

Radical Amazement: Our Judaism, Our Environment and our New Year

A Sermon for the High Holy Days by Senior Rabbi Amy M. Schwartzman

Temple Rodef Shalom

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Shana tova! Happy New Year... and might I also add...Yom Huledet Samayach! Happy Birthday – for today is the birthday of the world, the day when the earth came into being. Our prayerbook tells us, Hayom Harat Olam, 5768 years ago today our world was completed. Although many of us may attribute the actual number of years to sacred myth, we can easily embrace the idea – for all of our new years, all of our birthdays, mark a past time when life as we know it began.

Actually, I'm not one for big birthday celebrations, but I do love hearing my mother tell about the day I was born. And no surprise, my own kids frequently ask me to tell them about the day that they each arrived. There is a special excitement in remembering the joy and awe of that time. Today, it would be most appropriate to think about the birth and early days of our world. Some of us may think that we are too far removed from that event to connect to the awe and wonder of that beginning but I am sure that all of us have experienced pieces of it.

Can you recall a time, perhaps, when you stood at the edge of the ocean, maybe as the sun was rising and the crescent moon just fading from the sky. The sand was still cool from the past night's air and rough and dry on your feet as it covered the vast deep. At the water's edge, looking out at *mayim she'ein lahem sof* – water that cannot be seen to its end, you stood at a spot that has probably not changed much since the metaphoric or real six days of creation and you heard the unending sound of the sea and the waves, a sound that has not ceased since those days of the birth of the world - a sound that may have mesmerized some Adam or Eve somewhere as it has mesmerized many of us. And then, that wonderful moment arrived when the red disc of the sun peaked out of the horizon over the waters, changing slowly to orange and then gold, professing the wonder of color and more: giving promise to light that will sustain us and all other life. There was green seaweed, there were rocks and shells and even fish coming into view.

In moments like these we relive the wonder of harat olam, the birth of the world, and even now, far from that place, the primeval sound of the waves persists, “the voice of God over the waters” reaching our ears from a second before, or from eons before – it's impossible to tell.

All of us have had experiences like this I'm sure - if not by the ocean, then perhaps hiking up a mountain, or in the desert or deep in a beautiful forest. They inspire us; they fill us with awe and wonder. For many of us, myself included, these moments are spiritual. We feel connected

to something much greater than ourselves, a complex universe, beauty beyond words, forces outside of our human control, miracles of creation that stagger the mind. Could this be a hint to the Divine in the world? Could this be our chance to experience the awe that prevailed over the entire world at the beginning of time?

The famous 20th century scholar, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel had a term for just those moments when we observe the intricacy and interconnectedness of nature and experience the awe of creation. He called it radical amazement. In his own words: "Radical Amazement is the ability to marvel at the world with an authentic awareness of that which exists. It is that moment when we catch ourselves understanding that the world, created by God, is immeasurable in the treasures and wonders it can provide us." This term resonates strongly in me. I have experienced radical amazement in the moment when nature and my personal spirituality have been united.

Hayom Harat Olam – today marks the birth of our world. Today is a day for us to connect with the 'radical amazement' that each of us has experienced at some time in our lives. We may do this in our minds as we recall our encounters in nature, or perhaps we will do this together this afternoon as we gather in our garden for tashlich. There is yet another way that our very wise Reform tradition has helped us to honor and observe Harat Olam. Our Movement has suggested an alternative Torah reading for today. In place of the Akedah, the story of the binding of Isaac, we are also permitted to read the story of creation – Bereshit – Genesis 1:1 – the poetic saga of the beginnings of our universe culminating with the creation of humanity and God's charge to Adam and Eve *l'ovdah ul'shomrah* – to till and tend the earth. Factual or mythic, no matter – it is an inspiring story that places God's hand in our natural world.

Jewish tradition is deeply committed to and extremely concerned about the responsibility that God bestowed upon humanity to care for the earth in that sacred myth of creation. Let me share with you a Midrash, a creative supplementary text that our tradition added on to this story. This Midrash describes God taking Adam around the Garden of Eden for an orientation, as it were, to the realm of nature.

Can you imagine God showing off the red maple and rose bush, the great oak and the soft grasses? And can you imagine Adam's amazement at the hundreds of plants and animals God is introducing to him? "See how beautiful all of My creations are" says God in this legend, adding that "all this has been created for your sake. Reflect on this, and take care not to foul or destroy My world. For if you do, there will be none to repair it after you. And what is worse, you will bring death even to the righteous people in the future." (Kohelet Rabbah 7:13)

When I first read this text, a shiver went down my spine. These sentences, warning us not to corrupt our world lest we bring death to future generations, are two thousand years old. They existed before greenhouse gases and carbon emissions, before toxic chemicals and global warming. How rich and wise this ancient legend is. Consider its essential message: Human beings are the crown of creation, able to improve upon or destroy the world. We have been given license to utilize nature. Our choices, however, must exist in the tension between our own selfishness and our ultimate responsibility to our landlord, God. Above all, it tell us, as God told Adam, that some intrusions into the natural world have irreversible effects, and can, in the aggregate, doom even innocent future generations. What generation ever needed this Midrash more than ours, in which the human powers to create, and to permanently destroy, have reached unprecedented heights?

This powerful Midrash does not stand alone. From the Torah clear through to our modern texts we can see that our people have been instructed and even commanded to protect nature. We are told in Deuteronomy not to waste or cause wanton destruction by performing the mitzvah of Bal Tashchit; we are supposed to plant trees, the mitzvah of netiyah; and we are charged to refrain each week from controlling our world, observing the mitzvah of Shabbat. The rabbis of the Talmud went on to create more laws to protect water and fields, laws concerning cruelty to animals, air pollution and hazardous waste. It's inspiring to see that in some very profound ways our tradition was and is centuries ahead of its time.

Surely, you see where I am heading. There is no question that it's most appropriate to ask on this Rosh Hashanah – birthday of the world, on this day of reflection and contemplation – why the Jewish people, which comes with first-class environmental credentials, appears in many instances to be lagging behind in its ecological involvement. This is true for the world Jewish community in general, and also, I fear, for the Northern Virginia Jewry and for TRS. We have not taken enough action. As a rabbi I feel remiss for not consistently doing more to present an authentically Jewish perspective on these matters – reforestation, recycling and globalization to name a few. In a raft of 'green' issues Judaism has a balanced and affective approach that could be a source of pride to Jews and a source of inspiration to the non-Jewish world. But for some reason these issues are not making it into Reform Jewish magazine, nor my sermons and nor many of our homes.

I am proud that last spring we established environmental committees for our congregation. We are working on how we might change the way we run this building and how we can support environmental causes in our community. But surely more is needed.

We've all heard what the experts have said. We've seen the reports, read the papers and even watched the movie. Although there may still be disagreement about the reasons or the details,

I think at this point, most people agree that we are using up this earth and its resources at an astounding rate. And, as hard as it is to hear, as Americans, we are more responsible than anyone else. The reason is in large part, our affluence, a gift we treasure and do not want to give up. But how we use that affluence is the key to whether our children and children's children will have the same opportunity. At the rate we are going, it won't be long before we have exhausted our children's potential inheritance. And that is unacceptable from a Jewish perspective. Something must be done and soon, but it won't be easy.

We have to change – isn't that what this season is all about? These *Yamim Noraim* – days of awe are the time in the year when we, as Jews, make a concerted effort to look hard at our selves, our relationships and our actions and commit to change for the better. We have to change our thinking about the way we buy, the way we consume, the way we conceptualize the problem. Many of us may profess that we have begun the process, we've changed a few regular light bulbs to CFLs; we've added a few more items to our recycling bins. But we all know deep down that this is not nearly enough. The change that is necessary for us to live up to God's expectations of our people must be more extensive, more severe, more radical.

I suspect that in truth many of us are ready intellectually, but in our heart of hearts, we are not truly there. We are well meaning but a bit too self indulgent to give up our personal pleasures even when we know they hurt the delicate balance that is needed to sustain our world. I admit that I am part of this group. I am trying but I know that I can do more.

Let's go back to that moment at the shore of sea, or on the mountain or right here at Great Falls Park or just in your own back yard. Breathe in the wonderful crisp, fresh air. Doesn't that bring back the term that Rabbi Heschel coined? Doesn't it call to mind that phrase that captures those moments when we appreciate the complexity of our world and realize that we can't be all that there is, we can't be at the center of everything? Radical amazement is Heschel's eloquent phrase. We need more experiences of radical amazement to inspire us to change.

Once again Heschel provides direction. He went on to say that radical amazement does not stand alone. There is a part 2 to Heschel's theology of nature, humanity and God. True experiences of radical amazement lead to what Heschel calls 'the sacred deed.' Ethical obligations can arise naturally when we are in the presence of something infinitely complicated, beautiful and larger than ourselves. Heschel explains that: "A Jew is asked to take a leap of action rather than a leap of thought. It is in deeds that a person becomes aware of what life really is, of the power to harm and to hurt, to wreck and to ruin." Heschel's sacred deed is realized when we choose to use our ability to act to affirm God's vision of our world and its future. In carrying out a sacred task we disclose a divine intention. Through deeds of

ecological preservation, we continue God's work in the world and fulfill the Biblical and Midrashic charge to be the caretakers of God's earth.

For Heschel, Jews must move from awe to action, if we are to live up to our partnership with God. Thinking is less important than doing, and while we must have a deep appreciation and a sense of wonder when we are in nature, we also have to act in a way that helps the world keep its beauty. When it comes to the environment, every sacred deed is necessary to achieve a good balance. All our actions are important. As Heschel writes: "What we perform may seem slight, but the aftermath is immense; even a single deed generates an endless set of effects, initiating more than the most insightful person is able to master or to predict."

We all know that we should stop using plastic bags at the grocery store and turn off the water when we brush our teeth but Heschel would ask us for more. Surely sacred deeds mean deeper commitments and do not stop at easing our conscience with single gestures. Let us each commit to discover how much carbon our activities emit in a year and understand which changes in our lives will really make a difference. Changing the light bulbs and insulating our water heaters is a step in the right direction, but what about raising the temperature of our thermostat in the summer and reducing it in the winter, carpooling to work or maybe even working from home one day a week to avoid our commute. Would any of us consider changing our landscaping from the beautiful lawns we are so proud of to indigenous plants and bushes that won't require extra watering? One hour of a sprinkler can use over 600 gallons of water. Imagine how much water we would save if we all decided to make a change to what some people call water-wise plantings. If each of us were to commit to changing the way we approach these and so many more ecological decisions 1400 households could really make a difference.

One of the most distressing aspects of this issue though is that very little of this will matter if we don't all choose to do this together. I don't mean 'together' as in Rodef Shalom or even together as the State of Virginia or all of America. Global warming is called Global because the problem and the solution involve everyone on God's great earth at the same time. If we change our emission standards, but China doesn't, the global result will be ineffective. If Australia mandates different sources of energy for homes and cars, but North America does not, their efforts will be virtually lost because of our inaction.

Moving towards global unity requires our country, through its leaders, to work harder to join in international efforts. It will mean sacrifices for our country. I believe we cannot begin until we are willing to make changes that demonstrate our country's deep commitment to this issue. Changes in our policy – that is laws that ensure a unified effort to preserve this world. In the coming year, as we listen to the presidential candidates present and debate their views, this

issue must be one of our priorities in our decision making. It is our sacred responsibility to accept our role as God's guardians of this world.

Today, on this Yom Harat Olam, we are commanded to begin with ourselves. I would suggest that we do so by asking: How can we engage in a dialogue with each other that will change our expectations? A dialogue where we talk about how less is actually more? Less things, less usage of natural resources, less expectations of comfort, even less stuff for our kids. We all need to think and act beyond the basics. Heschel, the laws of our Torah, the texts of our tradition all compel us to do more.

Today I want to suggest as well that going green will not only contribute to the preservation of this world for us and future generations, I suggest that each of us might gain more spiritually than we forfeit materially. Many people here have shared with me the fact that they don't feel drawn to our mitzvot, our commandments. For some, there is no sense of obligation; for others there is little return in terms of personal spiritual reward. Let me suggest that if each one of us were to see our involvement in preserving the environment as a religious deed, which it is, the depth of our own spirituality might grow. Further we might find new connections in the many traditions that are grounded in nature's cycle. Building a sukkah, and eating or sleeping within it may bridge a new relationship between Judaism and you, a naturalist Jew. Tu B'shvat, the New Year of the trees may take on new urgency. Pesach, our spring festival, might be seen to house many new levels of meaning. This Rosh Hashanah, I hope, may provide you with a different and hopefully more meaningful perspective on the observance of our New Year.

Yom Huledet Samayach l'olahmaynu – Happy Birthday to our world!! How should we honor this auspicious day? Personally, I'd like to visit that seashore once again and imagine the day when I stand there, much older, my children grown and a new generation accompanying me. I imagine that the waves will be there, but will the beach be smaller, will the seaweed still be green and the fish visible at all? Standing at that sea shore, that place that has existed since those early days of our world, will I feel pride or will I feel shame?

Perhaps, standing there I will tell that new generation about the story of creation, how we can see God's hand in the nature that surrounds us and marvel at the beauty and complexity of our world. Will they be in awe of the sun now setting on the horizon, turning from gold, to orange and finally to deep red, a hint of the moon beginning to appear in the sky? Will they wonder if the sounds of the waves are coming to their ears from seconds before or perhaps from eons ago? It's impossible to tell. Today, I can only hope, act and hope that others will act with me.

Heschel provides a final word: "As civilization advances the sense of wonder declines. Such decline is an alarming symptom of our state of mind. Humanity will not perish for want of information; but only for want of appreciation."

On this Yom Harat Olam, day when we celebrate the creation of our world, may we open our eyes and hearts to the beauty that surrounds us everyday. May we appreciate the amazing, radical, complexity of nature that sustains and inspires us every day and may we be moved to the sacred deed that preserves this world, our world, God's world today and every day.

Amen.

Rabbi Amy Schwartzman
Temple Rodef Shalom
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