

TO WHOM DOES THE EARTH BELONG? HIGH HOLIDAY SERMON, 5740/1980

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Come with me, if you will, to the city of Jerusalem in the late fourth century before the common era. It is 2300 years earlier than this moment in which we live, and one of the best known men in all human history stands with his armies before the battered walls of Jerusalem. The young Alexander the great has crushed Jerusalem as he has conquered so many other great cities. His half drunken armies, aflush with victory sing the praises of Alexander and likem him to a God. Alexander himself seems to be excited and happy at first. For a few moments he rejoices in the fact that he seems to be fulfilling his mother's ambition for him. That is, to rule the world; to win that kind of fame that would establish him as a God. Fo a few days after his conquest of Jerusalem, Alexander permits himself to believe that the world is HIS.

The records of history tell us that Alexander did not bask in the glory of his victory for long. Within weeks, he was on his way determined to conquer other great cities and nations. Alexander came increasingly to believe that he could not stop short of conquering all the known world- for only thus could he hope to win immortality.

In modern times, there is not one but many Alexanders who seek to claim the world for themselves. Of course, the scenario is substantially changed. You see, Alexander believed in the Gods, and he also believed in the importance of philosophy and culture. Most of the would-be world conquerors today believe neither in the Gods nor in the importance of philosophy or culture. Of course, todays conquerors are not even in the realm of the military, they are in the realm of finance. They conquer by financial contril.

Come with me, if you will, to the city of Las Vegas, in the year 1980. Let us observe an event which seems to occur over and over again, although the central character may change with each scene. There are, of course, many average human beings of petty ambitions and faults who pass before us in the plush casino, as for a moment they pretend that they have wealth and power. Every so often, however, the tycoon comes into our view, with dollar signs radiating off of him like haloes,

with a bouncing young lady on each arm, and a drink in his hand. As we overhear part of his conversation, it sounds something like this: "Whatever you want, baby, I can get it for you. Money is no object. I own ten corporations and as many homes in as many countries. Nobody tells me what to do. Everybody does what I want them to do. The world is my oyster". To which kingly speech, the ladies squeal their delight and approval while the yes-men in the entourage eagerly respond with "Amen", or its equivalent, "right-on".

Our hero in this Las Vegas scene is, in one respect at least, like Alexander The Great. Each of these men believed that the world belonged to them and they were privileged to do whatever they pleased. It is because I believe that more and more people in our society are becoming, in one way or another, like the hero in our Las Vegas story that I think it appropriate for us to discuss at this High Holiday service the question, "To Whom Does The Earth Belong"?

Every Saturday morning at our Sabbath Service at Beth Am, we read from Psalm 8. Even though I read these words every Sabbath, I never fail to find them sobering and challenging. The Psalm reads:

"The earth is the Lords, and the fulness thereof.

The world and those that dwell therein".

It seems to me that in a world where it is possible to satisfy ourselves pleasureably in a thousand different ways, it is important to say this Psalm, to pray it, over and over again, at every possible interlude.

"The earth is the Lords, and the fulness thereof.

The world and those that dwell therein".

The question that the Psalm stimulates is this: How many of us live our life as if it were true that the world belongs to God? How many of us consciously and deliberately follow those ethical standards that we associate with God's rule of the world?

The first question-how many of us believe that the world belongs to God is not strictly a Jewish question. To be sure, the ancient Jews assumed

that God created the world, but other ancient peoples believed that too. The ancient Egyptians, for example, believed that the world was the product of the Gods, but they also believed that their King or Pharaoh was God incarnate. Because Pharaoh was God, there was no need for a Democratic law. Pharaoh's will was God's law, and the people had no choice but to do as the Pharaoh dictated.

The central purpose of Egyptian society was to fulfill the will of the divine King, therefore discipline or order was its goal. Indeed, the ancient Egyptian word for justice and truth, m'at, really means discipline or order. If you did what the King wanted, you were acting justly or truthfully.

The ancient Canaanites also believed that the God created the world, and they also identified their living King with the Gods. The Canaanites saw God's purpose differently from the Egyptians, however. The Canaanites measured all things by the standard of their success in getting the land to produce its crops. They believed that the Gods wanted them to do whatever was necessary to assure the fertility of the land. For this reason the Canaanites encouraged all sorts of sexual intercourse as part of their religious fertility rites. The Hebrews incorporated in their Bible prohibitions against sexual acts between humans and animals and between humans and the earth, precisely because these were part of Canaanite approved religious practice.

The distinctive genius of the Hebrews was manifested in two ways. First, in the way they perceived their God; and secondly, in the purpose they saw God projecting for mankind. The Hebrews did not think of their God in the person of the divine human ruler. For them, God was that unseen, loving, just parent who created all humans in His image. It is impossible to measure the depths of this revolutionary teaching found in our Bible. It meant that the King was not alone divine, but every human being, male and female, was created in the image of the divine. This meant simply that every human had the potential to grow towards God, towards ideal justice and love, and it implied, of course, that no one person, no King, has the right to rule arbitrarily over other human beings.

While the Greeks believed their Gods to have participated in sexual orgies and to be afflicted with human faults and emotions, the Hebrews

spoke of their God as a holy God, a different kind of God, a God identified with Torah, with the moral law. When the Hebrews taught, "The earth is the Lord's", they meant that the earth belonged to a moral God who required moral deeds from those to whom He had entrusted the governing of the earth.

The book of Leviticus reads in the 19th chapter, "Ye shall be holy because I the Lord your God am holy". Judaism calls us to be imitators of God in His holiness. If you really believe that the world belongs to God and not to the self proclaimed conquerors of land or money, then your deeds have to be measured by those standards that are so forcefully enumerated in our Bible and in our tradition.

The Biblical creation story tells us in its broad message that God created the world and then turned it over to His agent, humankind. God tells Adam and Eve, here now is my wonderful gift. Use it fruitfully, creatively, and responsibly. In other words, Judaism tells us that our purpose on earth is to serve as God's agent. It tells us that human life is holy.

Now the question is whether we modern Jews really believe that? The question is whether we are so blinded by our little successes, as Alexander was blinded and as our Las Vegas tycoon was blinded, that we have lost sight of the reason we are here on earth. The question is whether we are so tuned in to personal gratification that we can't hear what God is saying to us.

What do Jews mean when they say the earth is the Lord's? The first thing that Judaism tells us is that God Himself is not free to violate His own purpose for the earth as spelled out in His Torah. God Himself, Abraham tells us, is not free to be unjust. When God seems to get angry and wants to wipe out all of the people in Sodom because many had ignored the moral law, Abraham is not afraid to say to God, "Challilah L'cha, it is forbidden to You by Your own law that You punish the righteous along with the wicked". And, so the story tells us God is reminded of His own law, and He demonstrates a mercy even beyond that for which the Abraham was calling. You are right, God tells Abraham; I will not destroy even the wicked in Sodom, if there are so many as ten righteous people there. If the earth belongs to God, none of us is free to change the law as he sees fit, and if the earth belongs to God, our mercy must

exceed our justice.

Where the Kings of other lands could do as they pleased, Judaism makes it clear that even the King is bound by God's law and purpose. When King David stole the heart of another man's wife, the prophet Nathan condemned the King at the risk of the Prophet's life, and David, who was not without conscience, took off his royal robes, put on sack clothe and ashes and sat in the gate of the city confessing before all his crime against God. For a moment, David had thought that he was above the law. But unlike Alexander, Daivd knew that he was merely the agent in a world that bore the stamp of God's purpose.

These stories about Sodom and King David show us that great events must be undertaken or abandoned when measured against the standard of God's law, but if you believe that the earth is the Lord's, each little thing we do, will be measured by that standard also.

God is not concerned about how much profit we make in our business ventures, but He is concerned about how we relate to our employees, to our business associates, and to our customers. Recently a member of our congregation, who ostensibly was very charitable, died. When I spoke to his friends and co-workers, I first discovered that this man was ruthless in business ^{and} even to the members of his own family. If Judaism means anything, it means that the ends do not justify the means. To be ruthless in business is to say with Alexander that the world is mine and my law defines what is right and wrong.

If you believe that the earth is the Lord's, even your sexual acts, or especially them, will be measured in terms of God's purpose for us. A few decades ago one of my seminary teachers visited Miami and was swimming in his hotel pool. Dr. Tepfer overheard two male vacationers talking. One said to the other, "Have you found a girl to have sex with yet?". The other answered, "No", to which the first replied, "What, two days in Miami and you haven't had sex yet?". Dr. Tepfer's comment to me was, "Imagine talking that way about the use of an organ God has given to us for creative use".

Not only the sexual act but even the once mysterious events of birth and death have been increasingly separated from their association with God. When my first child was born, I felt awed and humble. I was so

grateful that I had been privileged, along with my wife, to share in the divine mystery of birth and creation. Never for a moment did I think, look what we have done. My thoughts were filled with gratitude to the God who had made it possible for us to be agents in this divine flow. Yet how many of us today associated God with a birth? How many of us prefer to be childless? How many of us look at children as a drag and a problem? While I have publicly stated by support for abortion in principle, I cannot help but deplore the extremes to which a woman's right to this right has been pushed by some. At the present time, there are almost as many abortions in America as there are births. This has to tell us something about our mechanistic view of the miracle of birth.

Many of us do not even associate God with the miracle of death. Many of us do not even pause to consider how it is that the flesh was so vibrant and creative now has become just a lump of clay. Many of us even at that moment pay no homage to the miracle of life. Nor do we think of the God who set in motion that process which gives to mere matter the ability to think, to speak and to love.

We live in such a time of false pride that many of us think that even birth and death are events solely in our control. We think that only we lend meaning to these events. No wonder that some of us can move from a birth to a death without breaking stride or shedding a tear or expressing a prayer of gratitude or an appeal for help. So magnificently self sufficient and dry is our life that we do not recognize that we are but a part of a flow of which we are but an insignificant part.

We live in a competitive society which does in many ways encourage those who are strongest and smartest to rise to the top in many professions. There is something good about this. On the other hand, such a society has a way of forgetting about those who are not quite as clever or about those who are not quite as aggressive. Increasingly in our society the disadvantaged, the poor and those from less dynamic cultural backgrounds find it more and more difficult to compete for training opportunities and for jobs. Judaism is not a religion designed for a highly competitive society. Judaism was born in an age where the family was the cultural unit and where each member of the family, according to his or her strength, upheld the other. The symbol that keeps emerging in early Jewish art is the symbol of the shepherd carrying the feeble lamb-caring for his flock. As the Lord is our

shepherd, so we are to be shepherds to one another. If you believe in the God of Judaism, you must look at those around you not as competitors to be beaten out, but as fellow human beings in need of support and understanding.