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Affirming Life in All Its Forms

“...You shall take the product of hadar (beautiful/citrus fruit) trees, branches of palm trees, boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the Eternal One your G!d seven days. You shall observe it as a festival of the Eternal One for seven days in the year; you shall observe it in the seventh month as a law for all time, throughout the ages. You shall live in booths (sukkot) seven days; all citizens in Israel shall live in booths in order that future generations may know that I had the Israelite people live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I, the Eternal One, your G!d.” (Leviticus 23: 40-43).

Our relationship with nature in modern society is usually not very intimate, especially if we live in cities. There is so much concrete, nature is often squeezed into sections of cities with parks designed to protect the pockets of nature that survive. The lights of cities often wash out the night sky so that only a few stars are visible on even clear nights. The holiday of *Sukkot* (known in English Bibles as the “Feast of Booths” or “Tabernacles”) is both an agricultural holiday coinciding with the last harvest of the year in the land of Israel, and a commemoration of the Exodus from Egypt in Biblical times. It begins on the full moon (as do a number of other Jewish holidays). The above quote from Leviticus concisely describes the main rituals surrounding it. Dwelling in *sukkot* (booths) during this holiday period, which will end on Sunday, gives us a bit more of a sense of connection to the natural world around us. The *sukkah* (booth) has to have at least three walls and a roof whose covering must be made of material that grows wild in nature. The roof itself must have enough gaps between the thatching to be able to see the stars at night. There is a fragility to a *sukkah* – a structure not meant to last forever – just as there is a fragility to our lives.

The fragility of life is particularly evident to us during this Covid-19 pandemic. With the number of deaths rising by close to 1,000 people a day still, it’s hard to ignore this fact. At the same time, the lives of many species on our

planet are fragile or in danger of extinction. Human beings are paradoxically both very resilient and very vulnerable. In Deuteronomy 30:19 we read the exhortation: “choose life!” That exhortation applies in so many circumstances. Choosing life doesn’t only mean making choices that sustain our own personal lives, (though of course we want to live in a manner that affirms and supports life), but it also means fostering the life of our society, and the life of the greater world around us.

Recognizing the fragility of life should cultivate compassion in us towards other living beings, both towards human beings and towards the innumerable species that still inhabit our planet, not to mention compassion and caring for supporting the life of the very *planet itself*, for Earth too is a living entity. Just as we look back at our own history which grounds us, and helps define our personal identities, creating rituals that keep us connected to our roots and help us remain mindful of our beliefs and values, so also we need to look towards what kind of society we hope to bequeath to our descendants, what conditions we want to prevail on the very Earth that our descendants will inherit.

Recognizing the fragility of life in all its forms should give us pause to seriously consider how we live, and what consequences our life choices will have on future generations. It should lead us to soberly assess and determine our priorities, for the fate of future generations lies in the balance. For too long we have ignored the ramifications of some of our decisions and recklessly treated the Earth as an infinite source of raw material to be exploited without regard to possible side-effects and consequences. We cannot take clean air and water for granted. Repealing (or “rolling back”) regulations that protect the environment for short term material gains is truly short-sighted. Our children and grandchildren will suffer the consequences, even if we don’t ourselves. We are the custodians of the planet and all of life is interdependent.

Last night, in the strong winds, the roof of our *sukkah* blew off – a reminder of the power of Mother Nature. We are regularly reminded of that power these days with the raging fires out West and the hurricanes down South. At the same time, we are mindful of the fact that something as miniscule as bacteria can fell a human being, even devastate whole societies. Yes, life is fragile – which should keep us grateful for our resilience and resourcefulness too! Our rituals and great myths are not meant to represent history, but to transmit teachings that *transcend* history, addressing the larger truths about life itself.

I would like to conclude with the traditional Hebrew toast: *L'khayim* – to Life!