

Forward with Purpose

Rosh Hashanah 5775

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Voted “Best Urban Duck Farm” by the staff of the Detroit Metro Times, the Duck ‘N’ Roll Inn looked like a good place for an adventure as Ben and I were planning a stopover in Detroit on the way to Canada.

The Inn’s profile on the website airbnb describes it as

“... an eclectic farmhouse on an urban duck farm....The farm provides pasture raised duck eggs to the Woodbridge Pub, as well as local residents.... It encompasses 4 city lots full of trees and garden, with a 3 lot community garden just across the street. ”

We booked our room and were soon on our way. The highway taking us from the airport into Detroit was bordered by medians of tall grasses and wildflowers. And then it hit me, of course: This is not a naturalization project ; this is what a highway median looks like when a bankrupt city can’t mow public land.

According to the New York Times, Detroit has gone from a city with a population of 2 million at its peak to around 700,000 today. Over 114,000 of the city's properties have been razed with another 80,000 in need of demolition. Only 35,000 of Detroit's 88,000 streetlights work. The unemployment rate is 50%. There are so many arsons a day that the struggling police force and firefighters can't be counted on to arrive. The city has the second-highest violent crime rate in the country.

And yet, urban homesteaders and artists are moving in, rehabbing homes, founding community gardens and urban forests. Businesspeople are working together to build a light rail system. The mayor plans to install 2,400 streetlights each month.

When we got to the Duck ‘N’ Roll Inn’s neighborhood, I took in the sight with, I’ll admit, a bit of trepidation. About every other house was abandoned -- burned out, stripped down or boarded up. But we also found the website's description of the neighborhood to be true: “... a strong coalition of homeowners with deep roots in the community have held things together...”

The renovated house was beautiful, and our boys loved the gaggle of ducks running around the courtyard protected by a huge, playful, Great Pyrenees puppy who became a fast friend. In addition to a good night's sleep, what I got from that night at the Duck 'N' Roll inn was a sense that we were participating, just briefly, in the larger movement of both downtown moguls and small neighborhood entrepreneurs to reclaim Detroit.

I'm telling you this story, not to encourage you all to pick up stakes and move to Motown, but because it offers examples of people responding with determination to big, seemingly intractable problems. The implosion and decay of Detroit was due to many causes, and was years in the making; the city is unlikely ever to recover its 1940's and 1950's reputation as "the Paris of the Midwest." Yet rather than being paralyzed by despair, there are people who engage in creative and hopeful action. Though they know that success is certainly not guaranteed, nonetheless they connect with others, build community, and find the strength and resolve to move forward.

And this season of renewal is a good time to think about responding to intractable problems. This Rosh Hashanah comes just a few days after the People's Climate March and the United Nations' Climate Summit 2014, an international gathering to grapple with perhaps the largest, most complex and difficult problem of our time.

Like many of you, I have followed the environmental news of recent years closely, with increasing concern and distress. My first awareness of the Divine came to me not in synagogue, but in nature – early morning sunrises in the fields during work on a local farm, wandering for hours to gather wildflowers on my parents' untamed 6 acres, and backpacking through amazing mountain ridges both here and abroad. Surrounded by - immersed in - finding myself a part of the natural world, I felt held by God's presence. Loving the natural world became the first way that I loved God. At times now, the very basis of this connection can feel threatened.

The existence of human-caused global climate change is well-established. Major scientific organizations around the world endorse the concept without exception; even in our often politically polarized landscape, large majorities in each of the major parties, as well as among independents, agree with the scientific conclusions concerning climate change.

And those conclusions, as you know, are terrifying. The problems are far greater than the threat to a single, Detroit-sized city; indeed, absent substantial alterations in human behavior, we are talking about species loss and geographic change on an unprecedented scale, perhaps even the unraveling of the web of interdependence that supports life on Earth.

In the face of dangers of this magnitude, how can we not despair? What is the way forward? What does Judaism teach us about responding to challenges that threaten to overwhelm us?

As a starting point, we might look at the story that Torah provides of our ancestors confronting a challenge on which their future depends. In the book of Numbers, camped outside of Canaan, the Israelites send out 12 scouts to assess the land and the people's ability to conquer it. Upon their return, the scouts report. They all agree that the land is good, "flowing with milk and honey;" they all also report that the cities are fortified, and that the people are large and strong and fierce. Ten of the spies continue and say that, in the presence of such giants, "We felt like grasshoppers in their presence and so too we must

have been like grasshoppers to them. We cannot conquer the land." The two remaining spies, Joshua and Caleb, addressing the same facts, reach a different conclusion: "We should go up at once, for we can conquer it." Drawing on their faith, they refuse to be paralyzed by fear; they see the giants and the city walls, and insist on confronting the challenge.

Naming the challenges accurately and resolving to move forward is not the end of the process; it is only the beginning. Our ancestors needed not only the courage to enter Canaan, but instruction on how to live when they settled there. In the form of *mitzvot*, commandments, Torah offered them guidance for sustainable living – guidance that can help us as well, as we engage with the challenges of climate change. I'd like to explore a few of those this morning, and discuss the lessons, support, and encouragement they provide for confronting the giants of our own time.

From the very beginning – the very beginning of *B'reishit* / Genesis – Torah gives us a remarkable gift: the Sabbath. In the Genesis story, the pinnacle of God's work of creation is not any cosmic wonder, not any awe-inspiring creature, not even the first human being; it is Shabbat. God's greatest creation is the day of ceasing, of *not doing*. In the ancient world, the idea of a day off was radical; today, it still is. Our culture's primary form of self-expression is consumption. We are encouraged to measure our success and our worth by the objects we can own and the resources that we can use. And in the age of online stores that never sleep, of cloud connectivity, we can be at it 24 hours a day. We spend most of our time, attention and energy acquiring or working to acquire more stuff. And yet, as the narrative in Genesis shows us, amidst the incredible energy of the first creation, even God took a break. And Torah says, so must we. In our weekly cycle of activity and work, we are to take a day of not doing – not creating, not acquiring, not making.

At this point, you may be wondering: How can observance of the Sabbath inform our response to climate change? In August, the New York Times summarized the draft report issued by the U.N.'s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Greenhouse gas emissions have been increasing at a faster rate since the year 2000 than in the 30 previous years. "A major part of the jump was caused by industrialization in China, which now accounts for half the world's coal use." Many of us have heard this before, and tend to feel helpless in response: "Even if we do everything we can to reduce our own carbon footprint, we can't do anything about China's emissions." But the U.N. panel tells us, "Those emissions are being incurred in large part to produce goods for consumption in the West."

Shabbat – a day of experiencing but not acquiring, not consuming – teaches us that we can relate differently to the world during the rest of the week as well. It reminds us that the purpose of our lives ought not to be making, using, and using up the greatest possible amount of stuff. We can relate to the world not simply as a source to fulfill our material desires, but as sacred creation.

Shabbat occurs once a week and is about cessation from everyday activity. On the other hand, keeping kosher is a *mitzvah* that is wedded to the day-to-day, that enters our

lives as frequently as food enters our mouths. We can think about kashrut in two ways. On one level, kashrut requires us to look beyond the food that is on our plate to consider how it got there. How was the food raised, prepared, processed? On another level, kashrut offers a way of being that can extend beyond food. Consider that by nature we are omnivores, capable of eating nearly every kind of animal – but there are many that we leave alone, do not kill and eat. That is, we make a conscious, daily choice to consume less than we might desire, less than might be readily available to us. At its core, kashrut is a mitzvah that offers daily practice in self-restraint.

What wisdom can kashrut offer us in responding to climate change? Many of us are becoming aware that our present system of food production and distribution plays a significant part in the greenhouse gas equation. The use of petroleum-based fertilizers, refrigeration and transportation of food from around the globe, the environmental cost of meat production (including tropical rainforest destruction) – all of these make a difference. The kinds of questions that kashrut has always instructed us to ask about the origins and production of our food can serve as a model for questions that are critically important today. After all, the very meaning of the word Kashrut is, literally translated, *suitable or appropriate*. As we grapple with climate change, what food choices are appropriate?

In addition, the cultivation of self-restraint that kashrut teaches us will be necessary far beyond our food choices. The UN Intergovernmental Panel notes that companies and governments have identified fossil fuel reserves at least four times greater than we can actually use if we are to avoid the worst consequences of global warming. That is, although so many aspects of our lives today depend upon coal, gas and oil, we must learn and exercise the self-restraint to leave most of what the planet has left – in the ground.

We've talked about the daily lessons that kashrut can teach us, and about the weekly encouragement that Shabbat can provide as we respond to climate change. Our tradition engages our relationship with the rest of creation in grander rhythms as well: the calendrical cycles by which we count the Shmita and Yovel years. And the year we are entering, 5775, is a shmita year – literally the “Year of Release,” but better known as the Sabbatical Year.

Torah tells us that as the Israelites prepared to enter Canaan they were commanded to count the years. Every seventh year was Shmita, release, a Sabbath for the land. During Shmita, fields were not to be plowed or planted, thereby allowing them to replenish themselves. Any crops that grew of their own accord were to be available to all to harvest, but especially to the poor, and stored food would be equitably distributed. Moreover, all debts were to be forgiven.

After seven Shmita years – that is, every fiftieth year – came Yovel, the "Proclamation," or, as it is often called, the “Jubilee” year. At that time, land would return to the tribes originally assigned when the Israelites entered the land, and any slaves or indentured servants would be set free.

What are the purposes of the Sabbatical and Jubilee years? What can we learn from them about the relationship between people and the rest of creation -- and about our responsibility for one another?

To begin with, there's a radical idea about land embedded in Shmita and Yovel: people are not free to do with it whatever they want. We may use the land for our needs, but within limits. We may plant and work land, but we do not "own" it in the sense of having permanent and absolute title to it. Rather, in the words of the psalmist, "The earth and all its fullness are God's." Just as we need Shabbat to renew ourselves, the land is entitled to its sabbatical year. We are stewards of creation, and may benefit from it; but the land has its own rhythms and cycles that do not revolve around human needs and desires.

From the mitzvot concerning land and time, we also see clearly that Earth and its resources can be used in ways that lead to greater social equity. Landholders are required during normal farming years to let the needy come and glean the corners of the fields, and any produce that falls or is uncollected; during Shmita, the poor have first claim to any incidental crops. These commandments, as well as the general distribution of stored food and the cancellation of debts show Torah's insistence on communal responsibility for the survival -- with dignity -- of the poor and vulnerable.

We know that while we are all subject to the growing effects of climate change -- more severe storms, droughts, forest fires, and floods -- it is, at least initially, increasingly the poorest in the developing world who are experiencing the most devastating consequences. For instance, Bangladesh, one of the world's most densely populated nations, produces only 0.3% of emissions contributing to climate change, yet scientists project that rising seas will force the displacement of 18 million people in the next 40 years. The Shmita year and Yovel remind us that we are responsible for one another, to steward the resources of creation to care for and protect each other. We need to reduce our fossil fuel use and greenhouse emissions not just for our own benefit, but to fulfill this sacred vision and imperative for justice.

In the words of Rabbi Tarfon in Pirke Avot, "The time is short, and the work is great." Where and how do we begin? The scientist and writer Bill McKibben pointed out on the radio just a few days ago that, while our individual actions -- reducing our energy use, replacing incandescent bulbs with LEDs and so on -- are important, they make little difference on their own. The most substantial change, he argued, will come through collective action. And so, like the Detroiters who choose to rebuild despite the obstacles, like our ancestors who entered the land knowing there were giants, let us find our inspiration and hope in engaging the challenge together. It is no surprise that right here in our own Kehillah - our own community - members have begun turning toward each other and working creatively together to find ways to reduce our synagogue's carbon footprint.

It turns out that the sanctuary roof right above our heads is well situated to harness the sun's energy. A preliminary assessment indicates that solar panels installed there could provide a significant percentage of Kehillah's electricity – as much as two-thirds of our annual energy needs. Additional evaluation will be done to determine the size, costs and output of a solar electric system best suited to our building. With the Board's approval, our Social Action Committee's Solarize Kehillah team is already on their way to beginning the assessment process. You'll be learning more in the coming weeks about this exciting initiative and how together we can provide financial support to make it a reality.

I wish I could say that this effort is enough; but, while it is significant, as all of us know it is one step on a long path. As Nigel Savage, the visionary founder and director of the Jewish environmental organization Hazon says,

We will not, in our lifetimes, wake up to this headline in the *New York Times*: 'Great News. Climate Change Fixed! Go Back to the Way You Were....' [W]e will live with this messy reality for the remainder of our lives. These are not resolvable challenges. What we must do is to recognize them as such — and to use that knowledge to underpin the work that can and should be done.... What is striking is that we have not begun to really understand the gifts that we do have within Jewish tradition....

Mr. Savage's use of the word "gifts" offers a final and most welcome reminder: our heritage, our holidays and rituals, are sources of deep joy. This morning, we have explored how the celebration of Shabbat, observance of Kashrut, and turning our attention to Shmita and Yovel teach us life-sustaining truths: the need to reduce consumption; to make conscious and ethical choices; to recognize, with respect and humility, the interconnections between ourselves and the rest of creation; and to acknowledge our responsibility to protect the most vulnerable.

We carry these insights forward with determination -- because that's the Jewish way. As Nigel Savage reminds us, "We will not resolve many of the greatest challenges of our time — but neither may we desist from engaging them with all that we know, all that we have, and all that we aspire to."

May this New Year be one of hope, of strength, and of renewed commitment to our world and to all of creation.

L'shanah tovah