

EREV ROSH HASHANA 5776

TIKUN TEVEL

Rabbi Gary Bretton-Granatoor

Congregation Shirat HaYam, Nantucket

This sermon began with a light bulb. One can say that a light went off in my head. We all know that the common 100 watt incandescent light bulb is now a thing of the past. As one who has a sensitivity to florescent lights, I was loathe to start replacing light bulbs in my house with CFLs (Compact Florescent lights). Some bulbs I replaced with halogen lights, which reduced the heat necessary to give light (that is measured in watts), but only incrementally. But then the technology of LEDs (Light Emitting Diodes) advanced and as production increased, the prices dropped. So when some light bulbs in my house burned out, and I ran out of my “stash” of stored up 100 watt bulbs, off I went to my local Home Depot to purchase some LEDs. When I realized that the 1100 watts of energy that were expended to provide light in our bedroom when I used incandescent bulbs would now only need 44 watts to get the same amount of lumens, I was “enlightened.” I have now started on a campaign to replace all the bulbs in my house with as many LEDs as possible. I started

to feel a bit smug as I was now doing my bit to reduce global warming.

But the one who really shook things up was Pope Francis, when in June he released an earth shattering (or should I say, an earth repairing) encyclical on Climate Change entitled, *Laudato Si* (Be Praised). With an initial audience of 1.2 billion Catholics for whom this encyclical creates religious obligation and responsibility, millions more see this document as a rallying cry to do something, and to accept responsibility for the created world that we share. In fact, the Pope intended the message for all: "...faced as we are with global environmental deterioration. I wish to address every living person on this planet."

With an even wider audience than Al Gore and his power-point presentations, Pope Francis ties climate change to human impact on the earth, and goes further by describing in detail how this will not just affect our world, but places an even greater burden on the poor and impoverished. "Both everyday experience and scientific research show that the gravest effects of all attacks on the environment are suffered by the poorest." (*Laudato Si* para. 48) It was the Pope who reminded us that the environmental crisis impacts the least amongst us to the greatest degree. Those living on coastal areas, with the seas rising due to ice caps melting, do not have the resources to move. Industrial fishing robs the

livelihoods of those who fish for food, and poor cannot afford bottled and purified water when local water sites are spoiled by pollution and industrial waste.

On Tuesday morning, for our second day of Rosh HaShana, we will read the opening lines of the book of Genesis. In the early chapters we learn that God places humanity as the crown of creation, to have dominion over the earth, but the Pope castigates those who would use this to assert the ability to do whatever one wants with the environment. There are those who cite Genesis as evidence that humanity has “dominion” over the earth that justifies practices like mountaintop mining or fishing with gill nets.

The idea that we humans can do what we want because the Bible says that we were given dominion over the earth, caused the Pope to lash out to the literalists who think this way. “This is not a correct interpretation of the Bible as understood by the Church,” Francis writes. The Bible teaches human beings to “till and keep” the garden of the world, he says. “Tilling’ refers to cultivating, plowing or working, while ‘keeping’ means caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving.

The Jewish sages told the story of a boat with many passengers. One took out a drill and began to bore a hole in the hull. When the other passengers began to protest, the man with the drill

exclaimed – “Why should you care? I am boring a hole under my own seat.”

While the Pope’s encyclical is both comprehensive and universal, Jewish sources are rife with stories and laws which compel us to care for our world. Under the general principle known as “Bal Tashchit” (Do Not Destroy) our Jewish sages taught that Adam (Man) and Adama (Earth) are intertwined. When God created Adam, God led him around all the trees in the Garden of Eden. God said to him, “See how beautiful and praiseworthy all of My works are? Everything I have created has been created for your sake. Think of this, and do not corrupt or destroy My world; for if you corrupt it, there will be no one to set it right after you.

(Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13)

It is not that we have dominion over the earth, but we have the responsibility to care for it – it is our home. Once, while the sage, Honi, was walking along a road, he saw an old man planting a carob tree. Honi asked him: “How many years will it take for this tree to give forth its fruit?” The man answered that it would require 70 years. Honi asked: “Are you so healthy a man that you expect to live that length of time and eat its fruit?” The man answered: “I found a fruitful world because my ancestors planted it for me. So, too, will I plant for my children.” (Babylonian Talmud, Ta’anit 23a)

As this New Year begins, we start a new seven year cycle of working the land for six years and in the seventh year, there is a Shabbat Shabbaton – a complete rest for the land – we call this the Shmitta year. In Israel, the Shmitta has just concluded, to return again in the year 2022. The command is both theological and scientific. The invention of fertilizer is relatively new. If one worked the land constantly, there would be no way to regenerate the necessary nutrients for continued planting. Giving the land a rest allows the balance to be restored and reminds us, that the land is God's.

“Six years shall you sow your field, and six years shall you prune your vineyard, and gather in the produce thereof. But that seventh year shall be a Sabbath of solemn rest, a Sabbath unto the Lord, you shall neither sow your field, nor prune your vineyard.” (Leviticus 25:3-4) Commentary (from TB Sanhedrin): The Holy One, blessed be God, said to the children of Israel: “Sow for six years and leave the land at rest for the seventh year, so that you may know that the land is Mine!” (San. 39a)

In Leviticus 26, the Torah warns us that if we refuse to let the Earth rest, it will “rest” anyway, despite us and upon us – through drought and famine and exile that turn an entire people into refugees.

And this past year, while Israel as a country acknowledged the Shmitta, Steve Gutow and Lawrence Troster (in an op-ed in Jewish Week) point out: Israel is affected severely by climate change. For years there have been worries about disappearing Tel Aviv beaches and a rapidly decreasing agricultural capacity. Now many scientists and global strategists have looked at the rise of ISIS and believe its meteoric growth has been intensified by the extreme drought in the Middle East enticing the people of the region to look to violent radical politics to find some solace to alleviate the agony of their miserable lives. In 2010 Israel pledged to reduce carbon dioxide emissions by 20 percent by 2020. At that time, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said, “The recent dry months, including the driest November in the history of the state, are a warning light to us all that the threat of climate change is no less menacing than the security threats that we face.... In a country that suffers from a severe water shortage, this is an existential struggle”

And the reality that we face each day is that global warming is raising sea levels. We see species of plants and animals that face extinction because we have changed the environment and the distribution of the world’s resources are consumed disproportionately by the wealthy countries to the detriment of the poor.

Believe it or not, there are vocal deniers of the impact of humans in climate change. Even in the halls of congress. In January, The Republican-controlled Senate defeated a measure stating that climate change is real and that human activity significantly contributes to it. Sen. Brian Schatz, D-Hawaii, offered the measure as the Senate debated the Keystone XL pipeline, which would tap the carbon-intensive oil sands in the Canadian province of Alberta. The Senate voted 50-49 on the measure, which required 60 votes in order to pass. “Only in the halls of Congress is this a controversial piece of legislation,” Schatz said.

The chairman of the environment committee, Sen. James Inhofe, R-Okla., is an enthusiastic denier of climate change, saying it is the “biggest hoax” perpetrated against humankind. “The hoax is there are some people so arrogant to think they are so powerful they can change the climate,” Inhofe said on the Senate floor. “Man can’t change the climate.”

Well Senator Inhofe, to quote your least favorite president, “Yes, we can!”

The day after I return from Nantucket, I will join the Pope at the Memorial site for 9/11 tragedy. From there, the Pope will address the United Nations on this critical topic of climate change. In December a summit will be held in Paris to address climate

change. On a macrocosmic level, we hope that the world will heed the Pope's challenge that the international community has not acted enough: "recent World Summits on the environment have not lived up to expectations because, due to lack of political will, they were unable to reach truly meaningful and effective global agreements on the environment." He writes, "the Church does not presume to settle scientific questions or to replace politics. But I am concerned to encourage an honest and open debate so that particular interests or ideologies will not prejudice the common good."

And so I present to you some themes of this High Holiday season, and some ways that we can think about crisis of climate change – and do something about this.

While this morning, we read the Torah reading often read on the Second Day of Rosh HaShana, it is tradition in some places to read about Ishmael and Hagar – refugees expelled from their home, sent into a desert, dying for lack of water. Yet God hears their cries and answers them. We need to hear those who are crying from the pain of a harsh environment, and the millions of climate refugees that are being forced from their land today and in coming years. But on the simplest level, we need to conserve our water – our friends and relatives in California are forced to ration, and some of us keep the tap open while brushing our teeth.

Tomorrow afternoon, we will gather for our annual Tashlich service – where we symbolically cast our sins away into the water. Tashlich offers an excellent opportunity to actually reflect on our relationship with water; while we cast our sins into the water, we should also consider the pollution our society produces; what we are dumping in the water.

All around this island, on every visit thus far, I have seen homes being repaired, renovated and constructed. We should push to build “greener” using recycled materials (so we don’t have to continue to despoil our forests for wood). We should look into solar energy to heat and power our homes. I know that there was an attempt to put up windmills – and they do cause a lot of noise and light pulsation, but there should be ways to harness the power around this island that is already here. I have been in conversation with several religious leaders on this island and in the coming months, they, too, will want to tackle these issues (and some have already started: Rev Linda Simmons of the church whose space we share has suggested several programs to her congregation and the Interfaith Council will also take up the idea that we work together to heal this island, and the world around us).

We in the Jewish community have often called our work at healing the social ills Tikun Olam – to repair the world. But it is time to take on the responsibility of Tikun Tevel – the repair of the earth.

In the Pope's challenge, he reminds us that each and every one of us can and should do simple things to make this world into the world it could and should be: Individuals must act. "An integral ecology is also made up of simple daily gestures which break with the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness," he writes. We should also consider taking public transit, carpooling, planting trees, turning off the lights, turning off the taps, fixing leaky faucets and recycling.

We welcome the Pope's rallying cry – one that has long precedence in our Jewish resources. As this New Year begins the next seven year cycle of the Sabbatical Year – we should ask ourselves what can we do now so that in 2022, when we celebrate the next Shmitta we can celebrate the world as being healthier and safer than the way we find it today. The power to heal the earth is wholly in our hands, And maybe it just starts with changing a lightbulb – and our point of view.

Shana Tova u'mitukah!

N.B. - Nigel Savage and Hazon, the Religious Action Center, Rabbi Daniel Swartz, and Pennsylvania Interfaith Power and Light, and the Vatican Website all contributed to this sermon.