

Sermon: Cheshbon HaAdamah: Taking an Accounting of Creation

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Among our family's favorite places to go for vacation is Stowe, Vermont. The smallness of the town, its bike path and scenic beauty, all make it an ideal place for getting away. One highlight of our trips to Stowe is heading to the top of Mount Mansfield. As the tallest mountain in Vermont, its rocky summits offer amazing views stretching as far as the eye can see. One picture that Emily and I particularly love is one of Liana and Jonah – she's about 8 and he's 5 – and they are holding hands as they make their way across the rocky peak.

One important aspect of the Mount Mansfield summit-scape is that it is the home to one of Vermont's only areas of alpine tundra. According to the Green Mountain Club, this rare vegetation is a remnant of the last ice age. The Alpine tundra contains plant life that is rare, fragile, and endangered. And because of this, as you enter the area, there is signage that instructs hikers to walk only on the marked trails, to stay on the rocks, and to avoid the delicate vegetation. Throughout the path, the conservancy has also carefully placed long wooden planks to walk upon as a way of protecting the wildlife.

In the words of one online guidebook: "Good outdoor ethics would suggest that you always try to stick to hard surfaces, but in these rare arctic tundra zones, it is especially important."

The notion of "good outdoor ethics" is very much at-home amidst Jewish ethical literature. Arising from a profound sense of awe at Creation, the book of Genesis describes God at the time of creation, not unlike a hiker high atop Mount Mansfield viewing the breathtaking expansive landscape – looking out upon the entirety of the world and declaring it truly 'tov'....so very 'good.' It was probably the ancient Psalmist who said it most succinctly: "La' Adonai ha'aretz u'm'lo'ah." – "The earth is God's.... and its fullness thereof."

According to Torah's narrative, humanity was created to be both part of and apart from all that had been divinely made. The foundational responsibilities placed upon people, again from the Genesis text, were twofold: First, they were called upon to be "ov'dim"... "workers" of the earth – gleaning what they needed for their livelihood and to support the generations to come....and, second – equally importantly, they were to be "shom'rim"... "protectors" of all that had been given to them. In fact, there is an entire category of Jewish law – entitled: "Bal Tashchit" – "Do not destroy" – which was widely interpreted by the rabbis to mean that wasteful destruction of anything in the natural world was strictly prohibited.

The deep connection between people and Creation is boldly highlighted in Torah by the Hebrew. There, the Hebrew word for "human being" is "Adam." While, the word for "earth" is "Adamah." The message is straightforward: Judaism views the destiny of one to be inextricably bound to the destiny of the other. Indeed, in the Torah stories that follow the creation accounts

we consistently find a direct correlation between the behavior of humanity and a response through nature. As God explained to the Children of Israel, should they act as they should, they will receive the rains in their proper measure and season.....their crops shall be bountiful.....and their earthly yield will sustain them. However, according to the text, on those occasions when humanity transgressed, the natural world was caused to release its wrath: the plagues upon Egyptian water, land, animal-life, and air.....the earth opening under the feet of Korach and his followers to swallow them, and, most famously, there is the flood of Noah.

As we know, in this narrative, God calls upon Noah to build an ark that would preserve life amidst a flooded world. Surprisingly, though, for us as readers, when Noah is faced by the destruction of all of humanity, Noah fails to raise his voice in protest - not even to question the divine decree. Such inaction stands in stark contrast to how Noah is described earlier in his story. There, he is said to be an “ish tsaddik” – “a righteous man” - and one who “hit’ha’lech Elohim” – who “walked with God.”

To help clarify our understanding of how a supposedly good man could have failed to act righteously, the rabbinic imagination attempted to save Noah’s reputation through a legend: It is said – they said – that during the time that Noah was constructing the ark, he took his time in doing so – laboring ever so slowly – working for 120 years, in fact – hoping that people would notice what he was doing and ask questions.....that they would listen to his warnings...and that they would change their ways.

I have been thinking a lot, lately, about that 120-year window of warning. About 120 years ago, in 1896, the Swedish scientist, Svante Arrhenius first wrote about the connection between carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere and land temperatures of the earth. From that time onward, leading scientists were mindful of the negative impacts of greenhouse gas emissions. In 1975, a climatologist by the name of Wallace Broecker first published the term: “Global warming.” And it was in 1988, when NASA Scientist James Hansen famously testified before the US Senate that human caused warming of the planet was underway. The following year, in 1989, the United Nations established the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change – the IPCC – a body of hundreds of the world’s top scientists charged with periodically providing international policy makers with accurate scientific information that would inform decision-making.

From 1989 to today, the IPCC – along with many other US and international meteorological bodies – has continued to do the critical work of recording the state of the planet’s environment, analyzing data, and reporting their results.....all in the hopes that society will review its findings and heed necessary warnings.

In much the same manner that, according to the Midrash, Noah’s neighbors observed the ark’s construction....day after day.....year after year....but failed to respond.....it is clear that we, in our own world, have a significant problem.

Some important statistics:

Despite the consistent reports on the dangers of greenhouse gas emissions, the rate of these emissions today is six times higher today than it was in the 1950's. And they are increasing!

Simply stated: greenhouse gases – a combination of Carbon Dioxide, Methane, and Nitrous Oxide - are predominantly caused by the burning of fossil fuels, our growing use of vehicles for transportation, the ways that we use our land for farming, grazing, and forestry, as well as through the industries of manufacturing and construction.

As a result, as Svante Arrhenius predicted, this dramatic rise in greenhouse gas emissions has led to a corresponding rise in global temperatures – with successive decades - beginning in the 1980's, 1990's, 2000's, and now the 2010's – receiving the dubious distinction of being the hottest on record.

In all, since 1900, the earth has warmed approximately by 1 degree Celsius – with the majority of the warming having taken place since 1970 – during the entire lifetime of a number of us. And, again, the temperatures are continuing to rise. A number of prominent scientists predict that if we don't make significant changes soon, by the end of the century, we will reach a 3 or 4 degree Celsius rise. Such an increase in global temperatures, we are told, would be catastrophic – impacting hundreds of millions of lives. Yet, that is the path that we seem to be on.

But one need not be a reader of statistics to note the differences in our climate already, with only a single degree of warming.

Alan Sano owns and operates Sano Farms, a 4,000 acre farm in Firebaugh, California. This past August, he shared the following: “Many farmers probably haven't read the new report from the United Nations warning of threats to the global food supply from climate change and land misuse. But we don't need to read the science. We're living it. Here in the San Joaquin Valley, one of the world's most productive agricultural regions, there's not much debate anymore that the climate is changing. The drought of recent years made it hard to ignore. We had limited surface water for irrigation and the groundwater was so depleted that land sank right under our feet. Temperatures in Fresno rose to 100 degrees or above on 15 days last month, which was the hottest month worldwide on record, following the hottest June, ever. The previous July, temperatures reached at least 100 degrees on 26 consecutive days, surpassing the record of 22 days in 2005....The heat is hard to ignore when you and your crew are trying to fix a broken tractor or harvest tomatoes under a blazing sun. As the world heats up, so do our soils, making it harder to get thirsty plants the water they need.”

Sanos continues: “Warm winters also threaten the Sierra Nevada snow pack, which provides 30% of California's water. We had a good wet winter this year, but a few years ago the snowpack was at its lowest level in 500 years. We also worry that last year's record CA wildfires, which blanketed the valley with smoke for weeks, might become the new normal. I don't get sick much, but that summer I had a hard time breathing because of the congestion in my lungs.”

What Mr. Sano reports is only the tip of the proverbial iceberg when it comes to signs that we are at the beginning stages of a global climate crisis.

On Rosh Hashanah, we traditionally engage in “Cheshbon HaNefesh” – taking an “accounting of our souls” in order to move us to improve ourselves. This year, the cry of the shofar.....giving voice to the cry of creation itself.....calls upon us to engage in “Cheshbon HaAdamah” – taking an ‘accounting on the state of our increasingly troubled planet.’

Around the world, we are witnessing rampant wildfires, record levels of heat, more and more regions experiencing drought and famine, growing amounts of farmlands in jeopardy, the loss of countless habitats and eco-systems, dramatic melting of arctic ice and corresponding rises in ocean levels....as well as more intense, frequent, and slower moving storms. These phenomena – not surprisingly – are changing lives....and taking lives. They are adding stress to already resource-challenged societies – increasing the likelihood of political strife and causing people to flee their countries as refugees.

If the forecasting of the experts is correct, the situation is only going to worsen – becoming critical for millions - over the coming decades. In the words of climate expert, Joseph Romm: “It is entirely possible, if not likely, that climate change will transform the lives of your children more than the Internet has.”

According to a recent survey from the Yale Program on Climate Communication, six in ten Americans are now either “alarmed” or “concerned” about the phenomenon of global warming. Those who are “alarmed” – some 29% of respondents - state that they are both fully convinced of the reality and seriousness of climate change and are taking individual action to address it. Those who are “concerned” – some 30% of respondents – say that they are also convinced that global warming is happening and that it is a serious problem, but they have not yet engaged the issue personally.

Among my confessions for these Holy Days is that, while I thought that I knew about global warming and about how serious the situation was..... I truly had no idea. Over the years, I had certainly read an occasional article, heard the voices of those expressing concern and made a number of environmentally responsible decisions. However, as I now reflect upon it, for a variety of reasons, I also passively chose to think that what I was doing – what we were doing – was somehow going to be enough....that somewhere along the line society would – on its own – right this ship. I was wrong. So much more needs to be done and it needs to be done now. I am grateful to two members of our TBS community: Joel Golden and Michael Bailit, leaders of our TBS Environmental Action initiative, for inviting me to look more deeply into what is unquestionably for us - and for our children and our grandchildren - an issue of existential importance.....and, as I see it.....an issue of Jewish ethical imperative.

According to a report issued last October by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, in order for us to avert the worst consequences of climate change, quote: “rapid and far reaching actions” will be necessary. In the simplest possible terms, the IPCC has recommended an expansive international effort be undertaken to cut greenhouse gas emissions in half by around 2030 and then to boldly move to a goal of zero emissions by 2050.

Such an enormous enterprise will unquestionably require a significant societal response. And, it would be naïve to believe that such a goal can be achieved without international political will and wherewithal. This said, we cannot merely look to others if we hope to adequately meet this challenge. Jewish tradition is clear in commanding that each of us must do all that we are able to bring about positive change.

The Israeli writer, Amos Oz speaks powerfully to this call for individual action – even, perhaps especially, when confronted with a challenge whose scale and magnitude are daunting.

He wrote.

“I believe that if one person is watching a huge calamity, let’s say a conflagration, a fire, there are always three principle options:

1. Run away, as far away and as fast as you can and let those who cannot run burn.
2. Write a very angry letter to the editor of your paper demanding that the responsible people be removed from office with disgrace. Or, for that matter, launch a demonstration. (Or)
3. Bring a bucket of water and throw it on the fire. And if you don’t have a bucket, bring a glass, and if you don’t have a glass, use a teaspoon. Everyone has a teaspoon. And yes, I know a teaspoon is little and the fire is huge but there are millions of us and each one of us has a teaspoon.”

Experts in the science of climate change offer a number of concrete and impactful actions for each of us to consider.

A non-exhaustive list includes:

First...because travel – by auto and airplane – is a significant contributor to climate change – one step that we can each take is to more thoughtfully consider how we travel – how many cars we use to move people from here to there – whether we are idling our vehicles unnecessarily when waiting in pick-up lines – whether we really need to fly to our destination or if we might find another mode of transport. According to one study, even a 10% reduction in our air travel would make a difference.

Because global food production and consumption is also a significant contributor to carbon emissions, we are told that amongst the most consequential changes that we can make is in how we eat. For example, according to the National Resources Defense Council, a staggering 40% of all food in the U.S. is wasted. Reducing our food waste is a simple, yet meaningful action that we can all take at our kitchen tables. As well, because the grazing of cattle – a growing industry worldwide – yields the release of powerful greenhouse gases – we are told that reducing our consumption of meat and leaning towards a more plant-based diet can make an important difference. This need not necessarily mean going vegan or becoming a vegetarian – though it can. It may, however, mean more thoughtfully considering our mealtime menu – and occasionally making a non-meat choice. Writer Jonathan Safran Foer makes the more dramatic

dietary recommendation of not eating any animal products before dinner. A small price, he says, to pay in return for a healthy planet.

Another tangible difference we can make is by considering more sustainable energy sources and resources when looking to purchase our cars and trucks.....in lighting, heating and cooling our homes.....and by ensuring the greatest energy efficiency of our homes and places of work.

To date, the most effective single tools that we have to reduce the amount of CO2 already in the atmosphere are trees. One significant act that we can take is either physically planting a tree or several trees or supporting organizations worldwide that engage in meaningful forestation work. The Jewish National Fund, for example, is one such organization that is close to the hearts of many of us.

Another tool that we have at hand that empowers our addressing the needs of the environment is the purchase of what-are-called carbon offsets. Carbon offsets are dollars that we donate that compensate for personal carbon emissions that we are not able to cut. The contributions that we make support organizations that are working to address climate change. Determining your own carbon offset amount and making a contribution is simple. One very good online tool to help you get started can be found at www.cooleffect.org.

One other important and meaningful way to engage in the ethics of environmental stewardship is by simply learning more about the subject - growing in our own understanding of the issue - and then by speaking about it with family, friends, and neighbors - as we are right now. Two outstanding and accessible books that I highly recommend are: Climate Change: What Everyone Needs to Know by Joseph Romm....and We Are the Weather: Saving the Planet Begins at Breakfast by Jonathan Safran Foer.

There are, of course, other important actions, that we may take. And, as we know, we need not commit to doing everything in order to fulfill our Jewish responsibility of being “Shomrim”.....”Guardians.” However, our Sages remind us that how we respond to our mandate to preserve our planet will impact not only our own generation, but those that will follow.

Last month, in Iceland, dozens of academics, environmentalists, and members of the public joined Iceland’s Prime Minister, Environment Minister, and former President at a gathering at the site of the former OK Glacier. At one time, the massive dome shaped glacier had been iconic in size and scope. However, by 2014, so much of the ice had melted that it could no longer be considered a glacier. Those who had gathered at OK’s site, had come to participate in a ceremony. In a sense, it was a funeral - a memorial service acknowledging the passing of what had been.

At the conclusion of the ceremony a special plaque – attached to a stone that had rested at the top of the glacier - was dedicated. Written in both Icelandic and English, the plaque reads: “A letter to the future: OK is the first Icelandic glacier to lose its status as a glacier. In the next 200 years, all our glaciers are expected to follow the same path. This monument is to acknowledge we know what is happening and what needs to be done. Only you know if we did it.” At the bottom of the plaque is the date: August 2019 and the carbon dioxide level in the atmosphere at the time:

415 parts per million.

According to one rabbinic legend, it was on Rosh Hashanah that the floodwaters that had tormented Noah's world, fully subsided. It was – we are told - a time of hope and possibility - a time when all life that had been preserved would commit to building together for their future.

On this Rosh Hashanah – on the day that is traditionally considered the birthday of Creation itself – we too are called upon to consider the future of Creation itself.....and step forward in fulfillment of our responsibility to preserve that which has been entrusted to us.

May we respond to this call with the urgency that it deserves.

May our efforts – individually and collectively - inspire even greater and more widespread action by others.

And may we be granted the courage of conscience, the strength of will, and the creativity of spirit that will enable us to help ensure a wondrous, blessed world for us and for our children after us.

Cain Y'hi Ratzon.....Be this God's will. Amen.