

Climate Change

Sermon for Second Day RH

9-8-21

The first time I attended what is called, “The Consultation on Conscience,” the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism’s big social just conference in DC, was back in the spring of 1987. It was the year after college and I was an intern at the RAC, as the Religious Action Center is called. I have many wonderful memories from that conference but one in particular stands out. It was a speech by a then young Senator from Tennessee, named, Al Gore. I remember him explaining the greenhouse effect and using his hands and long body to show the growth of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. Then he used an image that was to become one of the signature parts of his talks on this topic: what happens to a frog that is in a pot of cold water that is slowly heated all the way to a boil. In case you don’t know, when the water is heated slowly the frog doesn’t sense the change and doesn’t jump out of the pot. It boils to death. Not the most appealing metaphor, but it was hard to miss the point: The water was the earth’s atmosphere and humanity was the clueless frog. If we didn’t wake up to the rising temperatures and do something about them, we’d soon find ourselves cooked.

Well, that was 34 years ago. And since then, the heat’s been rising in the pot with no one turning down the flame and our planet is starting to boil: After what happened here last week, I don’t need to dramatize it for you. We experienced it ourselves. Climate change, global warming, once considered a threat if we don’t act is now a fact because we didn’t. The climate HAS changed because we haven’t changed.

According to Dr. Ron Heifetz, who taught leadership at the Harvard Kennedy School, there are broadly speaking two different kinds of problems that require two different kinds of approach to change. One kind of problem is a technical problem. There is something wrong that needs to be fixed. For example, your car breaks down. You bring it to an expert – an auto-mechanic. You pay them and you get it fixed. Problem solved.

But there are other kinds of problems that require more than technical expertise, more than financial resources to fix them. For example, let’s say someone – yours truly for instance – needs to exercise more. Now I can join a gym or buy some fancy equipment or even hire a personal trainer but, no matter how much I spend or what method I try, unless I am willing to change my behavior, e.g., move more, none of them will work. This is what Heifetz calls an “adaptive challenge”. We, ourselves, have to adapt. In order for change to take place we have to change.

Another term for this kind of change, one a bit more fitting for these High Holy Days, is Teshuvah. The process of Teshuvah is about recognizing that there are problems in our lives or in the world that really need to be addressed but in order to address them we need to change – and that isn’t easy. After all, what has happened to our climate since Al Gore gave that talk at the Consultation on Conscience back in 1987? These thirty-four years have seen a lot of change – in the climate, not in us... If the earth didn’t have our attention before this past week...it certainly, has it now. The question is...are we going to step up and do what we need to do to fix this mess or are we going to throw up our hands once again and say things like,

“This is too big...I can’t do anything about it.” “This is just scary and overwhelming....”

Or my personal favorite, “I’m just one person, what difference can I make on a global, international problem like this?”

Yes, this is a global, international problem and as human beings we have a responsibility to do something about climate change, but this isn’t just a human issue this is a Jewish moral issue. We have a responsibility to do t’shuvah, to change and try to convince others to change not just because it is the right thing to do.... we need to change because it is incumbent on us as Jews to do so. Rabbi Lawrence Troster, of blessed memory, who was a Jewish climate activist, laid out 10 Jewish teachings on the environment during the time that he worked with GreenFaith.

I want to share just a few of these that help us understand why, as Jews, we must find a way to change.

Rabbi Troster starts his list with, “God created the universe.” This is at the heart of Judaism and in many Reform congregations they read the Creation Story from the Book of Genesis this morning. Rosh Hashanah, is after all, seen as “the Birthday of the World.” But it is more than simply, “God made this wonderful place for us.” As Rabbi Troster further explained, “The environmental implications are that humans must realize that they do not have unrestricted freedom to misuse Creation, as it does not belong to them.” It does not belong to us. How much better do we treat something that we borrowed from a neighbor? The last thing we want to do is damage something we have been lent. So, we can go even further and say that if God created the world, we have a **responsibility** to protect it.

It seems pretty clear that when we humans get arrogant and entitled, we do the most damage to the earth and each other. The Torah does not say that we can just use the earth as we please. The creation story in Genesis, Chapter 2 says, “So God took the man, placing him in the Garden of Eden to work it and keep it.” The Hebrew says, “l’avodah” to work “u’l’shamrah” to protect, guard, keep. God did not give us the earth to exploit or abuse and that is why we need to view our place in Creation with love, awe and HUMILITY.

One of my favorite texts comes from a Midrash called Ecclesiastes Rabba (7:28) and it says, “In the hour when the Holy One created the first human being, God took the person before all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said to the person: “See my works, how fine and excellent they are! Now, all that I have created, for you I have created it. Think about this, and do not corrupt and desolate my world; for if you corrupt it, there is no one to set it right after you.” This text was written by rabbis about 1500 years ago. Did these rabbis have any idea how much damage we were capable of doing to our earth? I doubt it - but they knew we could easily lose our way, become complacent or worse, arrogant and not guard and protect our earth the way we need to. This important and strong warning is to help us remember that our earth is not something without limits.

And when we forget this important lesson, which we certainly have done in more recent years, we need to do t’shuvah, change our ways and get back to protecting the earth which God will not fix for us. But how do we do this? Judaism gives us some important guidance on this question. The Torah and the ancient rabbis, once again, having no idea what humanity would be capable of in the future provide us with Jewish values to guide us.

The first is “Ba’al Tashchit.” Ba’al Tashchit means do not waste. The details of Ba’al Tashchit evolve over time as people change and develop more “stuff”, but they are rooted in the

Book of Deuteronomy where we are told that even when we wage a war, we cannot cut down the fruit trees just to keep them from the enemy. In the Mishnah Torah, Rambam explains that this law doesn't just apply to fruit trees but there is a prohibition of the wanton destruction of household goods, clothes, buildings, springs, and food. Sometimes not wasting means considering carefully what our needs really are, (Do we really need a new cell phone when our old one is working just fine? Can we recycle, reuse, donate, find a new home for things we don't need anymore? This is not about being economical....it is about not wasting in a world full of waste.

Five years ago, in a High holiday sermon I spoke about plastic. Plastic is extremely problematic for two reasons. First, it is made from fossil fuels and with fossil fuels. Second, because of the way it is made it takes years and years to decompose and disappear. You don't have to go far on the internet to find pictures of plastic floating in our oceans and filling our landfills. It is not easy, but making adaptive change, and doing real t'shuvah demands that we find ways to use less plastic and other materials like it.

I think that it is important to recognize that Covid has set our efforts back some. I was doing so well with reusable bags at the store and then with Covid I wasn't allowed to bring my re-usable bags into the store. That Dunkin Iced Tea that I mentioned yesterday.... I had a reusable water bottle that I had them putting my Iced Tea into. As soon as Covid hit, that wasn't allowed anymore. New Jersey was about to ban the use of plastic bags at stores and push us all to use re-usable bags. That went out the window when Covid hit. There are still dangers from Covid, and we do need to be careful but we also need to get back into the mindset of doing everything we personally can to not waste (Ba'al Tashchit) because we now know that Covid is not the only danger we are facing on our earth.

And that takes me to one of the most important Jewish values that we must consider as we wrestle with this problem. That is Pikuach Nefesh. The Torah teaches us that saving a human life is one of the most important obligations of any Jew. I don't have to give you examples, after last week, that show us that Climate Change is a life-or-death issue and that people's lives are being lost. Unfortunately, it is also an Economic Justice issue as we see how many of those lives lost in the past week were in our low income and minority neighborhoods.

So now that I have made it clear that we are all OBLIGATED as Jews to repair our earth.... how do we do that? There are two important pieces of this. The first is to take a "cheshbon hanefesh" – an accounting of our own souls.... are we doing as much as we can in our own lives? Are we constantly looking for ways to reduce our carbon footprint? What did we throw out that could have been recycled, re-used or not purchased at all? A member of our congregation, Kate Sussman created an environmental audit that we can all use in our homes to think about what we can be doing better. We will get that posted on our Website under Social Action if it isn't there already. Take some time between now and Yom Kippur to reflect on what you have or haven't been doing for our earth this year and what habits you can change to contribute to the solution, rather than the problem.

There is another piece of this that is important and that is tackling this issue on a bigger level than just in our personal and family lives. We need to become climate activists. Being involved in our political system, going to demonstrations, writing emails to public officials may not be your thing but I'm going to ask you to give it a try because WE NEED YOU. Greenfaith is organizing a Climate Justice Action on October 17th and 18th and our congregation will be

participating. It is called “Faiths 4 Climate Justice: A Global, Multi-Religious Action.” There will be more information on these events on the website and in our eblasts in the next few weeks.

We need to get out there and make a statement to public officials everywhere that the tough work, the big things, the change we cannot make as individuals needs to move forward and move forward fast. There are lives at stake, our lives, our children’s lives, our grandchildren’s lives.

It pains me greatly that my younger daughter, Sarah, who is a typical member of Gen Z does not take the future for granted the way most of us did when we were her age. She lives with the knowledge that if we don’t change our ways, the earth will become uninhabitable – during her lifetime. In a painful article in the New York Times by Greta Thunberg and other youth climate activists, they wrote, “For children and young people, climate change is the single greatest threat to our futures. We are the ones who will have to clean up the mess you adults have made, and we are the ones who are more likely to suffer now. Children are more vulnerable than adults to the dangerous weather events, diseases and other harms caused by climate change....” They go on to share some statistics which are incredibly alarming. We are a people that lives by the words, “L’dor Va’dor” from generation to generation – will there be generations to pass Judaism down to if our earth becomes uninhabitable? I know it is overwhelming and feels like a problem that is just too big. But each of us can make a difference. One piece of plastic at a time....

As Mother Teresa, of blessed memory said, “I cannot do what you can do. You cannot do what I can do. Together we can do great things.” Our Jewish way of saying that is.... Lo Alecha ha’m’lacha ligmor, v’lo Ata ben chorin l’hivateil memena.” It is not our responsibility to complete the work...but we are not free to desist from it.” I don’t know if Albert Einstein knew this verse from Pirke Avot but he said, “The world is a dangerous place, not because of those who do evil, but because of those who look on and do nothing.” Each of us as individuals CAN and MUST make a difference, and we need everyone involved, making changes so the earth can survive. Regardless of who sits in the White House, regardless of who has control of Congress or the Supreme Court, we must be advocates for our earth and the people we love who would like to keep living on it.

This morning we will hear the shofar blast. The shofar blast should wake us up-wake us up to become the people we want to be, the people God wants us to be, the people our earth NEEDS us to be.