

## **An Inconvenient Sermon**

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*We're privileged to be able to share this sermon, preached last Rosh Hashanah by Rabbi Mychal Copeland of Stanford Hillel. Rabbi Mychal is a leading voice on the Stanford planning committee and a strong voice for change As she says, "Judaism is about action, not despair."*

## **An Inconvenient Sermon**

**Rabbi Mychal Copeland**

**Rosh Hashanah 5767 Hillel at Stanford**

Centuries ago, Rabbi Yochanan was walking on a road, and he saw a man named Honi the Circle Maker planting a carob tree. He asked him, "How long will it take this tree to bear fruit?" The man replied, "Seventy years." He asked him further, "Are you quite sure you will live another seventy years to eat its fruit?" Honi replied, "I myself found fully grown carob trees in the world; as my forebears planted for me, so am I planting for my children." In an ironic twist in the story, Honi, the Jewish Rip Van Winkle, fell asleep and awoke 70 years later to see fruit falling from his tree. Honi in this Talmudic story could only imagine as he planted, that his tree would bring fruit to the next generation, but he was fortunate enough through a surreal time lapse to literally reap the fruits of his own labor. Honi was a *shomer adamah*, a guardian of the earth, who had the foresight to act on behalf of future generations. I am highly doubtful that any of us is about to take a 70 year nap, enabling us to experience the consequences of our actions on this earth; either the fruits of our environmental labors OR the havoc we wreak through our shortsightedness. In fact, we rarely see the immediate repercussions of the way we treat the earth.

We are facing a global environmental catastrophe that is difficult to chart on a daily basis. Climate change is a worldwide threat that is perhaps our greatest global challenge yet. Local greenhouse gas emissions are projected to increase average temperatures by 2.5 to 10.4 degrees Fahrenheit in this century—bringing rising seas, major weather and agricultural disruptions, environmental refugees, migrating diseases, and other dangers which most harm the planet's poor and vulnerable. Global warming made the news last year when Katrina hit the gulf coast, as we learned that the number of category 4 and 5 hurricanes has almost doubled in the last 30 years. Many of you saw Al Gore's movie this summer, *An Inconvenient Truth*. He dramatically showed that global sea levels could rise by more than 20 feet with the loss of shelf ice in Greenland and Antarctica,

devastating coastal areas worldwide. Perhaps his prediction that hit home most was that these rising sea levels will eventually engulf San Francisco!

Rabbi Yerucham of Mir wrote, “The seismograph has taught us that a tremor in any part of the world can be felt by a sufficiently sensitive instrument everywhere in the world. The same is true of a person’s deeds. One should not think that his actions do not affect others. Everything one does in some way affects everyone else in the world.” This was never truer than in the case of global warming. Our actions on this side of the planet are surely affecting everyone else living on it. This is clearly a global issue, yet we contribute more than our fair share to the problem. The United States, with less than 5% of the world’s population, consumes one third of the earth’s resources, creates half of the world’s hazardous waste, and produces at least 25% of the world’s carbon dioxide emissions that lead to global warming. We are being embarrassingly outpaced by much of the rest of the planet.

America is more firmly locked into coal and oil than our European peers, caused by sprawling suburbs, oversized houses, and gas-guzzling cars. China is the world’s leader in carbon emissions, but American made cars can’t even be sold in China because they don’t meet **their** environmental standards. In fact, California’s attorney general, two days ago, sued six carmakers, including Ford, GM, and DaimlerChrysler, for making cars that are harming

California’s environment, charging that taxpayers have had to spend millions of dollars to clean it up. We have a difficult habit to break: thinking of energy as something cheap and at our disposal.

There **is** a minority of scientists who hold steadfast to the idea that we are merely experiencing a cyclical pattern. But most agree that what we are presently experiencing is far out of the range of the earth’s natural weather cycles. The majority of scientists warn that if the warming continues, we can expect catastrophic consequences in our world.

Today is the birthday of this world of ours, Rosh Hashanah, *hayom harat olam*. As we reflect on our Creation story from the book of Genesis, we hear twice of the creation of the earth and the relationship that Adam, in Hebrew, *Adam*, will have with his environment. *Adam* literally means “earth creature”, one taken from *adamah*, the earth. In Genesis, chapter 1:28, G!d blesses humans, saying, “Be fruitful, multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over every living thing that creeps upon the earth” [**v’kivshu-ha, ur’du bidnat hayam..**]. In Genesis Chapter 2:16, we encounter a different telling of the creation story. Humans are placed by G!d into Eden, and G!d charges them, “to cultivate the Garden and guard it” [**l’ovdah ul’shomra**]. From this second telling of the story, we glean a central Jewish principle: that we are

“*shomrei adamah*”, guardians of the earth.

We might read these two texts as divergent, presenting us with very different instructions. Philosopher Rav Joseph Soloveitchik in his classic work, *The Lonely Man of Faith*, presents a compelling comparison of the two stories. He imagines that there are literally two Adams created; one in Chapter 1 and another in Chapter 2. The first was created with the mandate to control nature while the second Adam was responsible for tending the garden that is this earth. In Soloveitchik’s reading, Adam the first represents “collective human technological genius”, manifested in our drive to conquer time and space, and overcome disease, yet it is also the basis for our greed, our will to produce and excel financially. In short, Soloveitchik writes, success is defined by Adam the first as “triumph over the cosmic forces”. It is the eternal struggle between human and nature. Dayan Grunfeld in *The Sabbath: A Guide to Its Understanding and Observance*, remarks that, “Man...is engaged in a constant struggle to gain mastery over Gd’s creation, to bring nature under his control.” (dayan grunfeld in Kleinp.79)

But how can the Torah give us two distinct answers to the questions we ask about our relationship to the environment? We often hear that as Jews we are to struggle with our texts, but here our text is actually struggling with itself! We are to take this struggle seriously because it is our human struggle as well. Our text fails to give us a simple answer to the environmental crisis which has existed in one form or another since the beginning of humankind. The Torah begs us to contemplate the struggle inherent in being human. As environmentally conscious Northern Californians, people who would like to think that we are *shomrei adamah*, guardians of the earth, we are likely to prefer the second Adam: the reading of humans as tenders of the Garden. But Soloveitchik warns us not to presume that the Adam tending the garden is an ideal vision for humanity. He writes, “in every one of us abide [both] personae...[adam the first and adam the second]. Rejection of either aspect of humanity would be tantamount to an act of disapproval of the divine scheme of creation which was approved by G!d as being very good, *tov m’od*, [as G!d remarks at the end of sixth day after creating humans]”. The two stories in Genesis are woven together to form one complicated lesson for human beings. We are instructed to gain control over the world, AND we must find a way to protect it as we are doing so and set limits on our own destructive tendencies. Our text struggles with itself because we must struggle with the reality of our existence and the ways in which we reside on this planet.

There is a rabbinic midrash about Adam in the Garden of Eden based on Genesis.

When the Holy Blessed One created Adam, G!d took him and led him around all the trees of the

Garden of Eden, and said to him: “Behold My works, how beautiful, how splendid they are. All that I have created, I created for your sake. Take care that you do not become corrupt and thus destroy My world. For once you become corrupt, there is no one after you to repair it. (Eccles.Rabbah 7:13) The midrash teaches us that the earth was created for our sake, yet we must not destroy it. This struggle is apparent in the way the Jewish tradition experiences time. Six days a week, we work, we create, we use, we destroy. One day a week, Shabbat, we enjoy the world as it is and we tread lightly. Many of us were taught that on Shabbat we refrain from work, but the Hebrew word *melacha*, what we translate from Torah as “work”, does not necessarily correspond with contemporary definitions of that word: work is what we do to earn money, our jobs, some would even define work as things we don’t like to do. The word in Torah, *melacha*, is a much broader and far more compelling concept. On Shabbat, we refrain from creating; we recognize and appreciate that there are limits to human creativity. Mordecai Kaplan wrote in *Judaism as a Civilization*, that “The function of the Sabbath is to prohibit man from engaging in work which in any way alters the environment, so that he should not delude himself into the belief that he is complete master of his destiny. (JAC p.444)” Similarly, Abraham Joshua Heschel writes in his book, *The Sabbath*, that “We renounce on this day every exercise of intelligent, purposeful control of natural objects and forces [p.16]”. On Shabbat, we refrain from using electricity: driving cars, baking, cooking, watching TV. We don’t use hot water. We bother the earth as little as is humanly possible. We don’t pick flowers. We imagine what it may have been like to live in the Garden of Eden, existing in perfect harmony with our environment. David Ehrenfeld and Philip Bentley write, “we create nothing, we destroy nothing, and we enjoy the bounty of the earth. In this way the Sabbath becomes a celebration of our tenancy and stewardship in the world. It is the Sabbath that defines the relationship between steward and Ruler. It is the Sabbath, ultimately, that completes and confirms the environmental wisdom of Judaism.” Creating nothing and destroying nothing—what a radical notion!

Shabbat, the foundation of our tradition, is a **model eco-day**. We celebrate Earth Day not just once a year, but at the end of every week, and that day is today.

I’m not talking about Shabbat the way it is often observed (and I am equally guilty of this)—with lights left on for 25 hours, or automatic switches and timers that, while incredibly convenient, further us from the ideal of an eco-Shabbat. I’m dreaming big—I’m talking about a Shabbat in which we don’t even turn lights on, following the commandment to not light fire literally. I am dreaming of a true Shabbat for the earth’s resources as well as for us.

Imagine what would happen if everyone in the state of California observed Shabbat for one day? Or even just Palo Alto? What if just **you** tried it for one Shabbat?

-By not driving for one day...you would save one pound of CO<sub>2</sub> for every mile you didn't drive that day. You would also be helping to lessen our dependence on oil from the Middle East, solving yet another global crisis.

-By turning off DVDs, TVs, and computers, you could save potentially hundreds of pounds of CO<sub>2</sub> each Shabbat [thousands of pounds of carbon dioxide each year.-from [climatecrisis.net](#)]

-By taking one day to stop creating, you would produce less waste overall

The laws pertaining to Shabbat are part of what is called "*halakhah*". This Hebrew word is usually translated as "Jewish law" but literally means "the walking". Halakhah is not meant to be a set of arbitrary restrictions on our freedom. It is the set of instructions Jews abide by as we struggle with how we walk through the world. In the case of Shabbat, our footsteps are to be barely felt on this earth one day a week. Shabbat is our tradition's answer to the struggle between utilizing resources on earth and tending our garden. Six days a week, we are destined to work hard and indeed, that often entails subduing our environment. But on the seventh day, we allow our little piece of earth to rest. And if, on this one day, we find that we feel more connected and less wasteful, we may find ourselves integrating some of our Shabbat practices into the rest of our week, perhaps not eliminating but **lessening** our impact on the world.

Halakhah is a guide to how we walk throughout our lives. Now there is a way to calculate the impact your walking has on the earth. If you search the web for the "environmental footprint quiz", you will answer a few questions about your lifestyle: how much you drive each week, what type of vehicle, how often you fly, whether or not you buy local produce, how much non-recyclable trash you produce, how much meat you eat. The website will then calculate your ecological footprint, defined as the amount of land you need to support your lifestyle. This means the land that produces all the things you need to survive and thrive and the land used to dispose of all the garbage you leave behind. I try to improve at least a few things about the way I live and consume every year, but apparently we would still need 2.5 planet earth's to support the way I live. The average ecological footprint in the United States is 24 acres per person. I encourage you to take the quiz, but warn you that it is incredibly disheartening. Take the quiz, breathe, and remember the dictum from Pirkei Avot, the Ethics of the Fathers, which says, "It is not up to you to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from it." An environmental reading of this verse could be, "you are not personally responsible

for solving this global problem-but you are not free from protecting the corner of the earth you tread on either”.

There are problems we face in our world right now that seem to have no solution, but **here**, change **IS** possible. In the words of Heschel, “one must live and act as if the fate of all time would depend on a single moment”. Environmentalists have made strides in many battles over the years—the ozone layer is coming back and air quality in the United States is far better than it was 30 years ago due to increased regulations. Climate disruption, too, is completely solvable. As Gregg Eastbrook writes in *The Atlantic*, “action to prevent runaway global warming may prove cheap, practical, effective, and totally consistent with economic growth.” He argues that rather than throwing up our hands in despair, we can solve this crisis through regulations that lead to innovation.

Judaism is about action, not despair. Pledge to take on just one or two New Year’s resolutions that will decrease your footprint on the earth or educate you about the situation. (this will be handed out too) Here are a few suggestions:

- See the movie, *An Inconvenient Truth*.
- Plant a tree: Honi’s single carob tree would help stop global warming by absorbing one ton of carbon dioxide over its lifetime, surpassing even Honi’s unusually long life
- Get local farm produce delivered to you. According to some estimates, farmers who practice conservation tillage could sequester 12-14% of the carbon emitted by vehicles and industry.
- Check your tires: keeping your tires inflated properly can increase your gas mileage by 3%, and every gallon of gas saved keeps 20 lbs of carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere
- Try to observe just one eco-Shabbat. Seem overwhelming? Maybe just try on one Shabbat to drive less, use a little less, or adjust your thermostat.

At the same time, my hope is that in giving the earth a rest in these minor ways, we will be inspired to affect a larger piece of earth than just what we inhabit. On the larger scale, we can put pressure on our political leaders to:

- Raise vehicle fuel economy across the board, and require SUVs and minivans to meet the same standard.
- Encourage the auto industry to further produce vehicles using hybrid-electric, fuel cell, and other promising clean technologies, and provide incentives for their purchase.
- Call for increased funding for inter-city rail and metropolitan mass transit to provide alternatives to single occupancy autos.

· Help your city become a **Cool City**: Back in 2005, 141 countries ratified the Kyoto Protocol, the international agreement to address climate change.

Seattle's mayor has been inviting mayors across the US to make a commitment to stopping global warming at the local level by signing the U.S. Mayor's Climate Protection Agreement. Frustrated by stalling on the federal level, local leaders are working to cut our dependence on oil, benefit public health and save taxpayer dollars. Some cities have introduced green municipal vehicle fleets with hybrid cars; energy efficient street lights and buildings, and renewable energy investments. There are to date 208 Cool Cities including in our area SF, Mnt.View, San Mateo, Los Altos Hills, Sunnyvale, and Palo Alto.

At Hillel, we are making some eco-New Year's resolutions this year as well. We are committing ourselves to greening our Hillel. Part of this effort will be joining the Coalition On the Environment and Jewish Life campaign called "How Many Jews Does it take to change a lightbulb?" This effort is calling on congregations, Jewish institutions, and individuals to install energy efficient, cost effective compact fluorescent light (CFL) bulbs. Since CFLs use 75% less energy than incandescent light bulbs, this leads to less production of greenhouse gas emissions, air pollution, and toxic waste. If every U.S. household replaced one bulb with a CFL, it would have the same impact as removing 1.3 million cars from the road. Yes, they are more expensive but a \$3 swirl pays for itself in lower electric bills in about five months. At Hillel, we are also in the process of forming a Green Taskforce made up of students who will educate our community on better environmental practices in and out of our center. Let us know if you would like to help us become part of the solution.

My grandmother was once planting a tree with my mother. My grandmother was beginning to age, and my mother asked her, "What is it like getting old?" My grandmother, who knew nothing of Honi the Circle Drawer, answered, "I won't be here to see this tree grow". She continued planting the tree. I barely knew her-she died when I was two years old. On her grave were words from the poet Keats that she recited throughout her lifetime as a response to the ephemeral nature of life: **a thing of beauty is a joy forever, its loveliness increases, it will never pass into nothingness.**

In some cases, we *may* see the fruits of our own labor; in others we may not. May we have the foresight to tend to our garden, to plant trees for the next generation. **Each of us** will pass from this life, but hopefully the beauty of the earth is the legacy we leave behind.