

“Holy Ground and the Covenant of Reciprocity”
Awaken Shabbat D’Var
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Shabbat Shalom! Since Sukkot, I’ve been reading Braiding Sweetgrass by Robin Wall Kimmerer, Native American woman and botanist. Dr. Kimmerer reflects on some of the greatest challenges we face today integrating, indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge and the teaching of plants. She speaks, in a contemporary language, truths elemental to our tradition – we are descended from a tribal people who lived intimately with creation. Torah is reflected in the three strands Dr. Kimmerer braids together as a foundation to find a way forward. The first strand, is understanding that all parts of creation, not just humans and animals, have being-ness. The Potawatamie word for being ness is Ya-we. She proposes a new pronoun, ki plural kin to clarify, that every moon, star, plant, body of water, rock, is not an “it” but is a person. Second strand, all beings of creation live in a deep, reciprocal relationship with each other. The third, cultivation of gratitude is essential to healing ourselves and all our kin. In her words, “Cultures of gratitude must also be cultures of reciprocity.... Each person, human or no, is bound to every other in a covenant of reciprocity. Plant breath for animal breath, winter and summer, predator and prey, grass and fire, night and day, living and dying. Our elders say that ceremony is the way we can remember to remember.” (On Being and Braiding Sweetgrass combined)

This week’s portion, Mishpatim, echoes in Dr. Kimmerer’s thought. We are still standing at Sinai, that place of revelation, beginning to forge a new identity as a people as we struggle to find the right way forward. Mishpatim means laws and this portion outlines a number of them from the treatment of slaves and strangers to leaving the edges of the field for those in need. If we take a broad view, many of the mitzvot can be seen as a way to live in reciprocal relationship with ourselves, with all our kin, human or not, and with the Divine. That verse which sounds so repugnant to our contemporary minds, “A life for a life, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” speaks to radical inter-dependence. The health and wholeness of our community, our planet, depends on the wholeness of each person, human or not. The mitzvah to bring the first fruits to the House of Lord reminds us in Dr. Kimmerer’s words that “we are showered everyday with gifts, but they are not

meant for us to keep. Their life is in their movement, the inhale and exhale of our shared breath.”

So what does this all have to do with our CRC Mitzvah Farm? Ki is a place of powerful revelation, where wonder grows as seeds sprout, drawing us into a deeper understanding of reciprocity with all our kin. Ki is a place of healing for ourselves, our community and indeed the planet. Ki strengthens us to find the right way forward and provides the soil for cultivation of practical tikkun olam.

Our Mitzvah Farm grew out of our process to become certified as a Greenfaith Congregation and a seed planted at the Holy Ground Collaborative by Arthur Culbert of the CWE Farm across the street. That seed, to use our holy grounds as gift gardens for the Collaborative’s food pantry at Trinity Episcopal. The farm was launched under the leadership of Rabbi Randy with Wendy Bell coordinating. We are part of a network of gift gardens in this neighborhood including CWE Farm, the Unitarian Church, New City School – led by CRC’s Julie Lazaroff, and a family on Westminster. Collectively, last year we donated around 3,000 pounds of organic produce. CRC donated 525 of those pounds. Last Autumn, we received a Gateway Greening Grant providing compost and raised beds which will help us reach our goal of raising 1,000 pounds of food this coming year. We were also invited to participate in their pilot orchard program, planting 10 fruit trees who just celebrated their first birthday. CRC is hosting Gateway Greening’s Pruning class tomorrow at 2:00 p.m. let Wendy know if you would like to join us.

But the Mitzvah Farm is about more than just food. As plants flourish so do relationships within CRC, as well as with our broader community. And we would love for you to help this community grow.

A growing community gathers weekly to care for our garden. We are in need of folks to harvest and take the produce to Trinity on Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday mornings. No experience is necessary! CRC’s kids through Mensch Makers, Tot Shabbat and religious school help with our garden. We just celebrated Tu B’Shevat with the little ones and they planted seeds as part of our seder. School groups from around the region have come for field trips to learn about growing food and Jewish life. We need volunteers to help with these larger groups and to develop programming for them. We are forming a permanent committee to

insure the sustainable growth of our Mitzvah Farm. We dream of weaving the teaching of plants throughout our congregation and community, so we can explore the seasonality of our holiday cycle, deepen our reciprocity with all our kin, open ours hearts to more gratitude, and understand more clearly the intersectionality of environmental and socio-economic justice. We distributed a sheet with ways to get involved and our contact information.

Without a direct relationship with the guests at Trinity Food Pantry it is sometimes challenging to understand or feel the reciprocal nature of the relationship we do have. In a culture which systemically creates an underclass through oppression and institutionalized racism, unjust policies, and un-liveable wages; those caught in the snare of poverty are all too often stigmatized as entitled takers. The truth reveals something far different. 26% of food insecure household are unable to work due to age or disability. 60% of food insecure households have a least one member who works at least 40 hours per week and 1 in 5 have at least one member who works more than 40 hours. Over half of the food insecure labor force work in retail, personal service, food and hospitality industries and healthcare. So Trinity's guests are the people preparing our carry-out dinners, caring for our elders, sick and dying family members, ringing up our purchases, cleaning our hotel rooms, caring for our children. Barbi Click will now speak more about their vital work at Trinity Food Pantry.