

Tropical Rainforests – Trees of Life

Talking Points/Sermon outline

- The importance of trees in our tradition: the Torah is compared to a tree – “It is a tree of life to all who hold fast to it, and all its supporters are happy.” (Proverbs 3:18) Why? Because trees are so important to life: Ibn Ezra said in commenting on Deuteronomy 20:19, “the life of humans depends on trees.”
- What is a tropical rainforest: defined as a tropical woodland with an annual rainfall of at least 100 inches (254 centimeters) and marked by lofty, broad-leaved, evergreen trees forming a continuous canopy. Found in tropical regions across the globe: e.g., Brazil, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Indonesia, etc..
- Why are they important part 1: They are critical hotbeds of biodiversity. Though they cover only 6% of Earth’s land surface, they provide homes to some 80% of all documented species.
- Side note – Jewish tradition values species intrinsically -- Maimonides taught, (Guide for the Perplexed, III:14), we are not to “believe that all things exist for the sake of humanity. On the contrary, one should believe that every species exists for its own sake and not for anything or anyone else.”
- This biodiversity is under threat – the last decade saw the destruction of forests covering an area equal to France, Germany and Great Britain combined.
- Why are they important part 2: provide many “services.” Including: protection from flooding and mudslides; clean water; more than a quarter of the oxygen we breathe; sustainable harvesting of fish and a wide array of crops.
- Why are they important part 3: Source of important medicines. National Cancer Institute estimates that 70% of anti-cancer medicines derived from plants that have come from rainforests.
- Why are they important part 4: Rainforests are also a key part of the struggle to combat climate change. Deforestation produces more greenhouse gas emissions than all the countries of the European Union combined. Tropical forest protection, however, could eliminate almost 1/3 of all greenhouse gas emissions planet-wide. A natural, in place and risk free way to capture and store carbon.
- Protecting Rainforests is a human rights issue. Out of 370 million indigenous people, 200 million live in tropical rainforests. Deforestation poses real threats to this population.
- Limited indigenous land rights are recognized, and those that are recognized are often not enforced
- Forest protectors are also subject to threats and actual violence. Global Witness, an international human rights, environmental and anti-corruption group, has documented nearly 1000 killings of environmental defenders since 2010, many of them indigenous leaders. Such murders are occurring at increasing rates and in more locations.
- When indigenous rights are protected, rainforests also thrive. E.g., in the Brazilian Amazon, deforestation-related greenhouse gas emissions were 27 times higher outside of indigenous lands than within them.
- We should work to increase the protection of such rights, which is occurring in Brazil, the Congo, and Indonesia, among other countries.

- Solvable problem with many reasons to hope, including : 1) we don't need any new technologies to solve the problem – rather, what we have to do is stop cutting down forests. 2) Deforestation efforts in many parts of the globe have been successful. 3) Faith communities are starting to become involved and can play a important role in raising the profile of rainforest protection.
- More a matter of will than knowhow – and faith groups are key to help providing that will.
- Interfaith Rainforest Initiative is a key way to get involved as a person of faith.
- Many particular teachings from the Jewish community can be relevant:
 - 1) Social justice: “Is it not enough for you to graze on choice grazing ground, but you must also trample with your feet what is left from your grazing? And is it not enough for you to drink clear water, but you must also muddy with your feet what is left? And must My flock graze on what your feet have trampled and drink what your feet have muddied?” (Ezekiel 34:18-19)
 - 2) Unity of all life: Rabbi Joseph ibn Kaspi, (from his Bible commentary, *Matzref La-Kesef* on Deuteronomy 22:6-7) commenting on the mitzvah of not taking the mother bird and eggs or fledglings at the same time – an early guidance toward sustainable harvest – wrote (in his : “In our pride we foolishly imagine that there is no kinship between us and the rest of the animal world, how much less with plants and minerals. To eradicate this foolish notion God gave us certain precepts, some concerning minerals, others vegetable, others animal, and others human. Above all we are bidden to be compassionate to all other human beings: “love thy neighbor as thyself.” Next in order come our relationships with the animals... for this reason, the Torah commands us to show pity to them, to send away the mother bird. In a descending scale come the precepts governing the plant world, since they are further removed from us. We are forbidden to cut down fruit trees and the like. After this comes the soil and inert matter, which is further removed but still akin to us. Thus the land itself must be rested every seven years. To conclude, the Torah inculcates in us a sense of our modesty and lowliness, so that we should be ever cognizant of the fact that we are of the same stuff as the ass and mule, the cabbage and the pomegranate, and even the lifeless stone.
 - 3) Call to responsibility and action – Ecclesiastes Rabbah (7:28) “When the Holy One created the first human being, God took that person around all the trees in the Garden of Eden and said , ‘See my works, how fine and excellent they are, which I have created for you. Think upon this and do not corrupt or destroy my world; for if you corrupt it there is no one to set it right after you.’”
- Action steps
 - 1) take steps to become further informed
 - 2) avoid tropical wood products and palm oil and reduce beef consumption.
 - 3) support advocacy campaigns on behalf of forests.

4) view this as a moral issue that Jews should get involved in.