

Come to the Rescue of our Cosmic Oasis

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Abstract: "An ecological nightmare of our own making looms on the horizon. If it is not suffering already, our planet will do so eventually and we along with it. This earth is urgently in need of a healing that we alone can provide"

Today we celebrate our New Year of 5767. In the tradition of our Rabbis, today is also *Yom Harat Olam*, the birthday of the world, the anniversary of creation. I think it appropriate on such a day to express sympathy for Pluto. It can't be easy to be demoted from a planet to a dwarf!

The story is told that a renowned nuclear physicist, a winner of the Nobel Prize, was once walking with a companion along the seashore when he saw a beautiful crustacean. The scientist picked it up, examined it cautiously and then carefully put it back precisely where he found it. The scientist's companion asked him why he replaced it so exactly. The scientist replied, "Perhaps I have already tampered too much with the universe."

In this era of heightened ecological concern – when the threat of an imminent environmental catastrophe pervades our media and our movies -- we must not fail to talk about climate change, global warming, and humanity's degradation of the environment.

Leonard Fine, the great social action activist, observes, "The earth we inhabit is in danger; the skies and the seas, the forests and the rivers, the soil and the air, are in peril. And with them, humankind itself is threatened. As earth's fullness has been our blessing, so its pollution now becomes our curse; as the wonder of nature's integrity has been our delight, so the horror of nature's disintegration now becomes our sorrow."

The earth – our earth -- is getting warmer and a warmer world will make extreme weather more frequent and more deadly. The heating up of the earth's atmosphere, surface, and seas will cause ferocious hurricanes, and shift precipitation patterns to create killer heat waves, searing drought, and devastating floods. A hotter world will cause sea levels to rise, cause low-lying coastal cities to be submerged like Atlantis, extend north the reach of equatorial diseases like malaria and West Nile virus, and bring about the extinction of many species.

This description of global warming is not a theoretical abstraction. Climate change is already happening: 2005 was the hottest year on record according to NASA. The earth's mountain glaciers and vast polar ice shelves – in the arctic, in Greenland, and in Antarctica -- are melting at an alarming rate. Both Europe and China experienced unprecedented flooding last year. And of course, here there was hurricane Katrina.

While some continue to attribute climate change to natural variations in solar output, the near universal consensus in climate science is that global warming – the heat trapped in by rising concentrations of carbon dioxide, methane, and other gas emissions creating a greenhouse effect – is real, it is man-made, and it is a serious problem. It's time to stop scoffing and to quit poo-hooing global warming. Global warming presents a genuine threat to the quality of life that our children, our grandchildren, and our great-grandchildren will experience on this planet.

Thousands of years ago, humanity had no choice but to contend with the formidable powers of nature. Thousands of years later, nature now has to defend itself from us – from the emissions we produce from smokestacks, tailpipes, and burning forests. “For the first time a species has the power to render this planet uninhabitable, either cataclysmically or incrementally” (Fine).

What does Judaism, our ancient wisdom tradition, teach us about how to live responsibly with nature? A Jewish environmental ethic certainly begins with profound reverence for all creation and a deeply held conviction that the earth does not belong to us but to God. As it's written in Psalm 24, “The earth is Adonai's and all that it holds...”

What then is our place in God's creation? Our tradition teaches that humanity is the pinnacle of creation. A Talmudic story compares creation to a great banquet. And why did God create humanity last in the order of creation? Because humanity is the banquet's guest of honor (b.t. Sanhedrin 38a). So too, Psalm 8 expounds, “What is man that you have been mindful of him...that you have made him little less than divine and adorned him with glory and majesty...”

But what about the book of Genesis that calls upon humanity to “master” the earth and to “rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth” (Gen. 1:27-28)? Does our prominent role in creation imply that humanity is superior to the natural world or that humanity should be the measure of all things?

To this question the Talmud offers a second and rather humbling explanation of why humanity was created last. “Our masters taught: for what reason was man created on the eve of the Sabbath? So that in case his heart grew proud, one might say to him: even the gnat preceded you in the order of creation.” Rather than conferring entitlement upon humanity, our Jewish sacred tradition has understood our unique God-like capabilities --“embodying the highest form of consciousness on this planet” -- to mandate a profound responsibility to love and to care for nature and for all creation.

Thus the first premise of a Jewish environmental ethic is that the earth belongs to God and we are no more than tenants on this planet. Once the lease is up, God expects the apartment to be left in at least the very same condition we found it, if not better.

The second premise is our God-given responsibility of human stewardship over the earth. The book of Genesis speaks to this. “The Lord God took the man and placed him in the garden of Eden, to till it and tend it” (Gen. 2:15). God put us here to serve and protect creation, “to till it and tend it.”

These biblical convictions of environmental responsibility were converted in subsequent generations by our Rabbis and medieval sages into legal principles and concrete rules of action.

The most important Rabbinic principle of Jewish environmental ethics is *baal tashchit*, “you may not destroy.” The Rabbis employed this principle to limit our use of creation to necessary and legitimate human benefit and to forbid the exploitation or needless destruction of nature.

Our Jewish sacred texts of Mishnah and Talmud provide us with the broad outlines of a contemporary Jewish ecological approach: human needs must be counterbalanced against the needs of nature. Human needs are privileged. But nature has rights too. Our relationship to nature should be characterized by restraint, humility, and non-interference.

“In the hour when the Holy One blessed be He created the first man,” says Koheleth Rabbah, a Jewish sacred text from the 3rd/4th century, “he took him and let him pass before all of the trees of the garden of Eden, and said to him: ‘See my works, how fine and excellent they are! Now all that I am going to create, I created for your sake. Think about this and do not corrupt and desolate my world; for if you corrupt it, there will be no one to set it right after you.’”

So we are the heirs to a majestic tradition of stewardship. But in this responsibility to the earth, have we not been derelict? As the earth’s designated stewards, have we demonstrated much more than indifference to climate change, to the loss of biological diversity, to the mishandling of nuclear and chemical waste? What will it take to prod us into action to save our cosmic oasis? Do we need to witness more hypodermic needles and dead whales on the beach? Must we see with our own eyes the rape of the rainforests or feel the absence of extinct species? Must we breathe the air where the skies are always brown or drink the highly polluted water there?

If we wish to save our cosmic oasis we must directly address the struggle between our lives as consumers and our lives as environmentally responsible citizens of the world. Our country, with 5% of the world’s population, produces 25% of the world’s total greenhouse gas emissions. The average American is responsible for about 15,000 pounds of carbon dioxide emissions into the atmosphere each year. The pollution we manufacture not only hurts our own health. We fail to appreciate how it also sails around the globe, endangering the health of men, women, and children in the developing world. So too, the toxic emissions from China’s coal-burning power plants and factories present an enormous threat to the health of everyone on this planet.

In order to slow down global warming, we must recognize that each one of us is a polluter. Since everyone has a carbon footprint, each one of us is a potential cause of global warming. In order to slow down global warming, each of us needs to reduce our carbon emissions. We need to make life-style changes to meet the objective of living a carbon neutral life.

Where do we start? By reducing emissions – emissions from our homes and our cars; by reducing emissions through consuming less and conserving wisely. Where do we start? We need

a new ethic guiding our life-style choices and relationship with the natural world. And that principle needs to be one of *anavah*, humility, and *baal tashchit*, “you may not destroy.”

But what if, out of apathy or paralysis, we allow the present course to continue? What if, quite bluntly, we simply don't care about the hurtful impact of our life styles on the health and the quality of life of those living in other parts of the world? Then we will suffer the consequences of our poor choices. For in the biosphere to which we belong, there is no cause without consequence (Swartz).

In Hebrew, the word for humanity is *adam*, which is where we get the Adam of Adam and Eve. The Hebrew word for the earth comes from the very same Hebrew root. It is *adamah*. *Adam* and *adamah*. We and the earth are intimately connected and interdependent. Our abuse of the natural world is tantamount to self-destruction.

“If we can hear the words from Sinai” writes my dear colleague Rabbi Richard Levy, “then love will flow from us and we shall serve all that is holy with all our intellect and all our passion and all our life. If we can serve all that is holy then in a few months when the raining time begins the rains will flow for us, the grasses will be green, the grains golden like the sun, and the rivers filled with life once more. All the children of God shall eat and there will be enough.

But if we turn from Sinai's words and serve only what is common and profane, making gods of our own comfort and our power, then the holiness of life will contract for us, the raining time will not come for us, and the produce of the earth will not be ours. Or worse, it will be ours unjustly and our acts shall isolate us from the flowing waves of green and gold...” An ecological nightmare of our own making looms on the horizon. If it is not suffering already, our planet will do so eventually and we along with it. This earth is urgently in need of a healing that we alone can provide. “It is not too late to keep our appointment with stewardship” (Fein).

Today is *Yom Harat Olam*, the birthday of the world, the anniversary of creation. Now is the time when all of us need to come to the rescue of the earth, our earth, our cosmic oasis, the only home we have.