

Rabbi Claudio Jodorkovsky Rosh Hashana Sermon 5772 (2012)

G-d said: "Let the land produce vegetation: Seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds."

And it was so.

The land produced vegetation: plants bearing seed according to their kinds, and trees bearing fruit with seed in it, according to their kinds. And G-d saw that it was good. And there was evening, and there was morning, the third day.

And the LORD G-d made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground, trees that were pleasing to the eye, and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

The LORD G-d took man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work and take care of it.

Word of Torah that describe the mythic tale of Creation. G-d created the world, but first he created a garden which would nurture the seeds of human life.

As a gardener devoted to his garden, who with talent and enthusiasm reveals the earth's hidden and powerful beauty, G-d takes, observes, meditates on, models and creates the roots of the Garden of Eden.

→I have some beautiful memories about gardens:

When I was a child I lived in a house with a lovely yard. My mother used to plant seeds and pull out the weeds; my father watered it almost every day after mowing the lawn.

For the first summers of our young lives my brother and I played there, together with several neighborhoods friends. The garden witnessed those important moments of our childhood, including pranks and the not uncommon scolding from our parents.

But as time passed, my parents decided to leave the house and move to an apartment. And from that moment 30 years ago until the past month, I have lived my life far from the luxurious green beauty of a garden.

So coming here to Saskatoon where almost every family has a garden, and renting a house with a spacious backyard where my children can enjoy, play and get dirty as I did with my brother gives me the gift of once again returning to the colors and smells of my childhood, and appreciating the beauty of nature.

And now, as an adult, being close to a garden again has made me to think about:

-What does the garden represent in our lives?

-Is a garden, in some deeper sense, an appropriate metaphor for life itself?

The Torah presents G-d as a gardener who created the Garden of Eden. He placed Adam and Eve (Adam and Hava) there, the first human beings, with the mission of “leovda uleshomra”, to work and safeguard it.

And as their descendants, we also have the mission of being the gardeners of our land.

We are called to imitate the “Great gardener” who in His mystery planted each of us on this earth to be His partners in tending his work.

This image of Gan Éden, the Garden of Eden, is an idyllic and compelling metaphor. And that’s why this morning of Rosh Hashana, when we celebrate the symbolic anniversary of the world’s creation, I want to invite us to look at ourselves as gardeners, the ones in charge of taking care of the garden in which we live, and try to think about how to improve our skills for the next year.

With this in mind, I would like to share with you what I think are some very important “rules” which can help us in the challenge of renewing our commitment to being good gardeners.

1) Rule number one:

*“Always plant at least one flower that you didn’t plant during the last year”.*

What will happen if we fulfill a new mitzvah that we didn’t fulfill last year?

What will happen if we take on a project which we never considered before?

Will we be able to plant a new flower in our garden? A flower that has never bloomed before in our yard?

Will we be able to be like the flowers: Original, colorful, one of a kind? Will we be able to regenerate and renew our commitment to our tradition?

→No flower imitates its neighbor as it grows. Each flower is inherently unique.

We learn from the garden that the worst thing we can do is be stagnant, living our lives without color, fragrance, passion, and meaning.

Will we be able to plant renewed seeds, eternal seeds... seeds that are the result of the past and the hope for a better future?

→Let’s decide to plant one new plant in our garden this year.

2) The second rule of gardening is the following:

*“Read a gardening book this spring”.*

We have plenty of gardening books in our tradition.

Let’s open the doors of our library. We have a magnificent treasure in this congregation. Let’s take advantage of it and draw from the spring of fresh water our tradition provides us, and irrigate the arid soil of our spirits.

We have to dedicate time to study Torah, to read Jewish literature, to live as a Jew every day.

It will be next to impossible to enrich our Jewish life if we sit by passively. We need to enhance our Jewish identity by participating actively in synagogue activities.

Let's open our book of life. How many pages have we filled with books, classes, activities?

Is there room for an increase in your Jewish cultural and spiritual life?...

→Let's rise to this challenge and enrich our lives with Jewish books this year.

3) This brings us to the third rule of gardening.

“Share your garden. The true gardener cultivates his or her plants and relationships as well”.

Judaism teaches that your actions are more important than your beliefs.

To actively give tzedakah, charity, is a concrete action, not a theological reflection.

To do Tzedaka means to open your hand to the needy.

It means that when you share what you have with others, you don't have less, rather, you help other people manage their necessities, and you'll feel richer spiritually by helping them.

Sharing the garden means accepting that we are blessed everyday with what grows from the earth, and that this blessing is multiplied when you share it with others.

→Share your garden, share the smell of the flowers... share your bread, your hallah...

→When you share your prosperity it too becomes round, like the hala agula -the round hallah of Rosh Hashana.

4) The gardener's fourth rule is: "Help your plants to grow healthily this year".

Rosh Hashana provides us with the opportunity to evaluate ourselves, to do a real-jeshvon hanefesh, an honest reviewing of our souls.

Which kind of plants are growing in our garden?

Are they sick or healthy?

Do they grow toward the sun or are they worn out?

How can we enrich our soil?

How can we increase the beauty of our flowers?

It is not only about realizing the beauty of the garden, but understanding that I am the only one responsible for taking care of it. It's about taking the soil into our own hands, planting in it seeds of hope and watering it with love every day, to see how the fruits sprout from the Tree of Life.

To do T'shuva, repentance, requires us to review our past actions, and try to change, in order to be a better person.

We ask for forgiveness, we forgive others and we also forgive ourselves.

→If we manage to do an honest Heshvon Hanefesh, a sincere accounting of our souls, I am sure our plants and fruits will grow strong and healthy in the garden of life.

5) And finally, the fifth rule of the gardener that I wish to share with you:

“Take out all the weeds from your garden at the end of the winter when you still have energy, this way you’ll prevent weeds from spreading and ruining the rest of the yard”.

As nature has seasons, so too our lives. And for everything under the sun there is a specific purpose. The Yamim Noraim, the High Holidays, Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, are the greatest opportunities that our tradition provides us with to clean the weeds of our yards, to remove the negative influences out of our lives and leave behind those things that cause us to diminish ourselves as human beings, as Jews and as fruits of this human garden.

We have to do Teshuva.

We have to remove the weeds in order to change and have a more fertile year, a year of plenty and evolving flowers.

It is time to prune, to trim, to clean, to open new ways and prepare the earth for this new year, for this new crop, for this new harvest.

“Hashamaim Shamaim Laad-nai, ve aaretz natan libnei adam”. –

In the words of the psalmist: “The heavens belong to the LORD, but the earth he has given to man”.

Ours is the earth.

Ours is the garden.

The earth must be removed, ploughed, cultivated.

We have to do Teshuva, to change, to break the comfort that prevents us from growing and helping making this world a better place, because for that purpose we were created and placed here, in our Garden of Eden: To take care of the land, to be gardeners, in the garden of life.

May G-d bless every one of us and our families, with a year of health, prosperity, achievements, love, peace and growth, with a good and sweet year.

Shana Tova