging is incurred. . . The Law forbids only wanton destruction... Not only one who cuts down trees, but also one who smashes household goods, tears clothes, demolishes a building, stops up a spring, or destroys articles of food with destructive intent transgresses the command "you must not destroy." Such a

person is not flogged, but is administered a disciplinary beating imposed by the Rabbis.

Maimonides makes explicit the Talmudic expansion on the law. He also sets clear limits on baal tashchit. What is significant to us is that he starts moving toward a more general ethical principle underlying baal tashchit -- that it trains a person not to be destructive.

Now, according to Jewish belief, there are 613 commandments that Moses gave to the Jewish people. While the top ten are listed explicitly, the others are buried within the text. The Sefer Ha-Hinukh is a thirteenth century text that explicates in

detail each of these 613 mitzvot and elaborates greatly upon this notion of ethical training.

Under mitzvah number 529, it reads:

The purpose of this mitzvah [baal tashchit] is to teach us to love that which is good and worthwhile and to cling to it, so that good becomes a part of us and we will avoid all that is evil and destructive. This is the way of the righteous and those who improve society, who love peace and rejoice in the good in people and bring them close to Torah: that nothing, not even a grain of mustard, should be lost to the world, that they should regret any loss or destruction

that they see, and if possible they will prevent any destruction that they can. Not so are the wicked, who are like demons, who rejoice in destruction of the world, and they are destroying themselves.

Allow me to repeat that, “This is the way of the righteous and those who improve society, who love peace and rejoice in the good in people and bring them close to Torah: that nothing, not even a grain of mustard, should be lost to the world, that they should regret any loss or destruction that they see, and if possible they will prevent any destruction that they can.”

Here, we see that a law about not taking an ax to a fruit-bearing tree during battle is meant to teach us how to improve society. The ruling implies that if we appreciate the trees, and refrain from taking even a seed of mustard for granted, that we will rejoice in the good in people, will improve society, and will bring people closer to Torah and to God.

And isn't that what the high holidays are all about. Asking for forgiveness from those we took for granted. Pledging to try our best to look at one another and the world not as a means to an end but as ends in and of themselves.

When we make it a rule not to waste or destroy,
when we have concern for even a seed of mustard,
we change our consciousness.

On Shabbat, we cover the challah as we bless the
candles and the wine to insure that the challah will
not be jealous that it was blessed last. While it may
seem absurd that we try to protect the feelings of a
challah, we do this every week to remind ourselves
that if we need to be concerned with how to treat a
loaf of bread, that all the more so, we need to be
concerned with how to treat one another.

If we treat challah with respect we will treat one
another with respect. And if we do not waste a seed
of mustard, perhaps we will not waste what else has

been given to us. And if we do not put an ax to trees in times of war, perhaps we will be a little less hasty to chop down one another.

Like the challah who was blessed last, we too were the last to be blessed by God. Lest we be jealous that we were not first in creation, God placed us in charge of taking care of the earth that was just formed.

In the next ten days, I want you to take a moment and place yourself in Adams shoes. God lifted Adam above the earth so Adam could see all that God had created. I want you to take a minute to do the same. You may be outside in nature, you may be in your home, it might be right here right now in our

congregation. I want you to take notice of everything, from the people, to the trees, to items as small as a mustard seed, and hear the words of God in your ear:

“Look at what I have created! See how beautiful it is, how excellent! I have created all this for your sake, and for the sake of those who come after you. Think about what I have said, and be careful not to destroy My world. For if you do, there will be no one to repair it after you.”

It is time for asking for forgiveness, for changing our behavior, for opening our eyes and discovering what is good and what is evil. It is

the time of year that we take out my favorite book and reread the story of creation and hear God tell us to preserve the earth. It is also a time for resolutions. May we resolve this year not use the earth or one another anymore, but realize that we have been commanded to protect them.