

Rosh HaShanah Morning 2019 / 5780
Rabbi Mark Cohn
For the love of the earth!

LOVE OF THE EARTH. It's that simple. Love the earth. That love is not an emotional love or a romantic love. It is about the kind of love as we are commanded in Torah - whereby love is about loyalty, obligation, and commitment. And no where is it clearer than in the section of Torah just read in which we are explicitly told:

L'ovdah u'lshomrah.
To serve and to guard the Creation.

Translated sometimes as to till and to tend or to cultivate and to keep.

But the Hebrew is far more instructive. The words in Hebrew speak to serving and working - the same root letters as the Hebrew word for the divine service offered in the sanctuary of old. And the same root letters as the Hebrew word for how we are to observe Shabbat. Would we treat the Temple of old or this temple as we do the earth? Imagine what the sanctuary would look like!

Taking care of the earth is at the core of what it means to be human. How can I be so bold in making that claim? Because it is the first job description we have in Torah and it is spoken to the first Human created.

And while we have a panoply of concerns for humanity today - at the end, beginning, and middle of the day NONE of them matter as much as the earth. Nothing. Nothing matters as much as concern for the earth because there is but one earth - and as the rabbis of old teach - "When God created the first human beings, God led them around the Garden of Eden and said: 'Look at my works! See how beautiful they are—how excellent! For your sake I created them all. See to it that you do not spoil and destroy My world; for if you do, there will be no one else to repair it.'" (Midrash Kohelet Rabbah, 1 on Ecclesiastes 7:13)

You have heard me speak on care of Creation countless times before. I've had people signing up to get rain-barrels and commit to buying shade-grown coffee. We've discussed solar panels and polar bears; we show movies here twice/month through our award-winning Temple Emanuel Environmental Movement movies.

"Environment is central, Rabbi Mark, we get it." Really? Do you? Do I?

I want you to think about the following.
A woman - a young woman - she is a late teen / early 20-something.

She escapes from the Nazis who are advancing on her part of Poland. Everyone around her - family included - shrugs over the Nazis. They believe the threats are real and they believe that death will ensue in case they do nothing.

But what can they do?
Where could they go?

The young woman decides to flee. She will head to America. She believed the threat to be real and she realized she would have to act to preserve her life. Oh, and ... she had shoes given to her by her younger sister - literally she gave her her shoes. Without shoes the older sister wouldn't have been able to leave. "You are so lucky to be leaving," were the last words her younger sister spoke. The younger sister didn't have the freedom to leave but she knew her sister with shoes, now, was lucky and smart to leave.

That young woman with the shoes and the will and foresight to leave Poland survived. Jonathan Safran Foer, important American Jewish novelist of today, is her grandson. He's alive because she believed something and acted accordingly.

The rest of his grandmother's family - and thus his family - died. They died in Poland. They died because of the Nazis. They died because they believed but without changing, willingly, or with the freedom to change, their circumstances - it didn't matter that they believed. They still died. They actually were murdered. And the murderous blood is on the hands and in the hearts of the murderers but their failure to act - the world's failure to act - left millions of our people and others as well - dead.

WE DO NOT HAVE THE TIME ANY LONGER TO SAY WE BELIEVE IN CLIMATE CHANGE BUT NOT CHANGE THE WAY WE LIVE AND THINK WE WILL CONTINUE TO LIVE THE WAY WE ARE CURRENTLY AND EXPECT TO BE SAFE - OR LIVE SAFELY - 20, 30, 50, 100 YEARS FROM NOW.

It is that simple.
And we can say we love the earth but do our actions reflect that love consistently?

I am hugely guilty of a disproportionately negative impact on the environment.

The worst thing I do: flying. I fly. I'm on a plane on average once/month maybe once every other month. THAT'S AN ENORMOUS IMPACT.

My coffee pods, the fertilizer on my lawn, my pool (don't even get me started). I love to be Mr. Earth and my proudest moment was when the Winston-Salem Journal dubbed me Eco-Rabbi. Did you know that if every person on the earth lived the way Americans live, we would need four earths to have a sustainable living

situation? If every person on earth lived the way the people of Bangladesh live, all of humanity would only need a continent the size of Asia to accommodate our needs?

So what do we do? People get all excited: “Eliminate plastic straws!!”

I’m all for paper straws and not plastic. Or better yet - drink from a cup with a straw! But how about instead of applauding Starbucks for getting rid of plastic straws and creating better lids - they changed from all those massive plastic cups? And it’s only meaningful if Dunkin’ Donuts and McDonalds and Burger King and Hardees and 7-11 and QM and - and everyone begins to make monumental change.

Straws are lovely to eliminate. But let’s face it - with the massive growth in China of a middle class that wants to live according to American standards; with industries like NASCAR that use a remarkable amount of resources for a frivolous competition and operate with unabashed disregard to reducing our carbon footprint; and with blatant disregard by leaders in our government for preserving and doing necessary upkeep for the national treasures that are our National Parks, getting rid of straws is like arranging the deck chairs after the Titanic hit the iceberg. Putting our recycling into single-stream bins like we have in Winston-Salem does more good to assuage our guilt for all the plastic we consume than it does for the environment.

I will continue to recycle and I will continue to drink without a straw. But we need to do SIGNIFICANTLY more.

Hazon, known as a Jewish lab for sustainability, has dubbed 5780 as a year to do earth teshuva.

Remember that teshuva, repentance, is about acknowledgment/acceptance; repair; change. It is the AR”C of repentance and we do it for ourselves with regards to individuals and now it is time to do it for the earth.

It is not okay to see the Amazon burning and not change our ways. And it is not okay to say that you/we believe something and not change our ways. Our behaviors have unintended consequences that adversely affect billions of innocent lives. I don’t believe the meat industry wanted to hurt the world but now that we know the disastrous impact of the livestock and poultry industries on the planet, we are wrong not to change our eating habits. The meat industry contributes more to greenhouse gases than all the autos and trucks in the world!

It is not okay to see how the poorer among us suffer disproportionately at the hands of the activities of the northern hemisphere and not change our ways. The devastation from Hurricane Dorian this past month hit a poor island and coastal residents especially hard. Island nations and coastal residents across the globe are

feeling the impact of climate change first and foremost from our decisions to live the lifestyle we have been over the last 100+ years. Our precious Israel is especially endangered as the Negev creeps north, populations increase, and increased heat adversely drives terror and anger.

The story of JSF's grandmother is gripping.
Her story is one we have heard many times and each time is chilling.

But it falls apart as a metaphor, for me, because she had a chance to do something that could immediately effect her (potential) children and grandchildren. She changed her ways; she was lucky to have somewhere to run, and it positively shaped her future. We could change our ways and should and must change our ways BUT we actually don't know the outcome.

I understand what JSF is trying to say but his grandmother had a place to escape to. If a smoker gives up smoking or vaping - there are safe places for him/her to wind up in and a healthier future nearly guaranteed. If the gun industry and our government worked to reduce available armaments we could reduce gun deaths in this country.

We have only one earth. It's not as if we can pick up and move somewhere and say - oh, I'll live better here. I could give up every drop of meat, commit to only riding my bike for transportation (which would be a long ride to CA), and never water my lawn again. But all of that will not save the planet when Disneyland hoses down their property every day.

We have but one earth. And decisions in Asia affect us in North America and choices in South America raise temperatures in the Mediterranean.

The fires burning in Saudi Arabia as a result of the drone strikes two weeks ago and the fires burning in the Amazon all summer as a result of clearing the forest for agriculture and livestock ARE MASSIVE in comparison to efforts I make as an individual or we do as a community.

We are in a horrible predicament as what I am telling you is that there is nothing and everything we can do. There is nothing and everything we can do.

I could go cold-turkey on my flying.
But the reality is - given family and life obligations - it is simply very hard to make it happen. But I can work on flying less and being very careful how I travel and where I travel.

Though remarkably a reflection of the first world luxuries I enjoy - whether it is coffee or craft beer, I have to watch my consumption of those two joys because those are

water-intensive industries. Though I don't buy sodas, wine, and stone-washed jeans - you should know they use a tremendous amount of water to create. I don't get credit for not buying them because, I'm not giving anything up by not buying them. The challenge is to find things I like and reduce my consumption. Remember the 3 'R's - the first is the most important: REDUCE. REUSE. RECYCLE.

I vote. This is so very important and complicated - because while the government matters a TON when it comes to setting policies and expectations, my vote matters little compared to the lobbyists at times. So I can vote also to which organizations I give political donations.

But - I also vote every day with my wallet. Every time I make a purchase (or more importantly DON'T make a purchase) I can help decide what products are available. I bought a car thinking it was better for the environment and I still believe it is ... but I realize that the hybrid battery is actually dangerous for the environment. I renovated my house because I had floor boards that were rotting and a kitchen that was sinking. That renovation required a dumpster and the waste was embarrassing. But how much renovation we do - and the products we use to replace the old - we have power in which products we buy and manufacturers will follow our dollars.

Restaurant owners choose to buy things based on their customers. Encourage owners to use alternatives to the deadly styrofoam or even better (regardless of what packaging they use) bring your own container, especially for the leftovers and to-go items (most assuredly drinks!). I do it and the owners realize they just saved money (and waste) on me.

5780 is a time more pressing than any in history to determine how much we actually LOVE the earth. Beneath a banner of "Love the Earth: Let's make the earth green again" we need to do better OR our children and our children's children will not only suffer mightily - but they will hold us accountable.

Yes - there is so much that needs to be done and it is monumental and it is a culture shift. But in the words of Edmund Fleg, "... when despair cries out, the Jew hopes." This from a man who had abandoned Judaism but rediscovered his love of Judaism as he realized that his people and his faith required of him a commitment and a connection - a love - that transcended time and he was writing in 1927 to a yet unborn grandchild about what Judaism meant to him and why being a Jew still mattered, at a time when he had witnessed the ill-effects of antisemitism and despair. "When despair cries out, the Jew hopes."

All is not lost - unless we deem it so. We have a small window of time to begin that culture shift. There are brilliant models of what people are doing right here in NC to Iceland to Israel to Costa Rica to wherever. We don't have an escape planet but we

have this planet. God has given us all the answers and resources we need. If we burn them up, then indeed, as the midrash teaches, "... there will be no one else to repair it."

Aleinu l'ovdah u'l'shomrah.

It is upon us to serve and to guard; to work and to protect God's holy Creation, whose birth we celebrate on this festive day.

As the shofar calls our souls to awaken, allow me to ask you (and know I am asking myself at the same time): How do you relate to the planet or the climate crisis? Which of our behaviors do we know are less than ideal? What are areas in the coming year to which we can commit in order to try to do better? The real question: Are WE willing to be inconvenienced for the good of the environment? Am I willing to travel less, consume less meat and dairy, and allow my lawn to go without fertilizer?

You probably know I write my sermons for me as much as for you. This is remarkably hard work to make the earth more sustainable. But we do not have time any longer to question our obligation.

Where am I or are you and are we willing to make our lives different - even harder - for the betterment of the whole? How do we make changes - knowing that it may make no earthly difference down the line but with the hope that others follow suit and we, at best, HOPE to assure a safer and better future?

Earth Teshuva is about acknowledging our wrongful ways, repairing the ill-effects of our actions, and changing our behaviors to lead to a healing that is global in scale. And it literally starts, right here, right now, with love. And it can begin with your NOT letting your cars idle as we have passed a resolution in the Board in 2012 (!!) - that this is a no idling/idling zone!

We can make sure the Earth sustains us as long as we sustain and honor and serve and guard the Earth!