As I write these words, millions of Canadians are once again in a cloud of smoke and the terrifying path of hundreds of wildfires across our country; more still facing our neighbors to the south. The images, and for some the first-hand experiences, are horrifying and a clear reminder of both the power of nature and our human-Jewish responsibility to be good stewards of our earth. It is in part because of this increasingly devastating reminder that we have invited award-winning scientist, environmentalist, and broadcaster Dr. David Suzuki to join us for selichot, to reinvigorate the environmental work of our community.

After his presentation David and I will have a conversation about our responsibility as people of faith and citizens of the planet to do the Jewish act of Tshuvah, return and repair for the harm we have caused in abdicating our sacred obligation to be guardians of the earth.

Still there is an even more personal lesson connected to this period of the Yamim Noraim (Days of Awe) that these wildfires evoke.

Fire has long held a special spiritual significance in Judaism. In the 19th century The Ger Rebbe, Rabbi Yehuda Aryeh Leib Alter, in his treatise, *Sefat Emet* distinguishes between a “fire that burns” (the unruly element) and a “fire that gives light” (the domestic element).

Admiel Kosmanis, a professor of religious and Jewish studies at the University of Potsdam, explains the Rebbe’s teaching as follows:

“This dichotomy mirrors the internal division within the Temple: the sacrifices were burnt on the altar in the Temple court while the menorah illuminated the inner Temple.”

He explains this difference by invoking the element of internalization: That the purpose of the fire on the altar is to use the fire to burn away our evil urges so we might turn toward goodness. The purpose of the light-bearing fire is to “light up the world by doing good.” He warns us, ultimately, that we must first “turn from evil… and only then, ‘Do good.’” (*Psalms 34:15)*

As we enter this High Holy Days we are challenged to burn to ashes our ego and pride. Like a raging forest fire we must leave nothing in our path that would block our way toward *t'shuvah*, repair and return. This requires honest and thorough *Heshbone HaNefesh,* an examination of our inner life and outer actions.

As my friend and colleague, Rabbi Laura Geller teaches, “the High Holy Days only ‘work’ when you do your own ‘work.’”

Too many of us come to synagogue with expectations that something will happen to make this season meaningful. That an external fire—the rabbi’s sermon, the cantor’s music—will spark an internal awareness. But that’s not how this works. We must provide the spark to our own burning desire to change.

In this New Year I pray that the fires outside subside and the fires within burn brightly, consuming that which keeps each of us from lighting up our life and the world with goodness.

Shanah Tovah

Rabbi Dan Moskovitz.