DO NOT DESTROY
ROSH HASHANAH DAY 5780
TEMPLE SHOLOM, VANCOUVER BC, CANADA
RABBI DAN MOSKOVITZ
SEPTEMBER 30, 2019

Rabbi- There were two Jews arguing over a bit of land.

J1- *J1 and J2 walk up the aisle to the Rabbi talking* Rabbi, I own such a lovely little piece of land and this one claims it is his!

J2- With all due respect, that land belongs to me!

J1- *crosses arms* It's mine because I planted it.

J2- *points at J1* it's **mine** because I watered it.

J1- It's **mine** because I harvested it.

J2- It's mine because I paid for it.

J1- *pointing* You listen to me!

J2- *pointing* No, You listen to me!

Rabbi- This is a very difficult case. I must go to the land and investigate further.

They walk somewhere, J1 & J2 still arguing…

J1- You are making no sense. Besides, the tradition is on my side!

J2- Aha! To the contrary, the tradition is on **my** side!

Rabbi- *raises hand* Shsh, enough already! *kneels and puts ear to the ground*. *He then rises and turns to J1 and J2 points at each in turn as they nod vigorously in turn* You say "the land is mine" and you say "the land is mine" *points down, "*but the land says" *THEN POINTS UP* "you belong to it".

If that view sounds familiar, it's the same way the First Nations see our relationship to the earth.

We are just renters, passing through during our brief time here.

We don't own any of this, but you wouldn't be able to tell sometimes by how we treat the place.

I don't mean this sanctuary, I mean THIS SANCTUARY, Mother Earth!

Torah begins with a vision of creation. But it's a Jewish story so it has more than one opinion.

The first, from the first chapter of Genesis, begins with God creating the world: light, oceans, land, vegetation, sun, moon, living creatures, and human beings (Oh My). "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 gives the human the responsibility "to till and to tend it." (Gen 2:15)

This sounds like 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 **connected with** the earth and being its guardian.

They are actually not different at all, they are deeply connected.

Where the first is about our God-like power as human beings to dominate nature, the second instructs us that not everything we *can* do, *may* we do. We have the power but not the permission; we have the ability but not the right.

The earth is not ours. It belongs to God, who made it. We are not the owners of nature we are its custodians. Our job is to serve it and care for it.

The story of creation places upon us a serious task – a tremendous burden.

A Midrash teaches that, "When God made Adam, He showed him the scope of creation, he walked him around the Garden of Eden and said to him: "See all My works, how beautiful they are. All I have made; I have made for you. Take care that you do not

destroy My world, for if you do, there will be no one left to mend what you have destroyed."[1]

We are to be *Shomrei Adamah*, Guardians of the Earth. I want to get that on an ID card with a badge. "Hold it right there Shomrei Adamah, put down that single use plastic."

The primary point the Torah is making is that, even in paradise, there are limits. There is forbidden fruit. Not everything we can do, may we do.

How true is that! Few moral principles have been forgotten more often and more disastrously, than, "Not everything we can do, may we do"

But I know what you're thinking, Climate Change – its doesn't get any bigger where do you start? Will anything I do make a difference?

That's such a natural human response. We are numb, paralyzed with indecision.

Some are tired of the topic, tired of being alarmed; the sky has been falling since Al Gore had his powerpoint. BTW the sky isn't falling, the seas are rising.

We have problem fatigue, add climate change to the list of things that are broken in our world and so we do nothing, except maybe worry.

Everyone knows the story of Noah.

God sees the wickedness of humanity;
God decides to wipe out the world with a flood, and start over;
God instructs Noah on how to build an ark, with its precise dimensions;
Noah brings two of every animal – or 7 of every kosher animal – onto the ark;
Forty days of rain;
Noah sends out the dove to see if there is dry land;
the dove returns with an olive branch in its mouth.

Sweet story but Noah almost missed the boat, he almost drowned in the flood with everyone and everything else.

A third century sage, Rabbi Yohanan, taught: "If not for the water reaching his ankles, he would not have entered the ark." (Midrash, Bereshit Rabbah 32:6)

Noah was in denial, overwhelmed by the scope of destruction unfolding before his eyes, as the waters climbed over his sandals, he was paralyzed with indecision.

[1] Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13

We are Noah, the oceans are literally rising around our feet and at best we are debating if we should get taller shoes. Its almost too late. At least Noah was enlightened enough to have built the arc in the first place, what are we doing?

Regardless of their historical accuracy, the Torah focuses on stories such as Adam and Noah is to emphasize the importance of our human responsibility for the natural world. To be Shomrei Adamah – Guardians of the Earth (I really do want a badge).

In a room full of reform and progressive Jews, the idea that we are commanded to do something, like *guard the* earth may not be reason enough. If we are honest with ourselves, sometimes we treat those tables like the 10 suggestions, not the 10 commandments.

But I think there is one commandment all of us take deadly seriously, we need to protect our children and grandchildren. Its not the meek that will inherit the earth is our kids.

If you have the opportunity to talk with - and more importantly listen to - our teens as I often do, you'll hear the real cost of our inaction:

REBECCA: *Don't dismiss us when we bring up climate action, this is our future we are talking about not yours*

EVAN: *Don't tell me to wait till I'm older and I'll know more, we all know enough right now, the science is clear, look out the window.*

TEEN 3: *Stop being such hypocrites, you say you love your pets, but you won't protect the rest of the animals on this planet.*

TEEN 4: *Join us in helping to fight climate change or get out of the way and let us do it, like teens are doing with Gun Violence, like you did when you were our age with Civil Rights and the Vietnam War. This is even bigger than those, it's the planet!*

What will we tell our children? How will we answer these teens?

What should we say to Rebecca and to Evan, two of the many Temple Sholom teens who are leaders in the Climate Strikes?

"Sorry, Rebecca, I know that you and your children are inundated with bugs and diseases like a biblical plague, but your parents really wanted a higher quality of living?"

"Evan, I am really sorry your own children can't play in the smoke and the heat but we really needed to mine all the natural gas from the sea because it was so economically profitable?"

“Sorry guys, you’re just kids, so idealistic, you don’t know, wait till your older you’ll understand.”

Those are pitiful explanations. If you have more of your life ahead of you than behind you as our teens and millennials do the future looks very different, it always has to the next generation. IN my generation the future was so bright we had to wear shades (remember that song lyric). For their generation their isn’t enough sunscreen to block out the harmful rays piercing the ozone layer.

Last year we watched a California city literally called Paradise turn into hell in less than two hours when it burned to the ground.

I know people who made plans to be out of Province in July and August because of the fires last year and the smoke that blanketed much of BC. Imagine a generation that needs to leave Vancouver in the summer because of extreme weather and smoke. We don’t leave Vancouver in the summer!

It is not my intent to scare you, but we need to overcome our overwhelm.

The past five years have been the hottest five years recorded since the world’s top weather and climate agencies started tracking global temperatures in the **18**80s.

This past July was the hottest month ever in recorded history.

More than 90% of the extra heat is going into the oceans, and it is fueling supercharged hurricanes

As the planet warms and sea levels rise forest-fire season will essentially be year-round, and warmer oceans will keep hurricanes and typhoons boiling months past the old norms.

There is a cascading effect that’s downright apocalyptic.

As ice melts in the Canadian North (which btw its doing faster than anywhere else on the planet so this is real for Canada. As it melts ancient carcasses will emerge from the melting permafrost as they are doing right now in Siberia, and with them germs from illnesses long thought extinct will begin to sweep the globe.

You think we have a world refugee crisis now, if we do nothing and the planet keeps warming even 1 or 2°c the ongoing drought and desertification will force huge numbers of Africans, Asians and Central Americans to move; in many places, the heat waves will

become literally unbearable, with nighttime temperatures staying above 37°c and outdoor work will be all but impossible for weeks and months at a time.

On low-lying ground like the Mekong Delta, the rising oceans will salt fields essential to supplying the world with rice. The U.N. has estimated we could see a billion climate refugees. There aren't enough walls or cages to keep them at bay.

We're taking about the most fateful issue there is, our children's lives literally depend on what we do right now.

So, let me ask you a question: How many Jews does it take to change a light bulb?

The answer is 854 families. That's how many families belong to our congregation, we are big, we have size and with size comes influence.

If 850 households all changed their lightbulbs or more broadly reduced their carbon consumption by 18% the impact would be real.

And if we do it, *we* lead on this issue in our community. If we do it, then the 15,000 households that make up the Vancouver Jewish community might follow, and if *they* follow, if the people who are called to repair the brokenness in the world stop talking about Tikkun Olam and start *doing* Tikkun Olam in a considered and consistent way, then others will join us. I know it to be true.

Our city is ready, and our country is ready, too. If anything, we are late to the party, hopefully not too late for the planet.

We learned all too well in the interior, to our south in Washington and California that it only takes a spark to start a forest fire. We can be a different kind of spark, one that starts a raging fire not of destruction but of passion for this most fundamental of all commandments, to be good stewards of the earth. Because as our text tells us, if we break it we will not get another one. There is no Planet B.

So, here is what I am asking us to do, what our teens are begging us to do. What Judaism has always obligated us to do.

The High Holy Days are about vows and oaths, and so let's make one, each of us right here and now, in front of our children and our grandchildren – a promise to them as much as it is to us.

Let's put the planet first.

The Talmud declares, we are not obligated to complete the task, but neither are we free to desist from it. We must not be numb, we must not be indifferent.

After the holiday ends you are going to get two emails, one about our Half Shekel Campaign and a second about this sermon. Please open both of them.

The sermon email will have some additional resources, including a list of workshops and seminars we are offering throughout the year on addressing climate change. You will also find a link to make a pledge to calculate and reduce your household environmental footprint by 18%.

Why 18%? Because it's a Jewish number, it means chai, it stands for life and this is about our very lives, and the lives of those teens that stood up and called us to action.

I am hoping that every family in our congregation will make this pledge and become Shomrei Adamah, Guardians of the Earth – I'll even give you a badge if it will motivate you.

But honestly, the personal reductions that we can make at home are not going to save the planet, though they may help it heal and they will go a long way to show our children we care about the world we are handing over to them.

The change we really need is bigger. We need a change that is national, and a change that is global.

I am not going to tell you how to vote but I am asking you to **think** about these issues when you do. Make your own hierarchy of values and then vote your values, it's as simple and powerful as that.

Beyond personal usage reductions and voting our conscience there is one more thing I think we need to do, and it's connected particularly to this holiday and season. We need to do *t'shuvah*.

We need to apologize to the planet and we need to apologize to God for being such lousy caretakers of this miraculous world. We need to examine why we have been so wasteful and careless with such a precious gift as the very air we breathe, water we drink and land we live on.

Please listen here for a moment, because I am deadly serious, there is something deeper going on here that needs to be addressed.

Think about it, what leads to any kind of wasteful behavior?

Anger, pride, and most of all, ego. To tread lightly and live without wasting, you have to cultivate the opposite of these traits—inner peace, humility and selflessness.

I think we can all agree, left, right and in between, that our society and our politics, which are a reflection of our lives could use some inner peace, humility and self**less**ness.

By consuming in a mindful way and not wasting, we can become healthier, more balanced human beings, and also promote a healthier and more balanced world.

Save the planet and you are on the road to saving your soul.

The changes we make in how we treat our planet, the mindfulness with which we relate to our natural world will echo in how we treat our community, our family and ourselves.

It really is true, what is good for the planet is good for you, good for me, and what is bad for the planet is most certainly bad for all of us.

In the words of Elie Wiesel, "The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference. The opposite of art is not ugliness, it's indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference. ***And the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference."***

Before God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, God asked Moses who would guarantee that they would endure l'dor v'dor from generation to generation.

Moses said his successor Joshua would, God said NO.

Moses suggested the leaders of the tribes, God said NO.

Moses then named the elders of the community, God said NO.

Finally, Moses offered the idea that the children would be the guarantors that the teachings of Torah would not be lost from one generation to the next.

He was right, they are reminding us now, as our tradition always intended that – care for our earth, being *Shomrei Adamah*, guardians of the planet is our obligation as Jews. It's a promise we made to God as we stood looking up at mount Sinai, it's a promise we must make to our children as they stand looking up at us as the waters and temperatures rise.

Two possible endings:
We are not obligated to complete the task, but neither are we free to desist from it. Do not desist. Do something, do it for your children, do it before its too late.