

Global Climate Strike Speech for Manchester Center, Vermont event

Rabbi Michael M. Cohen

“Who is the slayer? Who the victim? Speak.” 25 hundred years after Sophocles wrote those words our global ecosystem asks the same stark questions.

“Who is the slayer?” Us. “Who is the victim?” Us and life on earth. Speak. That is why we are gathered between the Green and Taconic Mountains in the Battenkill Watershed, with thousands worldwide. For a more biocentric orientation we should add Battenkill Watershed to our addresses. Our name, our street address, next line Battenkill Watershed, and then Manchester Center, Vermont.

Why are we gathered? To strengthen our resolve? For those who wish to be here but because of the reality of economics could not leave their job? For those who support this endeavor but decided for other reasons they could not be here? To send a message to those who do not believe humans cause Climate Change; Climate Cancer? To send a message to our President and Congress who are taking us down a dangerous, lethal path? We are here for all of these.

Our home, a small, fragile, magnificent oasis in the vastness of the universe. The Psalmist (24: 1-2) writes, “The earth belongs to the Lord, and everything on it.” The earth is on loan. When someone loans us something we take special care of it.

Care for the environment can also be a mirror. If we are kind and compassionate to the land, we will be more kind and compassionate to each other; and if we are kinder to each other we will be kinder to the land. This is so true in how we should treat and approach those who differ with us on this vital issue.

We understand it is scientifically proven Climate Change results from humans. However, scientifically proven is too often misunderstood to mean all scientists agree. Science has never operated that way. There is always a small voice of dissent within science; we do not make decisions based on those voices. Elevating that voice of scientific dissent to a level it has no right to demand corrupts the scientific process. Science is the best understanding of a particular phenomenon at a particular moment in human history.

Jacob Bronowski wrote, “All knowledge – all information between human beings – can only be exchanged within a play of tolerance...the realization that all knowledge is limited. Science is a very human form of knowledge. We are always at the brink of the known; we always feel forward for what is to be hoped. Every judgment in science stands on the edge of error and is

personal. Science is a tribute to what we can know although we are fallible.” (The Ascent of Man, p.174)

We are not mistaken - too much is at stake. By inference, Bronowski reminds us not to demonize those we disagree with; we must eliminate such toxicity from our discourse. Where does this leave us?

1. My students know about Acland's conflict resolution theory of Positions, Interests, and Needs which states when positions between parties seem too far to bridge we look for shared interests and needs and begin there. And they do exist.
2. That process is not short; at the same time we must act upon our convictions within the concentric circles of our lives strategically and effectively. We begin with ourselves and our families, and then our friends and community; followed by this Green Mountain State, the United States and our shared planet. Elise Boulding reminds us to be active responsible members of a “global civic community.” Our most impactful efforts should focus on large scale changes.

Human beings are a family, with the potential and complexities that come with being a family. We look for guidance. A source of guidance for me, of many sources, secular and religious, are the Five Books of Moses. In Genesis we read, “Fill the earth and conquer it,” (1:28) and, “cultivate it and guard it.” (2:15) My guess is we are more inclined to the second verse. The theological Rav Soloveitchik says we humans encompass both and we cannot escape that. Elaborating Rabbi Johnathan Sacks writes, “What is distinctive about humans as a species is precisely our godlike powers of dominating nature and exercising control of the forces that shape the physical world. This is a matter of fact, not value... Genesis 2, by contrast, is about morality and responsibility. It tells us about the moral limits of power. 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.”

In the same piece he reminds us that the word cultivate in Hebrew, *le'ovdah*, is related to the word servant. That is to say we are not the master of the environment, we are its servant. Our master the earth is calling us; it is time to listen.

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