



Canfei Nesharim

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Parshat Haazinu: The Heavens and the Earth Bear Witness

By Rabbi Yuval Cherlow

**“Give ear, O Heavens, and I will speak,
and may the Earth hear the words of my mouth”¹**

The Heavens do not know how to listen, and the Earth cannot hear that which the Creator has spoken. So how are we to understand Moses’ call to the cosmos, “Give ear, O Heavens, and I will speak, and may the Earth hear the words of my mouth” at the beginning of the Torah portion *Haazinu*?

Some commentaries interpret the call to Heaven and Earth as a call to become tools of the Creator for the realization His intentions.² Other commentators explain that Heaven and Earth bear witness simply by virtue of their eternal existence. They need not make any active effort in order to listen, since their actual existence is in fact their means of hearing.³ The profound and constantly increasing awareness of environmental issues and of the awesome responsibility we bear towards the Earth and its atmosphere afford us a special opportunity to contemplate the testimony given by Heaven and Earth.⁴

Heaven and Earth bear witness, in fact, to the character – in the general sense – of the society we are building, since they constitute the basic structure of the universe. The Earth testifies to how we live our lives. An appropriate attitude towards the Earth begins with a great sense of humility in the face of reality. While we were commanded to “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the land and subdue it,”⁵ this conquest does not mean sucking the Earth dry and exhausting nature’s treasures. It refers rather to a

¹ Deut. 32:1 (All Tanach translations from Artscroll Mesorah)

² Indeed, this is how Rashi (France, 11th century) explains it: “...so that, if they so merit, the witnesses may come and reward them – ‘The grapevine shall give forth its fruit, the Earth give forth its produce, and the Heavens give forth their dew’ (Zechariah 8:12). But if they are blameworthy, the hand of the witnesses will afflict them first – ‘He shall curb the Heavens, so that there will be no rain, and the Earth shall not give forth its produce.’ (Deut. 11:17)”

³ The Ramban comments: “[the commentary of the Ibn Ezra] ‘.. and it seems true to me that it is mainly due to their eternal existence.’ ... [explaining it] by way of the truth (the Kabbalah) [that] these are the first Heaven and Earth mentioned in Bereshit, for they will come into a covenant with Israel.”

That is to say, this is a metaphor for the meaning of the world’s existence and the purpose of its creation. Moses speaks to the Jewish people and not to Heaven and Earth, and explains to them that the existence of creation is conditional upon their listening to the words of admonition in the song of Ha’azinu, for if not, there would be no real purpose to the existence of creation, and it would indeed be unable to survive.

⁴ The multiplicity of commentaries allows for additional suggestions to be made, in the spirit of the Rashbam’s words regarding “the ever-increasing number of fresh *p’shatim*” (see his commentary to Bereshit 37:1). It is precisely the world’s advancement, and the discovery of new areas of life, that allow us to look into the eternal Torah and to expand its meanings.

⁵ Gen. 1:28

control and mastery of the world that is guided by knowledge of our responsibility to use it to realize the full potential of everything and everyone that exists in our world.

The failure to protect the environment serves as a very powerful testimony to a number of extremely basic issues. First, it exposes a society driven by consumerism and greed, one which knows no fulfillment, and does not know how to restrain itself from exhausting the pleasures of this world. This can be seen as the root of the verse found later in our parsha, “Jeshurun became grew fat and kicked.”⁶ The obesity spoken of here is a result of unbridled consumption and of intensive gorging on everything the world makes available to us. Not only this, but the abused Earth also testifies to the fact that our massive consumption has been done without any mechanisms put in place for its protection. What this points to is a society that is not at all afraid of decline and is not open-minded enough to allow for constructive criticism. The destruction of the environment is thus a testimony to the spiritual level of society.

Second, a society that destroys the environment is one that lacks any sensitivity towards future generations. Of itself, it espouses the philosophy ‘eat and drink, for tomorrow we shall die,’ while abandoning its children to an unknown future.⁷

It should be emphasized, however: it is not inherent that a society that takes pains to protect its environment will expand these efforts to its spiritual vision as well. On the contrary, it is possible to envisage a situation in which a society becomes addicted on a broad scale to the protection of its resources and environment, specifically out of a fear of, and an escape from, spiritual visions and a connection with the Divine. Protection of the environment may turn into a modern form of idolatry, precisely because of its focus on the real and tangible world, and its disconnect from a holy and pure life of faith.

That said, it is nonetheless true that the spiritual and moral stance that regards itself as responsible for the image of the world and the protection of the Earth is an appropriate foundation for the building of a truly spiritual world. The opposite is also true: we may find a moral and just society that does not see the need to protect the quality of its environmental life. There is usually, however, a connection between the character of society and its attitude towards its surroundings.⁸

⁶ Deut. 32:15

⁷ The song of Ha'azinu teaches us the spiritual significance of this attitude – the Creator speaks of how He nursed the nation with honey from a rock. This nursing represents the entering into an eternal covenant between the Creator and the Jewish people, with the purpose of realizing the unique vision of the nation of Israel. The Nation did not rise to this challenge, and this failure received expression throughout an entire pyramid of reality – from the real world as it appears to us, to the very highest spiritual vision.

⁸ One of the psychological methods for dealing with crisis situations is called the “drawers method” (see “A top-drawer therapy,” [Tamar Rotem, Haaretz](http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/ShArt.jhtml?itemNo=562503), 10-4-05, <<http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/pages/ShArt.jhtml?itemNo=562503>>). The basic idea underlying this theory is that when a person designs their close surroundings in a certain way, this design serves as an anchor for their spiritual image and for their ability to organize the other areas of their lives. It is not a direct connection, since there are many people whose internal worlds are organized, while their drawers are messy, and of course, the opposite exists as well – those whose excessive strictness with regards to organization and discipline is the very thing that makes their lives intolerable. Nevertheless, it is true to say that there is a certain connection between the world surrounding an individual and the world that is internal to them, and that the same principle from the world of drawers can also be applied to the entire surrounding world. Caring for the Earth achieves the same effect in general society as the drawers principle creates in the private individual. The reverse is also true – the environment can bear witness to the quality of the society that inhabits it.

We have dealt until now with the Earth, but these sentiments are also true with regard to the Heavens. (The Hebrew word for Heavens, *shamayim*, can mean both heaven and sky, so in our context we are looking at environmental problems relating to the skies or the atmosphere.) When attempting to discern the character of a society by looking to its skies, several issues are of relevance. Of these we will mention three: first and foremost, the ever-widening hole in the ozone layer,⁹ which testifies more than anything else to the character of Western society. Production methods and unbridled consumerism are today infecting the awakening giant – China, as well as its neighbor, India, and the world in which we live is entering an insane, materialistic rat race. The destruction of the atmosphere bears very real testimony to what is currently happening, as well as testimony to the character of the society in which we live and through which we develop.

The second issue is rainfall, which is heavily influenced by humans' actions on the Earth, such as deforestation and global warming. Drought, too, has a new facet – it is now also a consequence of human action, and can be avoided in part by adopting a better relationship towards the universe. The connection between man's moral stance and his ethical lifestyle, and rainfall, is truly a fascinating topic; not as a supernatural miracle, but as the direct and straightforward connection between over-consumption and scarcity of rainfall.

Thirdly, in a place farther away from us, but still one that is beginning to bear significance with regard to our destiny, the seeds of another catastrophe are being sown: the chaos taking place today in outer space. Experts claim that space is filling up with filth: satellite parts, waste, etc.¹⁰ This stuff, known as orbital debris or space junk, is becoming an integral part of space, with the Heavens once again bearing witness to the faulty character of humankind's activity in our world.

Our awareness of environmental protection reveals to us, then, an additional layer of significance to the testimony of Heaven and Earth. It is a direct testimony – not miraculous, one whose source lies in the structure of the natural world that lies before us. The world itself bears witness to the character of the society that inhabits it. A spiritual response must therefore be directed not only to the Heavens above, but also to the Earth below, and must be expressed not only in keeping the *mitzvot* and remaining loyal to the Divine covenant, but also in remaining loyal to the world designed by the Creator. By so doing, we will be fulfilling a twofold objective. We will protect the world designed by the Creator, and will fulfill His commandment from the beginning of Creation to take responsibility for the world's character and to ensure that it can fulfill its own purpose. The second objective is the harmony that will be created between our spiritual world and the real world in which we live. This harmony is what will allow us to build a world whose external framework and internal content both express exactly the same idea. It is then that Heaven and Earth will bear witness to the deep process of *teshuva* and *tikkun*—repentance and repair— that we are engaged in, while serving as a barometer of sorts that reflects our spiritual and moral character.

⁹ According to the US National Weather Service's Climate Prediction Center, "The ozone hole has steadily grown in size (up to 27 million sq. km.) and length of existence (from August through early December) over the past two decades." Reports and charts on the ozone hole are available online at <http://www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov/products/stratosphere/sbuv2to/ozone_hole.shtml>

¹⁰ See <<http://orbitaldebris.jsc.nasa.gov/faqs.html#1>>

Suggested Action Items:

1. As we come to the conclusion of our Eitz Chayim Hee Torah Commentary Series, take a few moments to list what you have learned and actions you have taken as a result of the series.
2. Make a list of environmental actions that you would like to explore and commit to in the coming year.
3. Choose to continue your subscription to the Torah Commentary and to learn again and take new actions in this coming year.
4. Tell your friends, colleagues, and community members to subscribe to the Eitz Chayim Hee Torah Commentary so that they can learn about Torah and the environment along with you.
5. For information on: sharing our weekly resources with your community, organizing a local study group, or receiving speaker training to deliver these speeches in your community, contact info@canfeinesharim.org

Rabbi Yuval Cherlow, Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Petach Tikva, is a graduate of Yeshivat Har Etzion and a retired major in the IDF. Rabbi Cherlow was amongst the founders of the Tzohar Foundation, a central Modern Orthodox foundation that works to build bridges between the religious and secular worlds. He is a member of Governmental Ethical Committees, and of the Presidential Press Council of Israel.