
ECO-JUSTICE

Spring 2001

The Story of Noah

A Modern Midrash

By Barak Gale and Mark X.Jacobs

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And God spoke to Noah, and to his children, saying: "Behold, I establish My covenant with you, and with your seed after you, and with every living creature that is with you, of the birds, of the cattle, and of every wild animal of the earth with you." (Genesis 9:9)

A modern midrash: Noah had all manner of living things aboard the ark and was ready for the great Mabul, the great flood. Well, almost all manner of living things. The lower decks were dark and damp and supported life from the many caves in the land, as well as the plants and creatures found in the world's great rainforests. Noah recognized the medicinal importance of many of these lower forms of life.

The upper decks supported life from the grasslands, the wetlands, and the forests. Noah understood the importance of the grasses for his domestic animals as well as for the wildlife he enjoyed watching while on safari. And he knew the birds nourished themselves in the

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Clean Power

By Steve MacAusland

Episcopal Power & Light

Until the recent implosion of the electric industry in California, over half the churches in the Episcopal Diocese of California were purchasing electricity generated from renewable resources such as the wind and the sun. This was neither an accident nor a miracle. It was the result of the vision and three years of hard work by The Rev. Sally Bingham, a priest and environmental minister at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. Now that the future of energy is up for grabs, Rev. Bingham is hard at work to ensure her brothers and sisters of faith that there will always be an opportunity to buy renewable energy in California and across the country.

Rev. Bingham's ministry, Episcopal Power and Light, is spreading across the country and has been warmly received from Maine to Pennsylvania. It landed in Connecticut when Jack Spaeth, Director of Administration and Finance for the Diocese, with guidance from Lynn Fulkerson, Chair of the Diocesan Committee on the Environment, signed up to buy green electricity from Green Mountain Energy.

"Working together, the community of faith can practice energy conservation, invest in energy efficiency, demand and buy renewable energy. Doing so we save energy, save money, save the planet, protect human health and create jobs," says Bingham.

EP&L was founded by Rev. Bingham and Steve MacAusland, a lay person from Massachusetts after a meeting of the Episcopal Environmental Network. "We were looking for something that would make a difference, and there are so many issues that it was hard to know where to start."

Bingham and MacAusland did not have to look far or long. Both live in states where deregulation of the electricity industry was taking place. "After love and the Holy Spirit, it is energy that makes the world go round," says MacAusland. Energy

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wetlands, and the importance of forests as shelter for many creatures. Noah greatly admired the ancient redwood trees and the gnarled oaks and olive trees, which evoked the timelessness and wisdom of their Creator.

Noah admired the ark, full of the diversity of God's creations tenaciously clinging to its decks for their very existence. Trees full of the song of birds surrounded by soft meadow grasses. Alpine flowers, a palate of brilliant colors. Timid mammals hiding from the light amidst the thick greenery of the lower decks.

Noah thought he had done pretty well in gathering male and female birds, cattle, wild creatures, and the creeping things of the earth. Yet surely the Creator did not require *every* creeping thing of its kind to be saved.

Furthermore, the last part of God's instruction – to take all food that is eaten by the creatures – could not mean *all plant life* after its kind aboard the ark. Surely this was a bit obsessive.

Noah was ready to *plotz!* The ark was already titanic; Noah was exhausted and exasperated. He turned to God and said, "*Dai Kvar!* Enough already! My body aches, my hand are blistered, my knees are bloody – all from building this gigantic ark and then searching for all the creatures that reside in every damp corner and atop every high place on earth. And then schlepping it all back to the ark. Please, God, can't we leave the *schmutz* our of the Ark. We just don't need every last one of your whims aboard the ark!"

And God, striving to remain patient with his dutiful servant, replied to Noah, "There is no *schmutz* in my creation, Noah. There is no *chometz* to be swept away. *Sh'ma!* Listen to the words of the holy Rav. Kook, who far in the future will serve as a special people's spiritual guide as they return after a long exile to the land that I will give them:

'Everything is full of riches and greatness, everything aspires to ascend, to be purified and elevated. Everything recites a song, offers praised, magnifies, exalts; everything builds, serves, perfects, elevates, aspires to unite and to be integrated. When we contemplate the physical creation as a whole, we realize that it is all one organism, that the parts are linked in varying gradations to each other. We see this in every plant, in every living being, 'Rav. Kook will teach.

Should you not preserve and protect each element of My creation in the ark, the wholeness Rav. Kook describes ill be forever broken, his inheritance impoverished.

Noah, listen *b'chol levevecha, b'chol nafshecha, b'cho meodecha* – with all

of your heart, with all of your soul, with all of your might."

Later that day, Noah went to his favorite spot alongside a creek, sheltered by giant cedars. He sat on a rock, closed his eyes, and listened to the bubbling water. Soon, a still, small voice invited him to look about.

He opened his eyes to gaze at the miraculous diversity of life around him, hearing each tree, each rock, each spider, each bird singing its song of praise to the Creator. The symphony of life overwhelmed Noah as he heard the words to be spoken by God to Job echo in his mind: "Ask the beasts, and they will teach you. The birds of the sky, they will tell you. Speak to the earth, and it will teach you. The fish of the sea, they will inform you."

And then Noah *got it*. All the creatures, all of them, even those he considered *schmutz*, belonged with him in the ark, and he belonged to them. And he prayed the words of Isaiah, the prophet to be: "Holy, holy, holy, is the Eternal One, the whole world is full of the Eternal's glory."

As Noah stood up to leave the place of his revelation, the words of a distant descendant Jacob came to his heart: "The Eternal One was here in this place, in all these myriad creations, and I, I did not know." I was too stuck in my own aches and pains, Noah thought, too focused on timetables and costs and expediency to understand the world around me.

On that day, Noah made a solemn promise. *Muchrach li*, he said, it is incumbent upon me to protect all of God's creation. For there is no one else.

On that day, creation smiled.

Noah gathered all of the rest of the creatures, plants and animals alike, bugs and mosses and toads and mushrooms – all of the strands of the web of life he had previously thought of as *schmutz* – and placed them in the ark for safe passage to the other side of the rainbow covenant.

And after the rains had come and gone, God set the rainbow in the sky as a sign of the Eternal's covenant with all creatures never again to flood the earth and jeopardize the existence of life: "Behold, I establish my covenant with you, and with you seed after you, and with every living creature that is with you, of the birds of the cattle, and of every wild animal of the earth with you..."

And after God finished announcing the covenant, God said, "And one last thing, Noah. You shall teach reverence for all of life and the human responsibility to fulfill My covenant with all of creation diligently to your children, and to your children's children."

DRINKING THE POND

The past decade of unprecedented economic prosperity and growth, while beneficial in many obvious ways, has also fueled America's frantic race to "keep up with the Joneses." Bigger houses, bigger cars, bigger everything – it seems we just can't get enough. So it shouldn't surprise us that the United States, although among the most technologically advanced countries in the world, is also one of the most wasteful. Though Americans are only five percent of the world's population, we consume forty percent of the earth's global resources. In fact, in the last fifty years, the United States has consumed more resources than the rest of the world did in all previous history. Energy use is at an all-time high and waste management is a top concern for urban and suburban communities. Given our rapid rate of consumption and growth, economists and ecologists alike are suggesting that by the end of the twenty-first century, the entire world will not have enough food, water, and housing for its inhabitants. This dire prediction has given birth to the "voluntary simplicity" movement. People across the country are consciously paring down their lives, using less and saving more. But how can we, as people of faith, promote the idea of simplicity and implement it in our lives? First, we must reflect on our own lifestyle choices. As individuals we could seek to reduce our energy use, perhaps by instituting a "day of simplicity," as suggested by the Unitarian Universalist Society, minimizing our consumption of electricity. We could also ask ourselves whether we really need every item we buy. As a nation, we can utilize our buying power to demand higher quality and longer-lasting products. With our purchasing power, we can influence companies to investigate and embrace environmentally friendly business practices and technologies.

A Native American proverb says, "A frog does not drink up the pond in which he lives." Our current lifestyle is no more sustainable. The choices we make, whether moral or economic, reflect our values. If we can take a lesson from one of the God's smallest creatures, perhaps we will be able to see responsible consumption not as an option, but as a moral obligation, one that offers us the chance to save the planet.

intensive industries in California and Massachusetts had lobbied state legislatures to introduce competition, lower costs, and change the industry that powers industry.

At the same time, representatives from around the world had gathered in Kyoto, Japan to discuss global warming, a phenomenon caused by fossil fuel combustion. And so Sally and Steve heard their call. If deregulation meant cheap electricity, industry would turn to coal and increase their emissions of green house gasses at a time when the world's leading climatologists were calling for a decrease in emission of seventy percent.

"Fortunately," says Bingham, "reducing emissions does not mean that we have to freeze in the dark. We can continue to live as comfortably as we choose if we invest in energy efficiency and buy renewable energy. That is what we are doing in the Episcopal Church. It is time that those of us who love God stand up for the gift of Creation."

A CENTER FOR CHANGE

By Melody Flowers

Since 1987, Toxics Action Center has helped over 300 neighborhood groups fight toxic pollution in the communities. Located in West Hartford, CT, Boston, MA, and Bangor, ME, organizers at Toxics Action Center work on a variety of issues including cleaning up hazardous waste sites, stopping proposed landfills and incinerators, stopping the spraying of pesticides, and pressuring companies to reduce their toxic chemical use and emissions.

Instrumental in the fight to clean up Connecticut's dirty power plants, the Toxics Action Center devotes one hundred percent of its time to building the capacity of these organizations by providing training in skills such as strategic planning, group building, message development, working with the media, and fundraising. Frank Gorke, an organizer with Toxics Action Center in CT, said, "We are dedicated to helping people gain power over the decisions that affect their neighborhoods and their lives."

The Toxics Action Center will be holding its annual educational conference on Saturday, March 31, 2001 at Yale University in New Haven from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm. The conference will consist of a variety of seminars and classes offering participants an opportunity to educate themselves on numerous local and statewide issues. Tickets are \$20 each and price includes breakfast and lunch. Eco-Justice has three tickets available; if you are interested, contact Terri Eickel at (860) 286-1085. Tickets will be distributed on a first come, first serve basis. See you there!

CALENDAR

MARCH

HARTFORD ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE NETWORK

Thursday, March 1, 5:30 PM
Hispanic Health Council
175 Main Street, Hartford
(860) 548-1133

EARTH PRAYERS

Monday, March 12, 7:30 PM
First Baptist Church of West Hartford
90 North Main Street, West Hartford
(860) 521-9460

TOXICS ACTION CENTER CONFERENCE

Saturday, March 31, 9:00 – 5:00 PM
Yale University, New Haven
(860) 233-7623
see enclosed flyer

APRIL

HARTFORD ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE NETWORK

Thursday, April 5, 5:30 PM
Hispanic Health Council
175 Main Street, Hartford
(860) 548-1133

EARTH PRAYERS

Monday, April 9, 7:30 PM
First Baptist Church of West Hartford
90 North Main Street, West Hartford
(860) 521-9460

MAY

HARTFORD ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE NETWORK

Thursday, May 3, 5:30 PM
Hispanic Health Council
175 Main Street, Hartford
(860) 548-1133

EARTH PRAYERS

Monday, May 14, 7:30 PM
First Baptist Church of West Hartford
90 North Main Street, West Hartford
(860) 521-9460

Eco-Justice Establishes Itself

On February 12, 2001 Eco-Justice held its first steering committee meeting to establish a formal organization. The attendees decided to rename the group, calling it the Inter-religious Eco-Justice Network. The mission statement reads:

The mission of the Inter-religious Eco-Justice Network is to engage people diverse faith traditions in prayer, dialogue, education, advocacy and celebration of the sacredness of creation. The Inter-religious Eco-Justice Network encourages faithful living that reflects a right relationship between humankind and the environment.

The steering committee and the mission statement will help guide the group to its goals.

The first order of business will be to plan the Clean Air Conference, tentatively scheduled for October 4, 2001. Paul Gorman, from the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, will be the guest speaker. After his presentation, people will be able to attend break-out groups to discuss various issues, from conservation to pollution to environmental health.

The Inter-Religious Eco-Justice Network will also continue its work to clean up Connecticut's dirty power plants and to spread the message of creation care.

Blessing Prayer for Seeds

Anonymous

God, Source of all Life,
who did hide Your Seeds in all that lives
be present here as we greet these tiny seeds
with their gifts of life.
Seeds of Life, so small,
and yet, in the mystery of death and burial,
you will produce ten-fold and more.
We sprinkle you with water, sacred sign of life,
asking that you may be embraced by our mother the earth,
fed by rain and kissed gently by the sun.
In caring for you we shall experience
the most ancient profession of the human family,
the primal vocation of being workers in the garden.
Soon you will be our pride and joy.
Soon you will be our food as we give up your life
that we may live.
Seeds, pregnant with life,
teach us the Easter Secret of Life,
as we ask God to bless you.
Amen.

