

Monday, October 2, 2006

Yom Kippur Day

GLOBAL REQUIEM?

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Congregation Emanu-El

Ask the beasts, and they will instruct you;
 The birds of the sky, they will tell you,
 Speak to the earth, it will teach you;
 The fish of the sea, they will inform you.

Until recently, this admonition from the Book of Job (12:7-8), listen carefully to the messages of earth's creatures, was largely ignored. Now, overwhelming evidence of environmental degradation has propelled ecological issues into the public eye and people are listening, even if they are uncertain what to do. News magazines champion the greening of America, a consciousness further raised by the release last spring of the feature documentary, "An Inconvenient Truth," an exhaustive catalogue of environmental dislocations, including unusually destructive weather patterns of floods, droughts, hurricanes, and tsunamis. Oil spills; poisoned ground water; global warming—the black tide of climate change; increasingly larger releases of carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide, hydrofluorocarbons and their resultant deterioration of public health; rapidly melting and receding glaciers; rising ocean levels; wildlife and aquatic ecosystem disruptions; over-fished seas; exhausted water resources; spreading deserts; longer temperate seasons in previously never-unfrozen regions; the wanton destruction of millions of acres of rain forests; the reckless harvesting of timber without replacement planting leave what may well be an indelible and irreversible mark on the time-line of twenty-first century. (As an aside, you may be interested to know that Israel is the only country in the world whose extensive reforestation program results in a net annual gain in the number of trees within its borders.) The seemingly insatiable appetite for resources and fuel drives the search for oil in environmentally sensitive areas. Nevertheless, the discovery of new oil and gas resources is not keeping pace with the swiftness at which these resources are being depleted. We are producing mountains of waste that exceed our capacity to recycle and recover resources.

The ever-increasing possibility of drowning in our own waste was driven home for me by a visit that I made this summer to the ancient Anatolian city of Ephesus (the modern Turkish city of Efes). Originally founded as the Hittite capital city (Apasa or Abasa), by the Roman period, Ephesus was the capital of the western part of Asia Minor, the fourth largest city in the empire. It was an important commercial and export center for Asia, situated at the mouth of the Cayster River on a gulf of the Aegean sea; it was also the hub of the region's road system. Ephesus featured a theatre capable of holding 25,000 spectators, several major bath complexes, and one of the most advanced aqueduct systems in the ancient world. The enormous ruins reveal a city that by the first century, when Paul (Acts 19:23–41) promoted his new religion there by preaching and writing 1 Corinthians, had grown to at least 250,000 people. However, what I

found to be most interesting was not above but beneath the long central market street. Under the paved road ran a huge 2'X4' sewer system that carried waste downhill into the Aegean harbor. As a result of the waste, the harbor gradually became silted and unusable in spite of repeated dredging. By the Byzantine period, it had become a malarial marsh, forcing residents to abandon the city. Today, the ruins of Ephesus are several miles from the sea. That scene reminded me of an ancient proverb: "Every human being is given the key to the gates of heaven, but that same key also unlocks the gates of hell."

A young man, depressed by evil and suffering in the world complained, "Why did God ever make such a world? Why, I could have made a better world than this myself."

To this complaint he received the terse reply, "That is exactly the reason God put you on this earth—to make it a better place. Now go ahead and do your part."

Like that young man, we, too, have a key that unlocks either of two gates, enabling us to further damage or repair this already broken world. Whether or not we acknowledge this reality, we seem to be opening the wrong gate. Our planet is dying because we tolerate the despoliation of the earth and sanction abuses that are contrary to our God-given role of stewards of the earth. Everything we do has some environmental consequence, whether intended or unintended. Because fresh air, clean water, natural resources, and plant and animal life seem unlimited, we have taken these precious gifts for granted and have not always been good stewards of the earth.

Jewish tradition teaches that human beings have a noble purpose here on earth, and it is not to allow our virgin forests to be uprooted, our streams and rivers to become contaminated, our wildlife to be deprived of sustenance, and our air to be blackened with the soot of cities and factories.

The Talmud reminds us that Adam, the first human being, was created as a single being to demonstrate that he was a progenitor of successive generations, teaching us that if any creature does not survive, many potential worlds are destroyed. When the last creature of a species dies, it cannot be recreated or replaced. Thus, after the completion of Creation, rabbinic legend asserts that God said to Adam, the first man: "See My world, how beautiful it is. Do not corrupt or destroy it, for if you do, there will be no one to set it right after you" (Koheleth Rabbah 7.13). We are losing species at the extinction rate of one species every nine minutes. It has been estimated that in 1850, while Darwin was penning his *The Origin of Species*, the rate was one every five years. Historian J.R. McNeill, author of *Something New Under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth-Century World* (W.W. Norton, 200X), offers this ominous warning: The human species is "playing dice with the planet, without knowing all the rules of the game." His words add urgency to the 1993 statement of the Union of Concerned Scientists, 1670 scientists, including 104 Nobel laureates, who signed the foreboding "World Scientists' Warning to Humanity", a statement that has become all the more urgent in 2006:

Human beings and the natural world are on a collision course. Human activities inflict harsh and often irreversible damage on the environment and on critical resources. If not checked, many of our current practices put at serious risk the future that we wish for human society and the plant and animal kingdom, and may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life in the manner that we know. Fundamental changes are urgent if we are to avoid the collision our present course will bring about.

Judaism utilizes the Hebrew term *bal taschit* to mean “eco-reverence” from the admonition, *Lo taschit*—“You shall not destroy” (Deut. 20:19). It is a prohibition against waste or wanton destruction of the environment. The author the Book of Leviticus records God’s admonition: “The land is Mine and you are my tenants” (25:23). This sober warning against wanton destruction of the environment views creation as an ongoing process in which God and human beings are considered co-partners in safeguarding the earth’s riches.

Millennia before oil wells, gas-guzzling SUVs, green-house gasses, and arithmetically increasing and over-consuming populations, the prophet Isaiah offered this prescient warning: *Lo tohu v’rah-ah lashevet yit-tzee-rah*—“God did not create the world in order that it might become a waste; God formed it for human habitation” (Isa. 45:18).

Naturally, there are those who hold that the scope of public health, poverty, political and civil unrest, terrorism, and a myriad of other problems dwarf the need to focus on fixing the environment. In addition, some religious leaders view environmentalism as the province of science and fear that such activism can be construed as New Age pantheism and nature worship. Furthermore, an element of our society is trying to discredit the environmental initiatives. For example, in response to “An Inconvenient Truth,” the oil industry-backed Competitive Enterprise Institute has run a series of 60-second spots including one in which an announcer intones “Carbon dioxide. They call it pollution. We call it life.”

Nevertheless, it is important to consider what if anything can be done. Until now, most attempted fixes and attempts to enhance the protection of earth’s creatures and natural resources have been five-fold: litigation, legislation, regulation, corporate responsibility, and broad based coalitions of consumer and citizen groups. Each of these approaches must continue to be utilized to strengthen ecological alliances and mandates in order to ensure the survival of earth’s diverse species and to protect its resources. However, those efforts seem so overwhelming and unattainable and their impact so remote that they provide those who might like to make a difference with the excuse to say, “What difference can I possibly make?”

Rather than focus on grand plans that seem unachievable, I would like to point out grass root efforts that each of us can embrace by describing our accomplishments at Temple Emanu-El. We have achieved a great deal in a short period of time with a small group of devoted staff members and volunteers.

- In recent months, we signed onto the congregational covenant of the California Interfaith Power and Light, promoting responsible stewardship of the planet, raising members' awareness of climate change, and modeling definitive steps to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from Congregation Emanu-El's operations.
- On Eco-Shabbat, held during Earth Day on the weekend of April 22, 2006, among the many activities held was an organized drive to collect outdated computers and small electronics. In so doing, we kept approximately 70,000 pounds of bio-hazardous material out of landfill.
- We have installed clearly labeled recycling bins in all our offices and communal spaces. We are now equipped to recycle paper cups and plates as well as food waste from our many receptions.
- Our list-serve provides interested members with doable advocacy actions.
- We have completed an energy audit of our buildings and have identified and fixed sources of energy and water waste. We have already implemented numerous energy and water efficient improvements to our buildings including changing 60 watt incandescent light bulbs to 13 or 28 watt compact florescent bulbs. Sidewalk and courtyard fixtures have been changed from 150 watts to 35 watts per fixture. All exit signs are now low voltage.
- We have installed automated resource-saving "touchless" bathroom sink fixtures and towel dispensers in two "test" bathrooms where new foam soap dispensers provide a user with 33% less soap than previously used.
- We have switched over to green chemical cleaners.
- Bike racks have been installed to encourage carbon dioxide-free trips to the Temple.
- We offer our employees discounted monthly public transit and BART passes.
- You may have noticed a recent packet of communications to members that were combined in a single 8X10 envelope in order to save paper and reduce mailing costs.
- This fall, on three Wednesday evenings, beginning this Wednesday, October 4, we will offer a free mini-course entitled: "Protect Our Environment—How To Be Part of The Solution," featuring two-hour informational sessions on energy and water conservation, waste reduction, and clean and green cars and homes. Why not come and see how you can make a small difference? If every member took just one conservation step, you can imagine the energy, land fill, and water savings that would result. For example, the average home utilizes 2000KW of power per year. By changing over to florescent bulbs that typically use 75% less power, the average homeowner can produce significant annual cash savings by eliminating 700KW of electricity. The simple act of disabling your computer's screen saver can save as much as \$100 of electricity per year. Multiple those savings by the number of computer owners here today and you can imagine the impact we all can have on the environment.

- Our pre-schoolers have learned to read the codes on the bottoms of containers in order to help recycle at school and at home.
- Our Pe'ah garden in Colma continues to be the largest provider of organic vegetables to the SF Food Bank. Last year's total of 23,000 pounds of produce were grown by Temple volunteers without the use of pesticides.

This summer, Senator Barbara Boxer toured our buildings, spoke at a Shabbat service, and presented the congregation with her prestigious "Conservation Champion Award" in recognition of our efforts to "green" the Temple. At that time, she stated:

I want you to know how proud and grateful I am for the work that Congregation Emanu-El and California Interfaith Power and Light are doing together. You are not just keeping California clean and energy efficient, but also are making a difference for our entire planet by your efforts to reduce global warming. Although each of these strategies may seem insignificant, if every citizen were to implement just one effort, you can imagine the environmental impact.

Here are a two advocacy things that you can do. In addition to the simple act of changing light bulbs, I encourage you to get involved politically by urging federal officials to promote renewable energy resources, legislate energy star efficiency for all new appliances, provide incentives for the production and purchase of more efficient automobiles, and follow California's lead in placing a cap on greenhouse gases. I urge support of Senator, Diane Feinstein's proposed landmark fuel economy and energy efficient legislation that will provide tax incentives for those who are willing to make the effort.

There are many grand statements that I could draw upon to conclude my remarks. After all, care of the earth is not a new mandate for the Jewish tradition as reflected in the admonition of the Torah:

The land must not be sold beyond reclaim, for the land is Mine; you are but strangers resident with Me.
Throughout the land that you hold, you must provide for the redemption of the land (see: Leviticus 25:8-19).

However, I have chosen to complete my remarks with a disarmingly engaging child-like metaphor that points out that this is no longer a problem of some future generation. It is our problem, impacting our lives and those of our children and grandchildren.

The Lorax, Dr Seuss' mythical character, lives in a bucolic setting that is being threatened by the overly ambitious and enterprising Once-ler who harvests all the Truffula Trees to manufacture clothes. Unable to stop the inevitable, the Lorax exits, leaving behind a pile of rocks, all that remains of his decimated world; the word "unless" is written on the top. Once-ler, now living in the boarded-up remains of his once proud empire, says to a child who has surveyed

the destruction: “But now, now that you’re here,/ the word of the Lorax seems perfectly clear,/ UNLESS someone like you/ cares a whole awful lot,/ Nothing is going to get better./ It’s not!”

On Yom Kippur, we are challenged to care by choosing life. It is a choice we must make while there is still time before the irreversible tipping point when earth’s ability to heal itself spins out of control into the abyss. You can change your habits and embrace a greener lifestyle if you care a whole awful lot. Something can get better before everything is not. On this day of requesting forgiveness, I ask you to make one simple pledge to save just one watt. Amen!