Reconnecting with Natural Religion: Thoughts on Parashat Ki Tavo, August 24, 2013

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(This week's Angel for Shabbat column is excerpted from my book, "Rhythms of Jewish Living," chapter two.)

Jewish religious experience is intimately linked to the rhythms of the natural world. The rhythms of the sun and moon govern our times of prayer, our religious festivals, our meditation of the universe. The phenomena of nature evoke within us responses to the greatness of God, the Creator, and we recite blessings on witnessing the powers of nature.

Centuries of Westernization and urbanization have profoundly affected Jewish religious sensitivity. There has been a steady and increasing alienation between Jewish religious observance and the natural world, with a parallel diminution in sensing the awe of God as Creator of the natural universe.

To illustrate the changed perception, we may consider the commonly observed Jewish religious experiences which recur on a regular basis. Modern Jews identify their religious lives with such events as the Passover seder, the High Holy Day synagogue services, Shabbat ceremonies and meals, the study of Torah, synagogue worship. The common denominator of these observances is that they generally happen indoors. They are observances in a synagogue, a home, or a place of study.

If we were to consider the situation of the ancient Israelites, we would be confronted with a different religious sensibility. The most important observances for them would have included the three pilgrimages to Jerusalem when they would journey to the holy city to celebrate Passover, Shavuoth and Succoth. They would include the observance of Bikkurim, the bringing of the first fruits to the Temple, a ceremony which was a great outdoor celebration. They would include the festivities which took place during the harvest festivals, the sharing of harvests with the poor, the bringing of animals to Jerusalem to be offered as sacrifices. Almost everything, in fact, would have involved being outdoors, in contact with the natural world.

Obviously, we have moved a long way from the agricultural life of ancient Israel to the urban life of contemporary society. By urbanizing religion and by placing its most important events indoors, we have lost touch with the original religious insight which connected us with the rhythms of nature.

In former times, Jews knew that the Sabbath was concluded by going outside and looking for stars. If it was dark enough to be able to observe three stars, then the Sabbath was over. Today, calendars and synagogue schedules list the time when Sabbath ends with the arrogant precision of mathematics. A person may pray in the morning without having experienced sunrise; may pray in the afternoon, without having experienced sunset; may say evening prayers without having seen a star in the sky. Religious life can be celebrated indoors with the assistance of clocks and calendars, without the need arising to go outside and determine the position of the sun.

By bringing religion indoors, some of our feeling of awe for the universe and its Creator has been lost. The regular daily connections with nature which Jewish tradition has prescribed are no longer easily experienced. But losing contact with the natural world threatens to make religion increasingly artificial, removed from its basic life source.

Until relatively modern times, the ideal religious personality was one who spent much time outdoors, who contemplated the wonders of the universe and the wisdom of its Maker. The ideal Jew lived in harmony with nature and participated in its rhythms. The notion that ideal piety can be found in a pale, scholarly, undernourished saint who spends his days and nights studying Torah in a study hall is not true to the original Jewish religious vision. The Biblical heroes and prophets, the Talmudic sages, the medieval pietists and mystics—all were involved in outdoor religion.

As we open our eyes more to the outdoors, to the rhythms of nature, we will come into relationship with God, Creator of the universe. Jewish spirituality entails appreciating the value of calm, natural wisdom.

Angel for Shabbat