

Glimpses of Eden

“From the Pulpit” (June 11, 2016)

By Cantor Shoshana Brown

Gardening is like praying – some might even say gardening *is* prayer. This is something that I have been sensing for some time, but only now am trying to put into words. Why is it that so many monasteries, both Christian and Buddhist, have lovingly and exactingly kept gardens? The Jewish tradition does not have a tradition of monasteries (God’s first commandment in the Torah was “be fruitful and multiply,” so the celibate life was never held up as an ideal in our tradition), but the idea of *the garden* is all over our Scriptures.

Of course the most famous garden in the Bible is the Garden of Eden. There, according to chapter one of Genesis, God told the first man and woman,

“See, I give you every seed-bearing plant that is upon all the earth, and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit; they shall be yours for food.” (Gen. 1:29)

And just a little later in Genesis we see the very Creator as a gardener! In chapter two of Genesis we read:

And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and placed there the human being that He had formed. (2:8)

In this “second” creation story, Scripture seems to say that rather than the garden being given to humanity to serve as our source of nourishment – *humanity* was created for the sake of the *garden*!:

The Lord God took the human-creature [which God had just formed], and placed it in the Garden of Eden, to till it and tend it. (2:15)

Of course the dénouement of the Eden-story is that humanity was exiled from this idyllic place where God could be heard “walking at the breezy time of the day” (Gen. 3:8). We were banished, kept from sneaking back in by *k’ruvim* (“cherubim”), God’s celestial security guards, armed with “fiery ever-turning sword[s]” (3:24).

Whether you believe in this story literally or not, the myth of *the primordial garden* is found in both sacred writings and folktales from around the world. Frequently these tales also tell of a tree bearing the fruit of immortality, a “tree of life,” in their midst. When Joni Mitchell, in 1969, composed the song “Woodstock,” she drew upon this nearly-universal intuition:

We are stardust, we are golden/ and we’ve got to get ourselves back to the garden.

To the degree that you accept (either in a literal or spiritual/psychological/ethical fashion) that humanity was supposed to dwell harmoniously with God, with nature, and with one another, but that, sadly, we “fell” from that state of harmony, *all of our religious endeavors* are indeed, as Joni sings, efforts to “get ourselves back to the garden.”

If some of you read my husband's (Rabbi Mark Elber's) column in this space two weeks ago, you might remember that we were preparing for the celebration of our son's becoming a bar mitzvah. What a joyful event! In preparation for our home being graced by far-flung friends and family who came to share in our joy, I spent weeks leading up to this special day sprucing things up around our house. While our guests might not have paid too much attention to our postage stamp-size lawn and garden, it was important to me as a host (and mother of the bar mitzvah) to have a small "Eden" to retire to after the big event, where we could relax and reconnect with one another after not seeing each other for quite some time. Soon the Sabbath would be over, and each couple or family member or friend would return to their own homes, but my desire was - for that brief moment of time that we could linger together after the ceremony - for everything to be perfect, both inside the house and in the garden.

Of course any gardener can tell you there is never a moment in a garden when everything is "perfect": there are always bugs, weeds, and a blighted blossom or two. But the continual day after day effort to bring one's garden ever closer to luminosity - found for me in the beauty of shrubs, herbs and flowers, but for others in fruits and vegetables - is indeed very similar to the spiritual life of prayer. We pray, for the most part, not to get God to magically intervene and "fix" the world around us, but to bring *ourselves* closer to "luminosity." By this I mean that we have to "till and tend" our souls so that we as individuals can blossom in the way God intended, not just for our own happiness, but so that we can serve the world in a way that brings it a little closer to that primordial harmony for which we instinctively yearn. Remember that a flower does not bloom for the sake of its own beauty, but to attract the bee, the butterfly and hummingbird. It provides them with nourishment, and they, in turn, help it to be "fruitful and multiply."

While working in the garden, digging my hands into the earth, planting and transplanting, pruning, weeding and fertilizing, watering in the late afternoon (I too like the "breezy time" of the day!), I fall into a kind of reverie. I will tell my husband that I will be out "just 15 minutes" and an hour slips by. I experience time differently. It is hard to explain. Sometimes I wonder whether the time and effort spent there should be spent instead on something of greater social import - and then I think of the monks. Were they not devoted to God? Did they not also serve the poor? And yet they knew that in a garden we are close to God in a special way, that as we tend and till, we pray, and as we pray, we gain strength and clarity to also tend and till God's greater world. What was God's overall purpose in creating the world? The Bible does not actually tell us. But as I "till and tend," I catch glimpses of the primordial harmony that, even if it never actually existed, the soul yearns for. Wishing you all a happy summer and, if you are gardeners, glimpses of Eden!

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