

This Eden Earth: Rosh Hashanah 5780, Rabbi Ethan Witkovsky at Park Avenue Synagogue

Devil's Lake is about an hour's drive from where I grew up. Nestled in between two mountains it either got its name from the mysteriously deep chasm in its center or due to a misinterpretation of its native American name. As a child though, I thought it was called "devil's" because it absorbed the sins of the local Jews once a year. On Rosh Hashanah my family and others would drive up to the park (*after* services of course) and do tashlich in its crystal-clear waters. Afterwards, we scrambled up the rock cliffs to the top the western mountain and there we sat in scenery inspired self-reflection. For my family the holiday wasn't complete without that trip to the lake and on top of those cliffs I was able to access the spirituality that the prayer book hadn't yet revealed. Rosh Hashanah, the celebration of the creation of the world, for us, involved being out in the world itself and those memories are at my core today.

As I reflect on my youth, I wonder what memories of Rosh Hashanah our son Aldo will have and what his experiences of nature will be. They will clearly be different from my own: the last time we brought Aldo to WI he couldn't handle grass that came up past his socks and asked my mother why her house didn't have a lobby. Aside from what it means to raise New Yorker, I worry that Aldo will not have the same *love* of nature that I do. Not because he is growing up in the concrete gardens of Manhattan but because when he is my age, the nature I love might not exist. The more we learn about the negative affects we have on our environment the more I worry about the security of basic human needs, let alone the existence of wilderness to ignite the imagination and sustain the soul.

I want to pass on a love of nature to my children because I inherited it from my parents. On the drive up to Devil's lake my mother, an environmental protection lawyer, pointed out the window to places she was working on: landfills, factories, forests, and as we crossed the Wisconsin river she would update us on her career case: cleaning up Wisconsin's Fox river, which was at one point, the most PCB polluted river in the country. On those car rides and throughout my childhood, she taught me to care about nature and to be aware of its fragility. Unfortunately, the environment's outlook has not improved since those trips through rural WI. Our understanding of how our way of life endangers our future has only grown and serves, like the poetry of the Holidays, to warn us of our precarious position on this Earth.

God has been warning us about environmental destruction since the very beginning when God put us in the garden of Eden and charged us to guard and work the land. The rabbis imagine that God toured Adam through the Garden and said "See how beautiful and wonderful My works are. Everything I have created, I created for you. Be mindful that you do not

devastate My world, for if you ruin it there is no one to repair it after you.”¹ God is treating us like toddlers who want to hold something breakable, “be very careful, hold it with two hands” and just like toddlers... as soon as God’s back is turned we smash the thing against the nearest table. God’s warning, built into the origins of us and of the world, is an explicit reminder that nature is not invincible, we must care about it not only for ourselves but for the future.

I have wanted to speak about environmentalism from the bima for years, but I every time I start to write I stop myself. I worry it will sound too harsh, too specific, too outside of my lane, I don’t want to be too negative or make people too angry. I know this is a hard issue to hear about, but after so many years, I also know the people in this room, that this is a community that can hear hard things and wants to have honest discussions and time is running out to have this conversation. God warned us at the beginning of creation to take care of the planet and we have not done a good enough job.

Today, right now, is the anniversary of that warning! According to tradition, Rosh Hashanah is not the first day of creation when G-d said “let there be light” but rather the sixth day on which G-d created human beings. On *this* day Adam and Eve are placed in Eden and warned by God to not destroy nature. God also warns them that they can eat anything in the garden except the fruit of the tree of knowledge. God has essentially said that there is a part of the natural world that is not open for consumption. Yet Adam and Eve couldn’t stop themselves. Within hours of God’s command, the snake appears and nudges Eve towards eating the fruit and both she and Adam exploit the one resource God told them not to. As they eat, knowledge fills the first humans; including knowledge of what they have done and... feeling shame for the first time, they cover themselves in fig leaves and hide in the Garden until God finds them, punishes them and banishes them from Eden.

We are today, in a situation like the one Adam and Eve faced. We are in danger of losing this planet, this Eden that has sustained humanity for hundreds of thousands of years and we are, like them, in this situation because of our own actions. We have exploited what we shouldn’t and knowledge is filling us of what we have done to the world. Humanity has built an incredible civilization but the way we live is also leading to its destruction. Yet there is hope for us because of the part of the story we are currently in. In the Talmud² the rabbis tell us that in the 9th hour of day Adam and Eve were told not to eat the fruit, in the 10th they ate it. In the 11th they were judged and in the 12th expelled from the Garden. We have eaten the fruit of knowledge; we know what our actions are doing to the planet. As report after report comes out

¹ Kohelet Rabbah 7:13

² BT Sanhedrin 38b

telling us what will happen if we do not change our ways, we can consider ourselves warned. But we haven't been kicked out yet, we right now are in the 11th hour of our story, there is still time before the final judgement is issued.

Adam and Eve's is a cautionary tale for in the 11th hour what did they do? They hid. Driven by shame, regret or perhaps fear, our progenitors tried to hide from the all-knowing God, a definitively futile act. Today we too try to hide. Our hiding looks different than Adam and Eve but it is no less futile. We hide behind many things: behind the imperfections of science, behind the vastness and complexity of the problem and we hide behind our own insignificance in the face of the climate crises.

We hide by finding excuses to not change our behavior when potential solutions come along. They are too hard, too expensive, too time consuming or make us feel awkward amongst our peers. Who wants to be the person schlepping their own reusable utensils or serving vegetarian when the world expects meat. We hide behind the imperfections in the solutions. 'Recycling isn't actually effective, electric cars aren't good either, solar panels cost too much and don't work,' the excuses can be endless. Of course, we want to make sure that when we act it is on solid footing, but we cannot allow the perfect to be the enemy of the good or a flaw in a plan to allow us to simply do nothing. Our rabbis remind us that "You are not obligated to finish the task, but neither are you free to cease from it"³ we don't have to have it all figured out, but we cannot stop trying either. If we wait till the alternatives are perfect, its all gonna be too late.

The sheer immensity of climate change and its repercussions often lead us to stop listening, focus on a different issue or wallow in despair. We hide behind our own smallness when compared to the magnitude of the problem. We become immobilized by enormity. We know that the actions of individuals are negligible in the grand scheme. Yet, while it may be true that this is bigger than straws and plastic bags, that doesn't mean we shouldn't care about the little things as well! Who better than Jews know the importance of small ritual actions! We eat special foods to remind ourselves of the miracle that we have food to eat. We offer prayers to a God we aren't sure listens to remind ourselves to be grateful and reach beyond the limits of our experience. We rest one day a week to remind ourselves that we have the power to stop and simply be in harmony with the world around us. Small rituals of conservation, whatever form they may take whatever their measurable effect on the environment might be, are incredibly important, because they keep the issue alive. Small actions remind us of great power;

³ Mishna Avot 2:16

that we can make a difference. Rituals of sustainability can prepare us to make the changes that will be required of us in the future.

Changes that will need to be made because we are in 11th hour. We know right from wrong, we have been warned of what will happen to us and we know that this time hiding is not an option. Our ancestors give us a clue on how to come out of hiding and move forward. Rabbi Nehemiyah⁴ insists that the fruit that Eve and Adam bit into was a fig and through this he creates a principle: (בדבר שקלקלו בו נתקנו) “In the way they erred they can repair.” Adam and Eve sin by eating a fig, which showed them they were naked and they solved that problem by covering themselves with fig leaves. “In the way they erred they can repair” This principle is true for our situation today, the cause of our sin, the ways we have created our current crisis can also be our salvation.

Our ability to master and shape the world around us is what got us into this mess and re-shaping the world sustainably is what will get us out. Apathy for this issue caused us to stumble, caring about it will stand us upright. Our drive for profit caused us to sin, making sustainability profitable can help us atone. We need to take all the energy and drive we used to build the world we live in and turn it towards saving that world for our children. New technologies drove our consumption and technology can save us. We need to re-harness our powers of creativity and construction as we invest in new infrastructure, new kinds of energy and new ways of making money that don't lead to our demise. Invention and ingenuity have led to our carbon addiction. Invention and ingenuity can be the way we repair what we have done and move sustainably into the future. Those with the wherewithal to do so have a moral obligation to turn their minds, money and manpower to this problem and help think, fund and organize for the people working on green solutions.

In the way they err they can also repair. Our personal choices of what to eat, what to wear, what to buy and how to travel have compounded to add to our fate. We can repair by each of us reconfiguring how we live our lives. We must reevaluate how we consume: what our homes look like, how much waste we create, our wardrobes, our parties... Its not that we can't have nice and convenient things, we simply need to make the sustainability of our lifestyle a factor in our decision making.

Sustainability should be a factor in our social interactions as well. As much as this is a collective effort it may take a few nudges to start the ball rolling. Embrace the idea of being “*that person.*” That eco-person in everyone's life who people hide their plastic water bottles

⁴ BT Sanhedrin 70b

when they see you coming. If you see something say something and help. Abraham, who we read about today, was known as Haivri “the Hebrew” which means “on the other side.” It was an epithet given to him⁵ because in the matter of idolatry he stood on one side of the issue and the whole world stood on the other. When a Jew knows something is right and just it is our job to stand up for it, even if we are standing against the entire world. Yet, just like Abraham, if we stand up for what is right and keep pushing our family, friends, businesses and institutions towards a greener future, I think we will find we are not standing alone for long.

We are not standing alone even now. There are people everywhere working to address the problems of climate change. Some are dedicating their professional lives to the cause. (My mother’s case on the Fox River worked by the way. The companies who polluted the river paid to clean it up and it is scheduled to be PCB free by next summer.) There are people who volunteer and make sustainability a priority in their busy lives. People in this room who are working to help organize their homes, their offices, their friends and this synagogue. And of course, there are children. The next generation knows they are fighting for their very lives. It was a 16-year-old who had the courage to speak at the UN and admonish world leaders for their failure to act. It was children who organized last week’s Climate Strike for some 4 million people worldwide. At the NY rally, I saw many PAS teens in attendance and this synagogue was a proud member of the Jewish Coalition that backed it.

If we are looking for steps on the path to sustainability. Perhaps we again need look no further than Adam, Eve and Eden. Their story follows a specific order: first they got knowledge, then they covered themselves and then began creating a new world outside of Eden. We too can follow their lead. We need knowledge and must keep reading and raising awareness of what is happening to our planet. We need to cover ourselves, that is to say get our houses in order and make sure that we are doing what we can, large and small, to mitigate our own footprint. We must, of course, also be a part of larger efforts of action and advocacy that endeavor to change the way we live our lives for sustainable consumption and growth.

For our part, I promise that this synagogue will care about climate change because we are Jews and because we must. We will educate on both the scientific and religious underpinnings of environmentalism. We will work to get our own house in order and make sure we are doing our part internally. We may also, if opportunities arise, get involved in movements and actions larger than ourselves. These are the only ways anything might change for the

⁵ Bereishit Rabbah 42:1

better. As the most important issue facing Jews, or any humans, right now this is the specific issue we need to care about, it is in our lane and it is too important to not get involved.

We have sinned, there is no way around that, intentionality is immaterial. We have eaten the fruit and we know that the judgement is coming. We cannot hide, cannot stop learning or stop trying to do something. It will be hard. The prospect of climate change and its effects on our society are paralyzingly abstract and terrifyingly dire. And yet there is hope. We still have the power to make things better. When she teaches my mother often uses a quote that is either a Kenyan proverb or from the environmentalist Wendell Barry: “We do not inherit the world from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children.” The midrash tells us that when God offered Israel the Torah God demanded that they provide guarantors. “our ancestors will guarantee for us” they replied, relying on the merit of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to vouch for them. God rejects this. “Our prophets then shall be our surety” they said hoping that the struggle of others who fought for justice would count for them but God again rejects. Finally, they said “our children will be our guarantors.” God was delighted and said these indeed are worthy but remember that if you do not live up to our bargain the debt shall fall to them.⁶

We cannot rely on the merits of those who came before nor can we rely on the efforts of a few prophets to save us. This is about paying off some of the debt we are passing to our children. It is no accident that the very next line after Adam and Eve leave Eden speaks of Eve giving birth. We are reminded that the expulsion from Paradise was not the end of the story, in fact it was the beginning. Adam and Eve did not give up; they built human society with pains in labor and by the sweat of their brow. They did this for us, and we have inherited a fantastic world both the human and the wild. It is our job now to put ourselves in Adam and Eve’s shoes, to think of ourselves not as the current owners of the world but as the ancestors of the next 100 generations. Everything we do should be with them in mind. We have the power and knowledge to do this, we can make things right. It is now our task to endure pains and sweat as we labor to build a new sustainable world not for us but for our children.

⁶ Shir Hashirm Rabbah 1:4