

Erev Yom Kippur:
Being a Good Steward and Living in Balance with the Earth

The spaciousness of the Days of Awe allows each of us to reflect on the difficulty, pain, and loss we endured throughout the past year, as well the accomplishments, blessings, and joy. It is in this spirit that we anticipate 5779 with a measure of concern and perhaps even dread, but also wonder, anticipation, and excitement for that which the future holds.

This December, Michael and I will be welcoming our first grandchild. We are filled with a sense of awe. I find myself imagining facetime with the baby and saying the *shema* at bedtime. I anticipate the miracle of moments, the places, spaces, and experiences we will explore together. I contemplate the baby reaching *bat* or *bar mitzvah*, realizing that I will be 71 at that *simcha* and that I will be 80 when she or he graduates from college. And in my ruminations, a fear rises up in me, not about the baby's arrival, not about being 71 or 80, but pure panic of that which this world holds for our unborn grandchild. Wendel Berry writes in *The Peace of Wild Things*;

*When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be.*

It is impossible to be present for these Days of Awe and not take stock of our impact on the earth.

This month, *Newsweek* highlighted scientific research, explaining, "Climate Change is on the verge of transforming earth into an unrecognizable, alien landscape. Earth's ecosystems around the globe are falling apart. Scientists have conclusively determined that current climate change is forcing a seismic shift in biodiversity which if unchanged over the next 100 years will create conditions that mirror the state of the planet as it emerged from the last ice age. Research provides an irrefutable wake-up call that we need to act now and to move rapidly towards an emission-free global economy."

On this day of Atonement, we are reeling from the aftermath of Hurricane Florence. Ever more frequently our communities are devastated by a "hurricane of a lifetime", unrelenting floods, earthquakes, droughts, wildfires, water shortages, and a plethora of natural disasters of shocking and debilitating proportion.

Each year 0.25 billion pounds of trash end up in our beautiful oceans. Much of this waste is plastic, creating a blight on nature, choking our waterways and landfills and wreaking havoc with animal life. The United States is the second largest carbon emission polluter. Global Warming is causing our atmosphere to become hotter, more turbulent, and more unpredictable. Sea levels are rising at dangerous and frightening levels.

And as this happens, our President questions the scientific veracity of global climate change, takes steps to relax rules and regulations protecting the environment, and rolls back regulations for coal and power plants. The United States has withdrawn from the Paris Climate Accord, and last week the Trump administration lifted yet more restrictions, this time on methane pollution.

At what point do we insist that our President recognize the scientific truth of global warming? At what point do we insist that the policies of the United States aggressively address this catastrophic trajectory?

Our Jewish tradition teaches us about the importance of caring for the earth, the *mitzvah* of being good stewards, the responsibility of partnering with God. In *Kohelet Rabbah* (Ecclesiastes 7:13) we learn, “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.’”

We are the only species in the world that has the ability to defile and destroy God’s world, but we are also the only species that has the ability to protect, preserve, and repair the planet.

All of us carry and utilize reusable shopping bags. For years I have used compostable products, when opting for disposable plates, silverware and cups. But more recently, I realized that there is no reason for me to have any plastic products in the house. I have made the determination to use glass storage containers, that all garbage liners and zip-lock bags in our home be 100 percent compostable, and that all cleaning products, shampoos, and soaps be sustainably sourced and green with the smallest impact on the earth.

Our tradition teaches that when we do not preserve the environment, we not only destroy life, but we diminish God’s presence in the world. If we truly believe that Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur entail a taking stock, an accountability for where we have been and where we are going, there could be no more pressing topic than the need for living in balance with the earth. This is a human responsibility. This is a Jewish responsibility. This is our responsibility for today

This past summer, Michael and I finally put solar panels on our house. Several times before this summer, we investigated, contemplated, priced out, considered, and weighed the expenditure. It wasn’t easy with five children, college tuitions, weddings, and competing priorities for our savings; each time we considered, we postponed. I’m not proud of this, but I understand, I get it.

While there are those who deny, most of us recognize the catastrophic repercussions of humanity’s footprint upon this planet, but we are confounded and overwhelmed by the enormity of the crisis. Our tradition teaches *Lo alecha hamlacha ligmor, v’lo ata ben chorin l’hibatel memena*; it is not our sole responsibility to solve any given problem, but it is our responsibility for being part of the solution.

We each need to do our absolute best, make the best decisions, and live with the utmost integrity, from the most simple to the most profound. Let us ask ourselves the hard questions: do we each recycle everything that is recyclable in our homes and offices, or do we sometimes find it inconvenient and throw the plastic or paper in the garbage? Do we each fill up a reusable water bottle before leaving the house, or do we buy bottled water during the day? Are we striving for a zero waste existence? Do we shut lights, unplug electronics, carpool, and use public transportation, or do we defer to that which is most convenient? Are we doing all of the big things and all of the small things that we are capable of doing to protect this planet?

Have you ever wondered why a Jew is enjoined to observe *kashrut*? Much more than simply dietary laws, the observance of *kashrut* creates a mindfulness in our personal living. More regularly and more frequently than any other sustained intentional activity in our lives, we eat. Most of us eat at least three times a day. All of us eat socially. We celebrate with food, mourn with food, and nurture with food. We eat to survive, we eat to communicate, we eat for enjoyment, and we eat for comfort. We eat because we are Jewish. *Kashrut* invites us to eat and live with an appreciation for, and mindfulness of, the Sacred in our lives. We human beings are, after all, preoccupied with our own comfort, the consuming instinct to meet our every want and need. It is no small wonder that on this most holy of days, when we hope to go beyond our human limitations, we abstain from eating. The fast is not intended for punishment, rather to minimize self-indulgence and maximize a focus on, and elevation toward, the Sacred.

*I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.*

Kashrut literally means that which is befitting, appropriate, or suitable. We at Congregation Emanuel call it eating with Jewish Consciousness. It provides an invitation and a framework for us as progressive Jews to be mindful of that which we believe and how to approach the world. *Kashrut* closes the gap between that which we profess to believe and how we live. It requires humility, gratitude, and living in balance with the earth and its inhabitants.

So it follows that the Torah forbids us from causing animal suffering as a basic principle of *kashrut*. The laws of keeping kosher dictate that an animal must be slaughtered humanely, without pain and suffering. Sadly, purchasing meat labeled with a “K” or “OU” no longer guarantees that the animal did not suffer. I keep kosher. Indeed for over 50 years I have been a vegetarian. But it was just recently that I made the determination that I would not buy leather products. When I buy shoes, they are fair trade, sustainably sourced, vegan products. If we believe that an animal should be slaughtered without suffering, surely it follows that the same animal should live without suffering.

Realistically, all animals that are raised and slaughtered through factory farming are caused suffering, some radically more and some perhaps less. Factory farming is responsible for crippling air pollution, deforestation, a threat to world food security, and catastrophic fossil fuel usage and carbon emissions. We grow animals in farm factories without respect for their lives.

Instead of generating meat that can sustain us, we engage in gluttony, producing unhealthy, inexpensive meat at unnatural levels.

There is a compelling argument that modern *kashrut* ought to require that all animals from which we harvest meat should live and die locally, humanely, compassionately, and sustainably.

*I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief.*

When we ingest animals that have suffered, we are responsible for their suffering. We assume and absorb that suffering into our very being. To truly live in balance, we ought not afford ourselves the luxury of separating our consumption of animals and animal products from how an animal lived and died.

For most of us, eating meat is a given. It is what we have always done. We think of it as part of Creation, a God-given right. Yet the dream of Genesis and the Garden of Eden is that of peaceful balanced existence. The Creation text suggests that God's initial intention for humankind was that we would be a purely vegan, or at minimum a vegetarian, society; "Behold, I have given to you every herb-yielding seed that is on the surface of the entire earth, and every tree that has seed-yielding fruit; it shall be yours for food." Initially, there is neither mention of, nor permission for, eating animals. We were to be stewards of the earth and its animals, but we were not given sanction to consume them.

All of the major commentators, Ibn Ezra, Maimonides, Nachmanides, Albo, Hirsch, Cassuto, and Leibowitz, concur that God's intention was not that animals be a source of food for human beings. For most of us, we have or have had a strong, even profound relationship with an animal, a dog, a cat, a horse. We love and communicate with our animals. We comfort and respond to them. Who among us was not moved by the images of the Orca Whale this past August? There was no question of the Orca's deep ability to feel as she carried her dead baby for more than 17 days; her profound mourning was apparent. Nahmanides describes animals as living creatures that feel pain and fear death. Animals possess souls; they, like human beings, possess a spark of the Divine.

Only after the flood, after we experience the unrestrained corruption of human kind, are we introduced to the idea of God giving reluctant permission for animal consumption. If your heart lusts for eating animals then "every moving thing that lives can be food for you." This development of animal consumption is described as a concession to human desire and lust. But even then, we are required to be good stewards, to protect the animals, to minimize the pain inflicted upon them. When we consume animals, we are bound by ethical standards. An animal should not suffer in its life, and animal should not suffer in its death. The laws of *kashrut* that forbid the consumption of an animal with its blood demonstrate a recognition of the animal's soul. In the consumption of meat, we are responsible for the animal's life.

The prophetic imagery of Isaiah supports the assertion that a spiritually actualized world is a world devoid of any manner of killing. Ha-Rav Kook suggests that these mystical ideals lay the foundation not only for being in balance, but also for forging peace.

*I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light.*

We have not done enough. It is difficult for us to stay alert and in tune with our responsibilities to one another, to the world. We need a radical idea to bring ourselves closer to living ethically, with responsibility, and in balance with the earth.

Today we are fasting. But what happens tomorrow and on the other 364 days of the year? *Kashrut* is the invitation to an individual and community while responding to basic needs, to remember who we are as Jews, and to stay connected to our highest ideals.

It is really simple and straightforward, and it is exceedingly difficult to do the things that we need to do. Today we have conceded to a society that is disconnected from kindness, compassion, respect, integrity, and truth. We are so consumed and blinded by our immediate needs that we have become complicit in bankrupting the earth and her resources. How do hope to leave the world for our own grandchildren and future generations?

On this Yom Kippur, wherever you are on the scale of consciousness, I implore you to challenge yourself, to extend beyond that which you did last year so as to do your part in healing the world.

What if we always stopped to express gratitude before we ate? What if we prioritized living in balance as we responded to our wants and needs? Could this mindfulness as individuals, and as a community, inform and shape not only our lives but also the world? This is the Yom Kippur invitation to elevate our lives toward the Sacred.

For a time I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.