



Earthy Torah

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Introduction

If you are reading this, you probably do not, have not and will not live on a farm. You have not harvested crops, slaughtered animals or grown food from the ground in order to make a living. If you have, you are in a small minority of people who have connected to the earth in this way.

You might be a person who enjoys the outdoors, hikes, swims in natural bodies of water and climbs rocks.

What is certainly the case is that you are a person who breathes air, drinks water, eats food and gets around during the day. That certainly would constitute living on earth, but ironically, few people actually *touch* the earth itself during the course of a day. We walk in shoes on pavement, or on flooring beneath our shod feet. When was the last time that you walked on grass with bare feet? We are literally disconnected from the earth beneath our feet.

When I think of Torah, my first thought is the large scroll sitting in a cabinet in a synagogue. If I pause for a moment and then think about its component ingredients, I realize it is composed of materials from the earth: animal skin and wood. Even though we may live an earth-detached life, the Torah, which we read four times a week, reconnects us to the earth. If you look at almost any Torah portion, it connects us with the planet that we are standing (or sitting) on. *Breisheet* contains several obvious connections, such as the Creation of the Universe. Let's take a less obvious one, such the second of this week's Torah portions, *Kedoshim*. (This Shabbat, we read a double Torah portion - *Acharei Mot* and *Kedoshim* back to back.)

Put on Your Earth Day Glasses

Kedoshim is right in the middle of the entire Torah. Naturally, we read the Torah from our own perspectives, which is the perspective of a person living in a city in the early 21st century. Since the Thursday of this week is the 40th annual Earth Day, let's put on our "earth day" glasses and look at the Torah portion this way.

Be Holy Because God is Holy

The opening salvo of *Kedoshim* reads like this: "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." (Vayikra 19:2) We are holy. God is holy. In *Breisheet*, space is created by a holy God, making it holy, and time itself is declared to be holy. To take a page from Moses' book, we are all standing on holy ground. (Now go outside and take off your shoes.)

The Jewish Earth Day

The first of the myriad of mitzvot in *Kedoshim* is: “Every person shall revere his mother and father, and My Sabbaths you shall keep.” (Vayikra 19:3) At first glance, these do not sound earthy, but remember that most of the laws of Shabbat are aimed at people who work on farms, raise cattle and transform raw materials from the earth into products for human consumption. We may not farm or raise sheep, but we do transform things from one state to another. When we refrain from acting upon the earth for a day, acknowledging that one day a week must be set aside to let everything rest, we make ourselves holy. This reminds me of the larger Sabbatical cycle, where one year out of seven, farmed lands are untouched. Sounds like a good-for-the-earth practice to me.

Tzedakah: An Earthy Mitzvah

Further on in *Kedoshim*, we read the following: “And when you reap your land’s harvest, you shall not finish off the edge of your field, nor pick up the gleanings of your harvest...For the poor and for the stranger you shall leave them. I am the Lord your God.” (Vayikra 19:9-11) Before there were coins minted to represent commodities, there were only commodities. The mitzvah of tzedakah, caring for those in our community who are disadvantaged, used to be done directly from the land. If you were a farmer, you would leave a certain portion of your crops unpicked for those who were hungry to come and eat. Generations of financial, social and urban development have encased the mitzvah of tzedakah in layers of abstraction. Nevertheless, when we give tzedakah in money form to an organization that helps people eat, we are engaging in the same mitzvah as the farmer. Beneath all the layers, it connects back to the earth.

Sometimes a Tree is not a Tree

Later in the same chapter, we find one of the most enduring Jewish symbols of all: trees: “And when you come to the land and plant any fruit-bearing tree, you shall leave its fruit untouched. Three years it shall be uncircumcised to you. It shall not be eaten. And in the fourth year, all its fruit shall be sacred, a jubilation before the Lord. And in the fifth year you may eat its fruit, that its yield may be increased for you. I am the Lord your God.” (Vayikra 19:23-25) This one is obvious: we should plant trees that provide food for others and us, and care for those trees. It can take years for some fruit trees to bear edible fruit, so I see here something else going on. Extrapolating from the text, I extend what the Torah is saying in the following way: take action to create a sustainable environment that will produce positive effects for the next three generations. Take care of the earth so that your great-grandkids will have something to eat, drink and breathe.

Happy Jewish Earth Day!

The Torah’s frame of reference for so many of the mitzvot is directed to people who live in close connection with their land. Even though we live in urbanized areas, we have something that helps us reconnect with the earth. The Earth Day people think that it is so amazing that they have been doing Earth Day for forty years. The Jewish people have been doing Earth Day for generations!! – we call it Shabbat, the holiest day of the year. Many families bring in Shabbat with the giving of tzedakah, which can connect us to our agricultural roots. Shabbat is a day of refraining from changing the land we live upon and the raw materials the land provides us for life. Lastly, Shabbat is a time to reflect upon how we treat our planet, and to go into the next week more aware of the impact we have on it. So Happy Earth Day, or as we say it...

Shabbat Shalom (and do not forget to take off your shoes this Shabbat. Moses would.)
Rabbi Pepperstone

AS A FAMILY:

- Consider doing an environmental survey of your house. This [link](#) will take you to a website that has information about ways to do that.
- Make it a family custom to put money in a tzedakah box every Friday afternoon before Shabbat.
- Go outside and play in the grass with your shoes off.

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THIS WEEK'S TORAH PORTIONS ACHAREI MOT AND KEDOSHIM, ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS:

1. What animal was Aaron commanded to sacrifice as a sin offering, and what were the Israelites commanded to offer?
 2. For the burnt offering, Aaron and the Israelites offered the same animal. What was it?
 3. Why were lots cast upon the two goats used as the sin offering for the Israelites?
 4. What was done with the live goat?
 5. God makes it clear to the Children of Israel that they must keep all of God's commandments. God then tells them not to follow the practices of whom?
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1. Why did God tell Moses that the children of Israel must be holy?
 2. When a peace offering was sacrificed, by when did it have to be completely eaten?
 3. When reaping the harvest of the land, we are commanded to leave what for whom?
 4. The wages of a hired servant must be paid by when?
 5. What could be the meaning of the commandment to not put a stumbling block before the blind?
 6. In a case between a wealthy and a poor person, who is to be favored in judgment? Explain.
 7. We are told not to gossip, and not to stand idly by the blood of our neighbor. What does this mean and how are the two connected?
 8. What is meant by "you shall surely rebuke thy neighbor and not bear sin because of him"?
 9. Describe the process of planting and harvesting fruit trees in the Land of Israel.
 10. We are commanded to treat the stranger the same as whom? Why?