

Rosh Hashanah 5780

Olam

Let me begin with a story:

The Holy Blessed One created the very first human, picked them up and took them to every single tree in the Garden of Eden, one after the other. And the Holy Blessing One said to the human: "Look at what I have made. Look at how beautiful, how special, these are. Everything I have created, I have created for you. Turn your thoughts towards not spoiling or destroying my world. For if you do, there will be nobody to put it right after you!

[Kohelet Rabbah 7:13]

This Midrash expresses a dimension of Rosh Hashanah that is often obscured by the awe-inspiring language and metaphors of the day. But in addition to being a day of hearing the Shofar and a day of heavenly judgment and kingship, Rosh Hashanah commemorates Creation. *Hayom harat olam*, we stand and sing, three times - often understood as, 'today is the birthday of the world.'

If that is the case, we might imagine that the world is quite relieved to leave 5779 behind.

I asked our member Mark Schleifstein - who in addition to organizing our team of greeters and ushers has another job as one of this country's leading environmental journalists - for a list of what he considered to be the major environmental disasters of last year. His list included hurricanes Michael, Barry and Dorian; large-scale fires causing multiple injuries and fatalities in Texas and in California, the heatwaves in Great Britain and the Gulf of Mexico, the floods that took place in China - and more locally, the August 2017 thunderstorm that caused the flooding that overwhelmed the drainage system here, air emission concerns in St John's Parish and the publication of a new study that puts Louisiana second in the nation in extreme heat days in the latter part of the 21st century (actually, extreme weeks and months).

And these are 'only' the disasters on a grand scale. The world may well be just as pleased to see the passing of a year in which every day, its human population acted unwisely towards it in myriad smaller ways. If an alien from another world were to land on ours they might well wonder: what is amiss? why does the species that seems to have the greatest investment in sustaining this planet treat it the way it does? As individuals, as communities, as countries, as citizens of the world, we humans seem to have forgotten that we are in relationship with the one and only planet that we know of that is hospitable enough to offer us long-term survival.

But Rosh Hashanah demands that we remember. Indeed, a marker of the Rosh Hashanah Amidah - the longest passage it contains, in fact - is the *zichronot*, the passages of remembrance. *Zichronot* is full of natural images - the bow in the clouds, the wind, the wilderness, and the beautiful phrase from Psalms:

God has made wondrous works to be remembered: God is gracious and compassionate (raham ve-hanun).

So the liturgy itself wants us to remember the world today.

Rabbi Jeremy Benstein teaches that it is not enough to have the familiar categories of *mitzvot bein Adam l'makom* and *bein Adam l'havero* - obligations between us and God and between us and other human beings. We need a third category to speak of our moral and ethical obligations to the world - *mitzvot bein adam le-olam*.

In traditional Jewish commentary there always four levels to a text. These These four categories give us four lenses for considering that new category of *mitzvot - bein adam l'olam*. Let's turn them on our relationship with our planet and see what we can learn.

Lens 1 - P'shat - beauty

The first lens is called *p'shat* - the way that something first presents itself. For us in our relationship with the world, the first lens is beauty. We might think of the famous pictures of the earth as shot from space - the misty blue pearl, the blue marble.

But all we really need to do is to walk with our eyes open to remind ourselves of the world's beauty. Can we recall a moment when we were simply stunned by it? On the grand scale we have mountains and hills, oceans and rivers, volcanos and geysers, the splendor of sunsets; on the microscopic scale we have the patterning of the seeds inside a sunflower, the intricacy of the tiny nest a mud dauber wasp built beside my front door, the swirls and curves of Josh Sands' Shofar. In the *Aleinu* prayer we acknowledge the way the sky is spread over us, the earth firmly founded beneath it - but how many of us hear the words our mouths are singing?

So this year, let us commit just to notice the beauty of our world because it is a mitzvah between us and the earth.

Level 2 - Remez - wonder

The second lens is called *Remez*, or 'hinting.' This focuses us on the sense of wonder we feel after we have been struck by the world's beauty. It's the difference between noticing the way the seeds are arranged at the center of a sunflower and knowing that they make mathematical sense because they follow the Fibonacci sequence.

Our liturgy is full of this sense of wonder. In the evening, we marvel at the way that day gives way to night; in the morning, our hearts rise up in joy as we open our eyes to the light of a new day. On the first day of every Jewish month we read Psalm 104, a hymn to all the natural wonders around us, as if with every new cycle of the moon we can begin marveling all over again.

This part of our year is called the *yamim noraim* - the days of awe. Can we commit, this year, to reconnecting to this sense of awe and wonder?

Level 3 - Drash - relationship

The third lens, *drash*, is prompted by our questioning - all this beauty, all this wonder, how are we connected with it? We're not standing behind a sheet of plate glass - we are part and parcel of the world. Our bodies are 60 per cent water - it's even in our bones. We are subject to seasons and tides, to wind and weather. We are only able to breathe because of the oxygen exhaled by the trees and plants around us. Given that relationship of mutual dependence, how should we interact with our world?

The first of the two creation narratives in the Torah is marked by the instruction to humankind to dominate, or subdue, nature. But the Midrash with which I began is based on the second Creation narrative, in which humankind is put into the Garden of Eden, by God, *l'ovdah u'leshomrah*, to 'serve it and preserve it.' This language speaks not to rulership but to relationship.

Level 4 – Sod - time

This brings us to the fourth lens, *sod* - what is the deepest meaning of our relationship with the earth? The Hebrew word *olam* implies not only space but time. *Le'olam va-ed* - forever and ever. And so when we say *Hayom harat olam* we are looking forward in time and acknowledging that today - right now - we are conceiving the world that future generations will inhabit.

We have probably all heard of Greta Thunberg, the outspoken Swedish teenager who recently crossed the Atlantic on a solar powered yacht to bring attention to the damage we are inflicting on our environment because, as she puts it, "we know that these consequences will face us in our lifetime." Not the lifetimes of many of us in this room today, but the lifetimes of our children. How much are those lifetimes worth to us, on this day on which we consider death, and life, and remember our true place in the world?

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz teaches that *every human being, like the primordial Adam, is put in charge of a certain portion of God's garden, to guard it and keep it.* Each of us can promise, this year, to look through one of the four lenses and take on a mitzvah *bein adam l'olam* - between humanity and the world - so as to nurture our unique part of the garden.

The P'shat lens focuses us on our immediate, daily lives. While meaningful policy change is required at national and international levels, we should not overlook the immediate and simple. We should remind ourselves that as individuals we do have some power. It turns out that one of the most effective ways for us to reduce our carbon footprint is simply to throw less food away. And we should not under-estimate the effect of small steps when they are taken by whole communities. In response to consumer petitions, Burger King UK is going to stop giving away plastic toys to kids (they have declared an amnesty on plastic toys already distributed and will be using them to create playgrounds) - and only last week, the Marriott hotel chain opted to stop giving out free toiletries packaged in plastic.

We can look through the Remez lens to engage our imaginations and creativity. Remez is also the place for imagining world-scale solutions that transcend national boundaries and sensibilities. Please find information and materials, please bring them to shul, please share them with us. And talk to Mark Schleifstein - or rather, listen to what he has to say!

What about the Drash lens? To a rabbi that can only mean one thing - I will be devoting some actual sermons to this subject that draw on our tradition's view of our relationship with our world. If you want something on a regular basis - let me know.

As for Sod - well, Shul School this year will be learning all about *Adamah*, the natural world. Our youngest members will be helping us build a celestial Sukkah, full of stars. One of the Zichronot verses is *Haben Yakir Li Efrayim* - Ephraim is my dear child. Let us learn from the children who are leading us.

In her TED talk, Greta Thunberg stated: *All we have to do is to wake up and change*. Today is Rosh Hashanah - the head of the year, but it can also be translated as 'the beginning of change.' For its beauty, for its wonder, for the way we are connected with it, for the generations that will come after us - let us remember our world and each promise, this year, to find a way - or more than one - to change it for the better. Because our lives depend on it. Shanah Tovah.