

Hayom Harat Olam- Today is the Birthday of the World
Erev Rosh Hashanah

Shana Tova and Happy Birthday, 5777. Hayom, TODAY is the birthday of the world. As it says so eloquently in our Reconstructionist Machzor, our High Holy Day prayerbook:

Today, the world is born!

Today shall stand before you all the beings of the cosmos, whether as your children or your servants.

If as your children, show them your mercy,
Like a mother toward her children.

If as your servants, then our eyes are turned toward you in great anticipation that you may be gracious.

Rendering judgment for the good, on our behalf, as clear as light of day.(p.651)

Today, Rosh Hashnah, is the moment in time that we honor the connection between Adam, humanity, Adama, earth, and Adon col Haolamim, the Creator of all worlds. We stand in amazement as we grasp the infinite within the finite, the world reflected in each atom, “worlds within worlds, souls within skins.” In the words of Albert Einstein, “The essence of the Jewish conception of life seems to lie in an affirmative attitude to the life of all creation. The life of the individual has meaning only insofar as it aids in making the life of every living thing nobler and more beautiful”. Following in his footsteps, the scientist James Lovelock spoke of our world as Gaia “the Super-organism composed of all life tightly coupled with the air, the oceans and the surface rocks”. Today, as we stand, along with all of earth’s creatures, to await Heavenly judgment, we can not help but tremble. Our report card doesn’t look so good.

David Seidenberg, a Rabbi who has devoted his life to the study of Judaism and the environment, holds out a strong hope- Hayom, im b’kolo tishmau. Today, if only we will listen! Harat olam, he reminds us does not mean ‘birthday’ of the world as much as *harat* means “conception, pregnancy and gestation”. This day is pregnant with eternal possibility. We are given a new chance, a new birth, a new start in our conception of the world. This is the moment to accept our responsibilities for the balance and wellbeing of all that God has created. This is a time for planetary tshuvah.

The strongest voice for planetary tshuvah, for turning and reassessing our values this Rosh Hashanah has been none other than-- the Pope. "This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her." said Pope Francis in a thunderous encyclical this past July. He called for an "ecological conversion"—a moral transformation linking the proper response to God for the gift of his creation to concern for justice, especially for the poor.

In this regard, his demands are placed squarely within Jewish tradition. Every seven years, we are told in both Leviticus and Deuteronomy, is to be a year of Shmittah, a sabbatical year where the land and its workers are to be given a year of rest. In an attempt to rebalance inevitable income inequality, all debts within the Israelite community are to be released every seven years as well. In Leviticus 26, we are warned:

"The land shall make up for its Sabbath years throughout the time that it is desolate and you are in the land of your enemies. Throughout the time it is desolate, it shall observe the rest that it did not observe in your Sabbath years while you were dwelling on it". If debts are not released, the Torah warns, there will be a permanent underclass plagued by injustice, with no thought for "the widow the orphan and the stranger."

This past year, 5776, was, according to the ancient count, a Shmittah year, a year demanding rest and rebalance. For many of us, this has been a watershed year, when have finally come to realize that our climate crisis is real, and that change, tshuvah, is both unavoidable and necessary.

I will not bore you with a long list of facts and figures of the dangers facing our planet-the media carries the story daily, "If only you will listen". An article in Rolling Stone magazine said it well:

Historians may look to 2015 as the year when shit really started hitting the fan. Some snapshots: In just the past few months, record-setting heat waves in Pakistan and India each killed more than 1,000 people. In Washington state's Olympic National Park, the rainforest caught fire for the first time in living memory. In California, suffering from its worst drought in a millennium, a 50-acre brush fire swelled seventyfold in a matter of hours, jumping across the I-15 freeway

during rush-hour traffic. Then, a few days later, the region was pounded by intense, virtually unheard-of summer rains. Puerto Rico is under its strictest water rationing in history as a monster El Niño forms in the tropical Pacific Ocean, shifting weather patterns worldwide.

And that was only July!

And in the midst of all this, we set out on a journey to what was to become a visit to the Garden of Eden, a safari in a 6,000 acre wilderness preserve in South Africa

How does a rabbi get to a wild life preserve on the border of South Africa and Mozambique, you might ask? Easy: the MJCS Dinner Dance. Last year, I sat too close to the auctioneer, and as the Nyala Safari went to a winning bidder, I mumbled “I’ve always wanted to do that”. SOLD! Said the auctioneer. You can have another six day safari package at the same price. “Go on”, Richard whispered, “its in Kenya, really close to Israel”. So, one year later, we found ourselves in the South African Bush, face to face with cheetahs, elephants, and the endangered white rhinoceros, armed only with my trusty iphone 5.

As we settled into the lodge (I passed up the opportunity to experience the Hemmingway-like safari tent) the sky above glowed with the setting sun.(Pic1 sunset) A deep quiet settled over the valley below. “And God called the light day, and the darkness He called night. There was evening and there was morning, a first day”(Gen1:4)

We were up before dawn, bundled into the jeep by 5am- did I mention that it was winter in South Africa? Within minutes, I realized that we had truly entered the Garden of Eden. As the jeep jostled along next to the border fence, two eyes glowed in the waning darkness. OMG! It’s a cheetah!(pic cheetah) Minutes later, I looked up, and there was a giraffe, poking its head through the trees(giraffe tree pic)Soon enough, the elephants showed up to greet the new visitors.(pic)

And God said “*Let the earth bring forth every kind of living creature: cattle, creeping things, and wild beasts of every kind.* ”(pics of cattle, snake, wildebeest, alligator, nyala,etc) It wasn’t always peaceful-we saw the cheetah eat its lunch (PIC). It was at that moment that I realized “Just

because you have long legs, big eyes and beautiful skin, you are not the top of the food chain.” We witnessed an elaborate negotiation between the elephants and the rhinos over a patch of turf (show video clip). A few days later we were told that the female leopard had recently been killed by a python- yes, there is a snake in the Garden of Eden- and one morning we came upon the half eaten body of the python, probably killed by the male leopard. (pic) Within the 6,000 acre reserve the animals were free to exist unimpeded in their natural state. No hunting is allowed this side of the fence, and the animals seemed comfortable with our presence.

And God made wild beasts of every kind, and all kinds of creeping things of the earth. And God saw that it was good.

But it is not always good. Nyala preserve is dedicating to saving the white rhino, and at the moment there are thirteen rhinos on the property. But 1400 rhinoceros have been killed in South Africa last year alone, and they are nearing extinction. Poachers kill the rhino for its horn, thought to provide a powerful healing potion or aphrodisiac, and the animal is then left to die. A rhino horn can provide a year’s wages for a struggling African family, and the poachers reap huge profits from the Asian market. Even the Garden of Eden is not immune. (Show rhino bones pic)

They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth. And God created man in his image, male and female he created them, to be God’s partner and to care for the earth and its creatures. At our best, the sages tell us, we are higher than the angels, who have no capacity to change. At our worst, we are lower than the beasts, who may instinctually kill for food, and territorial protection, but do not wipe out whole species for a horn. Cecil the Lion died because a Wisconsin dentist wanted a \$100,000 trophy on his wall, and poachers were willing to provide him with the opportunity. What if “my” Momma elephant, clearly the largest and wisest animal in the preserve, was to be killed just for her tusks?

And it was evening, it was morning, a sixth day. It was time for us to exit the Garden of Eden, and re-enter the waiting world of cars and carbon and climate crisis. Israel was hot, the hottest it has ever been in August. Last week, the “Valley” was even hotter. Despite a deluging rainstorm that almost ruined the Droeger “B’nai mitzvah” here last month, the hills of California remain dry and brown. We are now entering the fifth year of an unprecedented drought.

Author Charles Fishman, writing in the New York Times on August 16, tells us that California is weathering the drought with remarkable resilience. Despite our “water insecurity” issues, California has managed to grow its economy in every year of the drought, bringing employment back to pre-recession levels. Drip irrigation helps us to remain the “fruit bowl” of America. In his words, “We know what to do with water. We just have to do it”

To “Do it” is to change. We need to initiate an aggressive water recycling process throughout the state. Farm production numbers may look good, but that’s because the farmers of the Central Valley relentlessly pump water from the aquifers under their land without any government control, inflicting long term damage to our underground water supply. Who knew how much water it takes to grow a handful of almonds, my healthy snack of choice?

The Israelis are the heroes of drip irrigation and desalination. Living in a desert, they had little choice. Even I learned to shut the tap while brushing my teeth, and take really short showers, when I lived in Israel. Now, even though there is an abundance of water in Israel due to desalination and water saving systems, people maintain their water saving habits.

Change is possible, and quickly- given the proper incentives. The \$340 million allocated by the Southern California Water District for turf removal, in order to encourage gardens with succulents, and drought resistant plants, was allocated in a heartbeat. All over Los Angeles, lawns have been replaced by boulders and bricks. Many of us here in Malibu received notices demanding that we reduce our water bills by up to 70%. A Malibu Times article featured our own Jill and Tony Greenberg as the local success story; they reduced their water bill from \$1000 to \$300, but Jill had to give up her dream of the “perfect English garden” to do so.

All of these changes are important, but this spring, I finally understood that the looming crisis goes beyond trading pansies and roses for flowering cacti. There is a real danger of irrevocable disaster right here in our own backyard, the Pacific Ocean. I saw it with my own eyes, and the sobering reality has led me to a whole new understanding of the meaning of climate change.

I have lived on Point Dume for seventeen years now, and I have always had a key to the Riviera Three beach. In my mind, this beach has always been my retreat space, my “Garden of Eden” in Malibu. I do not surf, but I walk

often, enjoying the tidepools filled with sea creatures, the dolphins and the seals swimming by, and the beauty of the rock formations. It is a privilege to have access to one of the most pristine beaches on the West Coast.

My other morning walk is around Point Dume Preserve, which circles the Point. Last April, I was surprised by the large number of seals that I could see squirming on the rocks below. Many seemed to be pups, and I chuckled as I thought “The Moms have left the babies in the daycare while they go off for the day”. I did not know how right I was.

A few days later, I walked down to Riviera, excited because the tide was so low. When I got to the beach, I could sense that something was wrong. I walked a few feet past the rocks, and there it was- an entire family of dead seals, two adults and three pups, just lying on the beach. Nothing moved. I scurried on, only to find another grouping of dead seals further up the beach. In all, there were more than ten dead seals on the beach, and no one seemed to know what to do. I called the posted Wildlife Rescue number when I got home, and left a message. I did not return to the beach for three weeks.

I now know that the seal pups on the rocks below Point Dume were alone because their mothers were forced to go far out to sea to find food. Their usual sources of sardines and anchovies had moved further out to sea due to the warming sea temperatures near the shore. The pups do not have the strength to swim out, and are left behind, often to starve. In addition, harmful red algae blooms, encouraged by rising water temperatures have had an impact on the local marine ecosystems. Plankton, the base of the food chain, die off, and the entire food chain is altered. Many seals do not get enough food, and just don’t have the strength to survive. They are dying before our eyes.

An article in Rolling Stone Magazine last August, entitled The Point of No Return, Climate Change Nightmares are Already Here, explains impact of differentials in sea temperatures on the marine ecosystem. Even as global ocean temperatures rise to their highest levels in recorded history, some parts of the ocean, near where ice is melting exceptionally fast, are actually cooling, slowing ocean circulation currents and sending weather patterns into a frenzy. These weather patterns can bring a strong El Nino year, or violent storms. The largest ocean on earth, the Pacific, is exhibiting cyclical variability to greater extremes than other ocean basins. Get ready for a whiplash winter.

Unfortunately, my drama with the seals was not over. The images remained in my dreams, and for a month or more I was hesitant to go down to the beach. In late May, I deemed it to be safe, and escorted my son, daughter-in-law and year old grandson down the steps to his first day ever at the beach.

Sara Jane, my beloved daughter in law, wrinkled up her pretty nose and said “Wow, the smell of seaweed is really strong”. Surfers were catching waves, there were people on the beach, but the smell was overwhelming. There, on the rocks right at our feet, were the dead seals, in varying stages of discomposure. No one had taken the responsibility of removing them from the beach. I am certain that the city believed I was the job of the Riviera Beach club, while the Beach Group thought the Wildlife rescue should take action. Meanwhile, my grandson’s first memory of the ocean is an uncomfortable smell, and I wonder what the beach will be like when he is old enough to swim and surf. What is legacy that we are leaving our grandchildren?

When Adam walks in the Garden of Eden, just having tasted the apple, God calls out Ayecha- Where are you? Are you taking responsibility?

Where are you? Are you willing to make the changes necessary to save the marine life from extinction? Are you willing to curtail the use of fossil fuels, adjust your use of water, and alter your patterns of consumption? Are you ready to change, to do Tshuva, to repent and repair, before it is too late to preserve the life around us?

Hayom Harat Olam.

Today is Rosh Hashanah, a day pregnant with eternal possibilities. (Please rise)

Hayom ya’amdu kol yetzurey olamim ke’agudah achat

Today, the world is (re)born

Today we stand before you

All the beings of the cosmos, as one community

To do your will with perfect heart

To be renewed with their creator in the universal sacredness of life (Machzor p.633)

Hayom ticht’vienu l’chayim tovim

May we, and all species, be inscribed today for another year in the Book of Life.