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When It Seems Like Too Much, Just Do Your Part- “Lo Alecha Hamlacha Ligmor”

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This past year the United Nations issued its report on global warming. According to the United Nations report changes in the atmosphere, the oceans and glaciers and ice caps now show unequivocally that the world is warming due to human activities.

One of the things that struck me was the evaluation that “if we were to take every car off the road and close every factory we still could not reverse the effects of carbon dioxide and other pollutants on global warming.” Some still debate whether we are dealing with a natural cycle of global warming or whether it is caused by human technology- meanwhile we live through its effects. Meanwhile we watch the melting of the great glaciers and worry about the rising ocean levels. Not only is there the potential for coastal flooding and even the complete immersion of certain tropical islands, but the decreased desalinization of the oceans could have a catastrophic effect on ocean life and the availability of food resources. At the same time we hear about the growing Saharan deserts and decreased arable land. We got to the moon first, but now with the decreasing polar caps, the Russians are claiming the oil deposits beneath the Arctic Circle. I wonder who got the best deal there?

The problem with talking about global warming is that it often ends up, like many subjects today, devolving into politics. Republicans versus Democrats, conservatives versus liberals; sides have been drawn and too often the reasonable arguments of each side are ignored because the barriers are too fortified. When it comes to the question of global warming there are conservatives who feel that there is way too much hysteria about what they refer to as “normal, cyclical fluctuations of global temperatures.” On the other side, liberals castigate conservatives for their myopic self-centered view of the world and an inability to see the warning signs. And like most issues, we mostly hear the extreme views of each side.

So what are we supposed to do?

NOW WHAT?

In spite of my introduction, this sermon is not an attempt to prove the case for global warming: either you believe it or not. Every day we are confronted with news reports that deal with the theme of global warming.



Does it faze us anymore when we hear things like:

-Since 1980, we've experienced nineteen of the twenty hottest years on record - with 2005 being the hottest ever.

-Over the last four decades, the percentage of the Earth's surface suffering drought has more than doubled. In the United States, the drought we experienced in 2002 was the worst in forty years. And in Africa, more rivers are beginning to dry up, threatening the water supply across the continent.

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-As more land becomes parched, more forests are starting to burn. Across Indonesia, throughout Alaska, and in the Western United States, wildfires have raged in recent years like never before. A new record was set in 2002, as more than 7 million acres burned from Oregon down to Arizona.

-In the last 35 years, with warming ocean waters, category 4 and 5 hurricanes have doubled, and the wind speed and duration of these storms has jumped 50%.

You either accept the connection between these natural phenomena and global warming or you don't. While it is almost unanimously accepted that global warming is adversely affecting our world, the only question is how severe you consider our current circumstance to be.

I'm not going to offer any more statistics about global warming; for fear that some of you will begin to start thinking of refutations. I don't want to confuse the issue, because the issue is not how severe it is currently, only whether we should do nothing until everyone is convinced.

What will the next twenty years bring? What about the next fifty? No one knows. But what if this is not a normal cycle of nature? What if our consumption habits are contributing to the global warming? For those who do not believe this is a serious issue, what if you are wrong? Are we really ready to risk our future?

Today I want to go beyond the question of global warming. The question I want to ask is much bigger. My question deals with our ability to do something about it. Because there are those who argue that you and I can't do anything about it. There are people who accept the dangers of global warming and yet do nothing because they believe that it is up to world governments or big businesses to do something. This approach is predicated on the fact that even if we could put a stop to global warming that it could only be accomplished on a large scale.

So what are we to do?

LO ALECHA HAMLACHA LIGMOR

As usual, Jewish tradition has an important teaching to help us deal with overcoming this tension. Found in Pirkei Avot- The Ethics of the Fathers- we are taught: "*Lo alecha hamlacha ligmor, v'lo atah ben horin le'hebatel mee'mena*" - "It is not required that you finish the job, but neither are you exempt from beginning it." This teaching reminds us that when it comes to the great issues of life that are sufficiently complex and complicated we are not obligated to complete the task. But more importantly, we cannot sit back and do nothing. Doing nothing is not acceptable in our tradition.



Why are we required to act even in the face of overwhelming odds? Why not admit the reality of the situation? After all, Judaism is very realistic about the world. In this case, it is an issue of personal responsibility. It is a reminder that when we abdicate our ability for initiative and ingenuity we give up on our human condition. Our tradition won't allow for a forfeit. Even when the odds seem overwhelming, we must play the game of life as if we can make a difference.



define making a difference? Maybe our small contribution will have just the necessary impact. The degree to which humans impact global warming is an inexact science. Who is to see that our efforts won't help in some way? Who is to say that as we figure out the bigger issues that our small acts of today won't make a difference? I believe they will. I have to believe. Or perhaps we will inspire others. Perhaps your purchase of a Prius will inspire others to do the same. Who knows what our small acts will accomplish; it is this hope that makes each act significantly powerful on its own.

At this time of year rabbinic tradition teaches to be conscious of each of our decisions. We are supposed to live each day as if the next good deed we do will actually tip the scales of justice in our favor. What a perfect time to remind ourselves that each act, no matter how small, can make a difference.

WHAT CAN I DO?

When it comes to global warming what are the things that we can do? It is important to lobby our government and support businesses that are globally conscious and I encourage you to do so. We all know about the impact of emerging countries like China and Indonesia on the world eco-system. We have learned the term “carbon footprint” to express the impact that our personal habits make on the environment. Yet the solutions are not easy. Each answer seems to have its own set of issues. Like ethanol gas derived from corn that seems like a great alternative, but may cause as much impact on the environment due to the fact that there are no pipelines to move it and therefore it must be transported by truck. Eventually we feel frustrated and potentially hopeless about solving the problem. But we all know that there are little things that we can do. We may not have the answer today, but perhaps our actions will give us the time to figure out the right answers.

What can we do?

We all know that one of the most significant ways to decrease carbon dioxide is through the types of automobiles we drive and our driving habits. And while I admire people who drive hybrid cars and encourage people to purchase one, it is possible to make a difference with your existing automobile by cutting down on driving and by carpooling. In addition, when it is time to get a new car, strive to get a car with better gas mileage. The difference of driving a car that gets ten miles per gallon and one that gets twenty can be significant. Maybe your family really doesn't need the largest truck ever made and a smaller SUV will do- even going from 10 miles per gallon to 15 can make a difference. One does not have to become an eco-fanatic to make a difference.

What else can we do?

Replace your regular light bulbs with energy efficient ones. How many of you have already done this? These compact fluorescent light bulbs, known as cfl's, use only 25% of the energy of a regular bulb. And talk about individuals being able to have an impact, if every house in America installed just one cfl in place of a regular light bulb, we could prevent greenhouse gases equivalent to the emissions of more than 800,000 cars. If every household would install one cfl it would be like taking 800,000 cars off the road. This is a small act with great potential.

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In addition to CFL's we must consider energy efficient appliances and the latest suggestions of turning off computers when not in use and unplugging appliances when not in use because many appliances use energy even when in the off mode.

What else can be done?

Solar energy is becoming more efficient and affordable. With the opportunity of selling back unused energy. Those of us with the means must begin to make a statement about our beliefs.

There are many ways that we can make a difference. All you have to do is look on line to find suggestions about reducing oil consumption and carbon dioxide emissions. But again, there are those who believe that these actions will not make a difference. These may be small contributions to the cause, but together we can make a difference. Temple Aliyah is a sacred community. Together we can begin to make a difference. Margaret Mead wrote: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." And some of you may know the words of a popular Israeli song, "*Ani V'atah ne'shaneh et ha'olam*"-"You and I will change the world."

When we stop acting like we will make a difference then we have lost the greatest of all human qualities- hope.

BIGGER ISSUES

Like all issues that are far more complex than most people are willing to acknowledge, the oil we consume is not just about global warming. It is not just about the carbon monoxides that break down our atmosphere resulting in the ever-increasing hole in our ozone layer, it is also about the politics of oil.

Several weeks ago I attended an intimate meeting with Senator Diane Feinstein. With about thirty other leaders of the Jewish community, we had the opportunity to question her about any issues of concern. The topics of course focused on the Middle East. In particular American policy about the Israel-Palestinian conflict and Iran. In the words of Senator Feinstein, "we cannot resolve the issues of Iran or the Israel-Palestinian conflict until we attain energy self-sufficiency." If you want to decrease the political power of Iran and Saudi Arabia we need to use less foreign oil. If we want American foreign policy to function without concern of our own energy needs, then we must begin to do something. If you are a lover of Israel who is concerned about the political power of oil and the role that petro-dollars play in supporting world-wide terrorism and more specifically the efforts of Hamas, then we must stop doing nothing.

What can we do?



Make sure the next car gets better gas mileage. See if your current family situation has allowed you to downsize your cars. Many things have changed in the nine years since my family last purchased a family vehicle, that is why this summer we finally downsized from a large SUV to a smaller one that gets fifty percent better gas mileage. In addition, I hope to be very soon to be driving a hybrid, instead of my gas-guzzling Mustang GT. I am arriving late to the game of

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global warming concern, but I could no longer do nothing. I want to thank those of you who drive Prius and other hybrids and who have inspired me, your actions have made a difference.

So why don't people do more?

In addition to the feeling that our actions can't make a difference, I believe that another reason deals with personal inconsistencies that may be perceived as hypocritical. Can I own a large SUV that gets 8 miles per gallon and still replace my regular light bulbs with energy efficient light bulbs? Of course. Can I be a lousy recycler and still drive a Prius? Of course. We must come to believe that any action is better than none. We must not be critical of people who have made global warming their issue and don't yet live a hundred percent according to the lifestyle. In these issues of ultimate concern, when we should all be trying to do our part, let us not negate any act that makes a difference.

But unfortunately, another of the greatest obstacles to changing our ways is our dislike for inconvenience. We like our big cars and we don't like carpooling. We like our home lighting to be just right and Cfl's can be a brighter light and take a minute to warm up. Our time is precious and we don't want to be inconvenienced. Ultimately, we must be willing to accept compromises, to acknowledge that there are more important issues than our own needs and accept a small amount of inconvenience.

According to one source, in 2005 America used .16% less oil than the year before. This may not seem like much, but it is a beginning... lo alecha hamlacha ligmor- it is not for us to finish, but we must begin. Although global use of oil increased 1.3%, Americans must still acknowledge that we are the largest consumers of oil, utilizing approximately 20 million barrels per day, compared to China, the second largest consumer who utilizes approximately 7 million barrels per day.

The only way we stand a chance is to begin to change the things over which we have control.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

As a community Temple Aliyah has begun to take some small steps:

1. I hope you have noticed over the last year, the recycling bins in the courtyard used by our schools and staff. In addition, we recycle the discarded paper in our office.
2. Look above you if you can and you will notice energy efficient lighting that we have utilized for several years now.



3. In the coming years, as we consider necessary changes to our facilities we will also consider energy efficiency in these plans.
4. After the High Holy Days, we will be forming a new greening committee to evaluate the ways in which we can decrease our carbon footprint. Sisterhood has already begun to consider these issues in catering like using plates made from recycled goods and I would like us to look at the larger issues as a synagogue. If you are interested in serving on such a committee I would like you to leave a message in the office and I will pass on your name to the appropriate party.

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As a symbol of our desire to make a difference, it is my pleasure to acknowledge that our ner tamid- the eternal light above the ark is now solar powered. The ner tamid has long been a symbol of God's eternal presence. It harkens back to the first words heard in the universe "Let there be light," and cosmologically is connected to the first energy of creation. I am grateful to Kahn Solar who donated the materials and labor. I hope that each time we look at the ner tamid, we will now think of our obligation to preserve the limited resources of creation.

SOCIAL ACTION

Making a difference through small actions is not limited to ecological issues. Making a difference happens through one action at a time. One does not have to become a Mother Theresa to make a difference in the world.

Most schools now have requirements for community service, because it is a lesson, that just a couple of hours can make a difference. Granted a couple of hours is not going to make great changes in the world, but a couple of hours of reading to an underprivileged child through Koreh LA can make a difference to that child.

Can thirty dollars make a difference in Darfur? Through Jewish World Watch thirty dollars can provide a family with two solar cookers. What's the big difference? Well, in two of the larger refugee camps many of the households are headed by women. The violent acts that take place against women often happen when they are out collecting wood for cooking. In addition, two solar cookers can replace up to one ton of precious firewood. The refugee crisis has also led to the deforesting of these countries in conflict. The Jewish World Watch may not be able to stop the innocent killings of civilians in Darfur, but it allows you and me to make a big difference for one family with just thirty dollars.

COMFORTING PEOPLE

If you want to know the power of the individual to make a difference, just ask someone who received a call at a time of personal need. Whether it is illness or a death taking the time to write a note or make a call can mean the world to someone.

A common topic in my office is with congregants who come in to share with me that at one of these difficult moments people that mattered most to them did not bother to call or write a note. Whether it is the loss of a spouse, a child diagnosed with cancer or a divorce, some of their closest friends are not able to be a source of comfort. Often it is because people don't know what to say. Words are difficult to come by in these situations. How do you offer words of comfort without being trite? Let me give you some simple words I use, "I'm so sorry to hear about, fill in the blank, I just wanted to call and let you know I was thinking about you." If you are intimidated by a call, then just drop a note. But often we are just too busy and caught up with our own lives to respond. We don't think that our call or note will make a difference. That is where we make our mistake. Our little acts of kindness do matter. Each one has the potential to comfort another human being.



CONCLUSION

Whether it is global warming, conflict from war or just the lives of people around us our small acts are important. Each act is a statement of hope about us as individuals and about our society. It is a reminder that personal benign neglect can turn into communal complacency and we can't let that happen.





A Chasid once came to his rabbi in tears. "I feel so paralyzed. I've tried so hard to repair the world and it does no good - it's just hopeless. The world is still filled with sin." The rabbi very patiently embraced the man and explained: "Have hope. Before you change the world, you must start with yourself. And after you've repaired yourself, repair your community. And after your community, repair your nation. Know that then you will have begun to repair the world." The rabbi advised the Chasid to have hope. We must recapture the belief in ourselves to make a difference. To do nothing is unforgivable; it is the greatest sin of all. It is to acknowledge a hopelessness that reflects the death of the human spirit. Unless we believe that we can make a difference we might as well abdicate our elevated human status. We might as well ask God for forgiveness, because we have failed Him. One this very day when we celebrate the creation of humanity, we must act upon our human potential.

There is a Talmudic story of an old man planting a fruit tree. His old bent figure is hunched over the sapling as a stranger approaches the old man and says, "why are you planting that tree, you won't live long enough to eat of its fruit." The old man looked at the stranger and said, "I might not live long enough to eat of its fruit, but God willing my children and their children will be able to." Let us begin to plant our trees of hope through our actions.

What should your new year look like?

Picture yourself replacing your light bulbs with energy efficient ones or trading your car or truck in for one that gets better mileage, maybe even a hybrid.

Picture yourself writing a letter to a member of congress on behalf of an important cause.

Picture yourself considering energy efficient appliances and maybe even changing your house over to solar energy.

Picture yourself donating to Jewish World Watch for solar cookers that can help prevent violence and save precious resources.

Picture yourself writing a note to someone who is going through a difficult time and knowing that it makes a difference.

A rabbi was once asked, "How do you bring light to a darkened room?" his answer, "Strike a match!" Then they asked him, "Rabbi how do you bring light to a darkened world?" his answer, "Become the match, become the light!"





Back To The Garden

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The story is told of two old friends, both smokers, who are having a discussion about whether it is OK to smoke while you are davening, while you are praying. They decide after talking for some time that neither of them have the expertise to answer the question, and so one of the friends goes to the rabbi, and he asks, “rabbi, is OK to smoke while I’m davening.” The rabbi gets an angry expression on his face, and he says “how could you come and ask me a question like that! Its a few days before yom tov, and I’m busy, and how could you even think I would give you permission to smoke a cigarette while you are davening, while you are praying to God. When you are davening you should be thinking about God and matters of the spirit, not of physical needs and desires! Of course it is not OK to smoke while you are davening.!”

Well, the man went back to his friend - “What did the rabbi say?” his friend wanted to know. “Well,” the man said, “I’m sorry I asked - the rabbi got angry with me, and he said how could I even ask such a question, and of course its forbidden - .” His friend looked at him patiently, and then he said “let me give it a try.” So the next day his friend went to the rabbis office, and he knocked on the door, and the rabbi looked up, invited the man in, and said, “what can I do for you?” The man said “rabbi, I have a question for you - is it OK to DAVEN while I’m smoking?” “Ah, said the rabbi, “you are such a pious person, even while you are immersed in the physical qualities of this world, even something as mundane as smoking, you are still thinking about spiritual matters, you’re reaching out to God, and there is a prayer in your heart.”

Now in some ways that story reflects the American Jewish experience - a generation ago, maybe, certainly two generations ago, Jews lived their lives in a Jewish world. They had interactions with secular culture and secular life, but those were relatively few and far between, and they would come back to the world they knew, that they were familiar with, the world of Judaism. Today, in a way, it is exactly the opposite - most Jews today, certainly in the liberal Jewish community, live their lives in the secular world and they come into the spiritual world with relative infrequency. A Shabbat service here, a bar or bat mitzvah there - and certainly, year in and year out, our experience together of the HHDs.

And on these HHDs I find myself relating to the rabbi who felt so good about his congregant who prayed while he smoked. It is always amazing to me - all year long we wrestle with our secular lives, and then each fall when yom tov comes we hear the call of the shofar and it draws us back to our roots, brings us back to our traditions, and returns a spiritual dimension to our lives.



And I know, from talking to members of the congregation, that each year, when RH comes, there is an incredible sense of gratitude. We have so much to be grateful for! We live in a world with incredible satisfactions, and pleasures, safety, security, an ease of life that surpass anything experienced by human beings in ages gone by! We enjoy





a level of wealth, a quality of living, a convenience and ease that surrounds our daily experience. We can travel hundreds of miles in a matter of hours, we eat oranges in heated homes in the middle of the winter, and sit in perfect 72 degree temperatures in the heat of the summer. We can communicate at any time from any place we choose with those we love, and even those we don't. We expect to live long lives free of pain - 40 is the new 30, 50 is the new 40, and 60 is the new 50. If someone who lived 50 years ago came back to see your world it would be life a miracle to them - something out of a science fiction novel. But for all of the miracles we enjoy, the technology and conveniences of modern life, the greatest miracle of all is literally right underneath our feet, and yet we take it for granted every day. it is the earth - our planet, our home - the mountains, and the trees, and the rivers and the oceans and the dirt and the grass and the sky and the clouds. Of all the miracles, by far the greatest - the planet that gave us life.

BACK TO THE GARDEN

Maybe it is no accident that the Torah begins in a garden, the Garden of Eden. Every ancient culture has a creation myth, a story that explains the basic origins of the known universe, and the creatures that populate it. But of all the ancient near eastern creation myths - and there are many - the myth of ancient Israel is the only one that begins in a garden. We know that creation story extremely well - it is one of the best known narratives in all of literature. Lets just do a quick review and see how well we remember it

1. the entire process of creation, how many days does it take? 2. on the first day, what is created- light and darkness) 3. what day are the sun, moon, and stars created on? (the 4th day) 4. and the last thing that is created in the story - human beings - on which day - the 6th!

That is the 6th day of Creation - Adam and Eve come into the world, and where does God put them? In the Garden of Eden. The tradition has long associated that moment - humanity's entry into the Garden - into God's world, so to speak - with RH. This connection is especially reinforced in the musaf service, where after the shofar is sounded we recite together as a congregation "*Ha'yom Harat Olam*" - which means this is the birthday of the world! And later in musaf, in the Zichronot section, the section of musaf that talks about remembering, it says "*Zeh Ha'yom Te'hilat Ma'ase'ha*" - this is the day of the beginning of Your creation.

Imagine Adam and Eve, the first human beings, setting foot in the garden for the very first time. The first eyes to ever see a tree, or a beautiful flower - the first ears to ever hear the sound of the wind or the song of a bird - the first hands to ever feel the coolness of water. There is a beautiful midrashic legend, that Adam and Eve were overwhelmed with what they saw in the garden, everything new, for the first time - and God saw that they were afraid, and God came, and God gave them a tour of the garden so that they would feel more comfortable, more at home in this brave new world. And God showed them every



tree, and every flower, and every creature, and they began to understand how beautiful each individual thing was, let along the entire garden! And God said to them: "Look what I've made - how beautiful it all is - everything I've made, I've made it for you. Take care, lest you spoil and destroy my world, because if you do, there is no one after you to repair it." (Kohelet Rabah 7:13)

And in fact when God puts Adam and Eve in the garden God tells them their task is to work it and to guard it. In

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other words the very first mitzvah, the very first commandment given in the Torah to people is that they should work the earth - YES - but also they should care for it. The first mitzvah! And so, on RH-“Yom Ha'rat Olam”- the day the world was born - I am wondering, how are we doing? Have we obeyed the commandment, to care for the earth? Have we acknowledged what a miracle it is that we have such a beautiful planet to live our lives on? Have we heeded God's words in the midrash - “take care,” God said, “that you should not spoil and destroy my world.”

A GLOBAL PROBLEM - GLOBAL WARMING

It is virtually impossible to live in today's world, with the ubiquitous news and media sources - not to have at least heard of the issue of global warming. Not being a science teacher - in fact, and I am embarrassed to say this with my parents here, and even more embarrassed to say this with my in laws here - having barely passed 10th grade chemistry, the last time I even took science - I am not going to give you a detailed description of what causes this phenomenon. Very simply put - when the sun shines on the earth, its energy enters our atmosphere. Some of that energy hits the earth, and literally bounces off and goes back out into space. But some of that energy is trapped by our atmosphere and stays here - and we need that to happen because that is what warms the earth, and actually makes the earth's climate capable of sustaining life. But what is happening right now is that the layer of our atmosphere is getting thicker and thicker, and the thicker it gets, the harder it is for the sun's rays to escape. So more and more of the sun's energy stays inside of our atmosphere - it is not being released any more - and the overall average temperature of the earth is going up. And scientists now believe that what is causing this thickening of our atmosphere, and therefore the trapping of more and more of the sun's rays, is the release of man made greenhouse gases - mostly Carbon Dioxide.

The industrialized age has dramatically increased the amount of co2 that humanity produces - we all know that when we drive our cars we release co2 into the atmosphere - but also we do it when we run most of our industries, we increase the problem when we cut down trees, and far less well known, the use of electricity also plays a major role in the creation of greenhouse gases - why? anyone know? because much of the world's electricity is generated at coal burning power plants, and the burning of coal releases very high levels of co2 into the air -

Now you probably are aware that there has been a lot of debate about whether global warming is really happening, or how severe it actually is, and a lot of that debate has been politically oriented, and I don't want to get into politics today at all - I will only tell you that today, virtually every reputable scientist in the world - in the world - that studies this issue - believes that this is a real phenomenon, and a serious one.



TWO STATISTICS:

1. The first has to do with the temperature of the earth - since the time of the Civil War - about 1860 - the temperature of the earth has gradually been going up - and you are talking about a 150 year period, and there are fluctuations, and some years are colder, and some are warmer - but the general trend is that it is getting warmer and warmer. Now in that entire 150 year period, the 20 hottest years on record have all happened since 1980 - and the hottest year of all in that entire period? Believe it or not, it was 2005.





2. Even more striking to me than that, the amount of carbon dioxide in our atmosphere today compared with past years. We actually have records of the amount of CO₂ in our atmosphere going back 650,000 years - scientists figure that out by drilling into the arctic ice, they bring up samples from when the ice formed 50 thousand, or 100, or 200 thousand years ago, they can analyze the sample and they can tell what the earth's atmosphere was like at the time the sample was formed. And right now the level of CO₂ in our atmosphere is 27% higher than it has ever been in the last 650,000 years - and current projections are that within 50 years the level of CO₂ in our atmosphere will be two times what it has ever been in that same period.

Now - you might say - and some people are saying - so what? What is the worst that could happen? So in 50 years Baltimore will be like Miami Beach - I'll invest in suntan lotion and maui jim sunglasses. What could be bad? And I don't want to lay out a doom and gloom scenario, especially on RH - but more and more scientists are connecting global warming to an increase in severe weather problems in some parts of the world, to floods in other parts, to droughts in other parts - and in a worst case scenario - as the earth gets warmer and warmer - there could be a melting of the polar ice caps, which would radically raise the sea level around the world and dramatically change the coastline of every major continent. So in that scenario it would be nice if Baltimore were the new Miami beach - because the original Miami beach - well, it just wouldn't be there any more.

Judaism and Global Warming (my responsibility, stewardship, and the future - a return to the garden)

But today is RH. It is a day that focuses on hope, and opportunity, and the future. It is a day where our tradition tells us that we can make changes in our lives, and the tradition tells us that the changes we make in our lives can have an impact not only on us, not only on our families, not only on our communities, but on the entire world. One of the great challenges in addressing the problem of global warming is the perception that we have as individuals - what difference can I make?! You are talking about a global problem, and I am just one person! But Judaism has never accepted that argument. Instead, Judaism's position has always been when there is a global problem, you are the only person! It is not that you have to do it all - it says in the mishnah, it is not your duty to complete the work - its not that you have to do it all - but you do have to do something - that is your responsibility, as a human being, and a Jew.

Yogi Berra, the quotable Yankees catcher, supposedly once said - "If we don't change direction, we're liable to end up where we're going." I don't want to get to where we are going with global warming. During the season of the HHDs we talk about teshuvah, which we normally understand as meaning repentance - but more properly teshuvah means to turn, and the sense of it is that when you are on the wrong path, you are going in the wrong direction, that you can find within yourself the ability to turn aside - to change course and walk on a holier path. And I think that is the question we have to struggle with now, as a country, and also as a global community - do we have the will to turn aside from our present course, and find a better, safer, and healthier way towards the future?





So what can we do? There are all kinds of practical things that you can start to do. Many of them are obvious - Remember to recycle, insulate your home properly, and please, please, please remember that when you use electricity you are almost definitely burning fossil fuels. So turn out the lights!! Don't forget about your closet electricity users - a plugged in phone charger - even if the phone isn't being charged - a computer in sleep - even if the screen is dark - those things use electricity. And in some ways the easiest, and most effective small thing you can do - next time you need light bulbs, ask at the store for compact fluorescent light bulbs - CFL bulbs - this has nothing to do with the Canadian Football League. I could tell you that CFL bulbs last 10 times longer, and they use %66 less energy, but the one thing I want to tell you about them is this: if every home in the US substituted ONE - just one regular bulb for a CFL bulb it would have the effect on pollution levels of taking 1 million cars off the roads. And speaking of cars, that is one of the most obvious big things we can do - the next time you need a car, consider a car that gets better gas mileage than the one you currently drive - not only will that help our environment, but it will help reduce our dependency on foreign oil, which is a huge problem in and of itself but another sermon for another day.

But the most important thing you can do is to become informed, to become educated about this issue - learn about it, read about it, study it, ask questions, see Al Gore's movie - discover for yourself what it is all about, and discover what you can do about it. Remember the mitzvah is to be a shomer of the earth - a guardian - and we need to begin to understand that that is part and parcel of living a Jewish life. Caring for the earth is a Jewish value, a responsibility given to us by God, in a way a miracle that is entrusted into our care. Do we want to let a miracle slip out of our hands? Or can we hold it, and tend for it, and help it grow?

A moment ago I quoted Yogi Berra - you remember what he said? "If we don't change direction we're liable to end up where we're going." And I said, I don't want to get where we're going with global warming. But that is not completely true - because the issue isn't where I'm going. I know many of you still think I am in my mid 20s - thank you, I appreciate that. But this summer I turned 42 - not exactly an old man - but I figure I am probably about half way through my life. If I am lucky I'll have 40 - maybe 50 more years to be in God's beautiful world - to feel a cool breeze on my face, or the warmth of the sun on my back - to witness the promise of spring, and the coolness of autumn, and to hear the whisper of winter. So the issue isn't where I'm going - the issue really is where are my children going. What kind of world will they live in?

You know there is an old adage, in both fund raising and issue awareness raising - they always say, if you don't have something to point at, you know this building, we are going to build this building, we need money for that, or those whales, we are going to save those whales - if you don't have something to point at, then people aren't going to care about what you are saying. And that is one of the great challenges with global warming - its so big, so complicated, there is nothing to point at - you can't point at the earth, its just too big, people can't relate

to it. So I am not going to point at the earth today - I am going to point at your children, and your grandchildren, and their future. What kind of world do we want them to see? What kind of world do we want them to know? What kind of world do we want them to have? That world is being made right now, and it is being made by us. And our children all deserve the best that we can give them. God's world - God's world as it was meant to be. Friends - the future is here - we are it - we are on our own - so let us resolve to plant our trees in the opportunity of a new year. May it be a sweet one for each and every one of us.





Today The World Is Born

Rabbi Karen Chai Levy
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Today on Rosh Hashana, we declare in our liturgy: Hayom harat olam -today the world is born. On one level, this refers to the tradition that Rosh Hashana marks the sixth day of creation, the day that human beings were created. On another level, when we say the world is born today, in the present tense, we mean that today is a new beginning; we sound the shofar to wake us up, to urge us to look closely at how we're living our lives in this world we've been given. And we do teshuva, which means "returning;" we return to our highest vision for our lives. We realign ourselves with God's original vision for what the world could be. With that vision in mind, we renew the creation of the world. Hayom Harat Olam - today the world is born.

What kind of world do we want it to be? You may have noticed over the last several years that my sermons usually address our inner spiritual world, our individual relationships with God and others, and our teshuva process as personal transformation. This year, I'd like to go beyond our own growth and widen our lens. Really widen our lens. We still need to be thinking about ourselves, our relationships with family, our community, and of course Israel and the Jewish People, but I want to widen the lens even further and have us think about the whole planet.

Rav Kook, the first chief rabbi of pre-state Israel, spoke of our orientation to the world as the songs we sing. Some of us sing the song of our own life; some of us the song of the Jewish People; some of us the song of humanity. But there is also a fourth song - the song of all of existence, of the whole earth, of all of God's creatures. Rav Kook taught that when all four songs come together - the song of self, Jewish people, humanity, and the whole earth - then it's the song of God. Today on the birthday of all creation, we need to think about our own teshuva as notes in the song of the entire world.

As we are waking up to the sound of the shofar, the world is finally waking up about global warming. There is a consensus among scientists that climate change is real and that it's a result of human activities. Glaciers are melting, plants and animals are being forced from their habitat, hurricanes and droughts are increasing. I know that many of you have seen the movie, an Inconvenient Truth, and are aware of the catastrophic consequences for life on earth that are expected if we don't do teshuva. We are finally understanding that we humans really are co-creators with God, that our actions really do change the world. And so on this day when we resolve to create the world we want, I must deliver to you, an Inconvenient Sermon.



Don't worry. I'm not going to give you a lecture about the threats of climate change, you've seen the movie, and if you haven't, you should. I am, however, going to have us think about what God and the Torah require of us. Let's go back to this very day 5,767 years ago in Torah time. The Torah says that God put the human into the Garden of Eden l'ovdah u'lshomrah (Gen2:15). L'ovdah - to work it, to use it, to enjoy it. And L'Shomrah - to protect it, guard it, keep it for the next generations. In that beautiful garden, God gave us

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an enormous amount of power and an enormous amount of responsibility. According to the midrash (Kohelet Rabba 7:13), on that first Rosh Hashana, God led the human around the Garden of Eden and said, “Look at all of my works. See how beautiful they are, how excellent. See to it that you do not spoil or destroy My world - for if you do, there will be no one to repair it after you.”

Okay, so we're human, and we mess up. Humanity has done a great deal of damage to God's world, but that's why we have *teshuva*, turning around and changing our ways. We're instructed each year to return to a better place, to return to greater consciousness of our role as co-creators with God. We return, on the day the world is born, to that beautiful garden that God dreamed for us. *Hayom Harat Olam*. Today the world is born.

Some people think we have more immediate concerns: war, terrorism, threats to Israel, and so environmental problems shouldn't be at the top of our list as Jews. But, I don't even want to use the word “environment.” “Environment” makes it sound like it's one issue, something separate from us, outside of us. In Jewish thought, there is no such thing. Let's go back to the garden.

The created world is the Presence of God, the *Shechina*, as the prophet Isaiah said: *Melo kol ha'aretz k'vodo* - the fullness of the world is God's Presence. We feel that when we are moved by the awesome beauty of nature. We all know that the foundation of Jewish belief is *Adonai Echad*, God is One. One God might simply mean that there is only one God, not two or three. But the deeper understanding of *Adonai Echad* is: there's nothing but God, as it says in the Torah: *Ain Od Milvado* (Deut 4:35) -There is nothing but God. Within this Unified One, everything is connected, and everything is a manifestation of the Divine. So, it's not “the environment” we need to be concerned with, but the Garden of Eden, the dwelling place of God, the Divine Presence itself.

Hayom Harat Olam. I've been translating this phrase as “today the world is born.” But actually a more literal translation would be: Today the world is pregnant. Yes, pregnant with possibility. At this moment, we conceive of the world we want, we implant the seed for how we want to grow, and this next year of life will be born from our yearnings.

This image of the pregnant world can be understood another way, too. Just like the image of the Garden of Eden, the womb is also a microcosm. It IS the world for the fetus, and the fetus is completely interconnected with its world. Specifically, the amniotic fluid is constantly circulated by the fetus who is continually swallowing and secreting it, in and out and back in and back out. Before you start getting a little queasy thinking about that, remember that the world that God created for us is also a closed-loop system; in the garden, everything that goes out comes back in.



Later today we'll do *tashlich* and we'll throw our sins into the bay, but fish or birds will come and eat the bread, which will keep it in the ecosystem. Whatever we throw out will eventually come back to us in one form or another; when we put toxic chemicals into our ecosystem, we end up with cancer. We may think we can throw something away, but just like there is no place that is not God, there is no such place as “away” - we or our children or grandchildren will eat, drink, or breathe whatever we leave for them. When we say

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Hayom Harat Olam, today the world is pregnant, we must realize that we are living in the womb of the Shechina, a miraculous, interconnected system where everything lives and breathes the garden of the One God.

Just like a pregnant mother, in order to keep her baby healthy, avoids fish that we've poisoned with mercury, God wants the garden to be a holy and safe place for us to live. The difference between us and a fetus is: we get to make choices about how we tend the garden. Fortunately, the Torah guides us.

One of the 10 Commandments is to rest on Shabbat - what a genius concept. It's built into the very creation of the world that every seven days we refrain from working the earth and taking from it. Even God rested, so it's essential to life on earth that we have times of ceasing productive activity. We are given a law that understands our tendency to overwork ourselves, our animals, our employees, and the earth itself, depleting our physical and our inner resources. Similarly, the Torah commands that every seven years the land is to lie fallow so the soil can replenish itself.

Imagine the difference it would make if we stopped working ourselves and the earth one-seventh of the time. We need Shabbat more than ever, a day of resting in the garden, when we stop consuming and polluting, and when we just let ourselves and the earth BE. Shabbat is about refraining from manipulating the world around us and simply returning to creation by breathing, walking, relaxing, and connecting with God who created this beautiful garden. We need this kind of Shabbat consciousness on other days of the week, too, because we've lost the sense that we are living in the Garden of Eden.

Think how absurd our lives have become: we drive to the gym to walk on a treadmill; picture it: we drive a two-ton vehicle in traffic on the freeway, polluting the air, using Middle East oil, and adding to global warming, rather than simply going for a nice walk where we enjoy God's garden. Shabbat consciousness teaches us how to restrain ourselves from taking anything we want from the world and how to just gently be with it.

Our tradition intended for us to feel closely connected with God through the natural world. Our months follow the cycles of the moon, and our holidays follow the seasons of the harvest; our days begin and end with the setting of the sun; our food blessings require us know if what we're eating grew on trees or in the soil.

But we've become so disconnected from creation, and that takes its toll on our spiritual well-being, along with the well-being of the earth. Studies show that over the last five decades, as Americans have earned more, consumed more, thrown away more, bought bigger houses, and built more malls, our enjoyment of life has decreased because we work more hours, spend less time with our families, and spend more time driving in our cars. I recently read a book called, "Serve God, Save the Planet," in which the author describes an experiment he did with a group of 35 teenagers. He passed around a picture of a Hummer, (you know - the huge, expensive SUV that gets 11 mpg?) and every single one of the kids could identify it. Then he passed around a sugar maple leaf, which happens to be from the most common tree in his area in New Hampshire, the source of the local maple syrup, and the symbol of Canada, just a few miles away. Only two students could identify the leaf. I certainly can name more kinds





of cars than trees, how about you? What kind of things are we paying attention to? Shabbat consciousness helps us remember that we're living in God's garden; it helps us consume less and replenish more, and that makes life better for us and for everything else living on this planet.

Torah also limits what we take from the earth by the law of bal tashchit, which means: do not waste resources. Bal Tashchit originated with the command not to cut down fruit trees during war but was extended by the rabbis to mean that it is forbidden to destroy wantonly. God allows us to enjoy and use creation, but bal tashchit reigns us in from thinking that we own creation. It applies the essential principle stated in Leviticus (25:23): *Ki Li Ha'aretz*. The land is Mine, God says, you just get to live here.

But we've forgotten that. Americans are 5% of the world's population, but we consume a third of the earth's resources, create half of the world's hazardous waste, and produce 45% of the world's carbon dioxide emissions that lead to global warming.

Using less energy directly impacts how much carbon dioxide warms the atmosphere. In an Inconvenient Truth, Al Gore calls reducing carbon emissions "a moral imperative." Thousands of years before him, the Torah commanded us not to be wasteful and destructive with God's resources. I know that many contemporary Jews do not feel "commanded" to fulfill mitzvot; we see them as guidelines or traditions or "good deeds." However, when it comes to doing whatever we can to preserve life on earth, we must feel commanded. It is wrong for us to live today in a way that endangers future generations. So, even if you don't feel commanded by God or by the Torah, how about by Al Gore?

Drive less, carpool, make fuel efficiency the most important factor in what car you buy, buy locally grown organic produce, don't buy products that are wastefully packaged, and push for legislation that would limit greenhouse gas emissions. Make simple changes like turning off and unplugging electronics that you're not using or put on a sweater instead of turning up the thermostat. Switch to compact florescent light bulbs; if every household in the United States replaced one light bulb with a compact florescent, it would have the same impact as taking 1 million cars off the road - change five light bulbs! All of these are Jewish acts that fulfill a critical mitzvah, and they are all acts of teshuva, of returning to God's vision for the garden we are blessed to live in.

The mitzvot train us to live in a God-centered world rather than a self-centered world. The earth doesn't belong to us; we are just borrowing it. The rabbis of the Talmud legislated that something borrowed must be given back worth the same value as when we borrowed it. How will we leave the world for the next generation? The rabbis taught us the story of Honi who questioned a man he saw planting a carob tree. "Don't you know a carob tree takes 70 years to bear fruit?" Honi asked. The man replied, "I found this world with carob trees, and as my forebears planted them for me, so I will plant for my offspring." (Taanit 23a) And they didn't even know that planting trees reduces global warming by absorbing one ton of carbon dioxide over a tree's lifetime.



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We in the Bay Area enjoy one of the most beautiful places on earth. We also enjoy more wealth, resources, and power to make change than most of the people on the planet. As we enjoy the abundance from God's

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world, the Torah requires us to leave the corner of our field for the poor (Lev.19) and to give a tenth of our harvest to the Levite and the stranger. (Deut. 26) In other words, the Torah requires us to think beyond our own needs and to give back from the bounty we receive. We, who have so much, have a special responsibility to consider our impact on God's world and to make changes.

As part of our heshbon hanefesh, the accounting of our souls that we do this time of year, I urge all of us to do an accounting of the energy we are using. There are many resources on the internet for doing an audit of our personal impact on climate change. Check out climatecrisis.net, that's the website that goes along with An Inconvenient Truth, to calculate your personal impact and learn specific ways to reduce it.

The last few generations have created for us a world that is not sustainable, individually or globally. But this is not a message of gloom and doom; teshuva is possible - we can change and return in the direction of that beautiful garden. For example, the ozone layer is already beginning to come back because we realized we were doing damage and changed our ways. Let's celebrate the creation of the world by singing Rav Kook's fourfold song and by remembering that we help God create this world. Now is the time to look at our lives, to make change, and to begin again to create the world that God hopes we and the future generations will live in. *Hayom Harat Olam*. Today the world is born!





Judaism And The Environment

Rabbi Richard Plavin
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Manchester, CT

Twelve hours of bicycle peddling can provide lots of time to think. I mentioned last night my participation in the Hazon bike ride earlier this month, in support of Jewish environmental concerns. To be totally honest, I did not go on the Hazon ride because I am such an environmentalist. I went because it was an exciting challenge and would benefit what was obviously good cause. But it turned out to be so much more. In peddling 110 miles over two days we traveled through breathtaking country, and doing it on a bicycle I could truly appreciate it up close. In those hours, I got to think about some important issues, and I want to share some of that thinking with you this morning.

Is environmentalism a particularly Jewish concern? If anything is a universal issue, isn't it our concern for the planet? Surely, all of us, irrespective of religious persuasion, should be deeply concerned about the survival of planet Earth. Experts have been telling us in no uncertain terms that our physical environment is ailing, if not in a terminal state. Wendell Berry, the author and agronomist, wrote: "Our environmental problems ...are not, at root political; they are cultural...our country is not being destroyed by bad politics; it is being destroyed by a bad way of life." That way of life, which I believe is characterized by hyper-consumerism and unbridled consumption, is shared by us all, Americans of every color, ethnic background and religion. So why should Jews be particularly concerned?

I will answer that question for myself, but I think my answer would apply to any traditional Jew. At my core, it is my Jewish identity more than anything else that has shaped who I am. My values are based on the Jewish tradition. You have seen the same bumper stickers that I have on cars owned by Evangelical Christians. It asks a very direct question: "What would Jesus do?" Ironically, I think Jesus would have done exactly what any traditional Jew would do: look into the Torah and ask "What does God expect of me as a member of His people?" Peddling on those hills in the Berkshires, that was the question I asked myself: What does God have to say about my responsibility toward this beautiful world?

The most applicable Torah text is at the beginning of Genesis. In the first creation story, God says, "Fill the earth and master it." In the second, God takes the man He created, places him in the Garden, and tells him "L'avda - to till it, u'l'shamra - and to tend it." That second verb is the key. Our responsibility is to be *Shomrim*, guardians of this earth. To use the classic rabbinic term, we are *Shutafim b'Maaseh Brayshit* - we are God's partners in the work of Creation. God created the earth; now it is our responsibility to preserve it.



This idea is again addressed in a beautiful, rabbinic legend, a Midrash. The text presents a powerful image: God takes Adam for a tour of the garden, and points out all the flora and fauna and says to him, "Behold My works, how splendid they are. All that I have created, I

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created for your sake.” It continues: “Now listen up - do not ruin or destroy my world. *Sh'im kilkalta, ayn mee sh'taken achrecha* -if you mess it up, there is no one to clean up after you.” (Kohellet Rabba 7:13) The point could not be made more clearly. The agricultural laws of the Torah carry this idea as well. We are not to farm our land into oblivion. Every seventh year the fields are left fallow, to regenerate. Fruit trees cannot be harvested until their fourth year. Even when we harvest our fields, we cannot be overly materialist. The corners of the fields must be left for the poor; forgotten sheaves are for them as well.

Just two weeks ago, in our Torah reading, we studied the concept of *Bal Tashchit* - that wastefulness and destruction are forbidden. The rabbis derived this mitzvah from the Torah commandment that in besieging a city, the army may not destroy fruit trees. They took this much further and prohibited any wanton destruction. For example, the Halacha says that one must not adjust a lamp to burn too quickly, for this would be wasteful of fuel. That prohibition was laid down two thousand years ago, but how difficult is it to recognize that this principal applies to how we set our thermostats and what kind of automobiles we purchase?

Over the centuries, in fact for thousands of years, Jewish philosophers such as Maimonides, Rav Nachman and Rav Kook, Rabbis Shimshon Rafael Hirsch and Abraham Joshua Heschel, taught us about the importance of our relationship to this earth and the fact that God expects us to be stewards for this creation He has loaned us for our benefit.

This is the season for taking stock, for asking ourselves how we measure up to the expectations God may have of us. How are we doing in relation to our responsibility as *shomrim*, guardians, for this good earth? Are we doing our job? Do we recognize that if we allow this earth to fall into ruin, there is no one to set it right after us?

The experts all say we are not doing very well. We are using up this earth and its resources at an appalling rate, and as Americans, we are more responsible than anyone else. The reason is our affluence, a gift we treasure and do not want to give up. But how we use that affluence is the key to whether our children and children's children will have the same opportunity. A Native American proverb conveys this important thought: “Treat the earth well: it was not given to you by your parents, it was loaned to you by your children. We do not inherit the Earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children.”

At the rate we are going, it won't be long before we have exhausted our children's potential inheritance. Something must be done, and soon, but it won't be easy. It will require a radical change in the way we live and work.



If anything characterizes our society, it is consumerism. Manchester used to be known as “The City of Village Charm,” now it is known as the retail capital of eastern CT. It seems to me that this tendency to spend more and more is an important component in our environmental problem, even apart from the fossil fuel we consume in our many trips to the mall. Think of all the things you have purchased in the last few years that now find their home in some landfill. If only there was somehow I could recoup some of the dollars I have thrown away on purchases I at one time thought were phenomenal

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metziahs! Think about the packaging that surrounds those items: the tiny, high-tech gadgets that come in large, hard plastic encasements that require massive effort just to open, and then fill our waste containers and then our landfills. With less than 5% of the world's population, the United States' oil consumption represents about 26% of all oil consumed in the world. Many rabbis have a problem in preaching, in that they don't want to sound "holier than thou." I do not have that problem at all here. I am as guilty as anyone. In an age in which everyone recognizes the importance of physical exercise, and most of us conscientiously engage in it, we drive everywhere, and most often by ourselves in cars that consume far too much fuel. I often contemplate this fact, cruising the lot at the gym looking for a parking spot so I won't have to walk too far to go do my miles on the treadmill.

I do not like to be political in sermons, but I think this problem has important implications for us at the ballot box. We take many factors into account when we choose for whom to cast a vote. If we care about the future of our planet, we must make our ecological concerns an important part of that consideration. We must ask the candidates their position on strip mining and fuel consumption requirements, not to mention tax benefits for big oil companies. We are very concerned with the welfare of Israel, and know full well that her neighbors want her "wiped off the map," to borrow a phrase used by the President of Iran. It is Iran that finances the terrorists who shoot rockets into Israel, and it is primarily the people of the United States who finance Iran - by consuming their oil at such a prodigious rate. We must cut our fuel consumption or face the consequences. Were you aware that next Friday, here in Manchester, there will be a Bike to Work celebration. It is only symbolic because our highways do not have bike lanes, so for most commuters, this is not a practical suggestion, but at least it is a symbolic step in the right direction.

Keep this in mind: the fuels we use to heat our homes and to run our automobiles are only a part of the problem. A kazillion gallons of oil are burned up in the production and transportation of all the stuff we buy. Bottom line, materialism and consumerism are not only spiritual issues but environmental ones as well. To quote another Native American proverb: "Only when the last tree is cut; only when the last river is polluted; only when the last fish is caught; only then will they realize that you cannot eat money."

What kind of rabbi would I be if I did not offer a solution from our tradition? Each year, the institution of Earth Day is marked internationally. Our tradition instituted Earth Day long before it commenced here in 1973. The Jewish people celebrate Earth Day each and every week, as we are doing today, beginning at sundown each Friday. We call it Shabbat. Our beautiful tradition, long before recreational shopping existed, instituted one day a week on which we stop, look and appreciate. Rather than "Stop and Shop" we stop and give thanks.



As I see it, Shabbat is the ultimate environmental mitzvah. Living outside of Israel, none of the agricultural laws of the Torah apply to us. But Shabbat applies equally in Israel and in the Diaspora. The lessons it teaches of appreciating God's creation are vitally significant. Friday night, we begin Shabbat as the sun sets, reminding ourselves that the ultimate master of the universe is the creator, not some corporation which decrees the work day to end according to its schedule.





Some Jews have the misconception that Shabbat is a day on which everything is forbidden. The philosopher and Holocaust survivor Eric Fromm has a wonderful explanation for the forbidden labors of Shabbat. All of them, he says, remind us that it is God who is the Creator, not us. Six days a week, we create. On Shabbat, we set our physical creativity aside and admire the work of the Almighty. Rather than seeing these prohibitions as restrictions, Fromm understands them to be significant theological lessons, leading us to appreciate the gift of nature with which God has entrusted us.

Shabbat observance has so much potential as an environmental mitzvah.

- * If consuming fuel by driving our cars is a problem, doesn't it stand to reason that not driving one day in seven, except perhaps to the synagogue, will make a positive contribution?
- * If buying too much is exhausting the resources of the earth, doesn't it make sense that putting away the wallet and credit cards one day a week is a good thing?
- * If six days a week our consumerism is stoked by advertisements on the TV, marketing calls on the phone, and pop-up ads on our computers, wouldn't being free of all that one day a week be a blessing?

What is particularly nice about this suggestion is that even if I am wrong, and Shabbat observance does nothing at all for the environment, it will be a great blessing to you and your family.

We are exhausting our earth's resources, and we are exhausting ourselves. Let's take this first Shabbat of 5767 to mark a new beginning. May it be a year in which we take more seriously our responsibility to be guardians of this precious blessing we call the earth. As we celebrate the earth's birthday, let's wish it many more. And may it not only be a happy birthday, but a happy new year for us all. AMEN





Judaism And The Environment

Rabbi Gil Steinlauf
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Today is the birthday of the world. That's what we're really commemorating on this Rosh HaShanah. On this day, according to Tradition, "*Baruch she'amar v'hayah ha'olam,*" Blessed is God, who spoke and the world came into being. We Jews have been numbering the world's existence for 5,767 years, but we know that it is vastly older than that. The world has been around for billions of years; that it is a vast and incomprehensible cosmos whose very mysteries deepen our Awe of the Creator, of God.

We wonder at this world we live in, how it is an integral part of cosmic forces that at once terrify us, bewilder us, and stun us with their unfathomable beauty and power. How all the great oceans and seas and mountains and forests attest to the wonder of this Creation that we are all a part of.

This beautiful planet is, as the Torah says, *Tov Me'od*, it is very good. It is really a radical idea, that this world is *Tov Me'od*, very good—that in its essence, this universe is NOT neutral, but Good! There is a moral structure in Nature itself that we are here to uphold!

On Rosh HaShanah, we consider our place in Creation, our impact on that inherent goodness. In the first chapter of the book of Genesis, we learn that we have a very specific role in this world: it says that God created Man and Woman, and said to them: "*Pru urvu umil'u et haretz v'kivshuha,*" Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it, "*Urdu bidgat hayam uv'of haShamayim, uvchal chaya haromeset al ha'aretz,*" And rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over all the animals that roam the earth. And so we have great power over this world. We rule over this planet that God brought into being.

In the second chapter of Genesis, however, we get a very different description of our role in the world: it says that when God created humankind in the Garden of Eden, we were placed there "*l'ovdah uleshomrah,*" to work the land and to protect it. In this second chapter of Creation, we are not given sweeping authority. We simply are God's caretakers of a world that doesn't belong to us, it belongs to God.

So which description is correct? Are we here to *Kivshuha*, to conquer and subdue the land and all its creatures, or are we here *l'ovdah uleshomrah*, to tend and till it faithfully? It seems to me that this is a critically important question for us all to ponder in this day and age, this era of environmental crisis, on this day of appreciating our place in a Creation that seems all too threatened with all kinds of ecological devastations.



It seems that we are here both to subdue the land, to use it for our needs, but also to protect and guard it. But





how can we possibly do both those things at the same time? The answer comes to us not from Genesis, but from the 20th chapter of the book of Deuteronomy. In that chapter, God instructs us that when a time of war comes around, and we besiege a city and need to use a tree as a battering ram, we may NOT use a fruit-bearing tree, only a non-fruit-bearing tree. What is the difference between these kinds of trees?

The great medieval sage Moses Maimonides explains, that when we chop down a fruit tree, then the fruit is needlessly destroyed. Only when a fruit tree potentially harms another tree may it be destroyed. Thus, the rabbis of the later generations have come to teach us the meaning of these two seemingly contradictory teachings of the book of Genesis: We can *kivshuha*, we can make USE of this world for our needs; but we must also work to protect this world and NEVER NEEDLESSLY make use of the natural resources of this world.

The rabbis derived a very specific name for the wasteful misuse of this world. They called it the negative mitzvah of *Bal Taschit*, meaning, “thou shalt not destroy.” We must never needlessly destroy this precious, miraculous work of Creation. We do indeed have power to rule over the world and all its creatures, but we must do it with the greatest of care and awe, always respecting nature; always practicing what the rabbis called *Tza’ar ba’alei chayim*, taking care never to bring needless suffering to any kind of animal or creature.

Maimonides further explains that when the Torah commanded our ancestors to let the land of Israel lie fallow every seven years, this teaching was there to teach us how to preserve the earth and its natural health and fertility. The Talmud even tells us that when a tree was sick, the scholars of old were instructed to pray for the health of the tree!

And then there is the moving and beautiful Midrash, or rabbinic tale, about the emperor of Rome who finds an old Jewish man planting a fruit tree by the side of the road. The Roman emperor says to him: “Old man, what are you doing?” “I am planting fruit trees,” replies the old man. “*B’chayecha*, By your life, you must be a fool, old man,” says the emperor, “I hate to break it to you, but you’re not likely to make it to see these trees bear any fruit.” “Indeed, I may not,” replied the old Jewish man; “but I do not plant these trees just for myself; I plant them that someday my children and their children after them might eat of them and enjoy them.”

In every way, our tradition, for thousands of years has taught us that our respect for Creation not only preserves the world for ourselves, but for all the generations that follow us.

Of course, in our complicated world, adhering to these teachings can get very tricky, but the same respect for the environment is always emphasized no matter what. How many Jewish people today realize that whenever we build a house, we must ensure that when we build that house, it is Jewish law that we must do the absolute minimum damage possible to the ecosystem that house is built on? Or, according to the Talmud and the Shulchan Aruch, one of the most important sources of Jewish law, if a business does ecological damage to a city it is in, that business must leave that city before it does any more damage? Businesses are forbidden by Jewish law to pollute the air. Furthermore, the Shulchan Aruch teaches us that anyone who pollutes the water must personally pay for the damage he or she has caused.





In every corner of our Jewish tradition, we are enjoined to remember that this world is indeed *Tov Me'od*, very good, and while we can make use of the gift of this world, we must preserve that goodness with all our strength. We can all be so proud of our Jewish tradition because it has never wavered from a wise understanding about the preciousness of our environment.

So on this day, Rosh HaShanah, as we take stock of ourselves and of our environment, we have to ask ourselves, what has gone wrong?

The very structure of our modern society pollutes the oceans and rivers, decimates the rainforests, poisons the air, and melts the glaciers, and today, we are collecting the data about the results of our actions; we are now to weigh the evidence—and that evidence is mountainous: despite Judaism's teachings, our human race has not understood how powerful we have been over the world: we have been needlessly making use of Creation, destroying this world and ourselves in the process. Our minds, and now our hearts, are beginning to understand the teaching of the Torah: *Midah Keneget Midah*: Measure for Measure: all the actions that we put out into the universe return to us in kind: the mindless and destructive actions of humanity eventually comes back to haunt us. We and our children pay the price of our parents' and grandparents' mistakes in our environment.

The problem that we have to face today is that no matter how wise and beautiful the teachings of Creation are in Judaism, it hasn't been enough to instill sufficient wisdom in humankind as a whole. We can and must learn and follow Judaism's respect for nature, but we're now living in an era where our very 'rule' over nature is slipping because our environment is becoming ever-more surely inhospitable to the multiple forms of life as we now know it; and our ability to work the land and protect it is equally slipping because the damage we have already done threatens to be too great. We need nothing short of a new paradigm to live by in this world we have made for ourselves, this world of global warming and holes in the ozone layer, of melting ice-caps and rising sea-levels. And, thank God, there is an answer even for this world of today. When we look even deeper into our Jewish tradition, there is a wisdom and path to follow that can heal this very broken world.

Two Hundred years ago, there was an extraordinary rabbi named Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav. His teachings were so powerful and life-altering that he still has devoted followers around the world to this day. In so many ways, he defied the stereotype of a Chasidic rabbi of 200 years ago. When you think of such a learned rabbi, what do you picture: a rabbi in a Yeshiva, in a dark room with lots of books? This was not Rabbi Nahman. One of his disciples described him this way: "Our rabbi, of blessed memory, even though he had a separate room in the village where he worked by himself, would nonetheless usually go over the fields into the woods; and he would seclude himself there. Once I went with him...[walking] around the fields and the mountains. He stretched his hand toward the fields and mountains and said to me: 'On all these fields and mountains which you see around the town...I have walked several times.'" Rabbi Nahman's heart was in the open air; in the forests and in the hills and meadows. His teachings are filled with extraordinary insights, notions of Torah learned not just from books but from nature. He once said, "When a man prays in the field then all the grasses come to help him in prayer and give him force in it." He also said, "It is





better to be in solitude outside town, in a place where there are [plants], because these cause the heart to awaken.”

Such teachings about prayer we don't normally find in our prayerbooks. But what Rabbi Nahman taught us is vital, and fundamental to Judaism, and was always there. It's just that we haven't emphasized it enough; and now, more than ever in our history, we must teach his kind of wisdom – a Jewish wisdom derived from nature and experience, not JUST from study.

Maybe over the past few centuries, our people have become disconnected from a Judaism of nature, the kind of Judaism that we see in the ancient Psalms, a Judaism that wonders at God's creation in the forces of the natural world. As Psalm 121 says, “*Esah Einay El HeHarim Meayin Yavo Ezri*,” I turn my eyes to the mountains, from where comes my help.” Perhaps in the years in cities and shtetls, many of us feared that searching for God in nature too closely resembled pagan worship. But Rabbi Nahman did not have this fear. He was ahead of his time. He bravely reminded the people of his day that our environment is one of the most direct places to find depth of prayer and to experience the divine.

R. Nahman lived his life always keeping one idea at the forefront of his consciousness: “*Melo Kol Ha'Aretz Kevodo*.” The whole Earth is filled with God's Glory. Perhaps you recognize those words. They are originally the words of the prophet Isaiah. We say them whenever we daven the Kedushah, and go three times up on our toes: Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh, Adonai Tzeva'ot, Melo Kol Ha'Aretz Kevodo: Holy, Holy, Holy is God, the master of all forces of Nature: the whole Earth is Filled with God's glory.

If we take a moment to look deeply into those words, we can draw out a radical teaching: The word “*kevodo*,” God's glory, actually means God's absolute, undiluted Presence. The whole world is FILLED with Kevodo, with God's absolute, undiluted Presence. What if you and I took a lesson from Rabbi Nahman, and went by ourselves on a walk into the forests and hills and fields? What if, as we walked and felt the solidness of the Earth beneath our feet, as we felt the warmth of the sun on our skin, as we felt the breeze, and touched the trees and plants around us—what if, as we did this—we kept only One thought in our minds: *Melo Kol Ha'Aretz Kevodo*: Everything, without exception, is filled with, is an expression of the Absolute, Undiluted Presence of God, Whom Rabbi Nahman called *Ribono Shel Olam*—the master of the world? It's all, in every moment, a manifestation of the Master of all the Creation. Everything....

That would be quite a walk, wouldn't it? On such a walk, our every step, our every glance, our every breath, our every touch, every sound that we hear is a prayer. Indeed, then all the grasses would come to help us in prayer and give us force in that prayer. Rabbi Nahman showed us, through this simple lesson in Mindful aware-

ness of the Earth, the deepest secret of the Jewish notion of Creation: and that is, Creation isn't a historical event. It's happening right now, and we can all open up to it and feel it with every fiber of our being.

Rabbi Nahman's teaching comes directly out of Kabbalah, and it's a teaching of the deepest kind of interconnectedness: everything that we experience in this world is like a wave on the One Ocean: every galaxy and star, every





planet, every animal, every cloud, every flower, every blade of grass: it is all an emanation from the One *Ribono Shel Olam*, the One Divine Presence... *Melo Kol Ha'Aretz Kevodo*: the whole Earth is filled with God's glory, God's absolute, undiluted Presence.

And that blade of grass is not in any way really separate from you or me: we both are comprised of the same elements, the same sun, the same earth, the same wind, and the same clouds. Yes, we each have separate existences, but if we get too fixated on our separateness instead of our interconnectedness, we lose our grip on ultimate reality. If the wave gets too fixed on its separate existence, it can forget that it is truly the Ocean.

And just as we say every morning and every evening: *Shema Yisrael*: Pay attention, O Israel: *Adonai Eloheinu*: the One Being is the Divinity in all the forms of the world; *Adonai Echad*: and that Being is Only One.

It's a magnificent teaching, and it is literally at the heart of Judaism. Implicit in the very words of the Shema is the notion that we should never be so arrogant as to think that we are completely unique and separate from anything else in the world; neither should we be too humble and think that we cannot affect the whole universe through our will. For within our very being is the whole universe, and *Kevodo*, the absolute, undiluted Presence of God that can work in the world through our actions.

So the teachings of Rabbi Nahman and of Kabbalah call for a paradigm shift from the standard reading of Creation. In essence, these teachings tell us that we aren't just the rulers over the creatures of the earth, we're not just the earth's caretakers, but rather we are the Universe; every corner of creation is within us. When we look deep enough into our own hearts, we'll find God right there, creating the universe in every moment, in every breath. Deep within our own hearts is all the potential for all the *Tikkun Olam*—the healing that this world needs.

In this day and age, if, indeed, we are to be an *Or LaGoyim*, a light to the world, then we must take our Judaism to a deeper level: our Torah is not just an academic teaching about our place in the world; it's a call to feel the beauty and the suffering of the world as a basic element of our religious experience. We must feel the pathos of our planet as our own deepest experience and teach the world the wisdom that to take the Earth in vain is to take the name of God in vain. That if we pollute the air, we are in reality polluting our very souls: because our souls are called *Nishmat Kol Chai*, the breath of all life. To decimate the soil is to decimate our own bodies, for we are *bnei Adam*, the children of Adam, whose name is from *Adamah*, meaning Earth itself. To hurt the trees of the forest, we are in fact desecrating our Torah, for the Torah is called *Etz Chayim*, the true Tree of Life.



This is the moment when we need to step forward as Jews in the world and proclaim the Truth of *Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad* – that until humankind wakes up and sees how we and everything are all One, there is no hope for this world. This, of course, is no small task. I believe that now is the time for our very *Halakhah*, for our Jewish law to advance and progress to meet the changing needs of this ailing and globalizing world. We cannot just uphold a Judaism that glorifies an ancient past; but we must put forward a Judaism that gives us meaningful actions to address the present and future.





We have a magnificent system called Kashrut: Our dietary laws of separating milk and meat; of slaughtering procedures that emphasize kindness to animals. But today we live in a world that has invented factory farming that is destroying the environment and creating unprecedented harsh treatment and inhumane conditions for animals. This factory farming is the norm in most non-Kosher meat and poultry production, but this is even happening in Kosher facilities as well: if we are to take Kashrut seriously then we must advance what is known as “Eco-Kashrut,” a Kashrut for the new era: a Kashrut that demands that the environment and *tza’ar ba’alei chayim*, the compassionate treatment of animals, be a fundamental consideration of considering something Kosher, or fit for Jewish consumption.

Kashrut is only one example of the kinds of actions we need to start taking in the world as Jews. Our Halakhic system has always been evolving, and it must continue. We must create an ethics of environmentalism in our religious and personal practice that constantly teaches us that it is a mitzvah not just to avoid hurting the earth, but to actively support all causes and institutions that revere the soil, the air, and the water on the Earth.

I am asking something extraordinary of all of us in this community: I am asking us to consider adopting a new way of relating to our Judaism: To see Judaism as a religion that evolves – as the whole universe and the world itself evolves. We must move toward a Judaism of Interconnectedness, a Torah of Interbeing. A Judaism based on wisdom that has been around for centuries, but has gotten lost, particularly in the last century. And the world needs to hear this Torah of Everything-In-the-Oneness so very badly.

And that is why this year, we will be taking the lead in the Jewish world once again by becoming a Green Congregation. Our Board of Directors has voted on our officially becoming a partner congregation in the Sustainable Sanctuaries Program of an organization known as GreenFaith. The first program of its kind in the country, Sustainable Sanctuaries will help our congregation model environmentally sustainable behavior to the community, and we will become a center of religious-environmental activism.

Temple Israel will adopt environmentalist projects for the next 18 – 24 months: we have already done an energy-usage inventory on our congregation and have taken meaningful steps to reduce our energy waste significantly in the functioning of this building. We will be looking into the fiscally sound use of wind, solar and other sustainable energy in our facilities, and we will work on waste reduction and more efficient recycling, as well as replacing the use of toxic cleaning and other chemicals with environmentally sound ones. We have already made the commitment to have my house on Woodbine Court purchase its power from the new windmills that were recently put up in Atlantic City. These projects will demonstrate to us and to the wider community not only that we care, but that every household can do something as well.



We will continue to learn and study about our Jewish spiritual relationship to our world. The theme of our adult education program this year is Jewish Healing. And as with all things, to heal ourselves is to heal the entire world. Please come to Temple Israel on October 30th, as we will be having a special screening of the new documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth*, followed by a discussion. .



And finally, we will work on taking substantive action in our *Tikkun Olam*, or heal the world committee, to pool our resources and strength to work on some real causes of environmental justice. We will be organizing environmental health tours of local regions for our Temple Israel religious school Children and for Adults; we are looking into advocating for emissions reductions from diesel and other exhausts from our chocked roadways: Every act of healing we learn about and perform can in a very real way affect the entire world, because each of us is a world unto ourselves.

We, as a Jewish community, must be motivated by our Judaism, and take action to heal the whole world. According to the Rainforest Action Network, “more than an acre-and-a-half is lost every second of every day (that’s an area the size of two football fields a second!). At that rate, we lose an area more than twice the size of Florida every year, and if present rates of destruction continue, half our remaining rainforests will be gone by the year 2025, and by 2060 there will be no rainforests remaining on the earth at all. Many scientists call the rainforests, the Lungs of the Earth. To destroy the rainforest is, in a very real sense in Judaism, to destroy our own lungs in our own bodies, and in the bodies of our children.

We all know the famous quote from the Talmud: “To save a life is to save the whole world.” Hopefully we understand that quote more deeply today. And the converse of that quote is equally true as well: To save the whole world, is to save each and every life—my life, your life, our children’s lives. Each day is a new chance, a new opportunity to heal this broken world.

And nothing is too small or insignificant in that process of saving each other in the world. Each time we turn off the water when we brush our teeth, we conserve the precious water of our planet, and we are in truth hydrating our own bodies and giving drink to our children. Each time we turn off our lights when we’re not using them, when we take care not to let our cars idle when we’re waiting in the car, each time we take care to recycle, we are in truth nurturing our loved ones, because our every small saving act is an act of Creation itself.

I hope you will take a look at the Greenfaith pledge card on your seat. I would like to ask each and every one of you to take that card home, and after Rosh HaShanah, decide which boxes you would like to check off—even if it’s only one box. Please then bring it with you to shul on Yom Kippur, together with your food pantry donation. Our Tikkun Olam committee will tally up the results and print them in Temple Talk and we can all see and celebrate how we all have begun to making a difference in this One World, this One Creation of which we are all a part.

We say that God is *ham’chadesh b’tuvo bchol yom maaseh bereshit*: that God in God’s goodness, good actions renews Creation each and every day, each and every moment. With each and every choice we make, a whole new life, a whole new universe is created.



Hayom Harat Olam: Today is the birthday of the world. Today, right now, we can create the universe anew together with God because that power is in each of our hearts, it lies in the potential strength of each and every one of us. All it takes is for us to raise our awareness to *Melo Kol HaAretz Kevodo*: to see that each of us inter-exists together with every creature, every mountain, every sea, and every flower. We can





create the world anew when we resolve to teach this Truth through our words, through our choices, through our actions to *Kol Yoshvei Teivel*: to all the inhabitants of this One world we share.

May this new world that we create on this day be one of health and joy, of renewal and blessing for us and for our children, for generations to come. Amen.





An Unetaneh Tokef For The Earth

Rabbi David Greenspoon
Congregation Knesset Israel
Pittsfield, MA

On Rosh HaShanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed:

How many shall leave this world, and how many shall be born into it;

Who shall live and who shall die, who shall live out the limit of his days, and who shall not?

Who shall perish by the exhaust of industrial waste, and who shall die by waters polluted beyond their ability to sustain life?

Who shall die by the sword of corporations who decimate entire ecosystems, and who by the beast of conspicuous consumption that motivates the corporations to their greed?

Who shall die by hunger simply because locally there is no arable land due to global warming, and who by thirst as private companies have bought the rights to their public water sources?

Who shall die by earthquakes because they have blithely built their homes on fault lines, and who by plague because public health in the developing world is not our concern?

Who shall die strangled by leaking storehouses of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons, and who shall die having been stonewalled by governments unresponsive to their basic life needs?

Who shall rest with a clean conscious as their pillow. having made their best efforts to make a difference in the earth's ecological health, and who shall wander restlessly knowing that they failed to lift their voices and hands to make a difference for the environment at all?

Who shall be at peace, living in harmony with the world, and who shall be tormented by a world that teeters dangerously on the brink of exterminating itself?



Who shall be poor, “dis-eased” in body, mind, and spirit, and who will be enriched by a life that recognizes the blessings it has?

Who shall be humbled when the next generations asks what they did to protect their earth, and who shall be exalted for having helped sustain her?

On Rosh HaShanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed.