

Becoming *Shomrei Adamah*

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5768

Our girl is having a birthday. I can't believe how the time has flown! Every day she looks a little different, behaves in a slightly new manner. She's so precious. She brings a smile to the face of everyone who stops to look at her, and at the risk of sounding overly proud, she really is beautiful. Awe-inspiring, even. And while, as a very biased daddy, this description might befit our just-turned-one-year-old daughter, Mia, she is not the one I just described, and hers is not the birthday we celebrate this evening. Rather, on this sacred day of Rosh Hashanah, we gather to rejoice in the birthday of our earth.

Tomorrow morning, following each sounding of the shofar – in the moment our souls are reawakened by those blasts – we will read the words, "*Harei Harat Olam*" – This is the day of the world's birth.

In our family, in honor of our daughter's first birthday, a photo album was compiled - a retrospective on her first year of life. So too on Rosh Hashanah, the anniversary of creation, we, as Jews, are called upon to assess the state of our world, to marvel at how far she's come, to consider how she has fared in the years gone by, and to wonder about what her future may hold. On this sacred occasion, we turn the pages of our earthly album and consider some of the most important notes written by our own Jewish tradition.

The first pictures in this album are sketched by the opening verses of our Torah, Chapter 1: "God blessed [the humans] and said to them, 'Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it, [subdue it, conquer it.]'"¹ Nachmanides, one of our great Medieval Torah commentators, clarifies the scope of our authority in his response to this verse. He writes, "God gave [humans] power and dominion over the earth to do as they wish with the cattle, the reptiles, and all that crawl in the dust, and to build, *and to pluck up that which is planted* (Ecclesiastes 3:2), and to dig copper from the hills..." By the 13th century, even mining the earth for precious materials

¹ Genesis 1:28

was seen as *kosher* by Jewish standards. It would seem that the earth belongs to humans to use as we wish for our benefit.

As with most issues, however, the Torah does not speak with just one voice on this matter, and so the scrapbook continues. The very next chapter tells us, that “God took the [first human] and placed him in the garden of Eden, *le’ovda u’leshomra*, to till it and to tend to it.”² *Le’ovda* – to work the land. This is the same Hebrew root as *Avodah*, “sacred worship.” According to this understanding, to till the land is to be in reverent awe of it, not to idolize it certainly, but rather to stand in covenantal relationship with the earth as one would with God. *U’leshomra* – We are supposed to tend to the land, to guard it, to protect it from harm...this is the same Hebrew root found in our people’s most ancient blessing... *Y’varechecha Adonai V’Yishmerecha*...May God Bless You and Keep You...Tend To You...Care for You. From what does our land need protecting? From the first half of the verse...from our working of it.

One might ask, then, are we allowed to grow on the land? Of course, but the Torah reminds us that every seven years we must let our fields lie fallow that they not be overtaxed and eventually cease giving forth their gifts.³ *Le’ovda U’leshomra* – to till and to tend. Are we permitted to extract valuable minerals and natural resources from the earth for our benefit? Our Rabbis tell us that we are, but not without an eye to sustainability, to our earth’s capacity, or lack thereof, to replenish those reserves. *Le’ovda U’leshomra* – to work and to guard. May we harvest her trees in order to make the paper used in our sacred books like our Torah commentaries, or our prayerbooks, or, of course, the 7th Harry Potter? We are taught that, yes, we can fell trees for such purposes, but we must also replenish the forests that are decimated by those acts, and we cannot be blind to the other creatures impacted when we remove their natural habitat. *Le’ovda U’leshomra* – to cultivate and to protect.

As Jews, Torah seems to guide us towards a middle ground. The world is ours to master, but it is not ours. We must remember, first and foremost, that the classical Jewish outlook on our planet is a theocentric, not an anthropocentric, one. The earth is God’s...we get to borrow it for the time that we’re here. And as is the case with all tenants, the Landlord would

² Genesis 2:15

³ Leviticus 25:4

insist that we not trash the place before our lease is up. We are “stewards” of the land, neither subservient to nature’s whim, nor the owners of that which we oversee. We have responsibilities to *Avenu Malkeinu*, Our Concerned Parent on high, to do our part to care for Mother Earth.

I recognize that God-centered worldviews may not be for everyone. And yet, even if one were to remove God from this equation, it is still possible to maintain a viewpoint that, when we talk about matters of regional and global environmental import, we are talking about questions that are of ultimate consequence, matters which transcend us and demand our attention. We are, thus, what our tradition would call “*shomrei adamah*,” guardians of the land which has been entrusted to us by nature, by the generations that preceded us, or by God.

So what does that role demand of us this year, in 5768? While there are many environmental concerns worth discussing, as *shomrei adamah*, I believe that our attention this year must certainly be directed to the subject of global climate change in our world. Is our planet, in fact, getting warmer? As one might expect, there is not one solitary voice on this matter, but there is a vast and growing consensus of scientific observation and opinion that our planet is indeed heating up. Eleven of the twelve warmest years on record, in fact, have occurred within the last twelve years,⁴ and this is a reality that we cannot ignore.

One might, then, naturally ask: “Is this warming caused by, or at least exacerbated by, human activity?” Again, a seemingly ever-increasing number of experts believe that the answer is “yes.” In their estimation, the most significant contributor to this process is the carbon dioxide that is produced when we burn fossil fuels...to create electricity, to manufacture products, to heat our homes, and most of all, to power our vehicles.⁵ The most recent statement of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reports that the likelihood is “90...to 99 percent that emissions of heat-trapping gases like carbon dioxide, spewed from tailpipes and

⁴ On the Climate Change Beat, Doubt Gives Way to Certainty, William K. Stevens, NY Times, 2/6/07

⁵ The U.S. alone emits five **billion**, eight hundred and seventy-seven **million** metric tons of carbon dioxide each year. The White House’s United States Climate Action Report, released in March, estimates that, on our present course, our carbon output will increase by 11% in the decade from 2002 to 2012. That same report “contains sections describing growing risks to water supplies, coasts and ecosystems around the United States.” - U.S. Predicting Steady Increase for Emissions, Andrew Revkin, NY Times, 3/3/07

smokestacks, [a]re the dominant cause of the observed warming of the last 50 years.”⁶

There is great debate in the scientific community, however, about what these trends will mean for us. Many are skeptical, for example, that the recent increase in the intensity of tropical storms is fueled by global warming.⁷

A more dramatic signal of danger observed by scientists in recent studies is the melting of polar ice which is progressing at a rate three times greater than originally predicted.⁸ By this estimate, sea levels across the globe will be rising more rapidly than anticipated. This trend has a potentially devastating impact not only on the animals which inhabit affected areas, but eventually on the millions of people who dwell along coastland regions throughout the world. How fast will the water rise? We’re not sure, but much research leads us to believe that the trends are cause for concern.

Other serious issues are also at stake: How many species of insects and animals risk extinction if the warming continues? According to Jewish tradition all creatures, no matter how small or insignificant they may seem, contribute something to our world.⁹ Our great sage, Maimonides, built upon this teaching when he wrote that “God’s creatures do not exist for the sake of man’s existence. Rather, all beings are intended to exist for their own sake.”¹⁰ Given these Jewish lenses through which we view the world, how can we ignore the possibility that we may be contributing to the extinction of dozens, if not hundreds of species?

All of this, by the way, says nothing of the potential human costs of these climatological trends. How many millions of dollars in relief will it cost if the predicted weather extremes, droughts, and floods, shift from prediction to certainty? Our High Holy Day prayerbook calls upon us to consider aloud on these sacred days: Who shall live and who shall die? Who shall perish by fire and who by water? Who by hunger and who by thirst? For us, these are not metaphorical musings.

⁶ Stevens

⁷ Hurricanes and Hot Air, William M. Gray, Wall Street Journal, 7/26/07 (This trend may, in fact, be caused simply by changes in the Atlantic’s currents.)

⁸ Arctic sea ice decline: Faster than forecast, Stroeve, Holland, Meier, Scambos, and Serreze, in *Geophysical Research Letters*, Vol. 34, May, 2007

⁹ *Midrash Bereshit Rabbah 10:7*

¹⁰ *Moreh Nevuchim*, Chapter 8

Rabbi Daniel Swartz asks, “Is the fact that our behavior may be hazardous to the environment sufficient to make changing that behavior a moral imperative?”¹¹ Talmudist, Rabbi Jacob Ettinger, responds like any good Jew...with more queries. He suggests that, in such a situation, we ought to ask ourselves three questions, “How [undesirable is the potential outcome]? How reversible are the damages if they do occur? And, how likely is it, in the view of the best experts, that this potential hazard will come to pass?”¹² On all these counts, the current stakes appear high. We can’t know with absolute certainty how our ever-increasing emissions of greenhouse gases will impact our planet, but when measured along Rabbi Ettinger’s metrics, I believe that this matter deserves our attention and our action. Rabbi Ettinger would call this a moral imperative, and so should we.

As *shomrei adamah*, as protectors of the earth, and as concerned global citizens, we need to respond to that call, and the work ahead is daunting, to be sure. Indeed some are even saying that, at this point, there is actually very little that we can do to make a difference.

Should we simply throw up our hands and surrender to what may or may not be inevitable? 2,000 years ago, the great Rabbi Tarfon also faced an unknown future. The Temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed and the fate of Judaism and the Jewish people was in serious doubt. Confronting this uncertain future and all that it meant, Rabbi Tarfon taught: “it is not incumbent upon us to complete all of the work at hand, but,” he said, “we’re not free to walk away from the task either.”¹³ When it comes to facing our environmental future our tradition is clear: we need to enter into this conversation, and we need to act now.

As a temple family, we are beginning to take such steps. One person in our community, Michael Bailit, is convening members of our congregation to discuss ways in which Temple Beth Shalom can ensure that this sanctuary isn’t the only “green” room in the building. We can start by shutting off the air conditioning right now. Well, maybe not right now, but we can be a little bit more diligent about not heating and cooling rooms in our temple building when nobody is using them. For thousands of years,

¹¹ “Jews, Jewish Texts, and Nature: A Brief History,” Rabbi Daniel Swartz

¹² Ibid.

¹³ *Mishnah Avot 2:16*

Jews have held dear the value known in Hebrew as *Bal Tashchit*...roughly translated... “don’t waste anything that is potentially useful.” This deeply held sentiment, by the way, is the reason why leftovers can survive for multiple generations in a Jewish refrigerator. More germane to our discussion is the idea that we shouldn’t discard that which might be reused. Don’t throw away that which could be recycled and made functional once again. And one we’re often guilty of here, don’t print something on 1,000 separate pieces of paper, unless it’s absolutely necessary.

In the coming year our friends from First Parish will be sharing our sanctuary as their sacred space is undergoing complete renovation. Did you know that they intend to add solar panels to their building as part of that project? They are doing this because they understand that this will not only decrease their building’s carbon footprint on our atmosphere, but it will also save them money on electricity over the long haul. Perhaps we can learn by their example.

Indeed, as we know, this ethical environmental challenge extends beyond these walls and into our homes as well. As *shomrei adamah*, we know that there are steps, both large and small, that can be taken to improve our planet’s health. Replacing halogen or incandescent bulbs with the new Compact Fluorescent Lightbulbs is a fairly easy start, as is shutting down our computers at night, and, when possible, purchasing energy-saving appliances and programming our thermostats for maximum efficiency.

Yet, whether we want to admit it or not, our families’ biggest contributors to this problem are probably parked in our garages and driveways. Yes, over the course of an automobile’s lifetime, it really does matter whether it gets 15, or 30, or 60 miles to the gallon, and in America, our cars tend towards the very low end of that spectrum.

Our president has diagnosed us as “addicted to oil,”¹⁴ and he is no doubt correct. I find this reality, perhaps, the most alarming that I’ve discussed this evening. Because even if I don’t buy ANY of the global warming talk (and I do), and even if I couldn’t care less about the environment, our air quality, the animals, and the people at stake, this truth I hold to be self-evident: the oil is going to run out. At the earliest, scientists estimate that process could begin in the next 5-10 years. At the outside, a radical

¹⁴ State of the Union, 2006

decrease in availability, if not a total depletion of reserves, is only a generation or so away.¹⁵ When that happens, we had better have a combination of viable energy alternatives in place or we'll be making sacrifices that far exceed \$3.00 a gallon at the pump. Whether motivated by pragmatism, fiscal responsibility, environmental concern, or one's moral conscience, we have very good reasons to increase our energy efficiency and to begin a rapid move away from fossil fuels. That is why, in addition to striving for moderation in our own consumption, we must also raise our voices in the public square and demand that the politicians for whom we vote, and the corporations in which we invest, have the planet's best long term interests at the top of their agendas. *Le'ovda u'Leshomra* – to work the land responsibly – to care for our earth most faithfully.

The Talmud tells of Honi, an elderly man who set about planting a carob tree. A passerby witnessed his efforts and stopped to inquire, "How long will it take this tree to produce its fruits?" "Seventy years," answered Honi. "Do you really think you'll live to see the results of your work?" asked the passerby. "No," Honi replied, "but I found trees filled with carobs when I entered this world. My grandparents planted those for me. So I do the same for the generations to come."¹⁶ We involve ourselves in this discussion, and we act in consonance with our tradition's values, for my Mia's sake, for the sake of your children, and their children, and their grandchildren.

As we usher in this new year, let's commit ourselves to leaving a world for our descendants that is at least as sweet, as green, and as life-sustaining as the one into which we were born. I can think of no more valuable inheritance that we can leave them, nor a better birthday gift for our planet in this new year.

¹⁵ Comments of Dr. David Goodstein, Professor of Physics and Applied Physics at Caltech, at the "Skeptics Society Distinguished Lecture Series," June 2, 2006

¹⁶ *Bavli Ta'anit 23a*