

An Inconvenient Truth – An Urgent Cry
2nd Day Rosh Hashanah 5767 September 24th 2006
Rabbi Marc Soloway

I have never lived anywhere as beautiful as Colorado. Every day there are phenomenal opportunities to witness the stunning poetry of creation. Snow gathering in the mountains, the deer I see in my backyard, the changing colors of the leaves. When I first arrived here and used to turn left on to Arapahoe from Cherryvale and see the mountains, they used to take my breath away and I had a secret prayer: “Please God, may I never take this view for granted!” There are so many blessings we could say every single day on the captivating beauty of nature in Boulder.

On Rosh Hashanah we celebrate renewal, we celebrate creation, the birthday of the world. Yesterday, I spoke of a very personal and internal way for us to connect to this theme, a kind of re-creation of ourselves. Today, I want to look more globally at the physical planet that we inhabit and how we can, indeed, celebrate and honor it. In a couple of weeks, we will be starting the Torah again, reading Bereshit, the story of the creation of the world – the amazing genesis of life – heavens and earth, sun, moon, stars; plants and trees; animals, reptiles, birds, fish and, of course, human beings. There is a Midrash, a rabbinic story that says: When God created the first person, showing Adam all the trees in the Garden of Eden and saying, "See My handiwork, how beautiful and choice they are...be careful not to ruin and destroy my world, for if you do, there is no one to repair it after you." *Midrash Rabbah Ecclesiastes 7:13*)

We are, of course, the descendants of Adam and Eve and that voice speaking to Adam in the garden is speaking to us, right now. There is no one to repair it after us. Our very existence demands that we are stewards of this great planet

The term that many of us know well, *Tikun Olam*, means repair of the world. What this term actually means has changed throughout Jewish history from a rabbinic notion of a kind of social status quo, to a complicated Kabbalistic idea concerning broken vessels and the cosmic, spiritual power of performing a mitzvah. In our day, initiated by the

Reform movement and Jewish Renewal, the term Tikun Olam has taken a much more specific, concrete meaning – social action and a literal repair of the world. This, of course, takes different forms. For some of us, we may think of all the work that we as American Jews should be doing to support Israel; others may think of raising consciousness and acting on behalf of the millions of oppressed, suffering, hungry people in the world – the genocide in Darfur in the Sudan. Many people from our community have been very active volunteers in the inspirational community-wide Sudan project initiated by Har Hashem, which has already brought six young Sudanese women to Boulder, with more on their way. Others of us may be thinking of environmental issues; global warming and our response – a very literal repair of our broken, physical world. All of these and more are vital and very real associations with Tikun Olam and all of them are based on core Jewish values. Judaism has always been as much a religion of acting in the world as it has a spiritual and ritual based religion.

On Rosh Hashanah, we hear that great, mighty sound of the shofar and our souls are stirred by its notes. “Wake up, wake up!” demands the shofar. “stop sleeping, open your eyes, your hearts, your ears!” she calls. In antiquity, the shofar had different applications: it was blown on the New Moons and of course the New Year, the coronation of Kings and it was blown to herald danger – an approaching enemy, or a natural disaster. This year, among the varied ways that the shofar will speak to our souls, it will warn us too of the dangers that exist in our frightening world. I am sure for most of the danger at the forefront of our minds is the terrifying threat of radical Islam and that is certainly very real. That is not the danger I want to address today on this birthday of creation, though I do not want to ignore the ways in which our lives have changed because of it five years on from 9/11. I want to talk about another danger that is just as real, though not quite as convenient, the threat of the very existence of our planet due to the effects of global warming. We need to wake up to this reality and hear the call to action in the shofar, precisely because every single one of us can do something different in the coming year that will, it really will, make an impact.

Yes, I have seen Al Gore's powerful and compelling movie “An Inconvenient Truth.”

Those of you who are uncomfortable because you think this is a political, anti-Bush administration movie and sermon – rest assured this is not a political issue. The facts are, in my view and I am not a scientist, irrefutable and transcend the pettiness of party politics. We are talking about survival. Out of a survey of over 600 news clippings on the subject, half indicated there was a debate about whether global warming was a real phenomenon, created by our technology. But out of a survey of over 950 scientific papers on the subject, zero articles, yes, zero articles, deny that global warming is a fact. There is no debate among scientists.

There is no doubt that carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases are warming, or as others including Rabbi Arthur Waskow, would have it 'scorching' our planet. Almost every state this summer saw new records set in temperature. Glaciers are disappearing, the polar ice caps are melting, rivers and lakes are drying up and we are doing it. The average American generates about 15,000 pounds of Carbon Dioxide into the atmosphere from our transportation and domestic energy consumption, more per capita by huge proportions than any other nation.

Perhaps some of you are wondering – I hope not – how this is a Jewish issue, why is the rabbi talking about this on Rosh Hashanah. Well, apart from the frightening reality staring us in the face, there are elements, core values here that are very Jewish. There is a concept in the Torah, in the Book of Deuteronomy, of *bal taschit* – a prohibition against destruction and waste. Although the origin of this *mitzvah* applies to the very specific context of wanton destruction of fruit-bearing trees in a time of war, the principle of *Bal Tashchit*, do not destroy or waste, has been extended from its biblical origin through later rabbinic interpretation, to include other types of waste. The Talmud states explicitly:

Whoever breaks vessels, or tears garments, or destroys a building, or clogs a well, or does away with food in a destructive manner violates the negative mitzvah of *bal tashchit* (*Kiddushin* 32a)

There is a further opinion in a different section of the Talmud, stating that needless use of fuel is also a transgression of *bal tashchit* (*Shabbat* 67b). Maimonides, the medieval

scholar of Jewish law and philosophy, emphasizes the gravity of needless waste or destruction, derived from this same prohibition in the Torah and the Talmudic sources. He says:

The Law forbids only wanton destruction.... Not only one who cuts down trees, but also one who smashes household goods, tears clothes, demolishes a building, stops up a spring, or destroys articles of food with destructive intent transgresses the command "you must not destroy." Such a person is not flogged, **but is administered a disciplinary beating imposed by the Rabbis.** (Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Kings and Wars 6:8,10)

I am not sure that my authority as a rabbi in Boulder extends to administer beatings, but the beatings are coming anyway from the planet itself, in raging storms and floods! The 14th Century Spanish work, *Sefer HaHinnukh* stresses the human responsibility that is implicit in the prohibition, to preserve wherever possible.

The purpose of this mitzvah [bal tashchit] is to teach us to love that which is good and worthwhile and to cling to it, so that good becomes a part of us and we will avoid all that is evil and destructive. This is the way of the righteous and those who improve society, who love peace and rejoice in the good in people and bring them close to Torah: that nothing, not even a grain of mustard, should be lost to the world, that they should regret any loss or destruction that they see, and if possible they will prevent any destruction that they can. Not so are the wicked, who are like demons, who rejoice in destruction of the world, and they are destroying themselves. (Sefer Ha-Hinukh, #529)

This text clearly states that one of the moral qualities that define us as 'good' people is environmental responsibility and sensitivity. I could go on with more proof texts from rabbinic literature, but I think you get the point. These sources make it very clear that it is not just an ethical issue, or a personal choice, but a *halachic* imperative, a legally binding prohibition not to waste the precious resources of our planet. As the midrash states, we are partners in God's glorious universe, here to repair, protect and perfect the world.

The evidence that Al Gore and others in the field bring as to the urgency of this situation is pretty bleak and terrifying. We are so used to the extra security measures since 9/11 – taking off our shoes and belts and now not carrying any liquids, all in the name of avoiding a terrorist disaster, but how many of us take seriously the measures we could be taking to avoid an equally catastrophic eco-disaster? It may be more subtle, more gradual, but it is hard to refute the direction in which we are heading.

Perhaps the most important point made by this film is that there is something between knowledge and despair. We can see the alarming facts and go straight to a place of hopelessness, helplessness and despair. No, says Al Gore, there is somewhere else to go that gives us, each of us, literally the power to save the world! The movie estimates the impact that it would have if citizens of this planet, and specifically this great nation, changed our habits. The lines on the scary graphs signaling doom and destruction fall significantly, through simple changes in behavior. This too is very Jewish and very relevant to this time of year. We Jews never give up hope and belief in our capacity to change ourselves and change the world. Even if something seems utterly inevitable, we pray, we act, we behave as if we can alter the outcome. This is what it means to be God's partners in creation. On this Rosh Hashanah, this New Year, we have potential in a very real way to save the world. Climatecrisis.net, the official website for An Inconvenient Truth, has ten things we can all do: 1. **change a light**; replacing one regular light bulb with a compact fluorescent bulb will save 150 pounds of carbon dioxide a year; 2. **drive less**: every mile that you don't drive, but walk, bike, carpool, take the bus – saves one pound of CO₂. 3. **Recycle more**: if we recycled half of our household waste, we could save 2,400 pounds of CO₂ a year. 4. **Check your tires** – keeping tires inflated can improve gas mileage by 3% or more, every gallon of gas saved keeps 20 pounds of CO₂ out of atmosphere. 5. **Use less hot water** in washing ourselves and our clothes (a low flow shower head saves 350 pounds CO₂ per year, using cold or warm water on washing machine can save 500. 6. **Avoid products with a lot of packaging**; cutting down garbage by 10% can save 1,200 pounds of CO₂. 7. **Adjust your thermostat** 2 degrees in winter and 2 degrees in summer could save as much as 2000 pounds of CO₂ a year! 8. **Plant a tree** – a single tree will absorb one ton of CO₂ over its lifetime. Planting trees

is a very Jewish thing to do, by the way. **9. Turn off electronic devices:** turning off TVs computers, DVD players can save thousands of pounds of CO2. **10. Tell everyone you know to do the same.**

Can you imagine, by the way, how different the world could be if this country had started serious investment in sustainable energy – wind, sun, water, even cow manure – twenty years ago? We wouldn't need to be so dependent on the Arab and other nations for oil, the 'petropolitics', as Tom Friedman called it in a recent New York Times article, that fuels so many of our wars. Perhaps that is the subject for another sermon, but an interesting by-product of a change in the way we get our energy. Talking of the Middle East, it is passionate commitment of Jewish activists in this country who are putting environmental consciousness on the map in Israel. Zionist ideology has always been deeply connected to the land, yet ironically, as those of you who have spent time in Israel have noticed every time you go for a hike in a place of natural beauty, there is very little awareness of these issues by the average Israeli, whoever he or she is. Thanks to the work of the Green Zionist Alliance, now an official part of the World Zionist Organization, this is slowly beginning to change. And by the way, we are proud that Becca Weaver from our own community is a member. This too could be another sermon, but at this time in history, it is so important as Jews to bring in Israel to all our conversations. But now back here to Boulder, to this moment in this room.

If each of us in this room made a commitment to cut the CO2 we generate in half by the simple steps I just outlined, and moved towards becoming carbon neutral by investing in green energy sources, we could collectively reduce the amount of greenhouse gas by nearly 4,000,000 pounds here in Boulder. Call Excel Energy and switch over to their wind power program.

One of the images of this period in the Jewish calendar is of the scales. Will the weight of our good deeds over the year tip the balance on the side of sins. The concept of becoming carbon neutral is also a kind of scale too. We ask ourselves: if I recycle

everything, can I drive to work? If I bike to work every day, can I get on a plane?

Every year rabbis set goals and challenges for individuals and communities at this time of year. We're all going to take on x number of new *mitzvot* or commit to Torah study. Often these important, worthy and ambitious goals, to be brutally honest, fall on mostly deaf ears. This is different my friends because each of us can do it in our homes, in our work place, in our community- and we are stepping up our consciousness at Bonai Shalom this year. October has been designated as Energy Awareness Month in Boulder. Let's develop together our awareness of how much energy we use and how much we could save. Each of us can have a significant impact by these small changes that cost us very little, but the planet cannot afford for us not to make these changes. What greater gift could we give to the world on her birthday than a deep and real commitment to be partners in ensuring her survival? May the shofar wake us up to this urgent call!

During Hanukkah, our community will be taking part in the COEJL (Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life) program: "A Light unto the Nations: How Many Jews Does it Take to Change a Light Bulb?" encouraging a change over to compact fluorescents. Also, there is a community wide screening of An Inconvenient Truth at Boulder JCC on Monday October 9th at 6.30pm