

Message for *Parashat Matot-Masei*

5 August 2016

In 1960, the musical "The Fantastiks" opened on Broadway. It ran for over 40 years. It's a charming show, if you haven't seen it, about the relationships between two generations, their dreams, and conflicts. It's a fun show. At one point, the fathers, a bit puzzled about the behavior of their children, sing ...

Plant a carrot,

Get a carrot,

Not a Brussels sprout.

That's why I love vegetables.

You know what you're about!

Life is merry,

If it's very

Vegetarian!

A man who plants a garden

Is a very happy man!

Their reaction to the uncertainty of human life is to turn to steady cycles of nature. In nature, everything follows its course. The idea that the natural order follows certain laws is found already in the Torah, where we read:

“Then God 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. [...] And there was evening, and there was morning—the third day.

Gardening is a way to channel nature, to tame a force which we cannot control –in the case of “The Fantastiks,” the fathers cannot control the feelings of their son and daughter:

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During the past months, in an effort to getting to know each other, I have tried to share with you some of my passions and how they form and inform who I am as a rabbi. The time has come for sharing my passion for gardening. If you are like me, and love gardening, you may say that tending a garden COULD make you a happy person, although it could be frustrating too, because we share the garden with other life forces, which sometimes have other plans ... For example, when we lived in Cincinnati, Ohio, I started my first garden in this continent. I was so excited to plant roses and so many other beautiful shrubs –so were the neighborhood deer! So, I had to learn how “garden with (or around) deer.”

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If you are willing to compromise, I suppose, and live with very HUNGRY deer around you...

Gardens seem to have been around almost since the dawn of human civilization. Gardens, of course, play a central role in the Torah -well, at least one does:

“God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and placed there the man whom He had formed. And from the ground Adonai God caused to grow every tree that was pleasing to the sight and good for food, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and bad.”

One could say that God is the first "Master Gardener." Yet, we know that the "Garden of Eden" did not last very long. Let me clarify: I don't believe that there was a physical garden of Eden, nor do I think that an archaeologist will ever find it, because, for me, it is irrelevant where it existed or not. What matters is what we learn from it and how the story of the Garden of Eden has inspired our ancestors and us. I am intrigued by the idea that God is depicted in the Torah not just as the creator but also as gardener ... perhaps there are some lessons we may derive from tending gardens, which would make our actions Divinely-inspired.

Now, I am not the only rabbi who loves gardening or has thought about what Jewish lessons we can learn from gardening ... Some of you might have heard about Rabbi Balfour Brickner, who was a major figure in the the civil rights movement and struggle for women's reproductive rights. What you may not know, is Rabbi Brickner's other side, expressed in his book *Finding God in the Garden: Backyard Reflections on Life, Love, and Compost*. In book about gardening, Rabbi Brickner writes:

“Gardening is a lonely hobby. With no people to talk to, those of us who garden do a lot of talking to the plants and flowers — and even to the weeds. We mutter, we mumble, we groan. Occasionally, as when the tree peonies

come into full bloom near the end of May, we “ah!” (Everyone does then. The blooms are sometimes eight inches across, and the colors are breathtaking.) Besides digging and pulling, clipping, spraying, staking, raking, and hauling, we get time to think.”

I agree with Rabbi Brickner that gardening is almost therapeutic; a day tilting the soil and planting and trimming, could be an almost “religious experience.” So, not wonder that the image of gardens, especially of the idyllic Garden of Eden, have become part of many of our prayers and rituals. For instance, the traditional memorial prayer, *El Maleh Rachamim*, includes the phrase, *be-gan eden tihieh menuchatam*, “may their resting place be the Garden of Eden.” *Gan eden* here is usually understood to mean the Jewish version of Paradise. As you might have heard, Reform Judaism has abandoned any and all references to the after-life. It is true that we hold no single belief that we all should embrace; however, I do want to dwell on the idea that we pray that we would find rest in a garden. As a gardener, I like the idea –especially if I get to play in the dirt a bit too!

Underneath the idea that the afterlife includes a garden lies the fundamental connection between gardens and the cycle of life. Life and death are a constant presence in the garden. Throughout the year, gardens teach us about death and regeneration. I do feel a little sad in the fall when the flowers are gone and then the leaves drop. I love seeing the bare branches and twigs covered with ice and snow; there is a certain beauty to that. Then, I cannot tell you how excited I get to see the first green growth pushing through the frozen soil in late winter. It gives me hope and I can see how praying that we will find rest in a garden gives us all hope that not all life ends with death ...

The most rewarding aspects of gardening are the challenges one encounters and the joy of overcoming them. I mentioned gardening with deer already –that one you don’t ever “win.” One of the first rules that every gardening manual teaches is that you must know your environment. We need to learn about our soil type, sun exposure, our hardiness zone, and our insect and wildlife population. Each one of those aspects will present challenges, some of which may not even manifest during the first growing season, so we need to give it time –a year at least. Some challenges come with your garden, others, you create for yourself. Now, I need to tell you that at the very tender age of 5, I was already known to have a “green thumb.” My mother, z”l, would ask me to plant things around the garden, because if she did it, they would wither and die! I do not believe in "green thumb" power, but I've got it! Since I've got it, I feel I can take on bigger challenges.

I’m a rabbi, so I look for inspiration in our sources. We read in the book of Micah,

"But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig-tree, And none shall make them afraid; For the mouth Adonai of has spoken."

Hmm ... grapevines, in Northeast Indiana (or Kansas)...? Not a challenge, they have them everywhere. But “each one shall sit under his fig-tree,” now, that’s more interesting. You see, you cannot grow fig trees outdoors in the Fort Wayne Indiana –it’s too cold. I thought, “says who?” This is what happens when you get a gardening rabbi reading the Hebrew Bible ...

After some research, I found out that there is such a thing as a “Chicago Hardy” Fig tree –which means that, in theory, you can grow figs in Chicago. To make a long story short, my first harvest consisted of about 4 or 5 figs, one inch big. The plant then completely died down to the ground, just a few dead branches sticking out

about 3 feet tall remained all winter. I thought, “It was worth the try.” But then, in late May, leafs began to sprout from the very “dead” wood ... and my harvest doubled! 10 figs, 1 ½ inch big! It’s gotten bigger with each year ... It was a gardening challenge to test my green thumb, but it was also a challenge for the tree. I witnessed a true lesson in perseverance as I saw the tree grow, where one such tree shouldn’t. The life force that is within that fig tree is also inside all of us. We must learn to use that life force, our will power, to overcome our challenges. It may seem that we are failing, but perseverance will take us through the winter and we shall emerge revitalized in the spring!

Jewish ideas about gardens flourished in one book of the *Tanakh*, the Hebrew Bible, set entirely in the interplay between homes and gardens. In Song of Songs 6:2

“My beloved has gone down to his garden,
 To the beds of spices,
 To browse in the gardens
 And to pick lilies.
 I am my beloved’s
 And my beloved is mine;
 He browses among the lilies.”

The happiness of the garden depends on the great variety of its fruits, flowers and plants, and in the abundance of water. Being a people who originated in the Middle East, water is very important; everything is made good by water.

One of the first-ever secular Hebrew poems, written by Dunash ben Labrat, in Spain in the 10th century, celebrates the good life in the gardens of Medieval Andalusia:

To drink [wine] to health in golden goblets
 To perceive it as a flame inside sapphire goblets
 [...]
 At the shade of well-planted gardens encircled by rivers,
 displaying most desirable things henna and luscious fruits,
 pomegranates and almonds, and olives and dates
 [...]
 and springs, and pools and water channels ...

When I first read these poems, I was blown away. Here we have Jews, living in Muslim Spain, writing poems about wine-parties in the garden –I do like wine too. What attracted me the most to these poems is that they depicted gardens as places of great variety. If you have experienced a stroll down a path, in a beautifully cared for garden, in a cool summer evening, you know what I mean. If you haven't, you should try it some time. Once we experience it, it is easier to understand what *gan eden* means. It means the beauty of its variety that fills our senses and makes us feel alive.

The variety inherent to gardens brings me to the final lesson I have learned from gardening: Celebrate difference. A “serious” gardener has his or her own “thing.” They like roses, or peonies, or scented plants, or succulents, or ferns ... I like scented roses in particular ... but whatever it is, we want more of them, and we want more variety.

Gardening is a great way to learn how to deal with diversity; but more than “deal with,” we need to learn to celebrate it. As I look around our sanctuary and see our congregation, I imagine it as a luscious garden, which we all must tend and till. Our varied diversity comes from our skin color, from our upbringing, from whom we love and how, from our beautifully diverse families: families of one, of two, of many; families with children, families with none. Beth Torah is indeed a beautiful garden of delight ... May God grant us the ability to smell its fragrance, to see its colors, and to celebrate its variety.