

Drash, Aug. 11, 2012
Deuteronomy Chapter 11-Verses 13-21

Introduction before parsha is read: These verses contains the familiar second paragraph of the Shema. I will be offering an environmental commentary on God's blessing that with our people's adherence to the covenant, rains will fall and prosperity will abound. And conversely, God's admonition that if we stray, the Lord "will shut up the skies so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce."

I was invited by my friends Rhonda and Alan and Jon to offer some thoughts on the passage in the parsha recited in the Shema prayer. I have devoted much time in my professional work to studying the complex challenges of climate change and global warming. They asked that I consider this passage from the decidedly secular perspective of how we respond to what may be the greatest challenge our globe faces.

It is said that Rain is the special biblical sign of Divine Providence. What are we to make of the Shema's connection between faith, rain and prosperity? And of the apparent irony that it is our very prosperity today that endangers the global environment in the future. Almost literally, climate change threatens to do what God threatened in verse 17: "to shut up the skies so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce." And in an even more striking warning of our current circumstances, verse 17 warns that, if we stray, we as a people "will soon perish from the good land that the Lord is assigning to you." Scientists predict that as global temperatures increase, sea levels will rise, droughts and storms will intensify, forcing unprecedented migrations of whole peoples and cities from their "good lands."

In biblical times, rain and the local environments found in different places on Earth would have been understood to be largely beyond humankind's control and it was natural for people to place their faith in divine providence for the environments people encountered and for their prosperity. In modern times, we view things differently. Fossil fuels have brought us in the industrial age abundance and prosperity unimaginable to pre-industrial age peoples. At the same time, we have learned that our prosperity has come with human-induced environmental consequences. Global warming is the ultimate and most all-encompassing environmental risk engendered in the pursuit of prosperity.

I do not want to dwell on climate change science or policy this morning. Instead, I offer several observations from the parsha that capture the incomparable challenge of climate change.

First, commentators on the Shema have wrestled with the connection between morality and rainfall and morality and good fortune. Why are many admirable people not blessed with abundance? And why does life-giving rain fall not only on the righteous, but on the neighboring farms of the less worthy? Some commentators answer these questions by interpreting the passage in light of shifting grammatical usage. They emphasize that these verses are expressed in the plural and not the singular. To these commentators, the connection between morality, divine intervention and prosperity is to be understood not on an individual level, but on a community level. Here is how it is put in commentary cited in Etz Hayim: "Righteous communities will tend to thrive and bestow blessings on all their members, the good and less good alike. And

wicked communities will bring misfortune on all their inhabitants.” This communal focus has particular resonance when thinking about global warming. Our climate is changing not because of individual conduct, but because of society’s collective actions. Climate change is a global phenomenon and a historic as well as present problem. Our climate is the ultimate in what economists call a public good. Whatever climate change we are already experiencing today results from emissions over the past centuries and results equally from emissions in our own communities and nations as it does from emissions everywhere else on the globe. Thus, the ethical injunction of the passage of the Shema is consistent with the prevailing policy view that all citizens and societies of the world, because of their past and present conduct, bear collective responsibility for our present and future climate and that, fundamentally, only global-wide actions can effectively mitigate global warming.

Second, some commentators in reading these verses of the Shema note the dichotomy between peoples with different convictions and faith. Some people adhere to moral conduct instinctively, out of love of God. These people will heed the commandments without expectation of reward. But, there is a theme in these verses that for many other people moral conduct must be induced by the promise of rewards. Economists would say these people need and respond to incentives. Again, in Etz Chaim, these people have been described by some commentators as “less developed theologically.” The Shema appeals to this second class of people: as the verses make crystal clear that if we as a people act morally, ethically, and in accord with the God’s teachings, we are promised the reward of abundance and prosperity. However, in verses 16 and 17 we are warned that if we stray and resume idolatry, our reward will be withdrawn and literally the skies will dry up, “there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce and you will soon perish from the good land that the Lord is assigning to you. This is a foreshadowing of the consequences of global warming: drought that imperils crops, and rising sea levels that will force migrations of untold millions of people from the “good lands” that they have known.

In the context of global warming, this ethical dichotomy between doing good because it is right and doing good because it is good for us has a parallel. Climate change presents enormous challenges because it is what economists call a public good. This means that no matter what an individual does or even what a single country does will have little direct measurable impact on future climate within a time horizon that we can appreciate. The connection between improved conduct -- lower use of fossil fuels and energy – and stabilized global temperatures is highly attenuated from individual acts and national policies. Global warming and climate change can only be met by collective, global action on an unprecedented scale.

We are used to thinking that if our government adopts more sensible policies, we will experience rewards in the near future. That is, if we reduce harmful emissions, the environment will get cleaner. And we will experience tangible benefits within a reasonable time frame. That is simply not the case with global warming. Unless the entire globe and the entire global economy reduce carbon emissions dramatically, far more than any policies today contemplate, and unless we find complete substitutes for fossil fuels everywhere within less than 50 years, climate change may be irreversible. Even if we adopt far reaching policies on an international scale in the next decade, during all of our lifetimes and our children’s’ lifetimes, global temperatures will continue to rise.

So, even if individual actions do not bring immediate and tangible rewards, in the form of stabilized global temperatures, to what extent should each of us, as individuals be guided by an ethic of doing good, reducing our carbon emissions, just because it is right. To what extent should our nation change its energy policies now, just because it is the right direction to go, even if in so doing global climate change continues largely unabated because we have no assurance other nations will follow suit. If the reward of stabilizing global temperatures will not accrue to righteous individuals and sensible nations, what kind of changes in economic behavior should we make, individually and as a nation, out of an ethical responsibility to do right. Ethics and rewards are not easily separable in the context of global warming and in this sense we are all, at present, “less developed theologically.”

I offer one last perspective that intrigued me the most in the parsha. This is the contrast drawn in verses 10 and 11. The people are told in verse 11 that the promised land they are about to enter and possess is a land that “soaks up its water from the rains of heaven.” By contrast, in verse 10, the people are told that the promised land is different from the land whence they have come, Egypt. For in Egypt, “the grain you sowed had to be watered by your own labors.” One translation I consulted noted that the term “your own labors” is literally “by your feet.” This was a reference to the fact that in Egypt, farming depended on the annual flooding of the Nile, rather than seasonal rains and, most significantly, the success of farming in Egypt depended on the use of irrigation techniques: literally, before the use of fuels, human “feet” were used to open and close sluice gates and to make ridges in the fields needed for irrigation. What are we to make of the fact that the biblical blessing attributes prosperity and promises an award not for greater human ingenuity and labor but for faith? Apparently, hard work, investment, and ingenuity were not the keys to prosperity; indeed munificence seemed promised without any ingenuity required to be exercised. When the “rains would come in season,” all that the people were expected to do was merely to gather in the grains and wine and oil from the soaked lands.

This contrast between human ingenuity and divine blessing as the foundation of prosperity seems distinctly unmodern. Especially so in the context of global warming. The problem of global warming will not be solved by existing technology and energy sources. We will not solve global warming if all of us buy Priuses or electric vehicles or if we exploit through fracking the use of abundant natural gas to replace imported oil and even were we to shut down all of our coal-fired power plants. Global warming can only be solved with unprecedented applications of new technologies. We need human ingenuity and massive investments of capital, to restructure our entire economies to replace almost all fossil fuel uses. Nuclear power, solar power, algae, hydrogen are only some of the potential sources of new energy. For all of them, human ingenuity is critical

So what to make of the admonition in the parsha that ingenuity and human labors are not the solution for prosperity. It may be found in the injunction of verse 16: Take care not to be lured away to serve other gods, or the Lord’s anger will literally “shut up the skies.” Commentator in our siddur, Kol Hanishamah notes that the Shema teaches that even God’s blessings are not without risks. The prosperity promised to the people Israel might lead to pride, self-satisfaction and ingratitude. Ironically the more we are blessed, the more ungrateful we might become. The more entitled we may feel. The Shema passage warns us to be careful, that as our prosperity is assured, it not be taken for granted and that the people should not stray into idolatry.

I for one do not see technology as a modern-day idolatry. As I have said, new technology, human innovation and investment on a vast scale are essential to our finding solutions to global warming. But, as we look forward, we must always remind ourselves that just as the biblical blessing of abundant rains might have unforeseen consequences, there can be no doubt that the technology of the steam engine, perhaps the greatest single contributor to industrial age prosperity, has brought forth more than 200 years later unforeseen and potentially irremediable consequences. Similarly, nuclear energy brought forth great abundance of carbon-free energy, but with great risks and unforeseen consequences. Future technologies will likely carry their own risks and potentially adverse consequences.

Indeed, to my modern and secular mind, technological ingenuity has both caused our current conundrum and is the only way out. We have made the world prosperous beyond measure, but at the same time we may pass a point of no return. Climate scientists believe that if we do not drastically reduce carbon emissions in the next 30-40 years, by 90%, not 10-50%, temperature rises will be unabated and may become irreversible. We will have reached the stage of environmental idolatry. What we need, just as the biblical people needed, is the will and the way to master our technology and our environmental fates at the same time, and, to recognize that the only way to do so is not just through government policies, but by deep-seated global adherence to a new and, as yet, unformed ethic of responsibility for our global climate.