NEW FOR 5778

Speaking of Text

A WEEKLY EXPLORATION OF THE JEWISH BOOKSHELF

From Sarah to Mrs. Portnoy

Dr. Marjorie Lehman, Associate Professor of Talmud and Rabbinics, JTS

Mothers in the Jewish Cultural Imagination, edited by Marjorie Lehman, Jane Kanarek, and Simon Bronner

From Sarah in the Bible to Philip Roth's Mrs. Portnoy, images of the mother have been a hallmark of Jewish culture. Hallowed by some, excoriated by others—mothers have been depicted, on the one hand, as all that is good and sacred in the Jewish family, and, on the other, and far more frequently, as overbearing, guilt-inducing, and interfering. Working to disentangle motherhood from idealized notions of the Jewish family and stereotypes of the Jewish mother, this collection of essays on motherhood in the Jewish cultural imagination presents a complex, nuanced, and robust perspective on the subject. The essays included in this volume emphasize the variety of identities held by mothers as well as the vast array of cultural and social patterns that characterizations of mothers reflect.

As these essays show, Jews have used motherhood across time and place as a way to construct and comprehend their culture. Writers, activists, rabbis, artists, printers, and poets have projected, created, engaged, and contested Jewish culture by relying on the trope of "the Jewish mother," often breaking away from biological conceptions of motherhood. This volume seeks to give the figure of the mother a new and enhanced place at the heart of Judaism: not only as a central figure in family life, but also as a key agent in the transmission of Jewish religion and culture. Toward this end, the contributors to this volume highlight the complex network of symbols and images associated with Jewish mothers and motherhood as well as the vast array of social, historical, and cultural patterns that characterizations of mothers reflect. Each essay treats the topic from a specific perspective, from mother-daughter relationships in the Talmud to depictions of mothers in twentieth-century American Jewish children's literature. Collectively, they present a provocative examination of the ways mothers shape and problematize Jewish identity.

TORAH FROM JTS

JTS

Simhat Torah
Bereishit 5778

שמחת תורה
בראשית תשע"ח

A Year Without Second Chances

Professor Arnold M. Eisen, Chancellor, JTS

This week's commentary is part of a special series for 5778, in which Chancellor Eisen reflects on major themes of each of the five books of the Torah and their meaning for contemporary Jewish life.

One of the greatest gifts that Judaism offers its adherents is multiple opportunities for starting over. The first ten days of the New Year are devoted to *teshuvah*: repentance, renewal, return to one's best self and to God. On Simhat Torah, the final day of the fall holiday season, we read the last words in the Torah and then without pause scroll back to the very first word, *bereishit*, "in the beginning." Every week concludes with a Sabbath that recalls God's "resting" on the seventh day of Creation—a chance for human creatures to refresh, take stock of gifts and obligations, and turn a fresh page in life. Weekly, monthly, and yearly cycles all serve as reassuring reminders of a natural order in which we, the descendants of Adam and Eve, are meant to take our rightful place. The Creator, on the sixth day, pronounced that order "very good" (Gen. 1:31).

This year, however, there are signs that something in the natural order is *not* right, and strong evidence that the fault lies in large part with human beings. The portents were everywhere this summer: a hurricane season that was one of the worst ever; floods and forest fires that have taken a heavy toll in lives and property around the world; the third successive year that has been the hottest in recorded history; glaciers and polar ice melting at rates not seen in many hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years. The final 2017 draft report on climate change compiled by scientists from 13 US federal agencies, whose non-partisan research is mandated by Congress, sets forth some of the ever-stronger evidence confirming the fact of "continuing, rapid, human-caused warming of the global atmosphere and oceans." It is "extremely likely," the report concludes, "that human influence has been the dominant cause of the observed warming since the mid-20th century."

Page after page, chart after chart, lays out the magnitude of the unfolding disaster. Recent decades are "the warmest of the past 1500 years"—and things will soon get

worse. "Global climate is projected to continue to change over this century and beyond." The world's human population, beneficiary of so much progress and innovation in recent decades, seems set on "conducting an unprecedented experiment with the Earth's climate system through emissions from large-scale fossil-fuel combustion, widespread deforestation, and other changes to the atmosphere and landscape." If we fail to change course, no second chance is likely to be available.

Earlier generations—indeed, our own generation, until a few years ago—could not possibly have imagined this predicament. Our ancestors could not have felt the awful gravity of our God-given responsibility to serve and preserve the Earth (Gen. 2:15). Those who open their eyes to the unfolding drama cannot but recoil in fear at the prospect of what awaits humanity—which perhaps explains why so many people prefer to keep their eyes resolutely closed. One would expect rational human beings to use every available means to avert or mitigate the disaster about to strike them, their children, and their grandchildren. Jews—and anyone else who accepts a share of responsibility for the future of God's creation—have special obligation to exercise stewardship in ways never before possible, and never before required. Why are so many of us—Jews and others, religious and secular, liberals and conservatives, individuals and governments—and the government of the United States most of all—so slow to take the necessary steps when life hangs in the balance?

One factor might be the genuine difficulty in getting one's head around the fact that the dangers we face are utterly without precedent. Every passage of the Bible that I can think of assumes that nature is vast beyond human power to comprehend or permanently damage. Indeed, the Torah teaches that it is God who sends blessing and curse, rain and flood, as reward or punishment for human action. No Biblical writer (and few moderns) could have imagined that human action really *could* cause drastic change in weather patterns and sea levels—or that this action *would* come in part as the result of bad human decisions, exactly as the prophets declared. Our generation must think about something truly new (and terrifying) under the sun. We have to figure out as never before how to weigh conflicting obligations to present and future, wealthy and poor, large nations and small, our species and others.

A second aspect of our situation that is hard to grasp is the fact that resistance to change is the direct result of individual and national self-interest to maximize wealth or security and minimize sacrifice. There are of course "higher" motives involved as well: a wish to protect the jobs and well-being of today's workers rather than safeguard the lives of men and women who are children today, or not yet born; the desire of developing nations to make progress and achieve comforts that "first-world" countries won long ago, even at heavy cost to the Earth and their own environments. But there are also "lower" motives aplenty at work, starting with

the need of politicians to please voters who value short-term over long-term interest. Corporations make the same calculation with regard to profits, thereby enriching a relative handful at the expense of global well-being.

Economic inequality will grow because of climate change. Disasters disproportionately affect the countries and the social classes least able to cope. Those with means are better able to defend themselves against nature's onslaught, and better able to recover afterwards. Rising seawaters will raise insurance rates for the owners of wealthy beach condos; they will claim the lives of many millions of those with lesser means through disease, displacement, and starvation.

The immensity of the problem, and its global scale, make it still harder to respond effectively. When God gives Adam and Eve the Earth to enjoy and rule in chapter one, they have not yet run from responsibility, or blamed one another (and the serpent) when called to account. Humanity today numbers over seven billion souls, divided into some 195 nations, each of them fractured by religious and linguistic differences. The diversity of worldviews promotes widespread belief that there will never be agreement on right and wrong, or truth and falsehood. How can humanity, so vast and disunited, work together, with mutual trust and sacrifice, to do what is needed? There will always be those who scoff at the climate change data, as Noah's sons ridiculed the news of impending flood, and so give good people good reason for doing nothing, or waiting until we "know more." The Paris climate accord aroused great hope in many quarters only two years ago by proving that consensus, however fragile, was possible. The current U.S. administration has deprived us of that hope, and a significant reduction in emission of greenhouse gasses, by withdrawing America from the Paris Accords.

Jews always enter the New Year with Moses's concluding injunctions ringing in our ears. This year is no exception. *Blessing and curse are set before you*, Moses insists. *Choose life, choose blessing, choose the good!* (Deut. 30:19). If the Bible teaches anything, it is the fact and possibility of human responsibility for the well-being of humanity, and especially the most vulnerable. That lesson has never seemed more relevant. The Earth itself now joins the vulnerable in dependence on us to save them. Moses's voice competes with a fatalism that seems to grow louder by the day. *If the poor are poor, or the strangers in our midst mistreated, too bad for them, but it is not our problem; if thousands die from gun violence, let us pray for their families, but there is nothing we can do about the matter; if fire and flood destroy parts of the globe, let people move to other areas; if Planet Earth proves uninhabitable, there are other planets in the galaxy. Science will find a way to save us. Or God will. There is nothing* we *can do.*

That's not the story the Torah tells, or the action that conscience commands. Let's sound the alarm, and use the one chance we know is in our hands.

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