

# Earth Day and Jewish Perspectives on Environmentalism, Earth Consciousness & Ethical Eating

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## Deuteronomy 8

7. For the Lord your God brings you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and depths that spring out of valleys and hills;

8. A land of wheat, and barley, and vines, and fig trees, and pomegranates; a land of olive oil, and honey;

9. A land where you shall eat bread without scarceness, you shall not lack any thing in it; a land whose stones are iron, and out of whose hills you may dig bronze.

10. When you have eaten and are full, then you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land which he has given you.

These ancient words do not only apply to the Israelites as they were about to enter the land of Canaan--after 400 years of slavery and 40 years of wandering in the desert. These words are about us. They are about all inhabitants of the earth. The redemptive vision of all peoples, free peoples, having enough healthful foods to eat, and expressing gratitude to the Source of life for it. A land of abundant resources, and of flowing clean water.

It's Earth Day, 2012. Earth Day is 42 years old. Let's take a look at the creation story, the creation myth, if you will, in Genesis.

From Genesis 2:5,6

Now all the trees of the field were not yet on the earth and all the herb of the field had not yet sprouted, for G-d had not sent rain upon the earth and there was no person to work the soil.

A mist ascended from the earth and watered the whole surface of the soil.

And G-d formed the man of dust from the ground...

What we lose "in translation" is that the Hebrew word for the earth, the soil, is ADAMAH. The Hebrew word for person, the word for humankind, is ADAM.

However the world came into being, however humans beings ever came to appear on the earth, it is clear in this creation myth, that what grows—trees, grass, flowers, everything—requires the caring cooperation of US, of ADAM, to grow and care for what emerges from the earth—ADAMAH. We may not be created from it, but we are OF it, intimately connected to it, and it to us, in a primal ecology.

So—a few more Hebrew words, and then we'll sing.

Adamah—earth

Shamayim—sky

Esh—fire  
Mayim—water

The four classical elements:  
Adamah—earth  
Shamayim—sky  
Esh—fire  
Mayim—water

Love the earth, love the sky  
Heat of fire, drop of water  
I can feel it in my body, In my spirit and in my soul  
Adamah v'shamayim chom ha-esh, tzlil ha-mayim  
Ani margish zot be-gufi ruchy ve-nishmati  
Hey-Yah.....

When I sing this song, and I say  
“I can feel it in my body, In my spirit and in my soul”  
I ask myself what is the “it” the “it” that I feel in my body, my spirit and my soul.  
For me, right at this time, the “it” is the interconnectedness of everything and everyone.

In our global world, we can no longer “not know” what goes on far away from us—we see it all unfolding, in real time, documented on cell phones, facebook, twitter—  
Revolutions around the world, the murder of an unarmed black teen, to Hilary Clinton drinking a beer and dancing in a bar in South America.

Many of the products that we purchase—the grown up toy, the phones, the gadgets, AND some of our food comes from half way around the world. And some is produced by slaves. Estimates of modern slavery range from 12 to 27 million people. More than at any previous time in history. Human trafficking has been found in more than 90 cities in the United States, for things like agriculture, sex, and hair braiding.

The plight of the tomato workers in Immokalee Florida, taken up by many groups including Rabbis for Human Rights, exemplifies American home-grown slavery. This year at Passover, some people put a tomato on their seder plate, in addition to the traditional symbolic foods:

the parsley representing the earliest spring growth,  
the roasted egg for rebirth,  
the shank bone representing the Temple sacrifice,  
salt water for tears,  
charoset—the sweet mixture that reminds us of the rough raw material for building bricks, and  
the bitter herbs, whose taste reminds us of the bitterness of slavery.

The tomato was there to bring our attention to the oppression of farmworkers who harvest fruits and vegetables right here in the United States. And it reminds of us of our power to help create justice.

In Florida, change is happening through the efforts of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, an organization of farm workers that is working to end slavery and other abusive conditions for the tomato workers. 10 major U.S. food corporations have signed the coalition's Campaign for Fair Food Agreement, which raises the wage of tomato workers. Wages that have not increased since 1980. Are any of us who work making what we made in 1980? The Fair Food Agreement requires a code of conduct in the fields that includes a zero tolerance policy for forced labor. Since 2010, over 90% of Florida's tomato growers have begun to implement these agreements. Why has this happened? Because of consumers like us, grassroots efforts to create meaningful change are happening. Change that is happening in places like Florida.

As the Passover Seder begins, we say: "This year, we are slaves. Next, may we be free people."

It will take a tremendous effort to end modern slavery. There ARE steps we all can take. Buying certified Fair Trade is often a proxy for ethically produced goods. We can't grow everything ourselves, buy EVERYTHING local, or from our CSA, recycle, repurpose or barter all that we need.

Like CHOCOLATE.

600,000 cocoa farms in Cote d'Ivoire, the Ivory Coast.

There are approximately 15,000 child slaves working on these cocoa farms.

These child slaves spend long hours working in hazardous conditions, far from families, not going to school. Losing their childhoods. These children spray pesticides and apply fertilizer without any protective gear. They use machetes and other tools that are too large and too heavy for them, to chop down trees and burn vegetation. These child slaves sustain injuries from transporting heavy loads beyond what they can possibly bear.

Passover is the annual peak of Jewish chocolate consumption –probably because it makes an easy dessert without flour, which we don't eat for the week of the holiday—

It came to my attention a month before Passover that there was not a single company that was producing and selling Kosher for Passover chocolate. The choices for people who are strict in their personal eating practice were to

1. eat kosher for Passover chocolate that was likely made on the back of child slaves,
2. eat fair trade chocolate that was not specifically kosher for Passover, OR
3. just not eat chocolate for 8 days.

Some people I know put the chocolate that they purchased before they knew this information on the seder plate, right where the bitter herb goes.

That seder plate is getting crowded and complicated! Ask me later about the orange and the olive that have also been added over the years....

Others just did not eat chocolate during the holiday, which was my choice.

Fair Trade Judaica and other groups mobilized petitions to be sent to companies that produce kosher for Passover products. Based on this action, we will likely have fair trade, kosher for Passover chocolate next year.

As consumers, we have a lot of power to make things happen. More than we think.

We have to educate ourselves. We have to be willing to pay more for things that are produced by free people, earning a living wage.

Through a link from Rabbis for Human Rights, I went to a website called slaveryfootprint.org. In a series of windows, it asked about me— My age, gender, children, how many rooms in my house, the sports I play, the number of pairs of shoes I have, how much gold jewelry I have, cars.... The computer uses an algorithm. A program that tells you how many slaves work for me, based on my personal information -- 47. That's how many slaves work for me. It's a terrible feeling. Don't believe me. Do it for yourself. Slaveryfootprint.org. Then I clicked on "take action."

At the seder, we say "Next year, may all be free."

On Earth Day, over these past 42 years, we have moved from individual, discrete concerns about oil spills, polluting factories, toxic dumps, pesticides, and the extinction of particular species, to the major issue of climate change and all that it encompasses.

It is all interconnected.  
We are all interconnected.

ADAM—humanity.  
ADAMAH—the earth.  
The bounties that the earth, in partnership with us, with our work, for good and for ill, produce for us.

Next year, I pray that I would have zero slaves working for me. And I am not just praying. I am doing. Yet I know it is impossible. That can not stop me.

From Pirke Avot, the Ethics of our Fathers (2:21,20\_

Lo alecha ham'lacha ligmor,  
V'lo ata ben chorim l'hivatil mimena

As free people, we have many many choices that we make every day.  
Choose with care, consideration, and wisdom.  
Never forgetting our interconnectedness.

ADAM.  
ADAMAH.

Beyond an Earth Day.