

CORNSTALKS, CONCH SHELLS & MY JEWISH PROBLEM

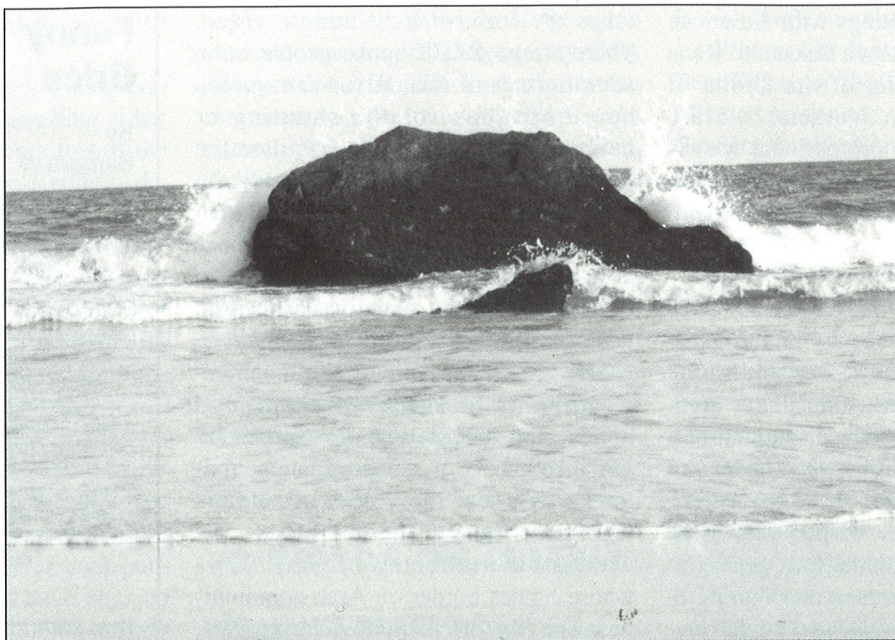
by Mary Gendler

Surrounded by lush foliage, chattering monkeys, huge banyan trees and ancient mossy temples, my husband I began reciting the traditional prayers of Kol Nidre. Our chants and prayers in Hebrew mingled easily with the sounds of the monkey forest in Ubud, Bali, where we found ourselves for Yom Kippur in 1987.

Although we were halfway around the world with no other Jews in sight, I felt we were in a kindred soul space. Bali is alive with neshama [soul]. It feels as if spirits sparkle and hover in every tree and flower. Religion and nature are closely intertwined.

Back in the United States—the land of Big Mac, hard rock, Wonder bread and crack—I wondered what I could do to preserve some of the spiritual magic I had experienced in Bali, how I could integrate this wholistic approach into my Jewish practices.

Most Jewish holidays were originally celebrations based on the natural cycles of the year. Like other peoples long ago, Jews lived close to nature and had an appropriate awe and reverence for her. We knew her by various names: Ashtoreth, Ashera, Ishtar, Adama...the Great Mother, the Great Goddess. In their zeal to smash idol worship, our forefathers crushed the reverencing of Ashera, and with her destruction, the respect of nature began to disappear. Religion went to our heads, became encased in bound volumes, was endlessly debated by bearded male scholars in dark, dusty rooms.



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Along with Ashera, we were severed from the earth, cut off from our connection with the feminine aspects of life. It is, I believe, through feeling our kinship with the earth and its creatures, experiencing (rather than mastering and controlling) the awesome majesty of the Universe, that we begin to feel the magic that is both within us and without. Judaism can be a vehicle for this discovery if we allow ourselves to connect with its ancient rhythms and meanings.

Sukkot, for example, is an unabashed nature festival. The sukkah, decorated with fruits and flowers, is a reminder of the ancient harvest season when families slept and ate in rough booths in the fields. Our sukkah is made with corn stalks, produce and greenery from our own woods and gardens.

If you're an urban dweller without a sukkah, perhaps a sacred space can be created inside your home. I don't yet invite the spirits of the harvest to join me, but perhaps I should, in the same way that one fills Elijah's cup. An offering to Adamah (our sweet mother without whose bounty

we could not exist)—a basket of fruit, some flowers—would feel appropriate.

I have long been aware of the importance of integrating my life with the cycles of nature. My husband and I live on five acres of land, and for twenty years we have grown much of our food organically. This close interaction with the earth has led

us to search out ways to bring this awareness into our practice of Judaism.

For the last 18 years, on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, a small group of us has gathered on a local beach to celebrate the birthday of the world. Arriving before sunrise, we watch the changing colors of the sky, and as the top of the sun pierces the horizon, we honor the moment with a cacophony of sound—shofars, conch shells, Tibetan horns, drums, song. Then we settle on our blankets and share readings, prayers and personal reflections about what has moved us during the past year. There is no prescribed order, no designated leader. Always there is a heightened sense of being at one with the universe as the crash of the waves and the cries of the gulls mingle with our songs and prayers in the early morning mist.

On Yom Kippur I have found that spending a few hours out-of-doors can encourage a valuable meditative experience. A spiritual and reflective diary which I write while sitting in a favorite spot helps me to connect my inner self with a sense of the larger world, while

providing a record of my journey over the years.

Chanukah, the festival of light, was initially a midwinter nature festival when the spirits of darkness were chased away by giant bonfires at the black time of the year. Light dispelling darkness—it is this mystery which stirred our foreparents, and it still has the power to move us if we but give it space to do so.

Mostly I shield myself from the anxiety of darkness in winter by staying in a house which is illuminated with hundreds of watts of artificial light. But when I step outside in late December and truly allow myself to experience the deep darkness already evident by late afternoon, I allow myself to feel some of the mystery.

To connect this to Jewish ritual practice, we light our Chanukah candles outside. We try to find a piece of driftwood or a large root from an old tree and we fashion a menorah. If you're in a group, each person can hold a stick topped by an individual candle.

Passover—the holiday of freedom, of exile and redemption. In New England where I live, Pesach comes just as the first crocuses force their way through the frigid earth, as the forsythia bursts into brilliant yellow, as the first chives bravely assert their survival of the frozen winter, and as the horseradish declares itself ready to be harvested for the seder plate. We bring all of these living things to the table as a living sign of rebirth and promise.

The world is filled with magic, with spirit, with holiness and wonder, and the Jewish tradition is rich in potential. For too long, however, we have let ourselves be led down the path of history and reason, experiencing the holy only as words, not as the glittering array of energy and forms which dance and shimmer about us here just as surely as in the monkey forests in Bali.

It is time to reassert our connection to Adamah [Earth], to reverence (not worship) the spirit of Ashera (the Great Mother), to reclaim and rejoice in the ancient wisdom and potential of our tradition.

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