

Rosh Hashanah 5780 / 2019 The Original Earth Day
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There was once a Jewish fellow who didn't own a watch (BC=before cellphones). Whenever he wanted to know the time, he would ask a coworker. Finally someone snapped at him, "Why don't you buy a watch?" "Why should I, when I can just ask?" "Well," retorted the coworker, "what do you do in the middle of the night?" "I use a shofar!" "A shofar!" "Yes. Whenever I want to know the time, I go to the window, I blow the Shofar, and all my neighbors start yelling, 'What are you doing? It's two in the morning!'"

Rosh Hashanah is the day that we blow the Shofar and awaken ourselves to improve our world. Rosh Hashanah is different from most Jewish holidays. It does not commemorate any event in Jewish history. It is not about the Exodus from Egypt, like Passover, or the dedication of the Temple, like Hanukkah. Rather, Rosh Hashanah has a universal theme: it commemorates the creation of humanity, and is called, Yom Harat Olam, "The Birthday of the World." The blasts of the shofar are likened by some to the cries of a new-born baby, a newborn world. The Alenu prayer that we say at the end of every service first originated on Rosh Hashanah. In it we pray "*l'takken 'olam bemalchut shadai,*" to repair the *whole world* as the kingdom of the Almighty."

With its humanitarian themes and concern for the entire planet, Rosh Hashanah could also be considered the original Earth Day. According to ancient Jewish tradition, this is the anniversary of the day on which the first human beings were created. The first man in the Bible is called “Adam,” because he was formed from and serves “Adamah,” the earth. In the vision of Genesis, human beings are intimately connected with the earth; we come from it and return to it. While some have pointed to the blessing in Genesis 1:28 to “fill the earth and subdue it” as a license to exploit the planet, authentic Jewish tradition sees it quite differently. Adam and his partner Havah, meaning, “mother of the living,” are designated as stewards in the Garden of Eden, pristine nature, “to serve and to guard it.” (Gen. 2;15). According to an ancient Midrash, God shows them all the natural beauties of the Garden, and then says basically, “take good care of my world and do not mess it up, because it’s the only one you are going to receive, and no one is coming to clean up after you!”

The Torah recognizes our covenantal obligations to the environment. The book of Leviticus has the revolutionary laws of the Sabbatical year and the Jubilee, in which the land was allowed to lie fallow and rest, while slaves were freed and ancestral properties restored. In this expansive biblical vision, environmental and social justice went hand in hand. In the book of

Deuteronomy, we are given the mitzvah of “Bal Tashchit”: we must not destroy fruit trees, even in wartime when laying siege to a city. This mitzvah was enlarged in later Jewish law to mean that it is forbidden to be wasteful in any way. The second paragraph of the Shema, also in Deuteronomy, warns us that failing to live in harmony with divine law will result in climate change and our exile and alienation from nature. All these biblical messages, are living seeds of environmental consciousness within our own tradition that are now being rediscovered and grown into new practices.

Fast forward a few thousand years and we live in the Anthropocene, or human-driven era. The environmental news cycle is daunting: scientists warning of the acceleration of global heating, frequent extreme weather events, the loss of 1/3 of our domestic bird population over recent decades, significant irreversible damage to our oceans and fish populations, the Amazon jungle on fire. We are fulfilling the negative warning of the ancient Midrash, fouling and degrading our precious garden of Eden.

Yet, hope is sprouting from a more engaged and caring public. This month we were heartened by the sight of nearly 7 million young people around the globe taking time out from school to march in protest of governmental inaction of climate change. This movement is inspirational, and yet it is shocking that children and teenagers have to go out and protest

for their very futures, while many of the world's great democracies, including our own, are headed by people who, as a recent article in the Times well put it, "have deep ties to the industries that are the biggest sources of planet-warming emissions, are hostile to protests, or use climate science denial to score political points." We face the most urgent challenge of our age and until we have the leaders willing to guide us from above, change will have to well from below and build from all sides.

In the Jewish world as well, a younger Jewish generation is leading the way. They are active in the new field of JOFEE, which stands for Jewish Outdoor Food, Farming, and Environmental Education. Hazon, the premier Jewish environmental organization, has declared this new Jewish year of 5780 as a year of Environmental *Teshuvah*, meaning repentance and return to right ways of living. Our *Teshuvah* can include becoming politically active for the environment, supporting environmental organizations, and making consistent changes in our personal and our communal lifestyles to be less wasteful and have a smaller carbon footprint. One thing that Hazon teaches that really stuck in my mind since, is that everyone who has any kind of leadership power and influence in any setting should *also* be an environmental leader, guiding their home or school or faith community or business to more sustainable ways. That's me and you.

Of course, it's true that the small actions we take as individuals are not commensurate with the vast international changes that are needed to heal our planet. And yet, that does not absolve us of personal responsibility. My friend Lucia Athens, chief sustainability officer for the city of Austin Texas, tells me that as citizens we can have a big *collective* impact built of our individual deeds. It's a very Jewish point of view really, that each of us must take responsibility. "It is not up to you to complete the work, neither are you free to desist from it." (Pike Avot).

We can start with our consumption. My teacher, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, coined the term, "Eco-Kosher." "Kosher" means proper and it's not proper or Eco-Kosher to eat food, even if technically kosher, but produced or served in a way that hurts workers or the environment. At PCS we are working to "green our kiddush," and it's a growing group effort. Thanks to donations from members Camille Galin and Ali Serebin, we have traded plastic for reusable metal cutlery and washable table cloths. We use little metal kiddush cups instead of those plastic disposable ones. For plates, we encourage Chinette, which is made from recycled paper and compostable—or better yet bring your own! Our president Leyla Nakisbendi did a demonstration of a zero-waste Kiddush at our summer picnic. B'nei Mitzvah trio of Clara, Zac, and Eli, are working on a composting mitzvah

project. Your holiday swag this year is a reusable water bottle that you can bring to Hebrew school, to kiddush, or anywhere. I welcome your volunteer contributions and initiatives for greening our synagogue this year.

Living in a beautiful natural setting like Westchester, we know that protecting the environment is not just about fighting destruction. It is preserving and caring for the glories of God's creation that surround us so that people can enjoy them for generations to come. Our sense of wonder and awe are at the heart of the conservationist spirit. That's why we are continuing to expand our offerings of outdoor and nature programs that foster a love of nature in young and old, such as our recent spiritual photography hike that I co-lead with our member Adam Brown. Connecting with nature as our sanctuary moves us to preserve, protect, and invest in our natural world by supporting local conservation groups like Westchester Land Trust, Hudson River Sloop Clearwater, Sawmill River Audubon and Friends of Rockefeller State Park Preserve. Think globally; act locally.

My teacher, Reb Zalman, taught that there are two iconic images of the last century that encapsulated the human potential for destruction and for redemption. For destruction, it was the image of the atomic mushroom cloud rising above the New Mexico desert, a signal that humanity now had the potential to wipe itself out.

Today, that image of destruction has even been superseded by photos like a polar bear on a melting ice-floe or images of the burning Amazon jungle.

By contrast, the iconic image of hope appeared a half century ago, the first sight of our planet from outer space, especially of the shining blue earth rising over the dry and desolate moon. According to Reb Zalman, this vision of our glowing planet in the blackness of space, “clarified better than a thousand words how much humanity as a whole has to lose and how much our collective home is worth fighting for. . . the sight of our planet in all its loveliness . . . is not only a scientific triumph but today’s most potent religious icon as well .. .Deutoronomy 30:19 lays out the choice clearly: ‘I call heaven and earth to witness to you this day: I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life, so that you and your seed may live.’”

This Rosh Hashanah, with each choice we make and each action we take, may we choose life. May the sound of the shofar call us to do environmental teshuvah on a personal and communal level. On this birthday of the world, let’s give our world, our home, the greatest present: a vibrant and sustainable future for generations to come, so that we and our descendants may live. Amen.