

Tropical Rainforests – Trees of Life **Sermon/D'var Torah**

“It is a tree of life to all who hold fast to it, and all its supporters are happy.” We quote this verse from Proverbs 3:18 when we return the Torah to the ark, but how often do we actually reflect on its meaning? For example, why is the Torah compared to a tree? Wouldn't a mountain be grander, a lion be more powerful, a shield feel more protective? And just what is a tree a life?

Though the authors of Proverbs were not modern ecologists, they knew, as have humans since the dawn of civilization or even before, that trees play an important role in our lives. Indeed, in many ways, as Ibn Ezra said in commenting on Deuteronomy 20:19, “the life of humans depends on trees.” Rabbeinu Bachya, commenting on the same verse, added: “it is not the actions of a wise and understanding nation to needlessly destroy something so worthy [as a forest], and therefore you should not expend energy to cut down a tree; rather you should protect it from destruction and damage and take blessing and benefit from it.” (Torah Commentary, Bachya ben Asher) And this sense of blessing is especially true in the wondrous, life-filled places we call tropical rainforests. I want to explore with you today how these rainforests are not only wondrous but also critical to life on our planet and why protecting them is not only environmentally critical but also an important human rights issues. As we proceed on this exploration, I'll also highlight some of the values our tradition espouses that call on us to make this a Jewish priority and not simply an ecological one.

So just what is a tropical rainforest, and where are they found? Merriam Webster defines them this way: 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. In other words, hot, wet, and very green places. They are found in tropical regions across the globe, in countries as different as Brazil, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Indonesia. It is hard to convey with mere words just how life-filled this natural Gardens of Eden are, but if you've even been blessed with the opportunity to walk in one, you know from experience that they are worth protecting simply because of their beauty, just as one would protect the Mona Lisa or Michelangelo's David.

But they are far more than just beautiful. 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. Our sage 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.” If that is so, then surely the home of such a high proportion of all species is worthy of protection. But far too many tropical forests are disappearing – the last decade saw the destruction of forests covering an area equal to France, Germany and Great Britain combined.

Healthy rainforests also protect against flooding and mudslides. They provide clean water and more than a quarter of the oxygen we breathe. Fish and a wide array of crops

can be harvested sustainably in healthy rainforests. The National Cancer Institute estimates that 70% of anti-cancer medicines derived from plants have come from rainforests. Each forest that is cut down, therefore, removes these natural protections, eliminates the possibilities of sustainable harvests, and possibly destroys medical miracles before they can be discovered.

Rainforests are also a key part of the struggle to combat climate change. If deforestation of tropical rainforests were a country, it would have higher greenhouse gas emissions than all the countries of the European Union combined. If, however, we protect and re-grow rainforests instead of cutting them down, we could eliminate almost 1/3 of all greenhouse gas emissions planet-wide. Just think – even before eliminating coal or building solar power plants, just by protecting and replanting rainforests, we'd solve 1/3 of the problem! People have talked about designing carbon capture and storage technologies to help address climate change – but we already have an incredible natural one, one that has amazing side-benefits instead of risky side-effects. So which will it be – adding more than another Europe's worth of greenhouse gases, or taking us a third of the way to solving humanity's greatest problem.

But protecting rainforests isn't just an environmental issue – it's also inextricably tied to human rights problems. Across our planet, there are over 5000 different indigenous peoples, with a total population of approximately 370 million. Some 200 million of those live in tropical rainforests. And these people face very real threats not only to their ways of life, but also to their very existence.

In parts of the world, the rights of indigenous people to live in and care for ancestral lands are ignored, despite international agreements such as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Even where such rights are recognized, however, they are often enforced weakly or not at all, subjecting the forests that indigenous peoples depend upon to degradation and destruction, polluting water sources, and eliminating traditional livelihoods. And far too often, it is not just land that is taken, but lives.

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. Even when actual violence doesn't occur, threats of violence are used to force indigenous peoples from their lands, typically by large agribusinesses, extractive industries, or the illegal drug trade.

Where indigenous rights are protected, however, rainforests also thrive. Deforestation rates in lands controlled by indigenous groups are much lower than in surrounding area. For example, in the Brazilian Amazon, deforestation-related greenhouse gas emissions were 27 times higher outside of indigenous lands than within them. Just in 2018, additional rights of indigenous people to lands containing tropical rainforests have been recognized in Brazil, the Congo, and Indonesia, among other countries. This produces a synergy that gives me hope – for whenever forests are protected, so too are human rights and vice versa.

Microsoft Office User 4/17/19 2:24 PM

Comment: Just so I know - a lot of this information comes from the Forest Fact Sheet and Country primers. Has this information been re-worded for the sermon, or has it been copied and pasted from those other documents? Thanks!

Hi Neddy – yes, this is from the fact sheet and primers. It has been re-worded for the sermon

Indeed, there are many sources of hope. Perhaps the most fundamental is that we don't need any new technologies to solve the problem – what we have to do primarily is stop cutting down forests. In cases where they have already been cut down, to at least start replanting indigenous rainforest tree, knowing that it is far easier to maintain the health of an existing forest than to re-create the intricate web of life found in a healthy forest. Even with these difficulties, however, reforestation efforts in many parts of the globe have been successful – so this is a matter of will more than know-how.

And faith groups across the planet are uniting to help provide some of that willpower, through the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, the IRI. I'm proud that Jewish communities are starting to join in this effort. Proud, but not surprised – for we should remember that many of our key texts and moral teachings were developed as indigenous traditions, before we were exiled from our land and, for hundreds of years and in dozens of nations, kept from owning land at all.

What are some of the Jewish teachings that can help energize us? From the time of the prophets, our people recognized the connection between human rights and environmental degradation. For example, Ezekiel wrote about how the “fat and healthy” were exploiting the weaker and degrading their resources. He depicted them as powerful “rams and bucks” trampling on the rights of the weaker sheep, saying: “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) It's not hard to imagine what he would say to those seeking to cut down forests and take lands from indigenous peoples.

Our traditions all speak to us about the unity of life, how all forms of life are related to and dependent on each other. For example, Rabbi Joseph ibn Kaspi, 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 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.”

Perhaps most importantly of all, however, our tradition commands us to take responsibility and to take action. Ecclesiastes Rabbah (7:28) teaches this beautifully: “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.'"

So what can you do? We can take steps to further inform ourselves about tropical rainforests and their protection. We can engage in simple actions that reduce our own role in the forces that lead to deforestation: avoiding products made from tropical woods or palm oil or reducing beef consumption. We can support some of the advocacy campaigns of the IRI or of the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life on behalf of rainforests. But I believe it is equally important that we come to see this as a moral issue, an issue of Jewish values. Holding fast to those values, we can truly become supporters of the tree of life – and that can help make the whole planet happy.