



Jewish Community Center of Paramus
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A Shabbat Message from our Rabbinical Intern **Sami Vingron**

Friday June 16, 2023 ~ Parsha: Shelach Lecha

Dear JCCP/CBT family,

Canadian Wildfires are a Religious Issue

Some years ago I watched a show on TV that told the story of the Dust Bowl of the 1930s. The term describes giant dust storms that brought great destruction and heavily impacted the American and Canadian ecology. It was an early example of what unsustainable agriculture can ultimately do. As the smoke from the Canadian wildfires covered the US East Coast last week, I was reminded of the impressive pictures I saw on TV that day. But I also was reminded of a key message in our Torah reading this week, *Parshat Shelach Lecha*.

In our *Parshah* we are confronted with a crucial aspect of the Torah which we tend to overlook: how important it is to live on fertile soil. Moses sends twelve spies to the Land of Israel to scout it before its conquest by the Israelites. Upon their return the spies say: "“We came to the land you sent us to; it does indeed flow with milk and honey, and this is its fruit.” (Numbers 13:27). The promise of the Land of Israel is its fruitfulness. In our *Parshah*, the Land of Israel is described as a “very good land” (Numbers 14:7). Repeatedly, the Torah tells us that milk and honey flow there. On the surface the deal with God is pretty simple: When the Jews/ Israelites do God`s will and keep God`s commandments, then God lets the rain fall at the right time and keeps the land fertile. If the Israelites/ Jews disobey God, then “the Lord`s anger will flare up against you, and He will shut up the skies so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce; and you will soon perish from the good land that the Lord is assigning to you” as we read in the Book of Deuteronomy (11:17) and also say twice every day as part of the second paragraph of the *Sh`ma* prayer.

Today, of course, we know of purely scientific explanations for why rain falls at specific times. We can work and manipulate soil, plants, etc. and so we do not feel reliant on God to maintain successful agriculture. And yet, it seems to be that there is a deeper truth behind this ancient Biblical theology. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch teaches that we, humans, are the stewards of God in the world, responsible to work and serve the land. He warns us not to misuse anything in this God given world. In the history of the United States, many people have related to this great country as the promised land, fertile and full of promises of prosperity and bliss. Yet just like the Dust Bowl, the smoke from the wildfires reminded me that this promise of America is tied to treating this land responsibly. Notwithstanding the question whether the consequences of climate change are the will of God or not, the darkened skies we experienced last week demonstrate what happens when we do abuse the world we are given. In the end, it comes down to this: When we fail to appreciate the natural resources that are now at our command, not only do we disregard God's covenant but our own misconduct will backfire against us.

It is very likely that there exists a connection between climate change, more specifically the rise of global temperatures, and the intensity of the current fires in Canada. When I saw the skies over New York City turn red and yellow, I felt shocked and frightened. Last year there were wildfires in 26 (out of 27) countries that belong to the European Union, including in my hometown of Berlin. The results were devastating. Thinking about this destruction, I feel angry and powerless. I am sure that in our congregation I am not alone with these feelings. It sometimes feels that we as humankind have broken the covenant with God. We have failed to be trustworthy stewards of God's creation. But the Torah also reminds us that repentance is possible. Indeed, returning to do God's will is seen as one of the greatest things a person –or a society– can do. The Talmud states that “in the place where a *baal teshuva* (a returnee to Judaism) stands, a completely righteous person cannot stand.” I understand this to mean that when we have failed to adhere to God's words and then return to the right path, we discover a new place that is even better than the one before. I wonder what this place, our world, would look like if we use this chance to return together.

Shabbat Shalom,

Sami Vingron
Rabbinical Intern