

Hayom Harat Olam—This is the Day of the World’s Birth:

Sustaining Our World as God’s Partners in Creation¹

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Rosh Hashanah has several names in our tradition including “*Yom Harat Olam*”—the Day of the Birth of the World. The Biblical story of Creation, from the beginning of Genesis, is read from the Torah in many communities—we will be reading it tomorrow. We read in our prayer books: “*Hayom Harat Olam*. This is the day of the world’s birth.” And we read in the Creation narrative that humans were created as God’s partners, instructed to “*U’milu et ha-aretz v’chiv’shua*—fill the earth; take charge of it.”² We are charged with the awesome responsibility of caring for God’s creation, and each Rosh Hashanah is a reminder of our important role.

The Torah commands farmers to allow the land to lie fallow every seventh year, and to allow fruit trees to blossom for three years before harvesting fruit. These sustainable practices are still followed in Israel today, as in ancient times, when the farming cycle aligned with the Jewish holiday cycle.

Today, very few of us are farmers or even have home gardens, but we make choices about what we eat, what we drive, and how we live our lives that impact our health and the health of our planet.

In raising the issues of sustainability and climate change, I am guided not by politics, but by traditional Jewish values. Caring for our planet is a moral issue. Whatever our stance, whether we agree or disagree with President Trump’s decision to exit the Paris Climate Agreement, we have a responsibility, as Jews, to act as *Shomrei Adamah*—guardians of our planet. The day after the President’s announcement, you may have

¹ A tremendous amount of appreciation is due to Aron Hirt-Manheimer for his patience, thoughts, and editorial suggestions. I am also grateful to my father, Rabbi Fred N. Reiner, for his input, as well as my wife Ashley for her patience and for pushing me to eat less meat!

² Genesis 1:28

considered cancelling the installation of solar panels, started stockpiling Styrofoam and aerosol cans, and explored buying a car that got ten miles per gallon. But hopefully you realized that even if the government won't take actions to protect our planet, we still can make a difference. The need to safeguard our planet is no less incumbent upon us, perhaps even more so.

Whatever the cause of climate change, the scientific data cannot be denied. Average surface temperatures are rising, most precipitously over the past 35 years. Warmer air leads to warmer oceans, which leads to increased precipitation; stronger and more frequent hurricanes as well as heavier rains and increased flooding. People are experiencing record heat waves and droughts, hurricanes and floods, shrinking ice sheets and rising sea levels.

The impact of environmental disasters is unmistakable and clear. Images of Houston and southeast Texas, Florida, and islands in the Caribbean are seared into our minds. The loss of life, property, and livelihood are unimaginable. From my own experiences working in the Louisiana Gulf Coast after hurricanes Katrina and Rita, there is nothing like driving through neighborhoods and seeing the piles of destroyed property in front of each house, the pervasive stench of mildew and rot unavoidable. Many in our congregation have family members living in the impacted areas, relatives who needed to evacuate. I want to especially recognize the Garret family, out of town members of our congregation, displaced after their Houston home was destroyed by flooding after Hurricane Harvey. But this was actually the third time in three years that the Garret home has been destroyed in so-called "500-year floods."

As difficult as it is to fathom the destruction of one's home and property by extreme weather, the potential ancillary impact of climate change is even harder to imagine. In other parts of the world, draught and famine lead to mass migrations, civil unrest, and wars that have the potential to become international conflicts. While the bloody conflict in Syria is associated with the Arab Spring of 2011, the ongoing civil war followed the most intense drought ever recorded in that nation. Over four years, crops failed and livestock died as a result of the drought, which led to significant increases in food prices, and a massive migration of 1.5 million people from rural farms to urban centers already burdened from an influx of another nearly 1.5 million refugees from Iraq in the years leading up to the drought.³ Could you imagine a

³ <http://www.pnas.org/content/112/11/3241.full>

sudden influx of between 1.5 and 3 million people into an urban area—a 23% increase in urban population in a short period of time? Even the greater New York City metropolitan area would struggle with such a sudden, major increase, and this area is significantly larger with greater capacity. Starving protesters demanded government reform and sparked conflict that continues. As the Syrian civil war continues to rage, water sources continue to be flashpoints for conflict.⁴ Many other combatants have entered the fray to capitalize on instability or protect their interests, escalating the conflict with perhaps even more catastrophic outcomes. Last January, Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis called climate change a national security threat testifying before Congress that climate change is “impacting stability in areas of the world where our troops are operating today.”⁵ Indeed, the potential impact of climate change is even greater than the threat posed by hurricanes, heat waves, and other extreme weather.

To be sure, there is not much that we could have done to end the drought in Syria or prevent the Civil War. But that does not mean other disasters cannot be prevented.

Water is as much an existential threat to Israel as neighboring countries who have sought to destroy the Jewish State. When I lived in Israel I learned that capturing the Golan Heights during the Six-Day War and annexing it in 1981 was as much about protection from military attack as it was about securing Israel’s sources for fresh water. In its early years of statehood, Israel began an ambitious project to build an infrastructure that would guarantee future water security. Today Israel is the global leader in water reclamation and de-salinization: about 80% of wastewater in Israel is reclaimed, comprising about 40% of the total water used for agricultural purposes.⁶ In 2016, 55% of domestic water in Israel was produced through desalinization.⁷ Israel’s commitment to sustainability helped make the dream of David Ben-Gurion, first Prime Minister of Israel, come true: to make the desert bloom.

Here in our sanctuary, as we contemplate our role in the world and celebrate the creation of our world, we must ask ourselves: What can we do, as a community and as individuals, to help sustain our planet in the year to come and beyond.

⁴ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-19533112>

⁵ <http://www.npr.org/2017/03/19/520708181/climate-change-as-an-issue-of-national-security>

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<http://af.reuters.com/article/commoditiesNews/idAFLDE6A01DQ20101114?pageNumber=3&virtualBrandChannel=0&sp=true>

⁷ <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/israel-proves-the-desalination-era-is-here/>

For starters, Congregation Shir Shalom has joined a number of congregations around the country to earn a “Seal of Sustainability” from Hazon, an international Jewish organization dedicated to creating “healthier and more sustainable communities in the Jewish world and beyond.”⁸ Toward that end, a small group of Congregation Shir Shalom volunteers and staff – the “Green Team” --began meeting over the summer to examine ways that our synagogue can become more sustainable. In recent years we started a recycling program, constructed an organic garden, started installing low energy LED bulbs (in our Sanctuary today!), and started giving food waste to a local farmer. We are investigating the possibility of installing solar panels and other projects to reduce energy usage. To earn the seal, we will need to audit our facility and energy usage, examining our building, energy systems, and waste stream. We will also need to complete three substantive sustainability projects over the next year.

Our Green Team, led by Lou Haber and Robert Fischman, is engaging our congregation (including the Early Childhood Center and Religious School) in programs that focus on sustainable and healthy eating practices and to host a number of what we are calling Green or Compostable *Kiddush/Oneg Shabbat* Receptions throughout the year.

For our third initiative, we are seeking your input and ideas. On Monday, you will receive an e-mail requesting ideas for our third initiative, which we hope to announce on Yom Kippur. If you are interested in joining our “Green Team,” please reach out to Lou or Robert or our office or me. And if anyone would like to donate a fully loaded Tesla Model S P100D or even a Chevy Volt or Nissan Leaf, it will be put to good use!

From the efforts of our congregation to our personal lives, our efforts at sustainability need to extend beyond this sacred space into our own homes. I have two suggestions for each of us to consider.

First, look into installing solar panels on your roof. It is more affordable than you might think. I know there are significant incentives available in Ridgefield and Lewisboro and potentially other towns too.

Second, “eat Jewishly.” Make food consumption a sacred experience by thinking about what we put on the table and how it affects our health and our planet.

⁸ Hazon.org

In the Creation narrative, God speaks to Adam and Eve, “Behold, I have given you every seed-producing plant on the face of the entire earth, and every tree that bears seed-producing fruit. This will be yours for eating.” To put this verse in context, God first instructs Adam and Eve to “be fruitful and multiply,” then to “take charge of the earth,” and then to eat their fruits and vegetables.

In 2009, Rabbi Eric Yoffie, at the time President of the Union for Reform Judaism, called for Reform Jews to “make a Jewish decision to reduce significantly the amount of red meat that we eat...” for the benefit of the world and our own bodies. Animal agriculture and meat consumption contribute more greenhouse gas emissions than all sources of transportation combined,⁹ and our appetite for meat leads to deforestation, both to create grazing land and to plant feed crops. In 2009 the meat industry was responsible for nearly “one-fifth of the man-made greenhouse gas emissions that are accelerating climate change throughout the world.”¹⁰

Reducing our consumption of meat is a sustainable decision that will lead to a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions and slow climate change.

And what impact will reducing our consumption of meat have on our health?

A 2012 study by the Harvard School of Public Health concluded that “people who ate the most red meat tended to die younger and to die more often from cardiovascular disease and cancer...” According to Dr. Walter Willett, “If someone is age 60 and has a 50% chance of dying in the next 25 years, adding one [3 oz] serving a day [of red meat] would increase his risk of dying in that time to about 57%, and if he had two servings a day, this would be about a 63% risk of dying in that time.”¹¹

I want to emphasize that the health benefits of reducing consumption of red meat are realized as part of a broader dietary effort. As a cardiologist in the congregation pointed out to me, replacing the red meat in your diet with copious amounts of

⁹ World Greenhouse Gas Emissions: 2000. World Resources Institute. <http://www.wri.org/resources/charts-graphs/world-greenhouse-gas-emissions-2000>

¹⁰ *Shabbat Morning Sermon, URJ's 70th Biennial*. Rabbi Eric Yoffie. November 9, 2009. <http://www.skepticalscience.com/how-much-meat-contribute-to-gw.html>

¹¹ <http://www.nih.gov/news-events/nih-research-matters/risk-red-meat> (Accessed 9/20/2017); <http://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/cutting-red-meat-for-a-longer-life>

fried/snack foods (even if they are plant based) will not have a significant health benefit.¹²

I am not suggesting that we should all become vegetarians. For those who are sitting here, thinking about the brisket you have waiting in the oven at home, you should still enjoy! As Rabbi Yoffie pointed out, the Torah instructs us to “rejoice” in celebrating the festivals of our tradition, and that we should “celebrate our sacred occasions and take delight in our eating.”¹³ Imagine the impact if we confined our consumption of meat to sacred celebrations—holy days and sacred milestones in our Jewish life journeys.

Today I am taking up Rabbi Yoffie’s banner and asking that we, as a sacred community, consider our consumption of meat and the impact that it has on our bodies and our planet. I ask specifically that every member of this congregation commit to reducing your consumption of meat in the year ahead by observing (what many call) a “meatless Monday” or a “Tofu Tuesday” -- commit to not eating meat one day each week.

This is a challenge for us all, and, as you can see, I am not the poster child for healthy eating. But I have come to recognize the impact that my food choices are having on me and on planet earth, that continuing to consume meat as I have in the past is unsustainable.

On this day of the world’s birth, let us resolve to work towards a sustainable future for ourselves and future generations. May we realize that Judaism is lived and expressed not only through worship, but in being a partner with God in sustaining Creation.

Amen and *Shanah Tovah*.

¹² This paragraph was not part of the original sermon. Following the early service, a cardiologist in the congregation approached me to share the concern he shares with patients, that promoting the health benefits from reduction of red meat consumption can lead patients to replace the red meat with other problematic foods. While he does not encourage patients to consume red meat, he emphasizes the importance of moderation and a balanced diet.

¹³ Deuteronomy 16:14