

## I-THOU AND NATURE By Rabbi Randy Fleisher

*If will and grace are joined, that  
as I contemplate a tree  
I am drawn into a relation, and the tree ceases to be an It...  
What I encounter is the tree itself  
-Martin Buber-*

Martin Buber understood the Gaian idea-that the earth is a living organism-through his original and spiritual language of relationship. If we truly have the ability to transcend the ordinary way we relate to one another during extraordinary moments of connection, mutuality and understanding, then there must exist the potential for 'I' to relate sometimes to even non-human life as 'Thou.'

Jewish tradition clearly wants us to view our connection to nature in a way that is deeper than mining that which we need from it. *Adam*, a Hebrew term that envelopes humanity as a whole, carries the same linguistic root as *adamah*, Hebrew for the earth. The central *mitzvah* of Sukkot is to live outdoors in huts that are made from nature and designed so that we can see nature as we eat, read and sleep. The Torah teaches that we are to give the gifts of *Shabbes* to the trees and fields, and the Psalms imagine all of us together in one congregation, filling creation with positive vibrations:

*Praise God, sun and moon...all bright stars...fire and hail, snow and smoke, storm wind...all fruit trees and cedars, all wild and tamed beasts, creeping things and winged birds...Let the rivers clap their hands; the mountains sing joyously together!*

While the ideas and inventions of the modern world have brought unbelievable freedom and convenience to humanity, they have also enabled most of us to lose such a visceral relationship to nature. When was the last time, asks the poet Shir Dicker, that we dug in dirt, took a great gulp of country air after a rainfall, climbed a mountain, sat among branches, smelled a barnyard, danced barefoot in the moonlight, milked a cow or hugged a tree?

One way to re-connect is to help us celebrate under the full moon of Shevat, the New Year of the Trees. We will tune ourselves to the life of nature beginning the process of renewal, as the underground sap begins to rise. We will, as the Kabbalists teach, help to maintain and encourage the essential flow of life by mindfully chewing the luscious fruits. And we will dig in the dirt, as we plant and nurture new life.

When we can have such I-Thou moments with nature, it is not only conservation efforts-important as they are-that gain support. Recently, Ed Harris, Dale Schreiber and I had the blessing of being in Colorado for a gathering of Jewish Renewal rabbis. There we met Gaby Meyer, an Israeli who organizes the *Sulcha* (Arabic for reconciliation), an annual festival which brings together Israelis and Palestinians. Gaby believes one of the reasons that the *Sulcha* is so successful is that it reminds the participants that they are both indigenous peoples and deeply connected to the same land. One participant said:

"The Arabs there knew that they could meet us there on our common land, far more safely than in the cities, at our grafted European roots. Indeed, in the desert we danced and drummed inter-tribally, sang, shared meals and recovered the ways of Abraham who mastered the art of living responsibly and respectfully with his family, his neighbors and the earth."

May the words of one of Gaby's songs-*Strong wind, deep water, tall trees, warm fire. I can feel these in my body, I can feel them in my soul-be true for each of us and may such a relationship bring us closer to tikkun olam.*

B'Ahavah (With Love),  
Rabbi Randy