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PASSOVER: THE FOUR SIGNS OF CLIMATE ACTION

One: Religion begins with wonder. We stand in awe of the universe around us. We sense the miracle that is existence. Abraham Joshua Heschel called this spiritual feeling “radical amazement.” Such amazement, he taught, is the root of religion and the responsibility that flows from it. We want to preserve that which is precious; safeguard that which we deem sacred. We sense a calling; an obligation. The spiritual is prelude to the ethical.

Passover is a statement of radical amazement. Later, Passover comes to commemorate the miraculous rebirth of a people, but at its most ancient heart, the holiday celebrates the miraculous rebirth of the Earth as it emerges from the dead of winter to the glory of spring. In the same way, the people of Israel emerge from the dead of slavery to the glory of redemption. These foundational stories of radical amazement are retold year after year, generation after generation, to keep the motivating spirit of Jewish identity and responsibility alive.

Moses experiences his own transformational moment of radical amazement while in the embrace of nature. He arrives to a great mountain and on that mountain side beholds a burning bush that is not consumed. Precisely when Moses turns aside to marvel at this sight does he hear the voice of God. Moses feels summoned in that time and place. He hears God call him by name. Moses responds with that classic affirmation of presence, “*Hineni*” – here I am.

Is it because Moses feels so truly awed and humbled that he removes his sandals in recognition that he treads on holy ground?

Do we recognize the miracles around us? Do we turn aside to marvel? Do we hear the commanding voice? Do we affirm our presence? Do we acknowledge that the very ground upon which we stand is holy?

*“Earth’s crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God!
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes.”* (Elizabeth Browning)

Two: The Torah tells us that Moses is “tending his flock” when he comes upon the place that is called “Horeb, the mountain of God.”

Indeed, Moses has withdrawn into the wilderness of his personal isolation. At this point he is far from family and community, minding his goats and his business. He has observed the desperation of his people, reacted impulsively to the injustice before him, but now has withdrawn from the fight. The encounter on the mountain changes something at his core. Moses is still reluctant and afraid. Yet inertia is no longer a plan; apathy is no longer an option.

“God says to man as he said to Moses: Put off thy shoes off thy feet – put off the habitual which encloses your foot and you will recognize that the place on which you happen to be standing at this moment is holy ground.” (Martin Buber)

Moses has come upon a sacred place of understanding that compels him to act. The rest, as they say, is history. The Exodus hinges on this pivotal moment. Moses reengages the fight. He returns to the belly of the beast. Against all odds he will overcome not only the heartlessness of Pharaoh but the despondency of a broken people.

One would like to think that the memory of a mountain, of that amazing encounter that birthed the vision of a covenant restored, sustained him through the darkest period.

That mountain of God is identified as one and the same with Sinai. Moses' personal epiphany foreshadows the grand event of communal revelation yet to unfold. An entire people will experience their moment of radical amazement. Like Moses, they will be changed forever – not completely, not perfectly, but enough to dare to dream of a different destiny.

Three: The dreariness of winter and the renewal of spring; the dark of Egypt and the light of Sinai; the crush of despair and the release of hope: All this propels the mixed multitudes forward during the long and winding trek toward the promised land.

The eternal rhythms of the Earth, echoed by the story of a people, will animate our ancestors in their annual celebrations of the cycle of the seasons. The Torah commands that the first of three great pilgrimage festivals shall be “...*in the month of spring, the time when you came out of Egypt.*” (Exodus 23:14) Radical amazement at the turn of the Earth, and the turn of history, cannot be missed.

*“Arise, my darling;
My fair one, come away!
For now the winter has past,
The rains are over and gone.
The blossoms have appeared in the land;
The time of singing has come...”* (Song of Songs 2:10-12)

The flowers push through the soil to greet the sun.

*“Fueled
by a million
man-made
wings of fire
the rocket tore a tunnel
through the sky –
and everybody cheered.
Fueled
only by a thought from God –
the seedling
urged its way
through the thickness of black –
as it pierced
the heavy ceiling of the soil –
up into outer space
no
one
even clapped.”* (Marcy Hans)

Flowers, flocks, family, community – all is reborn. Pesach applauds the miracle of the seed of life sprouting anew. Of course this festival also memorializes the dark side of degradation – the winter of discontent is an inescapable part of the story – but it does so in the context of the stirring song of spring.

Four: When we sense with radical amazement this spring awakening we will reengage both the fight for the planet and the fight for humanity.

We understand that a more responsible environmental policy in general, and a drastically more disciplined energy program in particular, is called for to insure that *“so long as the Earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease”* (Genesis 8:22).

During Passover, with close proximity to Earth Day, a discussion on the perils of ignoring energy conservation and the spiraling consequences of climate change as a series of modern day plagues can be provocative. So too can an exploration of our personal enslavements to habit and inertia, coupled with the entrenched indifference and hostility of modern day bureaucracies that echo Pharaoh’s insecurities and hardened heart.

Signing on to an energy covenant as a family and as an institution becomes an ethical imperative and a sacred task. Passover shows the way – the reawakening of the Earth to new life, the reawakening of our spirit to new possibilities, the transformative recognition of self-empowerment – for we stand on holy ground...and our name is called.

Source: Rabbi Barry L. Schwartz