

I Lift Mine Eyes Unto The Mountains  
A Sermon to Save the Earth  
Rabbi Joe Rooks Rapport  
December 14, 2007

In 1781, anticipating an American victory in the Revolutionary War that would open up new territory for settlement and expansion, two Virginia merchants named Jacob Cohen and Isaiah Isaacs commissioned a young explorer named Daniel Boone to survey some land in the far western reaches of what was then the Colony of Virginia. They paid the young man £6 in British sterling, since *he* lacked their confidence in the future of this young nation, at least where his fee for service was concerned. Boone set forth across the great mountains to survey and explore the land we now call Kentucky.

The mountains and the rivers and the rolling forests in between were all that was here when two Jews named Cohen & Isaacs sent Daniel Boone to stake their claim. Since before Kentucky was ever born, this land has belonged to us and we have belonged to this land.

A hundred years ago there were small Jewish communities scattered all across this Commonwealth. Thriving congregations in Owensboro, Paducah, and Henderson; smaller congregations in Bowling Green, Lexington, and Shelbyville; and several more tiny Jewish communities scattered throughout the state. With the passing of that century most of those communities have passed on as well. Jewish life in Kentucky has consolidated itself in the larger cities of Louisville and Lexington, and in the process we have lost some of our connection to the land.

I don't mean here, "the land" in an abstract sense. I mean this land, our land, the land of our commonwealth, the mountains and the rivers and the forests - which were all that was of this western wilderness when the first Jews of Kentucky came here to settle in this land. And yet, this is still our land as it is still the land of every citizen of our commonwealth, and though we may have forgotten the beauty of her mountains, or the chill of her rushing streams, or the sweet smell of her forests in the autumn, still in all, this is our land. And I have come to tell you this evening that our land is in danger and it is ours alone to protect.

The mountains themselves are in danger of extinction and it is up to us to speak on their behalf. There is a plague that has come upon us and its name is Mountain Top Removal Mining. It is cutting a wide swath through Appalachia and when it has run its course, there will be nothing left but a moonscape of rock and poisoned streams.

Mountaintop removal is exactly what it sounds like: Mining companies clear-cut native forests and blow off mountaintops with explosives to uncover seams of coal, blasting away up to 1000 feet of mountain top and then dumping millions of tons of the waste

rock into the valleys below, permanently burying streams. This destructive practice, has damaged or destroyed approximately 1,200 miles of streams, destroyed forests on hundreds of square miles of land, disrupted drinking water supplies, flooded communities, and destroyed wildlife habitat.

This is not one of those issues of environmentalism vs. economic development. It is not a debate over energy independence or our excessive reliance on foreign oil. This is not one of those painful choices between jobs for working people and the protection of the planet which we all love.

This is one of those clear issues of right and wrong. This should not be happening in a land we can claim as our own.

Mountain Top Removal is relatively new to the Appalachian mountains of Eastern Kentucky, but our neighbors in West Virginia have seen its devastation for nearly two decades now. What they have learned stands as a lesson for us on what this disaster *is* and *is not* all about.

More than 500 square miles of some of West Virginia's most beautiful mountains, forest and streams have become flattened heaps of rubble. At this pace, and with the completion of Mountain Top Removal projects already on line, half of West Virginia's mountains will be gone in the next twenty years. While there are laws which state that the land must be reclaimed once the mining is done, Mountains don't grow back and the black rubble that is left behind can't sustain the growth of trees or edible grasses. The water supply is poisoned and the wildlife is simply gone.

While there is money to be made in the mining, more money than ever before thanks to the soaring prices of oil, the economy West Virginia has never been so bleak. The areas where this blast and fill disaster has been allowed rank among the poorest regions of one of our nation's poorest states. Tourism, which is the state's largest industry, has been stifled, and even the logging industry has organized against this practice because of the lack of arable land for renewable forests which the destruction of the mountains leaves in its wake.

The jobs in underground mines, which once formed the bulwark of the employment in the region, have evaporated. In a state which once employed nearly 150,000 miners, only 15,000 employees now remain. More coal is being produced, but the number of jobs which it takes to produce it has declined by a factor of ten. And though the coal seams which are exposed when the mountain top is literally blown off could be easily reached by traditional underground mining, the simple arithmetic is this: Dynamite is cheaper than men and machines.

What we have learned from the painful experience of our neighbors to the east is that we have nothing to gain and everything to lose. We need the coal, we need the jobs which mining that coal has always brought us, and we need to step forward as a commonwealth to become leaders in clean coal technology as a source of new jobs and a cleaner planet for us all. This is not a “pie in the sky” environmentalism I now preach, it is a simple declaration of what I have seen and what any of us can see in what was once the great mountains of West Virginia.

Exploding the top off a mountain, to dredge out the wealth within its core, is an affront to the earth and to all who worship the God who made it and then placed it and its future in our hands.

As it says in the Midrash, The Ancient Legends of our People:

“God led Adam around all the trees of the Garden of Eden. And God said to Adam: ‘See My works, how good and praiseworthy they are? And all that I have created, I made for you. [But] be mindful that you do not spoil and destroy My world – for if you spoil it, there will be no one left to repair it.’”  
(Midrash Kohelet Rabbah 7:13)

There is a green wave rising in this commonwealth, much is being done on our behalf, and we must all play our part. Kentucky Congressmen John Yarmuth and Ben Chandler have both submitted bills in Congress to halt this devastation. The irony here is that we need no new laws to protect us, only the real enforcement of laws which have long been on the books. Administrative Exemptions have been granted for Mountain Top Removal in our existing Strip Mining legislation and the Clean Water Act. We need to draw attention to these abuses and much of that process has already begun.

Grassroots organizations are cropping up all over the state, individual churches and synagogues have begun to take action through the efforts of their own faith traditions. And now the effort of coalition building has begun. I spent the day in a conference sponsored by the Sierra Club, for religious leaders from across the state and across the religious spectrum, all who share this common concern for the protection of this land we all love.

It began with these words by John Muir, the Sierra Club founder,  
"Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul alike."

It ended with this prayer for the mountains we all share:

O Divine Spirit,  
Spirit of wind and water,

of mountain and majesty,  
of all creatures great and small:  
Hear our prayer of thanksgiving  
for the world that we take for granted,  
for your gracious gifts that we do not earn,  
for the daily blessings that we do not merit;  
Hear our prayer of confession  
as we acknowledge our self-absorption,  
our shortsightedness;  
our failure to care for all creation;  
Hear our prayer of supplication  
for the mountains, and those who love them;  
for the mountains, and those who live in them;  
for the mountains, and those who work to preserve and protect them;  
Bring us to that day when  
the rivers will clap their hands  
and the mountains will sing together for joy.

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If you have within you a love of the earth, the air, the water, and the mountains, then join me in forming a taskforce of our own. Our congregation has been a leader in the conservation efforts we have begun here within these walls. It is time for us to share that vision with a broader community of faith for the sake of this commonwealth we share as one.

Since before Kentucky was ever born, this land has belonged to us and we have belonged to this land and it is time to remember the bond between us and the land. Psalm 121 begins: "I lift my eyes unto the mountains, from where will my help come. My help will come from God, maker of heaven and earth." There is more here than a convenient reminder that when we lift our eyes to our mountains there is devastation to be seen all around. There is here a deeper lesson on the God who made heaven and earth and placed them, the earth and the air, and the mountains in between, within our hands to serve and protect.

We are one people and we are dependent on one another to make the vision of a commonwealth for all a reality in our lives. This is no new battle, it has deep roots within our movement. It is enshrined most poetically in the words of what came to be called the "Coal Miner's Prayer" of our old Union Prayer Book. It speaks in a voice from another age, but its message is no less relevant for the passing of the years:

*"How much we owe to the labors of our brothers! Day by day they dig far away from the sun that we may be warm, enlist in outposts of peril that we may be secure and brave the*

terrors of the unknown for truths that shed light on our way. Numberless gifts and blessings have been laid in our cradles as our birthright.

“Let us then, O Lord, be just and great-hearted in our dealings with our fellow human beings, sharing with them the fruit of our common labor, acknowledging before Thee that *we are but stewards of whatever we possess*. Help us to be among those who are willing to sacrifice that others may not hunger, who dare to be bearers of light in the dark loneliness of stricken lives, who struggle and even bleed for the triumph of righteousness among men. So may we be co-workers with Thee in the building of Thy Dominion which has been our vision and goal throughout the ages.” [emphasis added]

May this be our prayer, now and always. Amen.

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