

Rolling hills and rolling waves. Winds caressing clouds, clouds gifting rain. Sapphire seas flecked with silver life. Grasslands and grazers, predators and prey. How unfathomably precious is this Earth of ours: an intricate quilt, a dance of movement and stillness, a big blue marble in the vast velvet of space. Our singular, precious, “very good” home.

Before God begins to create, the world was, in the Hebrew, “tohu va’vohu,” understood to mean ‘formless chaos’. Rabbi Oren J. Hay¹ describes it this way: “Before God’s first utterance, the cosmos was all murky shadows and jagged edges; all color was muddled into an unseen, violent blur.”

God floats into this world and into our story, a spirit blowing across the depths, bringing order to chaos. And then those words, powerful as 10 billion suns: “Va’yehi Or/Let there be light.” God creates through language, speaking creation into being: Baruch Sh’amar V’Haya HaOlam, as we will sing tomorrow morning, intoning the Song of Generation. Suddenly, an orderly world unfurls: light and dark, above and below, land and sea. Plants, with their seed, give way to creatures that swarm in all corners of the world. Earth teems with fecundity. The created world in Genesis 1 is good, healthy and whole, without evil or violence.

We modern people can dismiss this account easily. It contradicts the fossil record. Its timeframe is absurd. But such a dismissal misses the point: the story, in all its majesty and mystery, reminds us of the wonder of creation - the breathtaking miracle that is our Goldilocks planet: the distance from our star sun that’s “just right” for liquid water, the mix of gases that’s “just right” for life, the gravity that holds atoms in without crushing bodies. What a rapturous wonder: the infinitely interlocking jigsaw puzzle that is Life on Earth, and the unfathomable surprise of our own existence. If we take these for granted, then we have become zombies: moving but soulless, eating but dead. Genesis 1 comes to remind us that life on earth is good and precious. We take it for granted at our peril.

In this account, humanity is created on the sixth day.

“Vayomer Elohim – naaseh adam b’tzelmo... Let us make human beings in our image, make them reflecting our nature so they can be responsible for the fish in the sea, the birds in the air, the cattle and, yes, Earth itself, and every animal that moves on the face of Earth. God created human beings godlike, reflecting God’s nature. God created them male and female. God blessed them: ‘Prosper! Reproduce! Fill Earth! Take charge!

¹ “Cosmic Disorder,” *Seven Days, Many Voices*, p. 3 CCAR Press, 2017

Be responsible for fish in the sea and birds in the air, for every living thing that moves of the face of Earth.”²

We are, in this poetic translation of Genesis 1, the pinnacle of existence, a microcosmos of the Creative Impulse itself, heads in the clouds and feet in the clods. We hold power over all other forms of life, although that power is held in check: we are to be vegetarian. Only God can take animal life. Like property managers for the LandLord, we are caretakers and tamers of Planet Earth.

The collection of Midrash known as Kohelet Rabbah (c. 6th – 8th century CE) extends the idea of human responsibility for the planet, imagining God’s first contact with humanity this way:

*When God created the first human beings, God led them around the Garden of Eden and said: “Look at My works! See how beautiful they are – how excellent! For your sake I created them all. See to it that you do not spoil My world: for if you do, there will be no one else to repair it.”*³

So – how’s that going? How’re we doing?

For starters, it’s been a scorcher of a summer, with fires blazing in California, Canada, Greece, Scandinavia, and Siberia. Heat related deaths are up in Japan (not to mention massive typhoons); crop yields are low in countries as diverse as Sweden and El Salvador.

“In isolation,” says Michael Mann, distinguished professor of atmospheric science and director of the Earth System Center at Penn State, “it might seem like any of these things could be dismissed as an anomaly, but it’s the interconnectedness of all these events and their extreme nature that tells us that we are now seeing the face of climate change. The impacts of climate change are no longer subtle.”⁴ If carbon emissions are not immediately reduced by several percent each year, he continues, “some of the worst (environmental) impacts will play out ... beyond our adaptive capacity frankly.”⁵ Let that sink in: “beyond our adaptive capacity.” That’s terrifying.

² The Message Translation

³ *Kohelet Rabbah on Ecclesiastes 7:13, in Seven Days p. 90*

⁴ Quoted in the New York Times on August 2, 2018

⁵ August 2, 2018 – wbur Here & Now.

<http://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2018/08/02/summer-weather-climate-change>

Meanwhile, the Great Barrier Reef continues to die, polar ice continues to melt, and the permafrost is thawing⁶. Bird populations are plummeting in the Mojave Desert⁷. Seabird carcasses, far from cities, are full of plastics. 35 million people depend on Lake Victoria, Africa's largest lake, for food, but the fish populations are in steep decline.⁸ Populations of marine vertebrates in Australia – fish turtles, birds, whales, dolphins and seals, were cut in half between 1970 and 2010.⁹ According to the magazine *The Monthly*, “the United Nations has found that nearly 90 percent of the world's fisheries are fully fished or overfished.”¹⁰

The impacts of human industry, including vastly increased levels of carbon, are here. And they will only get worse.

The more carbon in the air, the higher temperatures will rise. The higher they rise, the greater the impact on the environment and human beings. The United Nation's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change says the difference between a 1.5 degree Celsius rise and a 2 degree Celsius rise in global temperatures is “10 million fewer people in coastal areas [at risk to] floods, storm surges, or salt spray damaging crops.” 10 million – and that's at the low end of the impact. The approaching humanitarian crisis is a moral crisis as well.

How are we doing as God's property managers? Not well. Not well at all.

It's like the seven days of Creation, only in reverse. Teeming jungles fade to grasslands. Forest cathedrals turn black with char. Trees retreat to the poles. Birdsong grows silent, as does the wolf's cry. Mighty rivers sputter out and islands sink beneath rising tides. Coral, that salty rainbow, bleaches to white. Cities sit vacant and jagged, like scars on the skin of the world. The chaos of *tohu vavohu* blankets the planet once again. Earth slows down, lying dormant until it can replenish itself and, inevitably, begin again.

Today is Rosh Hashanah, mythic “birthday of the world.” Today is a day, especially, to celebrate and honor Creation. That's why we read Genesis 1 today.

⁶ Why Thawing Permafrost Matters, Earth Institute of Columbia University, January 11, 2018

⁷ KQED.org/science, “Bird Species Collapse in the Mojave, Driven by Climate Change, Amanda Heidt, August 15, 2018

⁸ Troubled Waters, Slate.com, Mark Weston, March 27, 2015

⁹ According to the World Wildlife Fund for Nature, cited in *The Monthly*, August, 2018, James Bradley

¹⁰ <https://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2018/august/1533045600/james-bradley/end-oceans>

But, some of you likely know, the Genesis account is not the traditional reading for Rosh Hashanah. In most Reform synagogues, which celebrate only one day of Rosh Hashanah, they're reading the Akeidah today.

The Akeidah. That *other* story, the one that lurks in the background of Rosh Hashanah, nearly unreadable, transgressing every boundary of morality.

The story starts abruptly: God tells Abraham to sacrifice his only son, his beloved one, there, "on the place that I will show you." Abraham seems to obey with alacrity, the text telling us that he sets out to fulfill his grim task "early in the morning," that is, without delay. Parent and child walk for three days, until "Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar" (Genesis 22:4). The place is called Moriah.

What type of man was Abraham to walk three days alongside the son he intends to kill? Did he wander in a daze, in denial about what's transpiring? Does he have faith that something will save them? Or is he focused, rehearsing in his mind how he'll bind the boy, render him helpless, and lift the knife?

I imagine Abraham, half crazed, so intent on the task at hand that he wasn't able to see what was right before his face: his son's innocence, devotion, hopefulness. Why did Abraham need to look up to see Moriah? Because he was looking down.

The Akeidah can and has been read many ways. The plain, literal meaning, called in Hebrew the *pshat*, is the story of a father's attempted murder of his son. Our tradition also encourages us to read our Great Stories as metaphor. It forces us to ask a stark, painful question: in what ways are we killing our children?

My friends, I fear that we have all become Abraham. Isaac represents our children, lying helpless and wide-eyed, unable to wake us from our torpor. Our actions, our routines, our inability to change, both individually and collectively, are dooming our children to a miserable future ... of forest fire and drought, of disease, mass migration and food insecurity. Yet we cannot – I cannot – find a way through it. I know I need to, but I can't seem to stop burning fossil fuels. To avoid plastic. To switch to solar. To stop using and wasting, using and wasting, each act, each product a lifting of the blade to my son's throat. I, too, am sleepwalking to Moriah.

Peter Montague asserts that humans today are

living beyond our means, borrowing capacity from the future and using it up. We are depleting the base of available capital, not merely living off the interest. This means future generations will have less capital to work with. Soil that we degrade will not be available to our grandchildren for growing crops. Mineral deposits that we mine and disperse into the environment are no longer available for future manufacture. Acidified oceans will not produce the abundance of fish that our heirs could have otherwise expected.

In sum [Montague continues], by exceeding the carrying capacity of the planet for industrialized people, we have put ourselves into direct competition with future generations: it's us or them.¹¹

Like Abraham, our eyes are down cast. Unseeing, we trudge forward, step after step, denying what lies ahead. It is now high time to lift them up and see what's right before our eyes.

This image of ourselves as Abraham is upsetting. It is painful. We know that we are good and well-intentioned people. It is horrible to picture ourselves holding that knife. But it may also be necessary. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* didn't wake us up. Al Gore's "frog in the pot" didn't stir us. Darren Aronofsky's film "Mother!" bombed at the box office. What will make us care enough to change our ways?

I look down, into my son's eyes, blue like the sky on a cloudy day. He looks up at me, all trust and possibility. I look into our bnei mitzvah kids' eyes, sparkling like sunlight on the sea, eager to experience life and see whom they'll become. I shut my eyes, and swallow my fears about the world they'll inhabit, about the ways their life choices will be diminished by ours. I blink away a tear for my kid, for our kids, and for all kids. I promise myself to do better. But I don't know how.

In the story, an angel calls out just as the knife falls. "Abraham! Abraham!" Stop! Startled from his trance, Abraham lifts his eyes and sees himself as he is, in his frenzy and his weakness and shame. New possibilities, once hidden from his sight, appear. Awake now, Abraham changes course.

¹¹ Rachel's Democracy & Health News #998, February 12, 2009

Sleepwalking to Moriah

Rabbi Dean Shapiro

Rosh Hashanah 5779

There are changes we can make – we, here in this room – for the good of all. For the good of our own selves and souls. We are incredibly powerful people: American, well educated, relatively wealthy. Our actions, our purchases, our votes hold a great deal of sway. We can put down the knives we wield, and we can call out to others to do the same. Let us become “shomrei Adamah – protectors of the Earth.” Let us speak for the future, in our own ways, individually and together. We can make a difference.

In my quest for answers, I’ve corresponded with sustainability experts from several fields – law, business, theology, and activism. They’ve sent me their recommendations for what an individual can do that makes a difference. Tomorrow, I will share seven actions, one for each of the mythical seven days of creation, that we can take in support of life on earth. I look forward to sharing them with you in the morning, and to partnering with you on behalf of the future.

Shanah Tovah.