

Birthday of the World
Rosh Hashanah 5777 - Day One
Temple B'nai Shalom
Braintree, Massachusetts
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One day a little girl asked her mother a question: “Mommy, where do people come from?”

Her mother answered, “Well, honey. A long time ago when God created the world he made a beautiful garden and made two people, a man and a woman, called Adam and Eve. They loved each other, they had children, and then their children had children when they grew up, and so on down to today.”

“Really?” the little girl said, “Now I’m confused. I asked Daddy. He said that a long time ago there were apes and gorillas and we come from them.”

Her mother replied, “Honey, I was talking about my side of the family.”

Apes, or Adam? Science or religion? Which explanation is true?

During our Shofar service a few moments ago our Cantor chanted, “*Hayom barat olam*” – “Today is the birthday of the world.”

As a matter of cold scientific fact, though, this is not the birthday of the world. The earth is not 5777 years old. We know that.

We don’t read the bible to learn scientific facts.

Science and religion are different. They are not at war with each other. Science and religion address different concerns. That’s why Mommy and Daddy both answered the little girl truthfully, but addressed different questions.

Science tells us how. Religion tells us why.

The science of cosmology tells us how the universe came into being. The science of biology tells us how species developed from single-cell organisms to the most complex animals, including us.

Religion, on the other hand, answers a different set of questions. Not how, but why. Why are we here? What is our purpose? What shall we do to make our lives of such a limited time span nevertheless lives of enduring meaning?

My message this morning is urgent: it is our obligation as Jews to do all we can to make sure that the world, no matter how old it is, has a happy birthday this year and many, many more.

The question of our purpose in life, the fundamental question that religion helps us answer, is the underlying meaning of the first question God asked Adam in our creation story. God begins the first conversation with Adam by asking Adam, “Where are you?”

That question, “Where are you?”, means today, “What are we doing about the great moral issues of our time?”

At different times, in response to different crises, that question has spurred humanity to take action.

When slavery was the law in half of this country, “Where are you?” meant “Where do you stand in relation to this moral outrage? What are you doing about it?”

The question is repeated in every age. Where are you in making sure that women have the vote? Where are you as Martin Luther King, Jr., demands that we end racist discrimination? Where are you in the fight to improve the relationship between our nation's police and the communities they are sworn to protect?

Today we face yet another moral crisis that demands of us that we declare where we are. I refer to the threat to life on our planet. The planet itself will survive for billions of years, but it can become a cold spinning rock devoid of life.

We cannot continue to pollute the air and water and soil of this world. Life on this planet is in serious jeopardy of being extinguished. That fate awaits the human race unless we assure a radical change in the way humanity relates to our planet.

If the world is to have a happy birthday, this year and every year, we must enlist in the fight against global warming caused by human activity. We have to join with those who work to preserve the purity of the air we all breathe, the water we all drink, and the fields and forests and oceans on which our future depends.

I spoke about this on Rosh Hashanah six years ago. Alice and I went to Alaska that year. We saw melting glaciers. We saw enormous cruise ships that each carry 3,000 people. Each of these monster ships produces as much sewage and waste as a mid-sized city. They spew out diesel exhaust. Each ship pollutes the atmosphere as much as the exhaust of 10,000 cars. Every day.

We saw in Alaska with our own eyes the fragile environment being overwhelmed by human disregard.

The problem has grown since then to become a crisis that demands our action.

- Earth's average surface temperature has been increasing at an unprecedented rate as a result of greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide produced by human activity.
- The year 2015 had been the warmest year on record so far, but 2016 will likely make a new record. The average temperature from January through May of this year was the warmest five-month period since 1880.
- There is more carbon dioxide in the atmosphere today than at any point in the last 800,000 years.
- Global sea levels have risen by about 8 inches since 1870.
- The seas are now rising at twice the rate of increase in the previous century.

The scientific evidence for warming of the climate system is unequivocal. Ninety-seven percent of climate scientists agree that climate-warming trends over the past century are very likely due to human activities. Most of the leading scientific organizations worldwide have issued public statements endorsing this position.

So we have to act.

Today I want to answer three questions:

What must we do?

Why is this a religious question?

How can religion and our spiritual practices help?

First, what shall WE do? When I send my sermon by email I will include a list of sites where we can explore the actions that make most sense for each of us. Here in the meantime is a summary of some of the simplest things we can do. I am sure some of us already do some of these some of the time. I hope all of us will do more of them more often:

- Turn off lights every time we leave a room.
- Put our computers to sleep every day when we are done using them or will be away for a while.
- Make recycling part of our daily routine.
- Join groups that engage in climate action.
- Study the records of candidates and elected officials. Vote for the ones who pledges to fight against global warming and are likely to fulfill that promise.
- Do not discard clothing and household goods. Give them a second life. Bring them to our rummage sale. The rummage sale is on Sunday, November 6. Right, Florence? Start now to identify and gather items from your closets and basements. Bring them to rummage when we are ready for them.

Why is environmental protection a religious issue?

Both Christian and Jewish leaders have answered that question.

Last year Pope Francis answered eloquently. He issued a papal encyclical urging the entire world to take action to save the planet. He said, in part:

What kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us, to children who are now growing up? Our engagement with global warming leads us inexorably to ask other pointed questions: What is the purpose of our life in this world? Why are we here? What is the goal of all our efforts? What need does the earth have of us? It is no longer enough simply to state that we should be concerned for future generations. What is at stake is our own dignity. Leaving an inhabitable planet to future generations is up to us. The issue is one that dramatically affects us, for it has to do with the ultimate meaning of our earthly sojourn.

My teacher, Rabbi Arthur Green of Hebrew College, has also long been advocating environmental activism as a religious issue. In his latest efforts, he proposes a daily practice that Alice and I have been following. It has helped to remind us every day of our duty to the environment, and helped reinforce habits of conservation.

This practice is an answer to our last question: how religion can motivate us to help save the planet.

I will explain that practice in a moment. First, let me put it in context.

Hebrew College described this new practice with the following introduction.

A vital Judaism for the twenty-first century must speak to the most critical issue confronting humanity as this century progresses: the survival of our planet as a fit habitat for human and other higher forms of life. The most important task of religion will be to help us humans change our relationship with the natural environment of which we are a part. Without such a change we will not survive.

Government decrees cannot by themselves achieve the changes we must make for our survival. The changes need to rise up from below, emerging from a shift in the way we humans think about ourselves and the meaning of our existence on this Earth. That is the true subject of religion.

Our Torah begins with God's creation of the world. The basis of our faith, as is true of all religion, emerges out of gratitude for our existence.

Existence contains the mysterious and sacred truth that we are accompanied by a divine presence. Our task as humans is to discover that presence and to hear its subtle voice addressing us from within all that is. That voice calls upon us today to act for the survival of that magnificent creation of which we are a part.

To underscore the centrality of this concern to our lives as Jews, the Rabbinical School of Hebrew College invites Jews everywhere to join in and thus renew an ancient practice. It involves the simple act of reciting each morning the verses of Genesis that describe the creation occurring that day of the week.

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[At this point in the service ushers distributed a document produced by Hebrew College that I explained to the congregation and that we then practiced reading. The document is available online [HERE](#). I encourage everyone to download the document, print it, and use it for the daily practice described below.

Hebrew College has also prepared two documents introducing and explaining the practice. They can be found [HERE](#) and [HERE](#).

Following is a version of the explanation I provided in the sermon.]

The first page is an introduction to the practice. The remainder of the document, beginning with page 2, provides a reading for each day of the week, beginning with Sunday. There is for each day a brief introduction in bold type, followed by the relevant verses from Genesis in Hebrew and then the same verses in English.

Here is the practice I am recommending. Take this document home. Find a time each day to read this aloud. The best way is with others in your family in the morning while either standing outside in good weather or looking out the window. But you can try it any way that works for you.

Don't be put off by the Hebrew. That's optional. You can just read the English. If you want to read a little Hebrew, you can read the first word or two. For Sunday, the word is *Bereishit*, "In the beginning." For the other days of the week through Friday, the first words are *Vayomer Elohim*, "God said."

Since Alice and I started doing this, we have become far more aware of the environment and our responsibility for preserving our planet. We turn off lights more frequently. I adjusted the power settings on our computers. We are committed to taking other actions I recommended earlier.

I hope you will try this. If you do, please let me know how it's going.

We can choose this venerable Jewish form as a way of affirming that protecting the environment is indeed a religious issue, one that stands at the very heart of our universal faith. Whether or not you have a daily prayer practice, you can recite these verses daily.

I hope that a commitment to this ancient practice will become learning that leads us to renewed action. Our world deserves no less.