

What is “home”? Our thoughts for Earth Day, coming up on April 22nd 2023

When you hear the word “home,” what comes to mind?

Of all the big questions of life, “Where is home?” is one of the biggest. Home could be a physical place, like the home we grew up in. It could be defined by relationships we have, as in, “I feel at home with the people I love.” It could be associated with experiences, as in, “I feel at home when I am ...” or “I feel at home when I am reading my favorite author.” Home can be many things.

Sometimes home is what feels so natural to us that we are hard pressed to define or understand it until we leave and can see it more clearly from a distance.

Take a moment to consider what comes to mind when you hear the word “home.”

If you’d like to, please share with a few people around you, what came to mind for you.

I would like to expand our notion of “home.” Imagine being on a rocket into space, and leveling off and orbiting around the earth. Imagine looking at “the big blue ball.” Now I ask, could we think of what we are gazing upon in our mind’s eye, our home? I hope so. Earth is the only place that I know of that human beings have existed.

We have an interesting verse in Chapter 1 of Genesis:

וַיְבָרֶךְ אֱלֹהִים וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם אֱלֹהִים פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת-הָאָרֶץ וּכְבֹּשׁוּהָ וּרְדוּ בְדִגַּת הַיָּם
וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבְכָל-חַיָּה הַרְמִשָּׁת עַל-הָאָרֶץ:

God blessed them and God said to them, “Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and subdue it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth.”

We then have another verse that I find fascinating:

וַיִּקַּח יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם וַיִּנְתְּהוּ בְּגֶן-עֵדֶן לְעֹבְדָהּ וּלְשִׁמְרָהּ:

God יהוה settled the Human in the garden of Eden, to till it and tend it.

There is a difference here in the wording that is striking. The second verse seems to be an additional instruction, in fact, the phrase, “to tend it” is really, to “guard” or “watch over” it.

We live in a world where we can see that a great deal of humanity’s history has been spent subduing the earth.

Whether we believe the conversations about climate change or not, if we look at our home, our earth, through a Jewish values lens, we can see that we are not simply to live off the earth, we are to guard it, be stewards of it as well.

Indeed, if we are to be respectful of God, we may examine the first verse of the 21st psalm which reads, “The earth is God’s and everything in it, the world and all of its inhabitants.” Of course, this is a value shared by all if not all faiths.

The idea for Earth Day was originally born in 1969, when a US Senator named Gaylord Nelson, witnessed the effects of a massive oil spill in Santa Barbara, CA. He called to action all Americans to take a stand for the environment in 1970, and thousands of colleges and universities across the United States organized protests for a healthy, sustainable Earth. This included air pollution from factories and freeways, as well as the loss of habitats for animals and animal extinction. Because of these national rallies, the first Earth Day helped create the United States Environmental Protection Agency and the Clean Air, Clean Water, and Endangered Species acts into law.

Today, we have similar concerns, and unfortunately they are even messier than that original oil spill. Increasing natural disasters, extreme weather, and rising global temperatures may seem impossible for one human, let alone millions or even billions of humans, to slow down, or stop. It has been reported that coral reefs are dying, we see pictures of animals on land and in the ocean with trash in their bellies or around their body, and yet humanity continues to pollute the air and our living spaces. But a small action, like picking up litter on the sidewalk that may have otherwise ended

up around the neck of an animal or in the ocean, still makes an impact — a step in the right direction, and an important change.¹

We may feel helpless to make a difference in our world, but everything that we do matters. The following are suggestions for what we can do.²

Reduce your carbon footprint

Get creative with new ways to switch up your commute, or a part of your daily routine. Instead of driving to your destination, carpool with friends, take public transportation, walk, skate, scooter, or ride a bike. Depending on the weather, you may enjoy this new form of travel even more than sitting in traffic.

Reuse, and recycle your wardrobe

Though it may seem insignificant in the grand scheme of things, your closet and your shopping habits can actually have a negative effect on our environment. By buying thrifted or gently used outfits online, new resources aren't used to make more clothes that will eventually end up being repurposed, reused, or in a landfill.

Switch up your diet

Most people may know that food production accounts for one-quarter to one-third of all greenhouse gas emissions worldwide, and the majority of the blame falls on the meat industry. The BBC recently reported that if the entire world became vegetarian and ate no red meat by 2050, food-related emissions would decrease by about 60%. If the world went vegan instead, emissions would decrease around 70%.

The idea behind celebrating Earth Day is because it is based on people working together in unity to achieve a better future for everyone. Connecting with people around the world is important to continue to appreciate and respect people from different countries, and other differences in opinion. No one is left out or left behind, everyone can do something small to make an impact on our planet.

¹ <https://nationaltoday.com/earth-day/>

² <https://nationaltoday.com/earth-day/>

Small acts matter

You don't have to plant a forest to enjoy Earth Day. Even if you feel like reusing your metal water bottle instead of buying a plastic bottle or plastic cups doesn't make much of a difference, your small acts can change and improve the world we live in. Now that you have awareness that climate change is affecting all of us, do your part to make positive changes wherever you go, no matter how small, they are significant, and this is your chance to improve our world.

We only have one Earth

Earth Day serves as a conscious reminder of how fragile our ecosystem can be, and how our actions can have positive or negative consequences on the world we live in. This holiday serves to ground us in what we need to do to protect our home, and what we can do now, in light of all the damage we have already done to our world. Not everyone has to go out in the streets and protest, but we all need to be reminded to stay in the right mindset -- Not to live in constant fear of the world burning down and flooding, but not to live in ignorance, either.

“The earth is God's and everything in it, the world and all of its inhabitants.”

May we appreciate and respect our earth, protect her, and love her.

Baruch atah Adonai, thank you God, for this beautiful earth upon which we live and grow.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Lisa