

Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5768
First Day, September 13, 2007
Rabbi Laura Geller

Rava, a 4th century Babylonian rabbi, imagines a person facing judgment in front of a heavenly tribunal. The person is asked to account for his/her life by answering a series of questions:

“Rava said: At the hour when they bring a person in for judgment, they ask him/her:

1. Did you conduct your business affairs faithfully?
2. Did you set aside time to study Torah?
3. Were you concerned for future generations?
4. Did you look forward to salvation?
5. Did you debate wisely? Were you able to infer one thing from another?”

Rava’s questions might not be our questions, but thinking about this metaphoric tribunal can help us focus on the questions we ought to be asking ourselves as we judge the meaning of our own lives. Over the next ten days, Rabbi Aaron and I will explore these questions with you (in fact, he began last night), and we’ll look together at how we might reframe them to help us do the work of these High Holy Days.

This morning I want to deal with just one of the questions, the third: “Were you concerned for future generations?”

A story:

“Once there was a tree and she loved a little boy. And every day the boy would come and he would gather her leaves and make them into crowns and play king of the forest. He would climb up her trunk and swing from her branches and eat apples... And when he was tired he would sleep in her shade. And the boy loved the tree very much. And the tree was happy.”

But time went by. And the boy grew older... The tree was often alone. Then one day the boy came to the tree, and the tree said ‘Come Boy, come and climb up my trunk and swing from my branches and eat apples and play in my shade and be happy.’ ‘I am too big to climb and play,’ said the boy. ‘I want to buy things and have fun. I want some money. Can you give me money?’ ‘I’m sorry,’ said the tree, ‘but I have no money. I have only leaves and apples. Take my apples, Boy, and sell them in the city. Then you will have money and then you will be happy.’ And the boy climbed up the tree and gathered her apples and carried them away. And the tree was happy.”

You all remember the story, *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein, and how the boy stayed away for a long time and the tree was sad. And then the boy/man came back and cut the

tree's branches to make a house... and her trunk to make a boat... until finally, there was almost nothing left of the tree.

The story ends with an image of a very sad old man sitting on a tree stump... with the words: "And the tree was happy."

But I don't think so. I don't think the tree was happy, and I don't think the grown-up boy was happy either. Chipping away at that tree brought momentary gains... but ultimately destruction... for the tree and for the man.

We are that boy/man, slowly destroying the Tree of Life... and soon there will be nothing left... for us or for our children.

Today is the "birthday of the world." Today we celebrate creation. Today we have to face the truth that we are destroying everything that we celebrate today.

I hope I don't need to convince any of you that global warming is real. I don't have any slides this morning about the snow melting on Kilimanjaro or graphic images of what is happening to the polar ice caps. I'm not a scientist, so I wouldn't be effective presenting statistics about the intensity of recent hurricanes, the increase in temperatures around the world, or the extinctions of species related to changes in climate and food supply. But at least some facts are pretty clear: although representing only 4.5 percent of the world's population, the United States contributes an estimated 25 percent of the greenhouse gases that are endangering our world.

Global warming is not a political issue. It is not a partisan issue; it is not about being a Democrat or a Republican. It is a religious issue, a moral issue, a Jewish issue, and that's why we need to focus on it, today... as we begin a new year, as we celebrate the "birthday of the world."

Our Torah begins with a vision of creation. But to be honest, it offers two different views. The first, from the first chapter of Genesis, begins with God's creating the world: light, oceans, land, vegetation, sun, moon, living creatures, and finally, human beings. "And God blessed the human beings and said to them: 'Be fruitful and increase; fill the earth and dominate it.'" The second chapter offers a different story, the story of the Garden of Eden. God creates the first human being, puts that human in the midst of the garden, and charges the human with the responsibility "to till and to tend it." (Gen 2:15)

Two different paradigms: fill the earth and dominate it, or till and tend the garden. One is a story of using the earth for our own needs, being apart from, separate from the earth. The other is a story of being a part of the earth and being its guardian.

For too long the first story has been the dominant Western one. And maybe the Jewish one as well. While Biblical Judaism is deeply connected to the land, and so many of our holidays relate to the cycles of nature, the Jewish story for the last 2000 years has been a story cut off from nature. Exiled, we were outsiders in places that didn't really want us, foreigners not

allowed to own land. As we became increasingly urban, our connection to nature grew more tenuous. Affected by Greek thought, Judaism began to privilege mind over body, the spiritual over the material, and history over nature. Though the Bible, the Psalms in particular and even our prayerbook, speak about the God of creation, our grandparents' lives were lived pretty far away from that original garden.

And that might explain why it has taken so long to see the environmental crisis in general, and global warming in specific, as a Jewish issue: it's because we don't really see ourselves as part of nature and therefore not affected by the health of forests, oceans, or air. That's why we are not more frightened by the signs of global warming or concerned about developing widespread renewable energy sources. We don't see the earth as a living organism of which we are a major limb.

But we are part of nature, living beings who are part of a larger living organism: the earth, the world. We may talk a lot about *Tikkun Olam*, repairing the world. But we have been so focused on all that needs to be fixed in our world that we forget that the world itself needs to be fixed. *Tikkun Olam*... fix the organism that we call earth, Mother Earth, or it will die.

It turns out that in spite of the view that the world is ours "to fill and dominate," a closer look at the values of our tradition suggests that from early on our sages were already aware of our connection to and responsibility for the earth. The classic statement of this perspective is a powerful riff, a *midrash*, on the creation story: "When God created the first human beings, God led them around the Garden of Eden and said: 'Look at My works! See how beautiful they are, how excellent. For your sake I created them all. Take care not to spoil or destroy My world, for if you do, there will no one to repair it after you.'" (*Midrash Rabba 3:1*)

That was written about 2000 years ago. I think of it whenever we sing *La Dor V'dor* at a Bar Mitzvah, "from generation to generation." We want to give our children and our grandchildren the gift of our tradition; we want to pass it down from generation to generation. We can only do that if there is world we can also pass along to them.

My husband went to The Climate Project training in Nashville last January, a three-day training about global warming taught by Al Gore. Richard told me that the moment that really got his attention was when Gore said: "If we don't change directions now, in ten years these trends will be irreversible." Richard turned to the person next to him and asked: "Did he really say 'ten years'?" In ten years Richard's daughter will be 36 years old. My children will be 28 and 35. Maybe they will have children of their own, my grandchildren. How old will your children be... when it is too late to give them an inhabitable world? How will we answer that question: "Were we concerned with future generations?"

We could talk a lot about all the Jewish values that form the core of what we might call an eco-theology. A good place to begin is the Biblical verses from Deuteronomy: "When, in your war against a city, you have to besiege it a long time in order to capture it, you must not destroy its trees... You may eat of them, but you must not cut them down..." (Deuteronomy 20:19-20). "You must not destroy": the Hebrew is "*Bal tashchit*." That principle becomes an important one in Jewish legal writings, codified by Maimonides in the 12th century:

“Whoever breaks vessels, tears garments, destroys a building, clogs a well, or does away with food in a destructive manner violates the negative mitzvah of *bal tashchit*. (*Kiddushin 32a*)” (*Mishna Torah, Laws of Kings and Wars 6:8-10*)

So recycling isn’t just a good thing to do; it is a profoundly Jewish thing.

One could argue that a part of this eco-theology is attention to what we eat. In fact, Rav Kook, the first chief rabbi of Israel, did argue that this is what keeping kosher is ultimately about. Most of us don’t keep kosher, and it isn’t clear that traditional *kashrut* challenges people to this kind of consciousness. But think about it for a moment. What if you brought this consciousness to your eating? What if, as you hold the apple in your hand before you dip it in honey this afternoon, you stop and listen to the blessing you say before you eat the apple: “Blessed are you, God, ruling over this world, who brings forth fruit from the tree.” Fruit of the tree? What tree? Where? If you really pay attention, you come to realize that this apple grew somewhere. Someone planted it, someone else tended the tree, picked the apple, packaged it, shipped it to your grocery store. How much human energy did it cost to get that apple to you... and how much fossil fuel?

L’dor v dor... If I want my as-yet-unborn grandchildren to dip apples into honey on Rosh Hashanah, is there something I ought to be doing differently with the food I eat now? Should I shop more at farmers markets? Bring reusable bags to the store? Stop drinking water from plastic bottles?

This is a matter of survival, and therefore of Jewish survival. At other moments in recent history, when it has felt as though Jewish survival might be at stake, when Israel was threatened, the entire community joined together in an emergency campaign called Israel in Crisis. Every single one of us opened our hearts and our checkbooks to give Israel the resources it needed to protect itself. Some of us even changed our lives to go to Israel to help.

We need to do this now, when again our futures are at stake. What are we willing to do to stop this destruction, the destruction of our world, our children’s world? What ought we as a Jewish community be doing about this urgent matter of Jewish survival? What is the form of this Jewish emergency campaign, the World in Crisis Campaign?

It starts here in our synagogue and it starts in our homes. Today we are launching a Greening the Synagogue Campaign. We are going to challenge ourselves as individuals and as a congregation to reduce our carbon footprint by 20% by 2010. A carbon footprint is the amount of carbon dioxide created by a person or an institution. U.S. homes account for 8% of the world’s emissions, with the average U.S. household emitting 55,000 pounds of carbon dioxide annually. If we could lower our carbon footprint by 20%, then we could make a significant difference. Not just Temple Emanuel, of course, but if we do it, and other religious communities do it, we will have begun to repair the world, literally, before all that is left is a stump.

So here is the form of our Emergency Campaign: after Rosh Hashanah, go to your computer and log on to the TEBH website. There is a link there to the Low Carbon Diet Personal CO₂

Calculator. You'll need a few months worth of gas and electric bills so you can enter your average number of kilowatts of water and therms of energy; you'll need to estimate the number of miles you drive and the average number of miles you fly every year. All you do is enter these numbers and click "calculate." Then print out the form and send it to the Temple. If you don't use a computer, fill out the form that is at your seat.

The results will be pretty shocking. My family's total annual CO₂ emission is 98,000 pounds, a lot higher than the national average. Based on our current lifestyle practices, we are at level one of a ten-point scale, with one being the worst.

On Yom Kippur I will pray with you "*Al Cheyt sh'chatanu*," for the sins we have sinned before God. This is one sin I can actually do something about. You can, too. So between Rosh Hashanah and Hanukah, which is, after all, a holiday celebrating renewable energy, with a little bit of oil lasting a long time, we hope that all Temple Emanuel member and families will calculate their carbon footprint and send the results to us. Then between Hanukah and next Rosh Hashanah, we'll all take steps to lower that footprint by 20%.

Some of the steps will be pretty easy: replacing an incandescent bulb with a fluorescent, for example, counts for a 100-pound annual reduction. (And we'll make this one very easy for you. The LADWP and the Coalition for the Environment in Jewish Life-South California have donated one compact fluorescent light bulb for each family. You can pick it up on your way out this morning.) And I'll spare you the jokes about how many Jews it takes to screw in a light bulb.

Some of the steps are a little harder or more expensive, like purchasing an energy-efficient refrigerator. But that will save you 500 pounds. My daily ten-minute shower generates up to four pounds of CO₂. If I were to reduce it to five minutes, it would cut our emissions by 175 pounds per year.

This is about us as individuals and about us as part of a larger community. The leaders of Temple Emanuel have made this pledge for our institution as well. At the May Board meeting, the Board voted to support this campaign and lower the carbon footprint of Temple Emanuel as a whole. At the September Board Retreat, each Board member filled out this Green Pledge. Our building generates carbon dioxide; so do all of our schools and all of our programs. Between Rosh Hashanah and Hanukah, the Greening Team will take the carbon footprint of the entire institution, and between Hanukah and the next Rosh Hashanah, we will make the necessary changes to reduce the carbon footprint 20%.

We are a large congregation... we have a gigantic footprint. "One small step if we do this only as individuals... one giant step if we do it together." The success of this program requires that we do it together... and that we hold each other accountable. All through the year we will be supporting each other as we "weigh in" through programs and projects that will help us find ways to reduce our carbon footprint.

Today I am asking you to sign this Green Pledge. By signing, you commit to taking your carbon footprint, sending it in to the Temple, taking steps to reduce your carbon footprint, and

reporting in to the committee twice as year. And here's another gift, donated by our congregant Lisa Foster, founder of "1 Bag at a Time." Take this reusable bag and use it instead of a paper or plastic bag when you go to the market.

This is not just about the world; it is also about our own souls. Again the words of a medieval sage: "The purpose of this mitzvah of *bal tashchit* is to teach us to love that which is good so that good becomes a part of us... This is the way of the righteous... that nothing, not even a grain of mustard, should be lost to the world, and if possible they will prevent any destruction that they can. Not so are the wicked, who don't prevent the destruction of the world. They not only destroy the world; they destroy their own soul." (*Sefer HaChinuch*, #529)

"Today is the birthday of the world." Today we celebrate the Tree of Life. Today we choose between life and death, blessing or curse. Will we end up like that sad boy/man... sitting alone on that stump of a very unhappy tree? Or do we change our lives... and live conscious of the truth that we are actually part of the tree... part of the Tree of Life.

So we return to the question posed by the 4th century sage with whom we began: "Were you concerned for future generations?" His vision of a heavenly tribunal may not be ours, but we will be asked that question... maybe not by God, but certainly by our children and our grandchildren.

On this New Year, may we choose for them and for the world. Amen.