

Rosh Hashanah Sermon
Rabbi Stacy Friedman
September 26, 2022, 5783

When NASA released the first images taken by the James Webb Telescope this past summer, the photos went viral. When I saw them for the first time, I gasped. I imagine you did too. For they are the clearest, sharpest, oldest and most distant representations ever taken of the universe, some 13.5 billion light-years away. They show luminous galaxies with radiant stars dancing above an ancient and endless mystery beyond human comprehension (unless of course you are a NASA scientist). Through these photos, we can peer back as if to the beginning of time, to the earliest moments of the creation of the universe and every moment since. To stare into the mystery of the universe, with its transcendent grandeur and magnificence, simply takes my breath away.

Today, this holy day, brings us back to the very same place, back to the creation of the world, back to the origins of human life, the natural world, and our planet itself. And our planet is so astoundingly beautiful. It is majestic, and it is sacred. And today we celebrate it all. But our world is also in trouble, and in addition to celebrating the grandeur of the world, we need to discuss the challenges to our earth as well.

There are times, when I look at our children and I wonder, what will their future be? What is the world they and future generations of the world's children will inherit from us? What will it take for them to have clean air to breathe and water to drink? What will it take to keep them safe from floods and fires and unrelenting temperatures? What can we do to preserve the brilliance and magnificence of this earth so that those who come after us can marvel at majestic animals in the wilderness and see towering sequoia trees up close? So that they too will be able to gaze up at the night sky and see luminous galaxies and stars dancing overhead.

I know it feels overwhelming and frightening at times and too many of us are losing hope and feeling despair. Ecoanxiety is a real thing, in fact my computer didn't even autocorrect the word! I feel it, I know many of us do, particularly our young people who have the most at stake. But they are also our teachers, and inspire us to act, to stand up and speak out, and make a difference in our world. Judaism teaches the very same lesson, it reminds us that action is the antidote to despair. We live in a time of climate change, yet every individual act moves the dial, every deed matters.

This year, it feels more urgent than ever as the *Unetane Tokef* prayer we recite sounds less like a prayer and more like headlines from today's news. *Mi yichyeh u'mi yamut*, who shall live and who shall die. Across the globe, five million people die every year due to the effects of climate change, from extreme heat, air pollution, famine, and more. *Mi va'ra'av u'mi va'tza-mah*, who by hunger and who by thirst. Over three billion people across the globe lack access to clean water. *Mi va'mayim u'mi va'eish*, who by water and who by fire. Puerto Rico has endured yet another devastating hurricane. And extreme monsoon rains have flooded Pakistan where one third of the nation is under

water and 33 million people were displaced from their homes with little access to food and water. Tragically, 1,500 people died in the floods, more than 530 of them were children. *Mi ya-ani u-mi ya'ashir*, who shall be poor and who shall be rich. We know that poor and underdeveloped nations suffer disproportionately from climate impacts and that most of the world's 22 million climate refugees are from under resourced areas. *Mi yanuch u-mi yanua*. Who will be troubled and who shall be at peace. Too many people are suffering, peace feels elusive, and the future is far too uncertain.

And that is why the *unetane tokef* prayer culminates in these words, *u'teshuva, u'tfillah, u'tzedakah ma'avirin et ro-ah ha'g'zei-rah*. *Teshuvah*, striving to do better, *tefillah*, prayer and reflection, and *tzedakah*, righteous and compassionate deeds, all help us repair the world and ease the suffering and pain of so many. This is the power of today, this is how we turn despair into hope, complacency into action, and doubt and fear into conviction and power.

Since the beginning of time, when the universe was created and the first humans were placed in the Garden of Eden, our role has been to care for and guard our earth, the waters, the sky, and everything in between. In Genesis 2:15, God commands Adam, whose very name means earth, "to till and tend the world, לְעַבְדָּהּ וּלְשָׁמְרָהּ, and to protect it from all harm. God's message was clear, human beings are to be the caretakers of the earth and guardians of all of God's creations.

And for the first 10,000 years of human civilization, we continued to dwell in a world which resembled the Garden of Eden, living in harmony with nature and our planet. But over time, humanity modernized and industrialized, and we left the lush and idyllic garden behind. The ancient rabbis even anticipated this possibility in a brilliant and prophetic midrash written over 1,000 years ago. Without knowing anything about pollution, the ozone, fossil fuels or global warming, they cautioned us against destroying the garden and leaving it behind. This ancient warning reflects what they already knew, that human power gone unchecked can be dangerous and corrupt. The rabbis teach, "When the Holy One created the first humans, God led them around the Garden of Eden and said to them: 'Look at My works, how beautiful and praiseworthy they are! And all that I have created, it was for you [to protect]. Pay attention that you do not destroy My world, for if you do, מִי אֵין מִי שְׂיִתְקַן אַחֲרָיךָ, there is no one to repair it after you."

My friends, there is no one to repair our world after us. No one. We cannot leave behind for the next generation to fix what prior generations, including our own, have broken. It's up to us to do everything in our power to heal and protect our exquisite and fragile planet. For we are שְׂמֹרֵי אֲדָמָה, *shomrei adamah*, guardians and healers of our planet and its inhabitants. Judaism maintains that this is our highest priority and most sacred obligation. In Deuteronomy we are commanded not to destroy trees that bear fruit. From this verse comes the Jewish ethical mandate of *bal tashchit*, the prohibition against destroying. Maimonides expands this prohibition and adds that even one who breaks vessels or rips up clothing or wastes food violates the commandment of "Do not destroy." And that was 900 years ago!

In fact, so important is caring for the earth in Judaism that Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, a 1st century sage of great renown, put it this way; “if you are holding a tree sapling in your hand and you are then told that the Messiah is about to arrive, first plant the sapling, and after you’ve planted the tree, then go out and greet the Messiah.” This esteemed rabbi lived through the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, the near decimation of his people, and still more important to him than anything was to plant a tree that would grow and sustain the earth and nourish the generations who came after him.

Rosh Hashanah, this holy day, calls on each of us to do the same. It calls upon us to plant the seeds of renewal that will heal our planet and bring hope to humanity. And the time is now. As we know, climate scientists around the world agree that we need to cut global emissions in half by the year 2030 and become carbon neutral by 2050. It requires both large-scale and personal actions. We need to hold accountable corporations and industries most responsible for producing greenhouse gas emissions. We need to advocate for climate justice and increased financial support for vulnerable countries and communities hardest hit by climate disasters, both around the world and in our own nation as well. And we know that to achieve the far-reaching climate policies our planet requires, we need a thriving democracy. We need to vote and ensure that everyone has access to vote. I know that so many of you are already writing postcards and making phone calls to get out the vote and it all makes a difference. We are also letting our elected leaders know that we care deeply about the future of our planet and they must. And we thank them when they introduce or support climate saving legislation. And the broader global Jewish community must prioritize climate change on its agenda as well.

I know that so many of you already do so much to care for and repair our planet. I acknowledge you, and am grateful to you, for you are our teachers. But some of us can do more to effect change, I know I certainly can. Yet at times, we don’t know where to begin or how to deepen our impact. That’s why our community members have come together and formed our Rodef Sholom Climate Action Initiative. For the past few years, we have offered programs on the climate, learned how to regenerate soil, and even took a field trip to the dump, to the Redwood landfill, to better understand our waste system and the sustainable methods they use. Some of you formed a CSA a few years ago and meet every Shabbat morning on the synagogue steps to receive boxes of fresh, local, and organic produce and support our local farmers. And Rodef Sholom is working closely with Dayenu: A Jewish Call to Climate Action, and the Religious Action Center and so much more. And we need to call upon the broader Jewish community to prioritize climate action on its agenda as well. And I truly want to thank Rabbi Elana for her leadership and vision, and for deepening our community’s investment in our environment. And our new synagogue will have solar panels, a community garden, and we’ve done everything we can to conserve water and reduce our carbon footprint. And please look for an email you will receive later this week with information and resources, and an invitation to a community-wide program where Ellie Cohen, CEO of The Climate

Center, will speak. We will learn from one another as well how we can work together to effect change.

And of course, our own personal actions move the dial as well. With every garden we plant, every object we recycle, we make a difference. Every time we use less, waste less, and drive less, we make a difference. With every solar panel we install, every efficient light bulb we use, we move the dial. I know sometimes we wonder how or even if our individual small acts make a difference. But do you remember that night, three weeks ago during the height of the heat wave? Our state's power grid was at near capacity as power usage reached record highs. At 5:45 pm, we all received an emergency warning alert- reduce our energy consumption or rolling blackouts will go into effect. And within five minutes people all over the state turned off air conditioners and fans and lights, and power demand dropped so significantly that we averted the blackouts. Within just five minutes. Don't let anyone tell you or me or our children that we are not making a difference, because we are.

This is why last Friday thousands and thousands of young people around the world took to the streets to demand action on climate change. From Jakarta to Tokyo, from Belfast to Nairobi, from New York to New Zealand, even in Antarctica, they protested as part of the Youth Global Climate Strike. Their message was clear: It is time for the world's leaders to do more, to take resolute and immediate action to protect the planet and humanity from climate change. The young protestors held signs aloft urging the world to act, imploring each of us to do more to protect their future here on earth. Some of their slogans were creative, like one young woman's which read, "I want a hot date, not a hot planet." Others messages were poignant and wrenching. Young children from New Delhi, where air pollution is the worst of any major city on earth, cried out in sweet, high pitched voices, "Wake up now, I want to breathe clean. I want to breathe clean. Wake up, wake up, wake up now." Children on the island nation of Kiribati, which is already sinking into the rising seas, chanted, "We're not drowning, we are fighting." Toward the end of the march in London, a Member of Parliament stood before the thousands of young activists assembled, and proclaimed to them, "Don't let anyone tell you [that] you are not making a difference. You are making history."

We are here today to celebrate the birthday of the world and the renewal of all creation. And our prayers, *teshuva*, תְּשׁוּבָה, and reflection of these High Holy Days are the very seeds we use to transform our lives, our relationships, and our world. And it's not about making history and transforming ourselves or the world overnight. It's not about guilt or berating ourselves for not making history ourselves or doing enough, nor is it about shaming or blaming anybody else. It is about committing to do better, it is about living with humility and finding ways to tread more lightly on this earth. And let's keep in mind what *Pirke Avot* teaches, that it is not up to us to complete the work, but neither can we desist from it. "לֹא עָלֶיךָ הַמְּלָאכָה לְגַמְרָהּ, וְלֹא אַתָּה בְּךָ חוֹרֵין לְבַטֵּל מִמֶּנָּה." We know we don't have to do it all ourselves; we just need to take one more step, commit to take one action, we take the next right step, then the next, and the next, join hands with one another, in our community, in our nation, and with those around the world. And we won't

let go until the work is done and we can all breathe freely, and we can all live in Eden once again.

I must admit to you that I almost didn't speak about this today. I am neither a scientist nor a policy maker and I can certainly do more to address climate change myself. You see, last year on Rosh Hashanah while leading services, I had a plastic water bottle on the bimah. I was thirsty and didn't think to bring my reusable bottle from home. And I heard about it from people who were upset. But this gentle rebuke was just what I needed to deepen my own process of environmental *teshuva*. So for the last year, I have examined my deeds, I've studied and read and listened, and I've committed to doing better for the planet. Among other changes, I've significantly altered my diet, reduced my fuel consumption, installed insulated windows, and now carry my water bottle with me wherever I go...most of the time. I realize that none of this is enough nor does it make me qualified to speak with you about saving the planet.

But I am speaking today as a human being who is in awe of our universe and feels most alive and at home among its mountain trails and desert vistas and who desperately wants to preserve our earth's natural beauty. I am speaking as a mother who loves my children and yours, and wants for all of God's children to be safe and to flourish on this planet for thousands of years. And I speak as a rabbi, who sees in our holy tradition a deep love of and reverence for our universe, whose very calendar is guided by the moon and the planets; whose festivals and holy days are connected to the land, the water, the sun. For ultimately we know that all of life is intertwined like the roots of the great Redwoods among which we dwell. And we human beings, we are of this planet, we are this universe. We are earth and we are air, we are water and we are sunlight. And we are so closely connected to one another and to it all. And when we gaze into the night sky and see luminous stars and galaxies too far away to comprehend, perhaps this is a mirror reflecting back at our own magnificence, reflecting our lives both past and future, and the souls of all living beings who ever existed. so that we can live in awe of the grandeur and brilliance of it all. Don't ever let anyone tell you that you do not have power.

Thank-you to Ellie Cohen, CEO of the Climate Center, who so generously shared her deep knowledge and passion with me and who inspired me to go solar!