

Ma'amadot: A Call to Protect Creation

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Avital Judaism for the twenty-first century must speak to the most critical issue confronting humanity as this century progresses: the survival of our planet as a fit habitat for human and other higher forms of life. The most important task of religion will be that of helping us humans to change our relationship with the natural environment of which we are a part. Without such a change—an essential shift from a position of rapacious *consumer* of resources to that of responsible *steward*—we will simply not survive.

To underscore the centrality of this concern to our lives as Jews, the Rabbinical School of Hebrew College, a nondenominational program in Newton Centre, Massachusetts, is calling on Jews everywhere to join us in renewing an ancient practice, that of reciting the *ma'amad*, or day of Creation, each day of the week. Each Sunday, we conclude our morning prayers by reciting, “In the beginning God created heaven and earth.” On Monday: “God said: Let there be a firmament,” and so forth through the week, leading to a renewed conclusion of the cycle with “heaven and earth were completed” as we raise our cup for *kiddush* on Friday night.

This practice was originally observed by Israelites, whose priestly neighbors were taking their weekly turn at serving in the Temple. As the priests offered sacrifices that they believed sustained the cosmos, the people of their town stood up and called out the days of creation, to join them in their holy service. Later, this daily recital became a universal custom, but one that eventually fell out of use. Our call to renew it now is a call to transforming our consciousness, a reordering of our religious priorities.

We choose this venerable Jewish form as a way of saying that protecting the environment is indeed a Jewish issue, one that stands at the very heart of our universal faith. We call upon Jews who pray daily, whatever their denomination or style of prayer, to join with us in this chorus of affirmation, declaring that we see this world as divine creation and commit ourselves to its loving protection.

We also ask Jews who do not engage in daily prayer to consider reciting these verses, along with the *Sh'ma*, as the beginning of a daily spiritual practice. The text to be recited each day, along with a brief *kavvanah*, or direction for prayer, is available for download on our website at hebrewcollege.edu/maamadot.

Over the next several months, we will publish a series of seven brief papers (to be available on our website) that will expand on seven topics for contemplation and renewed commitment, parallel to each of the seven days of Creation. We also hope to establish a Facebook group, where Jews who adopt this practice may share reflections around it. We invite Christian and other friends who are inspired to learn from Jewish practice to join us in this recitation, one that underscores our shared biblical heritage and commitment to protecting God's creation.

Why does this matter so concern us as religious people? The changes in human behavior needed for our survival will not be successfully mandated by government decree nor international treaties alone. They will need to rise up from below, emerging from a tectonic shift in the deep structures of the way we humans think about ourselves and the meaning of our existence on this Earth.

That is the true subject of religion, and all of the great religions of the world will need to turn themselves toward that task. Some religious leaders, including the pope and the Dalai Lama, have already moved significantly in that direction. Jewish voices have also begun to be heard addressing the urgency of this issue. We seek here to join in contributing to that effort.

Responsibility for our world and its survival is built deeply into the foundation of our religious worldview. Our ancient ancestors saw the daily sacrifices as sustaining the universe. Were it not for them, they believed, God would return the world to primordial chaos. The rabbis transferred this belief from the Temple offerings to the life of Torah and commandments. The Midrash says that "God made a condition in creating heaven and earth. If Israel accept My Torah, all will be well. If not, I will hereby return you to the chaos out of which you came."

How are we to interpret these teachings in a contemporary context? They cannot be read literally, claiming that Jewish life alone sustains the world. Such a narrow and exclusivist view of Judaism no longer works in our age. We no longer believe that we maintain the world's existence simply by praying and studying Torah. We must take them to mean that Torah, as we are to understand it, has to serve as a world-sustaining teaching. To live the life of Torah—to follow God's path—is to live in such a way as to help God's world to survive.

Our Torah begins with God's creation of the world. This stands as the basis of our faith, as it does of all religion, which emerges out of gratitude for our existence. We acknowledge a God who, in the words of our prayerbook, "renews every day the work of creation."

This faith in creation does not need to be taken literally. You may believe that our planet is 5,775 or 18 billion years old. You may understand God as a transcendent creator, existing before and beyond the universe, or as a force present within all of being itself, ever renewing the gift of life. You may believe in supernatural events, or you may see nature itself as the greatest of all miracles.

The point is that existence, including our own, contains a mysterious and sacred truth, that it is touched by a divine presence. Our task as human beings is to discover that presence and to hear its subtle voice addressing us. That voice calls out to us from within all that is. Today, it calls upon us to act for the very survival of that magnificent creation of which we are a part.

But there is another, more particular, reason why we should see the future of our relationship to the planet as a Jewish concern. The old Creation story, that of the seven days, was one of the great Jewish contributions to world civilization. We commemorate that story with our Shabbat, raising our cup of wine each week as the world's creation is completed, and asserting yet again that we live in a created world.

But that story is not only ours; it is also known throughout the world. It has taught the world some of our greatest values, including God's love for each creature, the dignity of every human as God's image, and the importance of both rest and holiness. We still believe in those values, and we want to see them carried over into the current story of human origins, the tale of evolution.

It, too, needs to become a sacred story, one that reflects our sense of awe and wonder before a divine presence that we still know to inhabit this world. It is important that we take an active role in the current conversation about our planet and its future so that our great truths be seen as essential to the new picture of human life on Earth that will inevitably emerge in this period of great transition in human history.

To partake in this universal effort, we Jews need to recommit ourselves to a faith in God's creation, defined in the broadest way. We should express it in a stronger commitment to Shabbat as our weekly celebration of it. We should embrace Shabbat as a time of raising our own awareness of God's presence throughout the created world, meaning that all of nature and its resources are to be treated with care and reverence.

But this renewed Shabbat should commit us to preserving creation during the week as well, taking on roles of leadership in all the many efforts to preserve our world, those involving conservation and protection of the environment in both the private and public spheres. This ritual, like all such practices, is not an end in itself, but a reminder that our very existence as a "kingdom of priests and holy people" is testimony to our faith that we live in a created world, and that we must treat it as a dwelling-place for the divine presence.

May this new commitment to an ancient practice become *talmud ha-mevi lidey ma'aseh*, learning that leads us to renewed action.