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Photo credit: Rabbi Korngold Reading Torah Outdoors

## **Guardians of the Earth: To Till and to Tend**

by Jamie Korngold

Excerpted from God in the Wilderness: Rediscovering the Spirituality of the Great Outdoors with the Adventure Rabbi, by Jamie Korngold, Doubleday Religion 2008, used with permission.

How many things You have made, O Lord; You have made them all with wisdom' the earth is full of Your creations....May the glory of the Lord endure forever.

Psalm 104:24 and 104:31



Rabbi Jamie Korngold reading from the *Torah* on a hike and *Shabbat* Service in Boulder, Colorado. *Photo credit: Peggy Dyer.* 

I once lived in a small tent, on a gravel bar, on the outskirts of a rainy Alaskan fishing town called Cordova. The town was so small that there were two roads, a handful of stop signs, and no traffic lights.

The main road started at the docks, where fisherman hauled supplies back and forth between town and their boats. From there the road headed up Main Street, past the post-office, grocery store, general store and café, and then headed out of town, past my gravel bar and finally a mile or so out to the canneries, where I worked. There the road curved back into the sea, where incessant waves washed onto the gravel.

Each morning at 4:30 a.m., my alarm jarred me from a deep sleep. The rain, which had lulled me to sleep at night, usually still played a tapping rhythm on the tent fly in the morning. I unzipped my sleeping bag quickly, like tearing off a band-aid so it won't hurt, and scrambled out into the tent vestibule where I kept my grimy work clothing. I liked to pretend this separation kept my tent somewhat clean.

I pulled on long underwear, wool pants, a shirt, and a fleece jacket, rain gear, boots, and finally my homemade knit hat, and stepped out into another Alaskan morning. I walked half a mile along the coast to the salmon processing plant, where I worked 18 hours a day gutting fish on the "slime-line." The factory was loud, despite my double set of earplugs; cold, despite my wool layers and raingear; and smelly – oh, did it stink! The work was repetitive and tiresome – but the money was good.

Toward the middle of August, when the rains began in earnest, our makeshift campground began to flood. My neighbors and I put our tents up on wooden pallets, first one high, and then two high. One morning I awoke to strange thrashing sounds. I looked outside and saw that the gravel bar had practically become a lake, and the salmon were trying to swim across it. But the water was so low, that the salmon couldn't actually swim, so they just sort of thrashed up against the gravel, indignantly pushing their way through the rocks, and many were suffocating in the low water.

A local explained that the river used to flow fast and free through what was now our campground. However, when the area had been mined for gravel, a few years ago, the river had been redirected a quarter mile to the east, and the salmon, which had spawned in that river for centuries, had not gotten the memo that the river had been moved. When it is time for salmon to lay eggs, they swim up river, back home – and even if the river that used to be home is no longer there, they still try to "go home," so to speak.

When I lived in Alaska, it was easy to see first-hand the inter-connectedness of human beings and nature. Every day I saw the impact of our choices on the land and sea around us, and I became acutely aware of the power and resilience of nature, but also of its vulnerability.

Now that I live in the lower 48, however, it is much more difficult to get the connection between driving my SUV and the heat we've been sweating in all summer. Paying \$60 to fill my gas tank, or cranking on the air conditioning, hurts my wallet, but it's just not the same as having confused salmon swim through your living room.

Sometimes, being environmentally responsible – recycling and biking instead of driving, etc. – feels as futile as the experience of trying to save money by just ordering a sandwich and iced tea for dinner, and ending up splitting the check with ten people who all ordered steak dinners and an expensive bottle of wine. What good can just one person do? Why should I bother installing high efficiency light bulbs when every driveway on the block has an SUV parked in it?

As always, I come back to my moral compass, religion. As Carl Pope, the Executive Director of the Sierra Club, said on a recent conference call with Jewish environmental leaders, "Morality doesn't help you stop hitting your own thumb with a hammer. But it does stop you from hurting people far away, or in the future." Our treatment of the planet is not just a scientific or political issue, it is moral issue. So what does religion teach us is our role in regard to nature? And what does the Bible tell us is the right thing to do?

One of the first things God does in the Bible, directly after placing Adam in the Garden of Eden, is to lay out Adam's job description: "And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the Garden of Eden to till it and tend it." 1

Although Judaism offers a lot of amazing thousand-year-old laws that still apply to the environment today, the crux of the Bible's ecological arguments is this verse itself, "to till it and tend it." The Earth is not ours; we are simply caretakers of it. Our job is "to till and to tend" God's creation, the Earth.

Unfortunately, a lot of fuss has been made about a verse that comes a bit earlier in the Bible. In the first creation story, God creates man in His image and then commands him, "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the Earth, and *subdue it;* and *have dominion over* the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves upon the Earth."

For years some religious people and corporations have argued that this passage gives us the right to fill the Earth, subdue it, and have dominion over every living thing on the planet. Those who hold this view explain that within this verse, God gives us the earth, and all that it holds, as a toolbox of resources, to use as we see fit. The "subdue and have dominion" verse has been used as a mandate for everything from strip-mining, to clear-cutting, to habitat destruction.

But unfortunately for those who use this verse to prove their point of view, just one chapter later we find a verse that counters the first one. The tricky thing about Bible study is that you can never read any verse in isolation, because each verse is explained by other verses throughout the Bible. The art of Bible study therefore involves hopping back and forth between texts to find the passages that explain each other, as in the "subdue and have dominion" verse, which is clarified by the "to till and to tend" verse.

I'm not saying that the "subdue and have dominion" verse is wrong. There is no denying that we have dominion over the earth. No other species in history has held the power to destroy life on the planet. In fact, we can choose from a variety of ways to destroy the earth, or at least change it so that life as we know it will no longer exist.

We can choose between quick death by pushing a few buttons that launch nuclear missiles, or slow death by poisoning our air and contaminating our water sources. And of course climate change provides another frightful option. Yes, we have subdued the

earth and we do have dominion over it. The urgent question is, what is our dominion supposed to look like? This is what is unclear in the excerpt of Biblical text.

Fortunately, Genesis 2:15 answers the question about dominion and clarifies any ambiguity. It tells us that we are supposed to be protectors; we are supposed to "till and tend" God's garden and take care of God's planet. There is also a breath-taking passage in the Jewish scriptural text, Midrash Ecclesiastes Rabbah, written around 800 C.E., which says, "When God created the first human beings, God led them around the garden of Eden and said: 'Look at my works! See how beautiful they are - how excellent! For your sake I created them all. See to it that you do not spoil and destroy My world; for if you do, there will be no one else to repair it."

I am amazed that these prescient words were written so many years ago, and that even then there was concern that we might spoil and destroy the earth. This additional text makes it clear that although God made the earth for us, God did not intend for us to use it recklessly. It is God's earth, not ours. "Take good care of it," God commands. What a clear call to action! Fortunately, today, many religious leaders have come to understand this message and many churches and synagogues are now leaders in the environmental movement.

For me, an equally strong call to action, and perhaps an even stronger argument for taking care of the earth, comes from something more immediate than the text. Some of my colleagues wonder what could be stronger than the words of the Bible, but for me it is the feeling I have when I am outdoors, riding my bike past a green pasture filled with blue chicory flowers as far as my eye can see, or sitting on the red rock high above town and watching a hawk ride the thermals round and round.

In my book, God in the Wilderness, I write about my outdoor journeys, as well as the experiences of participants on Adventure Rabbi trips. In the book I talk about what a potent place nature is for many of us, a place of indescribable connection, ripe with spiritual awakenings. If you are like me and experience your most powerful spiritual moments outdoors, the mandate is clear. We must take care of the planet, for as we destroy the earth (either through action or lack thereof) we destroy our opportunity for spirit, and we destroy ourselves.

## Endnotes:

- 1. Genesis 2.15.
- 2. Genesis 1:28.

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