

Rosh HaShanah: An Environmental Text Study

The Birthday of the World

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Rosh Hashanah marks the anniversary of the creation of the world. In addition to the themes of repentance, self-reflection and prayer that are traditionally thought about during the Yamim Noraim (High Holy Days), we mark and celebrate God's work in creating the world. As we contemplate our actions, both good and bad, during the past year, we turn our thoughts to the world around us and **our role as stewards of Creation**.

We encourage you to use the **High Holy Day Environmental Fact Sheet** (see www.rac.org/holidayguides) as well as the following texts and discussion questions to engage in environmental dialogue on Rosh Hashanah, the birthday of the world:

Text 1: To Till and to Tend

נִישַׁח יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים, אֶת-הָאָדָם; וַיִּנְחֵהוּ בְּגֶן-עֵדֶן, לְעַבְדָּהּ וּלְשָׁמְרָהּ.

The Eternal God took ADAM and placed him in the Garden of Eden to till it and tend it. **Genesis 2:15**

1. In what way is the task 'to till and to tend' the Garden of Eden relevant to us today?

Text 2: Environmental Protection

When the Holy Blessed One created the first human, God took him and showed him all the trees of the Garden of Eden, and said to him: "See my creations, how beautiful and praiseworthy they are, and all that I have created, I created for you. Be mindful not to ruin and destroy my world, for if you ruin it, there is nobody to fix it after you. – **Midrash in Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:8**

1. What lessons on environmental protection can be learned from this midrash?
2. What lessons on personal responsibility can be learned from this midrash?

Text 3: Righteousness

נֹחַ אִישׁ צַדִּיק תָּמִים הָיָה בְּדָרְתָיו

[NOAH WAS A RIGHTEOUS MAN; HE WAS BLAMELESS] IN HIS AGE. **Genesis 6:9**

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R. Judah and R. Nehemiah differed. R. Judah said: Only in his age was he a righteous man [by comparison]; had he flourished in the age of Moses or Samuel, he would not have been called righteous: in the street of the totally blind, the

one-eyed man is called clear-sighted, and the infant is called a scholar... Similarly, **IN HIS AGE** (Gen. 6:9) he was a righteous man. R. Nehemiah said: If he was righteous even in his age, how much more so [had he lived] in the age of Moses. He might be compared to a tightly closed phial of perfume lying in a graveyard, which nevertheless gave forth a fragrant odor; how much more then if it were outside the graveyard! - **Midrash Genesis Rabbah 30-9**

1. In this midrash, what is Rabbi Judah saying? What is Rabbi Nehemiah saying?
2. Do *you* believe Noah was righteous? Why or why not?
3. Can you think of other biblical figures who might have acted more righteously than Noah? (for example, see Genesis 18:22-32, Exodus 32)
4. Can you think of any modern examples of righteousness?

#### **Text 4: Reactions**

When Noah came out of the ark, he opened his eyes and saw the whole world completely destroyed. He began crying for the world and said, God, how could you have done this? ... God replied, Oh Noah, how different you are from the way Abraham ... will be. He will argue with me on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah when I tell him that I plan their destruction... But you, Noah, when I told you I would destroy the entire world, I lingered and delayed, so that you would speak on behalf of the world. But when you knew you would be safe in the ark, the evil of the world did not touch you. You thought of no one but your family. And now you complain? Then Noah knew that he had sinned. - **Midrash Tanhuma**

1. Do you think Noah reacted appropriately when 1) warned that a natural disaster was approaching and 2) when he emerged from the ark?
2. There are many respectable scientist, politicians and activists who warn of the dramatic environmental consequences of current human behavior—does society react appropriately to those warning calls? How do you personally react?
3. In what ways is Noah a role model? In what ways is he a bad example?

#### **Text 5: Being Neighborly**

One may not dig a well near his neighbor's well, nor a channel, cave, aqueduct, or basin for washing, unless he distanced it at least three spans from his neighbor's wall, and plastered with lime. One must distance olive or poppy waste, dung, salt, lime, and flint-stones three spans from his neighbor's wall, and plaster with lime. One must distance seeds, plowing, and urine from the wall three hand-lengths. - **Mishnah (Baba Batra 2:1)**

1. What lessons can be learned from this mishnah?
2. Can you think of an example of an environmental catastrophe where the lessons from the mishnah and Noah's behavior are applicable?
3. How can you use these lessons to reflect upon your personal engagement in the protection of the environment?

