



THE EARTH SPEAKS

Culture change always starts with stories.

And we aren't the only living beings with stories to tell.

The Earth's chorus of voices demands moral engagement, a new approach to our planet in peril.

Erev Rosh Hashanah, 5783

Who is the Lorax? Well... "He was shortish. And oldish. And brownish. And mossy. And he spoke with a voice that was sharpish and bossy." But we know him as the one who speaks for the trees, "for the trees had no tongues to protest" the Onceler's ax and his vision of a world filled with thneeds-- "that fine-something-that-all-people-need." As the Truffula trees fall, the well-attuned Lorax gives voice to the rest of the ecosystem: the Brown Bar-ba-loots, the Humming Fish, and the Swomee-Swans, "who could no longer sing a note, for no one can sing who has smog in his throat."

Again, who is the Lorax? The Lorax is a plea, now 51 years old, to see the natural world differently, to value it on its own terms. An imaginative leap, back to the age when we knew how to listen to non-human voices, when the whole world shimmered with vitality, when we animated these beliefs through stories. When stories mattered.

What more do we need to hear? There is nothing ambiguous about the science of climate change, no fact missing from the UN's IPCC reports. There's no shortage of newspaper articles detailing the devastation that's already occurred and the suffering that awaits us. A third of Pakistan was just under water. We are trapped in a quicksand of our own making - unable, unwilling to move even as the horizon disappears.

There's plenty of blame to go around: corporations that prioritize shareholders over shared-resources, politicians who stoke the flames of denialism while forests burn in our backyard, and the collective sum of our individual choices to eat, consume, and travel the way we do. But behind each of these failures is a story that drives our destructive action, a story so diffused in the air we breathe that we don't even realize how blackened our lungs have become, while the Earth is wheezing beneath our feet.

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What is the myth that fuels climate change? What is the "master story" that we've unconsciously adopted that makes it so hard to break free from the cycles of belief and behavior that are destroying the world around us? I believe this is the most urgent question we can ask on the precipice of a new year, on the day we call "Hayom Harat Olam" -- the day the

world is conceived, because myths are roots – everything grows from them, everything depends on them. Since they are concealed, we often don't know the extent of rot until the tree topples. "Unless," the Lorax said as he lifted himself through a hole in the sky, we can tell new stories and plant new roots.

We are so entangled in the destructive myth that we barely notice how often it shows up in our lives. But once in a while, the sap rises and what should have been sweet is instead bitter.

It was my first day in Crescent City, California, where I'd spend the next 6 months farming on 15 acres of vegetables, orchards, and livestock. Paul and Julie Jo, the sweet couple who'd entrust me and two other inexperienced suburban kids with their family business, brought us to their backyard to watch Bessie give birth to her first calf. I'd never seen anything like this, and it was extraordinary. She paced in the pasture, grazed and grunted, occasionally resting on her front knees. We were there, but in a sense, she was alone— guided by whatever inherent and inherited wisdom she had within. The calf was born, and within 10 minutes, she was trying to stand up, to walk to her mother and feed for the first time. But, she kept falling back down. I could feel Paul's nervousness rising, as he turned to me and said, "if she isn't able to walk within the first 30 minutes, her value decreases by 50% percent." A calf with any physical disability fetches less on the market, and apparently its first thirty minutes is determinative of her worth.

I don't blame Paul. I saw his books, watched him fall behind on his payments, admired how he persisted through exhaustion, growing food and raising animals for milk and meat. But, the story of a calf who is, first and foremost, a way to pay down the VISA bill— that story is part of a larger story where nature has no meaning except as resources that can be harnessed to generate profit. Trees are valued for their lumber. Land by what can be extracted from it. Animals, fish, and birds by their caloric value. How did we arrive at a myth that frames the natural world this way, that strips intrinsic worth from the rest of Creation?

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Amitav Ghosh, in his brilliant 2021 book, "The Nutmeg's Curse," traces this ideology to the encounter between European colonizers and the Indigenous peoples of the Americas, many of whom believed in the sacredness of Earth and the vitality of trees, mountains, and rivers. People who were in dialogue with the natural world, who listened and interpreted the stories of the nonhuman actors with whom they shared the landscape. He writes, "Colonization was not solely a process of establishing dominion over human beings. It was also a process of subjugating and reducing to muteness an entire universe of beings that was once thought of as having agency and powers of communication."¹ In other words, facing an Indigenous ideology that gave voice and attributed wisdom to the natural world, the colonizers silenced that story, replacing it with the notion of a desacralized, inanimate Earth.

¹ Ghosh, Amitav. *The Nutmeg's Curse*, p. 190

“These mutings,” Ghosh continues, “were essential to the [new myth] of economic extraction because in order to see something as a mere resource, we first need to see it as something that makes no demands of moral engagement with us. It is by representing a vast continuum of human and nonhuman beings as [voice-less] that the colonizer turns them into resources, to be used as slaves and commodities.”

Stories generate relationships. When I know your story, where you come from, what you’ve seen, and what you hope for, empathy becomes possible. I can feel your pain alongside you, feel the call within to respond. When I know your story, my heart is tugged towards action even when it’s inconvenient, towards responsibility, even when it involves personal sacrifice. But, by silencing the stories of people and plants, of Earth and everything-that-didn’t-look-like-them, the colonizers displaced living beings of all kinds from the realm of moral engagement.

The consequences of this mythology bridge the ecological with the social, silencing the cries of the earth alongside the cries of the poor, who are at the forefront of this unfolding tragedy. The brunt of a brazen treatment of Earth is felt disproportionately by communities of color, the economically disadvantaged, and in a cruel irony, the people whose lands were plundered by colonization will be punished again by the worst impacts of a changing climate their oppressors brought forth. We live in the aftershocks of this dangerous myth, and we barely even realize that the earth is shaking.

We’ve taken this story, forged in violence, and made it our own, seeing the natural world only through the prism of its extracted use to us. And as a result, the rivers are flooding, villages are sinking, the bees are collapsing, the ice is melting, and few are listening. Because, as the old story goes, how could a lifeless resource have something to say?

But, that’s not our story. It’s not the Jewish story.²

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The Jewish story, from the days of Creation to this day of re-creation, is that every being on earth has a story to tell. The Earth and its nonhuman inhabitants are a “communion of subjects, not a collection of objects.”³ They matter, well beyond the dollar sign we ascribe to them. In the words of Rambam, issuing a prophetic rebuke of the Colonialist myth that would seize our worldview, “It should not be believed that all beings exist for the sake of humans. On the contrary, all the other beings have been intended for their own sakes.”⁴ The Jewish story teaches that animals, plants, and the earth compose their own narratives and are endowed with the ability to form relationships with each other, with us, and with God. Ours is a tradition where:

² I’m deeply grateful for the friendship and scholarship of my teacher, Rabbi Dr. Ariel Mayse, who has written extensively on this topic. See: Mayse, Ariel. “Where Heaven and Earth Kiss,” *Journal of Jewish Ethics*. Vol. 5, No. 1, 2019

³ Berry, Thomas. *Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as Sacred Community*, p. 17

⁴ Maimonides. *Guide of the Perplexed*, 3:13

Mountains dance like rams, *he'harim rakdu ch'ailim*.⁵

Where the trees of the forest shout for joy, *az yirani'nu kol atzei ya'ar*.⁶

Where the Earth trembles, *huli aretz*,⁷ and the land spits out its inhabitants if we defile it through misdeed, *v'taki ha'aretz et yoshveha*.⁸

These images remind us that the richness of lived experience is not unique to humans alone. And, when we learn to listen to the songs, cries, and stories of the world around us, moral engagement is demanded of us. We begin to pause to consider how our actions impact the living beings around us.

The scientific reports, tragically, are not moving us to the paradigm shifts we need, and the Colonialist myth clouds our vision, locking us into a way of living that we know betrays the true nature of the world around us. What we need are the old-new Jewish myths to “show the fly the way out of the fly bottle.”⁹ We need a new vocabulary that helps provide the psychic and spiritual energy necessary for the work ahead, which is extensive and touches on every sector of activity.

That’s why this isn’t a sermon about the 10 things we should all do differently to mitigate the impact of climate change. That list exists, and we should do them—they’d really make a difference. But, what we fundamentally need is for a new story to take root so deeply in our being that every decision draws from it. How we eat, build, travel, vote, prosecute and defend, invest and divest, how we live and love. Culture change always starts with stories because stories help us see the world in a subjunctive mode—how it could be, not just how it is. Our task is to tell stories from the perspective of nonhuman voices, stories that “give life to all the beings, seen and unseen, that inhabit a living Earth.”¹⁰ As Robin Wall Kimmerer writes, in *Braiding Sweetgrass*, “Our relationship with land cannot heal until we hear its stories. But who will tell them?”¹¹ Let’s start by telling our own.

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Two men were fighting over a piece of land—each claimed ownership. To resolve their differences, they agreed to put the case before the rabbi, who listened but couldn’t come to a decision so finally, she said, “Since I cannot decide to whom this land belongs, let us ask the land.” She put her ear to the ground, then straightened up. “Gentlemen, the land says that it belongs to neither of you— but that you belong to it.”¹² What would happen if we took this story

⁵ Psalm 114:4

⁶ Psalm 96:12

⁷ Psalm 114:7

⁸ Leviticus 18:25

⁹ Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 309

¹⁰ Ghosh, Amitav. *The Nutmeg’s Curse*, p. 84

¹¹ Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass*, p. 40

¹² *Jewish Folk Story found in: Bernstein, Ellen. Let the Earth Teach you Torah*, p. 153

seriously? If the voice of the land was considered when we made decisions about what to build? If forests were consulted before we turned them into pasture? If we asked the earth for permission to take from it because we belong to it? In 1855, a chief of the Cayuse tribe refused to sign a treaty because he felt that it excluded the voice of the Earth: “I wonder if the ground has anything to say?” he asked.

Here’s where I need to say that I know what I’m asking of us is hard and might feel out of reach or even naive. In my 20’s, I spent 6 years farming, raising animals, growing food, wearing shoes less often than what’s socially acceptable, and yet, listening to the earth?! How? What does that mean? What language do the trees speak? I’m not suggesting that the words or stories we attribute to other living beings are spoken with human language. But I am offering the possibility that through relationship, attention, and respect for the complexity of life around us, we can become translators of the Earth’s teachings.

We can tell stories, like scientists such as Suzanne Simard does, about how healthy trees share nutrients with sick trees through fungal networks underground, even taking care of other species.¹³ Stories about how a tree that’s being attacked by insects will produce pheromones that waft through the breeze, warning trees downwind to produce defensive chemicals to ward off the attack.¹⁴ We can call out the limited and arrogant assumption of the question: If a tree falls in a forest, and there’s no one around to hear it, does it make a sound? by teaching the words of the Yalkut Reuveni, “Whenever they cut down a fruit tree, the cry rings out from one end of the earth to the other.” And then, we should cry with the trees, for the trees, just as the Lorax once did.

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What I’m asking us to do is to become translators. To learn a foreign language by immersing ourselves in a culture, by listening to the birds in the morning, or by resting under the tree in the park, and asking “what can you teach me?”

Think about a place you love, a park, campsite, mountain, or lake.

Have you ever felt an answer emerge from the quiet? What story could you compose from that answer? Translation always leaves a little behind, but “without translation, we would be living in provinces bordering on silence” (George Steiner). We would fall for the myth that says we’re the only ones with Torah to teach.

The story goes that the man who wrote down the Oral Torah, Rabbi Yehuda Ha’Nasi, was engaged in his learning, when a calf being led to slaughter rested its head on the rabbi’s lap and cried. He shouted “Go, you were created for this purpose.” At this moment, it was said in Heaven: “Since he wasn’t compassionate, let afflictions come upon him.” For the next 13 years,

¹³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Un2yBgIAxYs>

¹⁴ Kimmerer, Robin. *Braiding Sweetgrass*, p.19-20

R' Yehuda Ha'Nasi suffered from a toothache, until one day, his daughter was sweeping the house and found some weasels lying about. She was about to kill them when Rabbi Yehuda exclaimed, "Let them be...*rachamav al kol ma'asav*. God's mercies extend to all of creation."¹⁵

I hope it doesn't take us 13 years. I hope we'll wake up to the cruelty and arrogance of the old myth and bury it before too much suffering arrives. I hope this year is the beginning of telling a new story, about how the earth shimmers with vitality. A year of learning to listen to the voices of all living beings and translating their wisdom into the urgent Torah of our time. To shift our course from collision to connection, the first step is to embrace a new story, from which the seeds of change must then be planted in every corner of the earth.

¹⁵ Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 85a