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Tifereth Israel Synagogue
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GOING GREEN

I know this comes across as narcissistic or paranoid, but most congregants seem to notice when I get a new car. I can't wait for the license plates to arrive so it doesn't seem so obvious. ("Oh, the car? I got that a while ago.")

I was planning on keeping my old car a little longer since there was nothing wrong with it, but when Adam and Sarah moved from New York to Northern California they needed to buy two cars. Since I had decided to replace mine within the coming year Judy and I decided to sell it to them now, and at very good price, I might add!

Shopping for a replacement did not require a lot of test drives. Several months ago Judy and I decided that our next vehicle was going to be a hybrid. When I first learned about hybrids I was hesitant. While they save gas they cost more to buy. I wasn't sure I would save enough on gas to justify the additional cost of the vehicle.

When it came time to make a purchase, while the rising price of gasoline was a consideration, it was not definitive. Our primary concerns were our responsibility to reduce our use of fossil fuel, the world's reserves of which grow smaller each day, and to halt global warming, which is caused by the release of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.

Last year we rented the Al Gore documentary, "An Inconvenient Truth" and it frightened us. "An Inconvenient Truth" is a filmed version of the presentation that Gore has been making throughout the world for the last thirty years. He documents the rising levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere and how their exponential increase has led to global warming and climate change.

I am sure all of you heard this week that the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration predicted a loss of two-thirds of the earth's polar bear population within fifty years due to the melting of their icy habitats. Well, Gore has been teaching for several years about melting snow caps and glaciers and how their demise will affect polar wildlife. He shows how melting ice is filling the oceans with additional water and raising the sea level, which is of particular concern to coastal populations such as ours. Gore also documents the increase in mean temperatures throughout the world and how the increased heat affects life everywhere.

Now I know that some people reject out of hand anything Al Gore says and believe that his presentation is politically motivated. I urge them to see this documentary, especially if they don't want to. While there may be quibbles over specific

statistics the phenomenon of global warming has been corroborated by innumerable scientists. As time passes the naysayers are diminishing in number.

The U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change now uses the word “unequivocal” to describe the warming of the climate system. And the committee is highly confident that human activities, from burning fossil fuels to the cutting down of forests, are contributing to the warming. (IPCC website)

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency says that :

“Scientists know with virtual certainty that:

1. Human activities are changing the composition of Earth's atmosphere. Increasing levels of greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide (CO₂) in the atmosphere since pre-industrial times are well-documented and understood.

2. The atmospheric buildup of CO₂ and other greenhouse gases is largely the result of human activities such as the burning of fossil fuels.

3. An ‘unequivocal’ warming trend of about 1.0 to 1.7°F occurred from 1906-2005. Warming occurred in both the Northern and Southern Hemispheres, and over the oceans (IPCC, 2007).

4. The major greenhouse gases emitted by human activities remain in the atmosphere for periods ranging from decades to centuries. It is therefore virtually certain that atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases will continue to rise over the next few decades.

5. Increasing greenhouse gas concentrations tend to warm the planet.”

And finally, these are the words of a noted American:

“The issue of climate change respects no border. Its effects cannot be reined in by an army nor advanced by any ideology. Climate change, with its potential to impact every corner of the world, is an issue that must be addressed by the world.

“There is a natural greenhouse effect that contributes to warming. Greenhouse gases trap heat, and thus warm the earth because they prevent a significant proportion of infrared radiation from escaping into space. Concentration of greenhouse gases, especially CO₂, have increased substantially since the beginning of the industrial revolution. And the National Academy of Sciences indicate that the increase is due in large part to human activity.

“By increasing conservation and energy efficiency and aggressively using these clean energy technologies, we can reduce our greenhouse gas emissions by significant amounts in the coming years. We can make great progress in reducing emissions, and we will. Yet, even that isn't enough.”

This last quotation was not the words of some tree hugging environmentalist. They were the words of our current president, George W. Bush, in a speech he gave on June 11, 2007. I do not think there is any question that President Bush is politically conservative yet he, too, is concerned about global warming and is urging our country and the world to confront the problem

While there is debate on the degree to which human activity affects climate change and how best to fight it, the negative effects that human activity has on the world's climate is a scientific fact.

I am not sure exactly why, perhaps it is the birth of my first grandchild and worry about the world which he will inherit, but in the last year I have become increasingly concerned about the effect we humans have on the environment. My concern not only embraces global warming but other critical environmental issues such as our reliance and the consumption of fossil fuels, the continued pollution of the atmosphere and water, the destruction of the rain forests, the over logging of forests, the over fishing of the seas, and even the number of plastic beverage containers and paper and plastic bags we utilize each year.

I have already said that many people reject Al Gore's conclusions out of hand, because they think he is politically motivated. Some may also suggest that my speaking on these issues is a reflection of my politics. Let me assure you it is not. My concern with these issues and my sharing them with you has nothing to do with politics and everything to do with Judaism; our faith, our relationship with God, our relationship with each other, and our relationship with the earth upon which we live.

To understand how Judaism feels about our responsibilities to the world in which we live, one must consult Jewish sources. The second chapter of Genesis is an excellent place to start. According to the Torah, God created humans in order for us to be caretakers of the world God had fashioned:

“And the LORD God planted a garden eastward, in Eden; and there He put the man whom He had formed. And out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil...And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it.” (Gen. 2:8-15)

According to Genesis 2, God first created plants and animals before creating human beings. God created Adam with a specific objective in mind: Adam was “to dress

and keep” the world. Human beings were to be God’s caretakers of Creation.

According to Judaism, the earth and all that is upon it belongs to God. [quote] We are allowed to benefit from the gifts of nature with which God has blessed us, but we may not abuse them. They are lent to us, we do not own them. The earth belongs to the Master of the Universe, and the Torah and the rabbis constantly remind us that we are only sojourners here. [quote] One day we will die, future generations will continue to benefit from God’s gift.

One well known Jewish reminder that the earth belongs to God is the *Shemita* or Sabbatical year ordained in the Bible. Every seven years the land was not to be planted, worked, or systematically harvested. Israelites were to eat only what they had stored away from past harvests or produce which grew on its own. Although the *Shemita* year provided ecological benefits, i.e., the regeneration of minerals in the unworked soil, this was not the Torah’s primary concern. The Torah says that the land belongs God and just as human beings are to rest every seven days so is the land to rest every seven years. The *Shemita* year reminds us that we do not have full dominion over the land. We are only its temporary caretakers. The earth belongs to God.

There are literally hundreds of other Jewish sources about caring for the environment, but I will suffice with just one more example. The Torah says that when you besiege a city you may not cut down fruit bearing trees to make siege works or defensive structures. [quote]. Fruit bearing trees were sources of nutrition and life therefore they could not be harmed, even during times of duress.

The rabbis extended this Biblical law against cutting down fruit trees into a general prohibition against needless destruction of any natural resource. They called this mitzvah *ba’al tashchit* - you shall not destroy.

Rabbi Moses Maimonides, who lived in the 12th century and was one of the greatest Jewish scholars of all time, wrote: “Not only one who cuts down food trees, but also one who smashes household goods, tears cloths, demolishes a building, stops up a spring, or destroys food on purpose violates the command: *You must not destroy.*” (Mishne Torah, Book of Judges, Laws of Kings and Wars 6:10)

And Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady, the founder of the Chabad Chassidic movement taught: “This Biblical command [*ba’al tashchit*, You must not destroy...!] prohibits the spoiling of any object from which humankind may benefit (Shulchan Aruch ha-Rav, Choshen Mishpat, Hukkot Shemirat Haguf va’Nefesh 14)

Anytime we are engaged in a wasteful or harmful activity that destroys the environment we are violating the *mitzvah* of *ba’al tashchit*, “you shall not destroy.” This is when we toss litter in a public park, throw recyclables in the trash, run our showers too long, or take needless trips to the grocery. Every time we waste or harm a natural

resource we are being negligent of our duty to “dress and keep” the world.

A couple of weeks ago I was speaking with a colleague and friend about my sermons for the holy days. I shared today’s theme with him and his immediate comment was: “I hope that you are not advocating any type of government intervention. That would be extremely political.” I told him no. I am not advocating any particular political point of view. What I am advocating is that each of us takes greater responsibility to preserve our natural resources and reduce pollution and climate change.

Over the years Tifereth Israel, acting as a responsible Jewish institution, has become increasingly energy and ecologically conscious. We began about seven years when we noticed the amount of waste paper we were generating, though I know some congregants may not agree on our definition of “waste paper!”. We decided to install recycling bins in our offices. We had one for white waste paper, a second for colored paper, and a third for bottles and cans. We dutifully separated our recyclables into these containers for about six months...until we discovered that each and every bin was being emptied into the same dumpster in the back! We belatedly found out that Waste Management, the company that picks up our garbage, does not have a recycling program for their business customers, even though the City of San Diego provides recycle bins for homes. Hopefully, a program will be instituted for businesses soon. We have decreased our use of paper, as I am sure you have noticed from our ubiquitous emails, but the amount of waste paper we generate continues to be problematic.

So we haven’t done so well on the paper recycling front, but we have been successful in many other areas. Several years ago we installed energy efficient lighting in all of our fluorescent fixtures. More recently, all of our remodeling projects, the Goodman Chapel and Cohen Social Hall, as well as our newly re-landscaped entryway, have utilized energy efficient lighting where feasible. Although we were not thrilled about installing new air conditioning units in the Cohen Social Hall and in our sanctuary, the new units use much less electricity than the old ones, particularly when we keep the temperature warmer than everyone likes. Although it has proven to be a very difficult job, we have repaired our outdoor irrigation systems and monitor them constantly. Many of us are also on constant patrol, closing doors and turning off lights when our rooms are not in use. We even explored putting up a solar electrical generation system on our roof, which one of our members generously offered to finance, only to find out that it is not practical given the specifics of our electrical usage.

The kinds of adjustments I just outlined were not difficult nor grandiose. Most were relatively simple ways of decreasing our consumption of electricity and other natural resources, and not coincidentally, saving money. Any of us as individuals are capable of making the same kinds of changes in our lives. There are countless ways that all of us can conserve and reduce the amount of energy and water we waste and trash we generate.

Let me share with you a few simple suggestions: when you run errands, plan your route in advance so that you minimize the amount of fuel you use running from place to place. When you replace your lighting consider fluorescent and other energy saving fixtures where possible. When you purchase your next vehicle, look for a hybrid or at least a car or truck which gets good gas mileage. Consider installing solar power in your homes to generate electricity or warm your pool or spa. S.D.G. & E. has a program in which they install equipment on your air conditioning compressor which allows them to switch it off for a few minutes each hour when power consumption is high. This not only saves fuel, but helps eliminate the need for increased power generating facilities while causing minimal discomfort. Recycle your paper, your plastic, your glass, and everything you can. It has gotten to the point where I feel guilty if I am tempted to throw the plastic newspaper bag in the trash instead of the recycling bin.

One green innovation which I particularly love is actually a throwback to the past. Many markets, including Trader Joes, Keils, and Costco, have begun selling reusable grocery bags for 99¢ each. We even picked one up in Israel. Printed on it is: []“Super Sol’s Green Bag.” We wanted to bring some more home with us but they sold out immediately. Judy and I keep these in bags in our car and *shlep* them in to every market we shop in. Taking in your own shopping bag is a small inconvenience, but highly significant. When 1 ton of paper bags is reused or recycled, 3 cubic meters of landfill space is saved and 13 - 17 trees are spared! In 1997, 955,000 tons of paper bags were used in the United States. When 1 ton of plastic bags is reused or recycled, the energy equivalent of 11 barrels of oil is saved. (Sierra Club)

Not every suggestion will be possible or practical for every family. But that does not free us from the obligation of reducing our energy use and preserving our natural resources. We have to start somewhere.

According to our tradition and in the words found in our in our Mahzor, *hayom harat olam*. Today is the birthday of the world. Rosh Hashana does not only mark the beginning of the Days of Awe, it celebrates the birthday of the world.

On this day it is not only our responsibility to change ourselves, but to change the world. Up to now we have done a pretty good job of changing the physical world in which we live, but in ways which are not always so beneficial. This year I am asking that one of your Rosh Hashana resolutions will be to save our planet by taking steps to reduce emissions, save electricity and water, and curb pollution.

What better birthday gift could we give to our planet than to begin to heal its wounds from the damage we have done? What better legacy can we bequeath to our children and grandchildren and future generations than a world filled with clean air, fresh water, glaciers, and polar bears? It is not too late to turn back the tide of planetary damage.

I close with a selection from Midrash Rabbah on Ecclesiastes 7:13 which teaches a lesson worth heeding today.

The *midrash* describes God giving Adam, the first human being, a tour of the Garden of Eden. He shows Adam everything, the grass, the trees, the animals, fish, fowl, and insects. Then God says to Adam: "See how beautiful all My creations are, all this has been created for your sake. So reflect on this, and take care not to foul or destroy my world.

For if you do, there will be none to repair it after you."