

Nomi Lerman  
Rosh Hashana 5777  
Morning Dvar Torah

Shana Tova everyone! I am going to begin by sharing a story from the Talmud with you:

One day a wealthy farmer was out plowing his field as usual. On this day, he was surprised to find large stones in the field, and decided to move them onto a public road to get them out of the way. Someone saw him dumping these stones, and asked “Why are you taking stones from what is not yours and placing them onto what belongs to you?” What a confusing thing to say! The farmer glared at this odd stranger, and continued moving the stones. After many years of success, the farmer suddenly lost his field and wealth. Broken and tired, he was walking along the public road and stumbled over the *very same* stones he had dumped, which were blocking his way on the road. He threw his hands into the air and said, “it was not for nothing a wise person once said to me, “Listen! You are removing stones from what is not yours and placing them onto what belongs to you!”

“Please turn to the person next to you and share your reaction and thoughts about what is going on in this story.”

*1.5 minutes of discussion*

*\*sing ahava, rachamim to bring everyone back\**

“Would anyone like to share what you thought happened in this story, and what your take-away is?”

I read the Talmud story as questioning land ownership-- that perhaps we are to view land more as a collective responsibility, rather than from the perspective of individual ownership. Ultimately, the earth can't actually be owned by people. We can choose to be mindful of how we use resources, and mindful that we share this space with so many other people who will feel our actions. The story also tells us that wise people are on the road speaking to us, and hoping that we listen closely to them.

Our story from the Talmud reminds me of what is happening at the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in North Dakota. A company called Energy Transfers is building the Dakota Access oil Pipeline right next to Standing Rock under the Missouri river, which puts the reservation's only drinking water source at risk for contamination. Residents of Standing Rock created protest camps last April, and since the pipeline's construction began, thousands of Indigenous people from more than 200 Native Nations have joined in the fight to protect water. A gathering of this scale, with this many indigenous people unifying together from around the world has never happened before. The encampments are communal gathering points for people to stay in tents, share food, and pray in ceremony as

they work towards resisting the pipeline's construction. Just last month, a pipeline in Alabama unleashed thousands of gallons of oil into a wildlife reserve pond, causing the largest oil spill in 20 years. This is exactly what Standing Rock is working to prevent.

Pipeline protesters call themselves earth defenders and water protectors, carrying the chant *Mni Wiconi* with them, which is Lakota for "water is life". This past labor day weekend, bulldozers destroyed two miles of holy sacred burial ground while earth defenders witnessed the desecration, and continued to protest nonviolently. Water protectors have faced tear gas, biting dogs, arrests, and police guns during nonviolent protests and sacred ceremonies. Standing Rock clearly says over and over again, "We will not rest until our lands, people, waters and sacred sites are permanently protected." Similar protests are sprouting up all over the world, including here in West Roxbury, where expansion of a methane gas pipeline is ongoing. Community members are organizing a solidarity action to protest the West Roxbury pipeline strategically during sukkot, and I invite all of you to join us in protecting our community, and showing our solidarity with the Standing Rock Sioux Nation.

*Besides the ancient Jewish custom of organizing political protests, what does water and earth protecting look like in our tradition?* In the second chapter of the Torah, G-d places Adam in the garden, and instructs Adam "L'ovda U'L'Shomra", that Adam must serve and guard the garden. Commentators discuss how Adam was placed on earth in order to be a guardian, and that Adam's main task was to protect the garden from anything that might harm the trees, plants, and animals inside.

Later it is taught that if there was a drought, the whole Jewish village would go out to the public square and fast together as a community. We learn of Honi the circle-maker, who draws a circle on the ground and refuses to leave or stop praying until G-d showered the village with rain! We equate the Torah itself to water in so many of our texts because, as people who dwell on earth, we know water to be the source of life-- just as many other cultures do as well.

Comparing the water protectors of Standing Rock and the oil company to our characters from the Talmud, I ask-- who is the wise person and who is the stone-dumper? Our wise person's question could have been understood as protest, but really this person was simply predicting that scattered stones on a public road will affect anyone who uses that road-- especially the people who use it every day.

The Dakota Access pipeline was originally supposed to be built through Bismarck, North Dakota, which is a city that is 94% white. The residents of Bismarck were worried that a spill would pollute their drinking water, and so the pipeline's path was moved to being half a mile next to the Standing Rock Reservation. Here is environmental racism at work-- targeting low-income communities of color to be the first to feel the effects of environmental

devastation. Perhaps like this oil company, our farmer in the Talmud believed that he would never have to use the public road, believing he wouldn't ever experience stumbling over the stones he chose to dump. Only after falling, he was able to realize his mistake, and start making teshuva by acknowledging the stranger's wisdom.

We often translate teshuva as "repentance" or "return", and I also like to understand teshuva as reconciliation. While we celebrate the birthday of the world this Rosh Hashana, I am asking-- how do we make teshuva with the earth? How do we make reconciliation with the people who witness and feel the environmental impact of our country's actions the deepest, because this is their ancestral homeland?

A friend of mine who is an American Indian elder once asked to meet my grandfather, who survived Auschwitz, and I helped facilitate an introduction. Throughout the time they spent with one another, they shared their stories of survival, which were similar in quite a few ways. I witnessed a powerful and healing connection between them as they each recognized within the other not only the pain, but the true will to live and thrive with their people. At the end, they must have spent five minutes shaking each other's hands, each with a sweet smile on his face, thanking the other for listening and connecting. I had never witnessed something like this before, and still when I think about how this meeting impacted me-- and my grandparent's relationship with the United States, I feel how powerful it truly was. I am grateful that my ancestors found land to survive on as refugees fleeing genocide, and yet, I grieve knowing that the infrastructure set up in this country was created through genocide. As someone whose ancestors are not indigenous to this land, I aim to understand the impact my presence has here, and to be a part of repairing the harm that continues.

The Zohar shares that we were born into our respective lives in order to make tikkunim, or repairs, on our souls. One way to dive into this task is to form connections with people, to make mistakes, and then to cleanse ourselves with the returning renewal of teshuva. The way complete teshuva works is that when we are faced with the same opportunity to mess up, we either repeat the mistake, or we choose to break our pattern, which is a tikkun. Our tradition teaches that we are all inextricably bound to every single human and piece of creation on earth, and so along with that connection comes a responsibility when things become broken. Teshuva gives us the chance to make reconciliation with people and creation, and to strive towards complete repair. My question is, after the irreversible pain of genocide and environmental disaster, how do we break this country's pattern and confront the remaining structures that continue to cause harm?

We live in a time where we recognize that fasting without action is not enough. The indigenous people who are protecting their water and the future of their grandchildren are sacrificing so much to ensure that life continues. Just as our ancestors gathered in the square to fast and pray for rain, we are witnessing

a community of communities gathering in their own way, asking for clean and safe water. How can we listen and support the wise person on the road warning us that the earth is not ours to pollute?

Both Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur give us permission to seek out opportunities for reconciliation, which is a process that helps us learn how to grow both individually and most of all, collectively. In this process, we can look around at our relationships with people in our community, with the people on this continent, and with the earth itself, and strive to work towards solidarity, healing, and transformation.

Shana Tova!