GUARDIANS OF THE EARTH
ROSH HASHANAH DAY 5780
TEMPLE SHOLOM, VANCOUVER BC, CANADA
RABBI DAN MOSKOVITZ
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SKIT

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".

SERMON

If that 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, if anything the earth owns us.

You see, Torah begins with a vision, a vision of creation. But it's a Jewish story so it has more than one version.

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)

I know, those sound 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.

But they are not different, the two stories are actually deeply related.

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. That's a huge distinction, a Jewish distinction; 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.

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**. That's not only true of the Jewish view of care for the earth. It's the Jewish view of everything. Its why we have commandments. **Not everything we can do, may we do!**

Few moral principles have been forgotten more often and more disastrously, than, "Not everything we can do, may we do."

[1] Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13

Its dangerous for me to try to guess what you're thinking, but there tends to be two schools of thought on this subject.

Some are tired of the topic, tired of being alarmed; maybe even skeptical that its anything more than a natural cycle. I mean the sky has been falling since Al Gore made his inconvenient PowerPoint. (BTW the sky isn't falling, the seas are rising.)

Others are deeply concerned, but the problem of Climate Change seems so vast we wonder where do we start? Will anything I do make a difference?

In both instances we have problem fatigue. Add climate change to the list of things that are broken in our world and it's so overwhelming that we do nothing, except maybe worry.

We are not the first to think that way. You remember 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 to build an ark, gives him precise dimensions;
- Noah brings two of every animal – or 7 of every kosher animal – onto the ark;
- Forty days and nights 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.

In fact, a third-century sage, Rabbi Yohanan, taught: "If not for the water reaching his ankles, he would not have entered the ark."[2]

Noah was unable to conceive of the scope of destruction God told him was about to be unleashed.

What can information about a horror, a literally unheard of one, mean to the human brain, which is unprepared to receive it because it concerns a horror that is without precedent in the history of humanity? We have no reference point and so we just stand there as the waters rise.

Jewish French Philosopher Raymond Aron, who had fled to London in 1940, was asked whether he knew what was happening at that time in the East. He answered: I knew, but I didn't believe it, and because I didn't believe it, I didn't know.

[2] Midrash, Bereshit Rabbah 32:6

Our minds and hearts are well built to perform certain tasks, and poorly designed for others. We are good at things like calculating the path of a hurricane, and bad at things like deciding to get out of its way.

We are Noah, to quote the Game of Thrones, “Winter is Coming" and it’s almost too late.

That shofar blast we heard a few moments ago. It needs to wake us from our complacency, from our disbelief. Scientists say we have 11 years to slow climate change enough to avoid catastrophe.

We need to do this, not because of the science, but because of the Jewish. “Tikkun Olam”, Repair the World, it’s not a metaphor.

If there isn’t a Jewish argument for combating climate change, then Judaism has no meaning.

It’s the literal language of Judaism, to participate in the repair of the world

Regardless of their historical accuracy, the Torah focuses on stories such as Adam and Noah to emphasize the importance of our human responsibility to the natural world. To be *Shomrei Adamah* – Guardians of the Earth

The idea that we are commanded to do something, like *guard the earth* may not be reason enough to do it. If we are honest with ourselves, sometimes we treat those tablets like the 10 suggestions, not the 10 Commandments.

But I think there is one commandment all of us take deadly seriously. We are commanded to protect our children and grandchildren. It’s not the meek that will inherit the earth, it’s 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 urgency of now:

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 you did when you were our age with Civil Rights and the Vietnam War. This is even bigger than those, it’s all life on earth!*

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

"Sorry guys, but you're just kids, so idealistic, you don't know, wait till you're older, you'll understand."

Isn't that what the older generation always says, isn't that what our parents said to us?

Put yourself in their shoes, if you have more of your life ahead of you than behind you as our teens and Millennials do, the future looks very different than it may to those of us who are older.

Look, it's not my intent to scare you, but we need to overcome our overwhelm, and we need to stop **dismissing** what those younger than us are **insisting**.

And this is why…

The past five years have been the hottest five years in recorded history.

This past July was the hottest month **ever** for our planet.

As the planet warms and sea levels rise, forest-fire season will essentially be year-round, and warmer oceans will keep hurricanes and typhoons roiling months past the old norms. Dorian, Maria, Katrina, Harvey – these will become those household guests that keep coming back year after year.

There is a cascading effect that's downright apocalyptic.

One of the most vulnerable places is Israel. But it's not just Israel the Canadian north is melting twice as fast as the rest of the planet.

We think Global Warming and we think about melting icebergs and polar bears who won't have a home. What we need to understand, what we seem not to understand; everything is expected to change, its all connected: the air we breathe, the food we eat, the water we drink, the landscapes we see, the oceans, the seasons, the daily routine, the quality of life.

Our children will have to adapt or become extinct. They will have to dress differently, behave differently, live differently.

If we do nothing; the planet will keep warming, even 1 or 2°C, we will see persistent drought, disease and forests will become deserts and this will force huge numbers of Africans, Asians and Central Americans to move.

The U.N. has estimated we could see a billion climate refugees.

We think there are too many refugees to handle now?!

In many places, particularly Israel, the heat will become literally unbearable. It will be impossible to exist without an air conditioner. It will no longer be a matter of comfort but of survival. A broken air conditioner will become an issue of life-or-death."

We're talking about the most fateful issue there is; the most Jewish issues there is; our children's lives literally depend on what we do *right now*.

We learned all too well last summer in the BC Interior, to our south in Washington and California, that it only takes a single spark to start a forest fire.

We can be a different kind of spark, one that starts a flame not of destruction but of passion for this most fundamental of all commandments – to be good stewards of the earth. Because as our torah tells us, if we break it, we will not get another one. There is no Planet B.

(PAUSE)

But we're not powerless, our congregation is 854 families. We are big. And with size comes influence.

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

And if we do it, ***we*** will lead our community on this issue. If we do it, then the 15,000 households that make up the Vancouver Jewish community might follow, they have followed us before; 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; and we can begin to change the world. I know it to be true.

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.

So, here is what I am asking us to do, what our teens and young adults are begging us to do. What Judaism has always obligated us to do, since the time of creation.

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 a promise to ourselves.

Let's put the planet and all life on it first.

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 a link to calculate your household environmental footprint. My challenge, our challenge is to reduce it by 18%.

Our rabbis teach that if you want to change the direction of your life you simply need to take one step in the other direction, so we will have monthly workshops on the steps you can take.

- How to change the way we eat so it's better for the planet.
- How to reduce our waste and consumption.
- We will even have a workshop on bicycle repair so we can go from gas power to pedal power.

You simply need to take the first step and we will help you take the next, we can walk this road together.

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, the lives of our children and grandchildren. The life of this planet we are commanded to guard and protect.

I am hoping that every family will make this pledge and become Shomrei Adamah, Guardians of the Earth.

But honestly, the changes 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, a change that is global.

And 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.

Take a moment during these Ten Day of Repentance to meditate on Liron Gertzman's photos on our Gallery Wall and Barbara Heller's tapestries in our Social Hall. Look at what we had, the miracle and beauty of this planet and look what we are doing to it.

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.

And we need to promise to make it right. *L'taken Olam B'Malchut Shadai*, to restore the world to the majesty God created it.

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, and our children are reminding us now, as our tradition always intended – that caring 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 to us as the waters rise beneath their feet.

We are not obligated to complete the task, but neither are we free to desist from it.

Join me, join us as a congregation, to take meaningful action before it’s too late. Our children’s future depends on it. We have proven we can change the world, let’s use our collective power and faith to change it for good.

RESOURCES:
I highly recommend the book: “We Are the Weather” by Jonathan Safran Foer – it was published only a few weeks before Rosh Hashanah and not in time for much of the writing of this sermon but it is an incredibly insightful and eloquent approach to the topic.