

## ECOLOGY IN ANCIENT RELIGIOUS TEXTS.

### **“In Most Religions Humans Are Guardians Of The Earth.”**

*Speech delivered by Dr Ruth Rabinowitz Director of MamaEarth Foundation at the Interfaith discussion on the subject. 10<sup>th</sup> August 2011.*

When God began to create the heaven and the earth, the earth being unformed and void with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water, God said let there be light.

So begins the remarkable introduction to the Torah, or the Guide to Jewish Life and founding document for the Judeo Christian and Muslim religions. I recently began to learn the verses by heart because I found the poetry so beautiful and the wholeness so appealing. It is also the introduction to a book that is the blueprint for my credo “think ecology as a metaphor for everything”.

The 5 books of the Torah combine history, law, tradition, ethics, biology, science and some believe, mythology, into a fundamental treatise which has guided the life of the Jewish people for over 3000 years. It is an attempt to express in words the meeting between the human and the divine and to govern the way in which humans interact with one another and the rest of creation. I called Genesis remarkable because for ideas that were revealed 1300 years before the birth of Christ and recorded at least 2400 years ago if not before, they show remarkable insight into the nature of life even as it is understood today.

One of the prevailing themes of 21<sup>st</sup> Century science is the concept of connectedness. It is reflected in quantum physics, globalization, astronomy, climate change and the new science of environment. Einstein demonstrated that energy is never lost as it is converted from one form of energy to another and from energy into matter and back again. That’s what  $e=mc^2$  is about.

What is life? Physically, it is changing patterns of energy.

What is Ecology? It is the modern understanding of the web of interconnected give and take relationship between various elements in a system, some living and some non living, moving towards a state of balance. It explains the interwoven nature of all aspects of life. It describes the interacting stuff of the universe, earth, air, fire and water or solids, liquids and gases, transformed from one in to the other by the transforming power of fire, energy released from

matter. Ecosystems exist at the smallest microscopic level of the atom, the nucleus, the cell, the visible level of organisms such as humans, dogs or elephants, as communities of plants, humans or animals, geographical spaces such as a garden, a pond, a sea and on into the vastness of the globe, our earth mother, Gaia.

Energy, from a physical perspective, is the closest we come to a modern understanding of God. Creation began with light energy which metamorphosed into all that exists on the face of the universe. Einstein's version of the oneness of God is the indestructible nature of energy and its relationship with matter, as it is transformed from one form into another. That being the case, why are we so concerned about the depletion of our energy resources? Because, we greedily plunder earth's centuries old, non renewable energy resources, polluting the air with their use and disregarding the destructive power of coal, oil and nuclear. We could easily change our ways and use only renewable sources, such as sun, wind, water, plant and animal waste, and we could limit our appetite for material goods.

Every right thinking person should be concerned about our plundering earth's natural resources, over fishing the sea, satisfying our greed and then dumping our waste onto the earth where it leeches into the water, deforesting for food or fuel and ravaging the earth with little regard for the consequences. But most people are too busy to care.

In short we are ignoring the revealed wisdom in Torah. There are several themes that emerge from the Torah.

1. First is the balance between opposing forces, such as the sacred and the profane, human and divine, freedom and enslavement, imminent and transcendent nature of God.
2. Linked with this is the idea of covenantal relationships. Blessings must be balanced with responsibilities. There must be give and take between man and God, one person and another and between people and nature.
3. Also related to this is the theme of unity in diversity. A unique feature of the Judeo Christian and most other religions practiced today, is the idea of a single creator, God is One and everything is part of one God, no matter how we acknowledge and pray to that God. An ecologically balanced and healthy earth is one in state of harmony and balance, where covenantal give and take relationships permeate the entire chain of life and all life is interlinked so that each person and each entity is as important as every other one. Blake who expressed his religious ideas in poetry,

captures the essence of this when he writes “ no man is an island entire of himself; each is part of the universe, a piece of the whole.”

4. The Torah also introduces practices that link the personal and the universal. Home of the body, the house, the community and the earth are linked and many traditions and practices link the inner and personal with the outer and communal. An example of this is the freedom from pharaoh. It is at the same time a personal experience in that we are freed from egotistical self interest, as it is an awareness of God and all the other elements of creation; the revelation at Sinai involved every one who heard it and every descendent who would come after them; the arrangement of the temple represents body, senses, emotions and spirit and a holy site where the community can be united in their connection with God.

This ecological awareness is present in Genesis 1 as it is in the pattern of festivals and traditions. The first day of Genesis involves the creation of light; the second creation of heaven or air. Water is already in existence as if it is part of the original fabric of creation. The third day sees earth emerge and on it seed bearing plants of every kind. The fourth the heavenly bodies important not just to dominate the day and the night and to serve as lights in the expanse of the sky that shine upon the earth , but as signs of the times, the days and the years and to separate day and night in addition to light and darkness. The ability to mark the cycles of time and react to the seasons marked the dawn of civilization. The message is that sustained life is cyclical, as order is created out of chaos. The fifth day sees the creation of sea creatures, creeping things of all kinds that the sea brought forth in swarms and birds that fly above the earth across the expanse of sky. How closely it follows the evolution of life from water as the substrate for early organisms to fish, insects and birds. The creation of the 6<sup>th</sup> day links all forms of animals, cattle, wild beasts and living creatures that walk upon the earth with none other than man, of whom God says “God created Man in his own image male and female he created them. And God blessed them saying be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and rule it. You shall have dominion over the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, the entire earth and all the living things that move upon the earth”. What a neat classification of living forms. What a strong message for our serving as the custodians of the earth. Before God rested from the work of creation that he had done, he offered the green plants on the earth to the various categories of animals and humans as food. God created order of out chaos and made man the caretaker of her creation. The rest of the Torah provides further guidance on how this should be done.

How should we respond to this amazing creation? There was a time when people demonstrated their gratitude or their longings through sacrifice. It was replaced by prayer. But for me a good substitute for that primitive ritual is recycling. Sacrifice had the effect of making people give something back as a token of gratitude, using the fruits and creatures of the earth and raising them to a level of spirituality, linked with God whence they come. Nothing should be taken for granted. Everything is precious and should be used with circumspection and respect. Recycling is a way of acknowledging the energy that goes into our creature comforts and of being able to take the merest bit of trouble to show respect for the earth and to give something back after we have had our fill.

The holidays follow a sequence of human development and of natural cycles. First comes Passover celebrating the freedom of the people and of each individual, from the slavery of self interest. Then there is revelation at Sinai, with Shavuot corresponding with the first harvest. Live within the give and take framework and your harvest, your life will prosper. Almost 6 months later is a period of rededication with Rosh Hashanah and Atonement, for our failure to live up to the commitments at Sinai. This is followed by Sukkoth, which is the most ecological of all the festivals. It demonstrates the scope for uniting all elements of one's being and uniting oneself with all the elements of nature and the world beyond. Sukkot is the blue print for Jung's theory of potentiation, the collective unconscious and archetypes. It is also a blueprint for the ecology of existence. We are made aware of the potential for connecting the many aspects of ourselves with our immediate surroundings and the wider world.

Interestingly, water has great significance on Sukkoth, celebrated each night as it is poured on the alter. The message of Sukkoth is that through our harmonious relationship within ourselves, one another and the earth, we become vessels for God's blessing and agents of Peace. WE enjoy clean freshwater rich harvest and a thriving home, planet Earth. Water, the substrate for the creation of living creatures, is the modern barometer for our impact on the planet and whether it's acid mind drainage in Gauteng, or sewage filled water in the Cape, the picture is not pretty.

Modern science teaches us that energy burst onto the world stage about 14 billion years ago and from that time has been transformed from one form to another until we have life as we know it. When energy flows through the system we have a healthy ecosystem and a healthy world. Modern science also teaches us that the earth is at a tipping point. Financial meltdown will pass, but global meltdown may be beyond our power to correct if

we continue to behave with casual disregard of our earth home. Even those who are skeptical of the climate change theory must realize that the earth has lost its state of balance.

We have disturbed the natural order. We have forgotten that each of us is nothing and yet everything, as we form part of the cycle of energy that flows through the vast yet microscopic universe. When God had completed the work of creation which she had one, she saw that it was very good. When we step back to review the work of destruction that we are doing, we see that it is not good. Either we will change our ways, or we will leave our earth home in a sorry state for our descendants. The wisdom of the prophets and the religions is reflected in our ancient treatises and our modern science, may it be reflected in our changing ways.