

The Interconnectedness of All Life

One of my esteemed teachers, Rabbi Zalman Schachter Shalomi (may his memory always be a blessing), often made a point of saying we need to understand the earth “organismically.” In other words, all of us who dwell on this planet are part of one great living organism which is the earth itself. From this perspective, just as every organ of the human body has an essential function and must be healthy to perform its function optimally, so all the various inhabitants of the earth have their essential functions in the life of the planet. I refer not only to the talking bipeds we call humans, but every component including the inanimate.

It’s often easy to forget the interconnectedness of all life on this planet and to have an inflated view of ourselves as the center of the universe. I don’t think it’s an exaggeration to say that we often take for granted and don’t think enough about the many other organisms that populate our planet along with us. Ecological shifts in the balance between different species often create dramatic changes somewhere later down the line. It’s easy to lose sight of this.

Here’s a simple example. For the last decade, bees have been dying out at what scientists believe are alarming rates in North America and in Europe. One might think: “Okay, that means I’m less likely to get stung.” However, bees are an essential link in the food chain. Bees are not only the source for honey, but they are also the main pollinators of crops that are grown. We might think that dairy products, for example, are thoroughly independent of bees because they are not crops, but rather come from animals. However, if we delve further, we discover that that is not the case. Cows eat grass and grass requires nitrogen in the soil which is often produced by clover, which depends on bees for its pollination.

I recently read that another important link in the food chain is in crisis. Coral reefs, which are an essential link in feeding one billion people with fish because of their role in providing nourishment and shelter to a large percentage of marine life, are dying out at an unprecedented rate. Scientists from various institutions that study the ecosystems of marine life believe that this is a result of the rise of temperatures in the oceans. (The rise of temperatures on land ultimately affects ocean temperatures too.)

Back around 1975 I was fortunate enough to go snorkeling along the coast of the Red Sea off of Eilat (on the Sinai Peninsula). I was wonderstruck by the magnificent colors of the coral. It was only then that I was made aware that coral is a living organism. According to what I recently read in an April 10th New York Times article, in many places and in huge quantities,

coral reefs are turning white - about one third of the world's reefs are presently in danger of dying. Here's an example of something on our planet, underwater, that most of us don't see or think about on a daily basis, yet its health and survival plays a huge role in human existence.

If you travel to the Amazon in Brazil, you will see large areas of rainforest that have been cleared for raising cattle. Not only does the rainforest produce oxygen, but it also contains countless plants that could serve numerous functions, medicinal among others, that are being burned into oblivion for the short-term needs of grazing cattle. A resource such as the Amazon rainforest seems endless, but, ultimately, it's not.

This reminds me of the story of the king who comes to a small town and asks everyone in the town to contribute one cup of wine to the barrel for the upcoming festivities when the king returns in a week. One person thinks to himself: "if I put a cup of water in the barrel instead of wine, it will never be noticed among all the other cups of wine." As promised the king returns in a week, turns the spigot on the barrel and out comes clear water!! Apparently everyone else had the same notion that their one cup of water wouldn't matter.

There's a rabbinic teaching from "The Ethics of Our Ancestors" (*Pirkei Avot* 2:21): "We are not obligated to finish the task, but neither are we free to neglect it." The task of caring for the planet is a vast, endless endeavor. Rather than seeing the world and its creations as there to be exploited by us, I prefer the understanding that we are custodians of our planet. As in the words of a prayer for peace that we recite on Saturday morning: "We have come into being to praise, to labor, and to love."

The Talmud tells of a first century B.C.E. teacher called *Khoni HaM'agel* (Khoni the Circle Maker). He is said to have been wandering through the countryside of the land of Israel, when he noticed an elderly man planting a carob tree. He asked the man, "How long will it take for this carob tree to bear fruit?" The elderly man responded: "70 years." *Khoni* asked him if he expected to live to eat the fruit of the carob tree. He replied: "No, but just as my parents and grandparents planted carob trees for me to eat, I am planting for my children and grandchildren to eat."

It is spring, the time when the earth reawakens in the Northern Hemisphere. May we all learn to be ever better custodians of our precious planet and may we recognize and be grateful for the miracle of life that's all around us.