

Rabbi Lisa Edwards
Erev Rosh Hashanah 5767
September 23, 2006

Beth Chayim Chadashim (BCC), Los Angeles
“Pick up a shovel”

Shabbat shalom

Imagine for a minute a photograph entitled “Environment.” Notice what is in the photograph.

Raise your hand if the image in your photograph included any people.

Are you surprised? I’m told that typically fewer than 5% of people asked to imagine “environment” include people.

My mother, whose memory is a blessing, used to get annoyed at photographs of --scenery. Why bother taking a photograph if there are no people in it? Don’t show me your slide shows or vacation photos or new house photos unless there is someone to see. It didn’t have to be someone she knew (although she preferred that), but it had to be someone – it had to be peopled. For my mother it was all about people.

There is a midrash, a legend, told about Adam and God, based on the version of the story that says Adam came first, then Eve -- Torah tells us that “God took the human and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and watch over it – *l’avdah ul-shamrah*.”[Gen. 2:15] The midrash says that God said to Adam: “Look at My works! See how beautiful they are — how excellent! For your sake I created them all. See to it that you do not spoil and destroy My world, for if you do, there will be no one after you to repair it” (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7: 13)

When God showed Adam God’s beautiful works – Adam was the only human being on earth. In his mind’s eye the environment was definitely peopleless, but not for long and not ever again. -- Eve came along 7 verses later – and the earth has never been unpeopled since. But it HAS been deprived of others of God’s creatures.

I’ve been reading a lot of science websites lately, and learning and re-learning some vocabulary. For example:

The term “background rate of extinction” “refers to the number of extinctions that would be occurring naturally in the absence of human influence. Estimates range from one to ten species per year for the past 600 million years,” with a few periods of mass extinctions due to various causes.

“Extinctions are a natural part of evolutionary processes, but through most of the history of life on Earth, *biological diversity* has been increasing.meaning many more species have appeared than disappeared.

But the previous changes in the environment that brought earlier mass extinctions took tens of thousands or even millions of years to occur.” The extinction episode that scientists believe we are in now –“has been precipitated by human activities, and it appears to be happening thousands of times more quickly than the others. _

When I was a little kid the bedroom decorations that I chose were twin beds filled with stuffed animals, window shelves that kept expanding to accommodate my growing glass menagerie, and OF COURSE a living, working ant farm.

In Jr. High my mother and I redecorated my room. The ant farm had departed some time earlier – something about it tipping over when no one was around, and all the ants moving into the twin beds...I can't quite remember. During this re-model, most of the stuffed animals departed, except for the giant teddy bear. I got a real desk that would hold a typewriter, and a big bulletin board – dark brown cork (very sophisticated, and cork can be harvested without damaging the tree) My cork board held, not photos of movie stars or the Beatles, but quotations I typed up from famous writers – most of which I found while paging through my treasured volume of Bartlett's Familiar Quotations

Abraham Lincoln, Mark Twain, Albert Schweitzer, the poets e.e.cummings and Karl Shapiro all graced my bulletin board. But oddly, the only one I remember now by heart was this one, by the naturalist Charles William Beebe.

“When the last of a race of living things breathes no more, another heaven and another earth must pass before such a one can be again.” His comment made me cry when I first read it.

If Al Gore and his scientist friends are to be believed, and there is no reason not to believe them, then Charles William Beebe's poetic argument for conservation and preservation and endangered species protection may need editing... Not “when the last of a race of living things breathes no more,” but rather “when every last race of living things breathes no more, another heaven and another earth must pass before any such ones can be again.”

If Al Gore and his scientist friends are to be believed – and I repeat, there is no reason not to believe them – then we have little time left for *tshuvah* – for turning it around.

But here's the good news – even in the face of global warming, a condition humans helped bring about, we humans can turn it around. We have time if we start now. There are people who know what needs to be done and -- better news yet -- some of it is easy. We in this room can help turn it around. And what better time to start than tonight.

What better time than on Rosh Hashanah. It is Rosh Hashanah which is also known as *Yom Harat Olam* – the day God first conceived of the world – and is often called the “birthday of the world” – what a nice birthday present we could give the world. Oddly, Rosh Hashanah is also in some Jewish legends said to have begun at the first moment of the *8th day* of the world's existence – in other words, the day after the seven days of creation – the day of “what next?” And also because this day is also known as *Yom Hazikaron* – the day of remembering – can we remember the earth?

This holy day is also known as *Yom Teruah* – the day of sounding the shofar – sounding the alarm – calling us to prayer, to renewal, to right action *tefilah, tshuvah u' tzadakah*. It is also called *Yom HaDin* – Judgment Day. And *Yom haKiseh* – the hidden day – the only major Jewish holy day when the moon is hidden from us, when the night is especially dark, a night then when it is up to us to bring light to the world.

Rosh Hashanah is, in short, a day ripe with potential, with possibility, when all creation lay before God, lay before Adam and Eve, lies before us – waiting to see how and what we will do next. A day when God waits too to see what we will do with the souls the Holy One breathed into us and with the world the Holy One charged us -through Adam - “to serve and to protect” or perhaps better: “to appreciate and to respect”

l'avdah ul-shamrah.

God's world, not ours, we are but borrowers, as God says to us in Torah:

“But the land may not be sold permanently, because the land is Mine, because you are sojourners and visitors with me!” [Lev. 25:23]

It is because this night is all potential that I want tonight to invite, encourage, request, *charge* us all with taking steps - some of them simple steps - to change our lives enough to make a difference in the world, to change our lives for the sake of God's good earth.

If you are among the 5% of people who already picture people in your photograph of the environment– you're a step ahead, for as much as we might appreciate nature without humans intruding, cluttering it up, dragging it down, if we don't feel connected, integrally related, the task we have ahead of us – of saving our planet – will be so much harder.

If when we talk of global warming we imagine only vast empty spaces of melting glaciers and oceans filled to overflowing, it's easy to feel overwhelmed. To lose the small picture in the midst of the big one. To disconnect from the problem or the victims or the solutions.

I want to read to you several paragraphs from a speech given this past April in Chicago by [Illinois] Senator Barack Obama. A speech entitled “The Coming Storm,” Senator Obama lays out the problems. But as I read to you, I ask you to practice putting people in the photos of the environment he describes. He said:

The issue of climate change is one that we ignore at our own peril. There may still be disputes about exactly how much we're contributing to the warming of the earth's atmosphere and how much is naturally occurring, but what we can be scientifically certain of is that our continued use of fossil fuels is pushing us to a point of no return. And unless we free ourselves from a dependence on these fossil fuels and chart a new course on energy in this country, we are condemning future generations to global catastrophe.

Just think about some of the trends we've seen.

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

These high temperatures are drying up already dry land, causing unprecedented drought that's ruining crops, devastating farmers and spreading famine to already poor parts of the world. 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.

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.

And while the situation on the land may look ugly, what's going on in the oceans is even worse. Hurricanes and typhoons thrive in warm water, and as the temperature has risen, so has the intensity of these storms. In the last thirty-five years, the percentage of Category 4 and 5 hurricanes has doubled, and the wind speed and duration of these storms has jumped 50%. ... Last year, Japan set a new record when it suffered its tenth typhoon and the United States set a record for the most tornadoes we've ever had. And at one point, Hurricane Wilma was the most powerful storm ever measured.

These are all frightening situations, but perhaps none more so than what is beginning to occur at the North and South *Poles*. There, a satellite image from space or a trip to the region shows indisputable evidence that the polar ice caps are melting. But it's not just a slow, steady thaw that's been occurring over centuries, it's a rapidly accelerating meltdown that may eventually dump enough water into the ocean to annihilate coastal regions across the globe.

In 1996, a melting Greenland dumped about 22 cubic miles of water into the sea. Today, just ten years later, it's melting twice as fast. In real terms, this means that every single month, Greenland is dumping into the ocean an amount of water 54 times greater than the city of Los Angeles uses in an entire year. All in all, Greenland has enough ice to raise the global sea level 23 feet, making nearly every coastal city imaginable into a New Orleans.

And that's just an *excerpt* from his speech.

The verdict is in: not since Noah and the ark has our earth and all its inhabitants been in more danger.

In more danger, and yet there is much we can do to slow the destruction, even to reverse it. And we who are touched by Jewish tradition – and we wouldn't be here if we weren't somehow touched by Jewish tradition – we come to this task with special training, special instruction, for Jewish tradition points us over and over again toward awareness and care for the environment, toward kindness to animals and human beings, toward an appreciation for trees and our intricate relationship to them. As we will read on Yom Kippur morning, Jewish tradition teaches us to choose life over death, blessing over curse, and shows us that those choices are placed in front of us daily – for us to make. [Deuteronomy 30:19]

Jews are instructed to be a light to the nations, to respect moderation not consumption, to appreciate something as simple as Shabbat – a day apart, a day without worry or desire for more than we have already, a day to appreciate what we have: “a day of not producing.”

And there is much more specifically about the earth and our relationship to nature. Two small examples: The concept of sabbatical is taught first in Torah, where the year of rest in every seven is given not to people, but to the land. It also teaches us that we may harvest a tree but not without planting another.

And one more – of so many -- one of my favorites - this very practical advice from the 1st century sage Johanan ben Zakkai: If you are planting a tree and someone comes and says the messiah is coming, finish planting the tree, and then get up to greet the messiah.

[Johanan ben Zakkai Avot de Rabbi Natan 31b]

Perhaps it means you shouldn't believe everyone who tells you the messiah is here. Perhaps it means the Messiah travels slowly. And maybe it means the messianic age will arrive --- will be brought on – only by each person taking the time, the effort, the care to plant a tree. Did you know, by the way, that a single tree - over its lifetime - will absorb one ton of carbon dioxide – a main cause of global warming --? Bless these trees!!

Maybe because Jews are taught to plant the tree first, it should come as no surprise that there are already Jewish organizations devoted to protecting and serving, respecting and appreciating the planet. These organizations and others work to educate and to take group action. We can join with them as individuals and as a congregation. We can learn from them how to “green” our lives, our homes, our cars, our synagogue – our current one *and* a *new* one.

If you'd like to learn more about how Jewish tradition calls us to action and what actions to take, come study with me and Daniel and others at BCC in the coming months. Help me set up a “green team” at BCC – a team to encourage our community to work on all sorts of environment related issues, from educating ourselves to advocating for legislation, to speaking truth to power on the ways corporations and government have conspired to endanger the earth, to taking action in our own lives to reduce, recycle, reuse, replenish, remember our charge, our responsibility, our possibilities –

It is a frightening topic this global warming. As scary as Hurricane Katrina, as painful as war in Israel, as anxiety inducing as homeland terrorism, as sad as the increasing rates of HIV/AIDS and cancer, infertility and birth defects – and yes, all of those can be connected to our misuse of the earth and its inhabitants.

But let's not be frightened by it tonight. Not here. Not on Rosh Hashanah. For Rosh Hashanah comes to tell us we can turn it around, we can turn ourselves around, we can change for the better, we can heal this most amazing world that God has set before us.

On Rosh Hashanah while we are looking at our own actions – we can begin tonight doing *tshuvah* and *tikkun* both – “turning” from our wasteful ways and seeking “repair” – not only *tikkun olam* – repair of the world -- but *tikkun nefesh* – repair of our souls, of our own actions, habits, mind sets.

I know it's easy to feel paralyzed when such a global vision is set before us. So let's take our cue again from Judaism and from our own knowledge of how we make changes in our own lives, in our own hearts: one step at a time, little by little, person by person and person-to-person, AND all of *us* together.

We each have within our power the power to change, the power to make a difference. The power, for example, *through some very simple changes*, to reduce by thousands of pounds a year the amount of carbon dioxide each of us causes to be released into the atmosphere.

For another few moments here I want to ask you to imagine a few more photographs of the environment – make it a little slide show this time – in every slide a picture of a person– a picture of you (my mother would have loved it!).
Picture yourself changing a light bulb – [PROPS – regular light bulb, energy saver light bulb] from this bright idea to this brighter idea.

Picture yourself inflating the tires on your car.

Picture yourself wheeling your very full recycle barrel to the curb for the city to pick up and recycle.

Picture yourself turning off your computer or your stereo or your television when you're through using it for the day.

Simple enough, no? not so scary.

Picture thousands of pounds of carbon dioxide never coming into existence.

One last photo – picture yourself beside the tree you just finished planting. Picture the tree already absorbing carbon dioxide, already giving you air to breathe. Picture yourself standing there

[lisa: stand w/ left hand shovel – not a real one - right hand out to shake a hand]
shovel in hand, ready to greet the messiah!

Holy One of Blessing,
With Your help – we can do this.
Open our eyes,
Calm our fears,
Widen our imaginations,
As we renew our commitment to respect and appreciate Your world.
Walk with us, Holy One, be with us.
Hear our prayers –
be they offered in silence or with sound,
with words or with action.
Help us, Holy One, to love Your gifts enough to save them.
Help us love Your world as though it *were* our own.
Help us love Your world enough to pass it on.

And let us all say: Amen

Shabbat shalom, Shana tova u'metukha – a peaceful year, a sweet year to us all.

http://www.bagheera.com/inthewild/ext_background.htm
http://www.bagheera.com/inthewild/class_glossary.htm#Anthro

Wonder and Restraint: A Rabbinic Call to Environmental Action

January, 2006

www.coejl.org

Ten things to do from www.climatecrisis.net. Alas, that's only 1/3 of the amount of the yearly release of carbon dioxide into the air by the average car driven 10,000 miles a year [5.5 tons]. But it's a start – it's a good start.

http://www.stopglobalwarming.org/sgw_headlines.asp