

Rosh Hashanah Day 2 5780

Climate Change on the Birthday of the World

Good morning, shanah tovah. As I've been getting to know you, many people have asked me why I was inspired to become a rabbi. I was raised in a community that emphasized the role of human beings as partners with God. The Book of Genesis tells us that God made Adam and Even with a purpose, placing them in the Garden of Eden “to till it and tend it.” Then God paraded every living creature before Adam and Even in order that they might give each animal a name. Through these acts, Adam and Eve became God’s partners in caring for creation. As a child I was taught that whatever we do, as doctors or teachers or scientists or parents, our actions ought to be informed by the knowledge that we are responsible for taking care of the world alongside our original creator. This message resonated with me and motivated me to pursue the rabbinate as a way of continuing this profound work. We each have unique talents and passions to bring to this mission, and our Jewish values, texts, and traditions can guide us in focusing those talents on the ultimate goal of helping God care for creation.

When I refer to creation, I do not mean to limit our conversation to the seven-day long project described in the first chapters of Genesis. Rather, I mean to include both that event and the ongoing evolution of and care for our planet. The Hasidic Master Meshulam Feibush writes that each year, on the occasion of the High Holy Days, the light of creation is stirred anew.¹ This reminds us that creation is a miracle which continues to unfold each and every day if we let it. Miracles are powerful, but they can still be overpowered by destructive forces.

¹ Meshullam Feibush, YDE 53

At the end of the Torah, God describes all the miracles the Israelites will experience as they enter and inhabit the Land of Israel, but warns that these miracles will cease if they do not behave as instructed. These warnings are so important that one of them even made it into our daily liturgy as the second paragraph of shema. This paragraph is theologically challenging because it suggests a direct relationship between our actions and our collective fate, and implies that disasters like drought and famine are punishments from God. This idea was, in fact, so difficult for ancient rabbis that they adopted the custom of saying this paragraph in a whisper, even when it is read directly from the Torah as part of the weekly parsha.

Certainly, we know that disaster can strike anyone of any moral caliber. However, the context of this particular paragraph sheds a bit more light on its meaning. The warning that God will close the sky if we do not follow the commandments comes shortly after a set of commandments about how to take care of the Land. As the Israelites prepared to enter the Land of Israel and establish their own government for the first time, God warned them to treat one another fairly, to practice kindness to animals, and to be conscious of the seven-year cycle of land usage. The idea that God might close the sky is not just a threat, it is a practical warning that if we do not take care of the Land, it will eventually be unable to take care of us.

It is our responsibility as the descendants of these intrepid pioneers to continue writing the story of our tradition and our planet. But I fear we are bringing that story to a close too soon. I am growing more and more fearful that instead of caring for our planet, human activity has begun to cause what environmental activist Bill McKibben calls “Genesis in reverse,”

the extinction of thousands of plants and animals and the destruction of our once thriving habitat.²

More and more people are arriving at the harsh realization that our planet is in dire straits. Ocean levels are rising, and at the same time so is the population and the demand for food. We use about 10 calories of fossil fuel energy to make just one calorie of food for human consumers. That means that when we eat an apple with a nutritional value of 100 calories, it has taken 1,000 calories to plant, water, fertilize, pick, and transport that apple to your hands. Not because it's necessary for the apple's existence, but because that's the system of agriculture we have created to get apples from trees to people. And that's just produce! Our processed food costs even more. As the population of the world surpasses 7 billion people, we cannot sustain that kind of energy drain. The earth does not have 1,000 calories of energy to contribute each time someone wants an apple!

Part of the way our current system became so wasteful is through underappreciation and underutilization of the resources that are available to us. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel may not have been thinking of Climate Change in particular, but he was absolutely correct when he predicted that "Mankind will not perish for want of information, but only for want of appreciation."³ We simply stop at the most convenient option, and we need to start looking further. Again, we return to the concept of partnership. The natural world is not here merely for our enjoyment and consumption. Nor do we need to sacrifice our entire well being for the sake of the planet. We are here "to till and to tend," and when we work together, mindfully, we can engage in some pretty amazing endeavors that are good

² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u1Uu_J61mWQ

³ Heschel, God in search of Man p. 46

for both us and the planet. I recently listened to a podcast that calculated the monetary value of bats. This report investigated a cotton farm in Texas that chose to foster a flock of bats in place of spraying pesticides for an entire growing season. The report concluded that the farmer would have had to spray hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of pesticides over the course of the growing season to eradicate the same number of bugs that the bats ate for free and without putting poisonous chemicals into the surrounding air and water.⁴

I know that not everything will be a win-win like this, but there are more of these opportunities than we might realize. And yet we often take these resources for granted, seeking out what is most expedient or the best short-term financial decision without looking into the effects it will have years or decades or generations from now. We spray harmful pesticides without a second thought to what they might destroy or what we might do instead. We perpetuate systems of transportation that spend energy frivolously. We demand fruit out of season, and acquire it by importing it from all corners of the globe. We overuse land and don't clean up after our own messes. Just this summer in Massachusetts, we had a crisis of blue-green algae in our lakes and rivers, at least partially because of the high levels of nitrogen runoff from homes and lawns and farms. As a direct result of our energy use, the temperature of the planet continues to rise, and over 400,000 square miles of the arctic sea has already melted! There is more carbon in the air today than at any point in the last 800,000 years and it is because of us.

I truly believe that these questions about how humans impact the planet have never been more pressing than they are now. It is our

⁴ Radiolab. December 23, 2014. <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/radiolab/episodes/worth>

responsibility as God's original creative partners to re-examine our relationship with the created world. As my teacher, Rabbi Arthur Green, recently wrote:

A vital Judaism for the twenty-first century must speak to the most critical issue confronting humanity as this century progresses: the survival of our planet as a fit habitat for human and other higher forms of life. The most important task of religion will be that of helping us humans to change our relationship with the natural environment of which we are a part. Without such a change – an essential shift from a position of rapacious consumer of resources to that of responsible steward – we will simply not survive.⁵

We will simply not survive. So what are we to do?

First, we must not lose hope. We must allow our fear to motivate us, not paralyze us. As Congresswoman Pat Schroeder famously said, “you can't wring your hands and roll up your sleeves at the same time.” The Climate Crisis is growing more serious by the day, but most climate scientists agree that we have a little more time to turn things around. Just as the sound of the shofar blasts through the month of Elul and stirs our hearts, we must let the voices of scientists and activists awaken us to change.

Second, we must not lose ourselves to divisive arguments. We live in a profoundly polarized political environment, in which almost every issue has become a point of contention. While there are many problems I care deeply about, I truly believe that climate change needs to be the priority and must

⁵ Rabbi Arthur Green, *Ma'amadot: A Call to Protect Creation*

become an exception to the polarization phenomenon. Luckily, from what I understand, I also believe that this can be reasonably accomplished. While there are many perspectives and possible solutions to this problem, in this case I think the multitude of possibilities is an asset. I have yet to come across climate change solutions that are mutually exclusive. Do you want to recycle more? Great! Do you want to drive a more efficient car or drive less? Great! Do you want to buy local? Great, do that too! Every day people are publishing new lists of “Top Ten Things you can do to Save the Planet.” These lists include a whole range of items, so I say let’s pick our “Top Ten” “Top Ten Lists” and do all One Hundred of the ideas on them. Of course, there is more work to be done. Scientists and politicians will have to engage in difficult conversations and make tough decisions. Consumers will also have to make concessions. But these are all things I believe we can, and must, do on all sides of the aisle.

Whatever we believe about Climate Change and its many possible solutions, the most important thing to do is to act. Act now. What issue is close to your heart? Can you use less water or less plastic? Can you carpool to work? Can you plant wildflowers instead of a lawn, or use natural fertilizers in your yard? Can you make consumer choices that encourage local growth and smaller carbon footprints? Perhaps you are excited about solar panels or wind projects. Perhaps you are outspoken and energetic about advocating for more sustainable infrastructure and environmentally friendly legislation. There are so many problems but, fortunately, there are also so many ways to solve them. Educate yourselves, find some you believe will be effective, and get involved in the projects you believe in.

Turning back the clock on climate change is not easy, and it will require a lot of intelligence, hard work, and emotional energy to turn us

toward lasting change. To nourish us during this enormous task, Rabbi Green suggests that we renew an ancient practice of reciting daily ma'amadot, daily passages about God's work in Genesis, alongside the psalm of the day. For example, on Sunday we would say "in the beginning God created heaven and earth" because that is what God created on the First Day. On Monday we would recite the description of the second day's work, and so on throughout the week. Over the past several years I have taken my teacher's call to heart, and recited these passages daily. This practice has helped me begin each day with appreciation for the resources I am using, and reminded me not to use more than is necessary or more than my share. I invite you to join me in this practice, or to consider a daily mindfulness practice that might lead you to deepen your connection with the natural world. Use these ma'amadot to remind you to do something, each day, to protect our world.

Now you may wonder if the changes I have suggested are truly significant enough to make the difference we need. We have already caused so much damage to the ozone layer, the oceans, and the forests. How can we even talk about repairing the damage? Do these small changes even matter at this point? I don't know. But I know that we cannot afford to fall into despair. There is a famous proverb, attributed to several different cultures including our own, that says, "there are two perfect times to plant a tree: 50 years ago, and now." Let's get together and plant this tree.

This is the kind of thinking that motivated me to become a rabbi in the first place. I hope I can share wisdom and encouragement from our tradition that will help us all confront the reality of our problems, and speak about them with both somberness and hope. I hope I can lead us all

in nurturing each other's unique talents and encouraging each other to bring those talents to bear on the most pressing issues of our day.

This is no small new year's resolution that I am asking us to make. I am asking us to take on a serious commitment to change, for the better, the way our presence on this planet affects the environment. I am asking us to promise that, at the end of next year, we will be able to reflect and realize that we have done something good for this planet. May we all come together at this time next year and say to God, "we have tended, we have tilled, we have cared for your garden as your partners in creation." May our presence on this planet, truly be a blessing. Shanah Tovah