

Guardians of the Earth

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Growing up in Brooklyn, “nature” wasn’t something we really dealt with. Sometimes, my connection to the natural world seemed limited to the weeds growing in the cracks of the sidewalk and to my mom yelling at me to get away from that injured pigeon (true story). To be fair, I did live across the street from Prospect Park and both my parents have green thumbs and made a beautiful backyard. But living in the big city, it was natural to grow unconcerned with the environment.

The suburbs have a lot more nature than the city, but it’s easy enough for it to become nothing more than scenery or inconvenience: a yard mowed by a lawn service; a deer that nearly clips your car; a sunset colored by the haze of pollution. Humans have always had to adapt to the elements around us. As our mastery over the environment has grown, we can overpower or ignore our connection with the natural world.

As Jews moved from being farmers to urban dwellers, they found that Judaism still enabled interaction with nature. While the prayer for rain may not have held nearly as much relevance for Jews who moved to London or Minsk, our holidays are still based on the sun and the moon. In a couple weeks, we’ll build an outdoor hut and wave natural plant species on Sukkot. We explore Bible stories that are nature bound – from Noah’s Ark to the burning bush.

In our own lives, we reconnect with nature when we take a trip to the Rocky Mountains or the Caribbean or perhaps ski down a magnificent slope. The pristine wonder of nature still inspires us. Yet we need not go far. A trip to the zoo with a small child or a walk through a botanic garden can link us to the heaven and earth that Genesis says God created in six days.

Perhaps because of my urban upbringing, I have always enjoyed brief journeys into the natural world. But that left me with a “here” and “there” approach. “There” is the beauty of nature I cherish. “Here” I don’t really think about it. It was only when I began to bike ride as an adult that I uncovered the natural world right before me. Here is there. Biking – whether in Livingston or off in more obscure, and usually far too hilly, parts of the world – forces you to interact with the environment more directly. From the elevations in the road to changes in the weather, from interacting with human beings in their cars to discovering wildlife and scenic visions in the most unlikely places, I found a new sense of wonder and appreciation for the earth and my role in it. With appreciation comes concern and the desire to protect.

We are guardians of the earth. *Shomrei Adamah* in Hebrew. It isn't a new job. It was first given to Adam in the Garden of Eden by God. Just as God created the first human being, God placed him in the Garden "to till and to tend it."¹ We maintain that divine role of guarding and caring for the world. According to one early Midrash, God said to Adam, "Look at My works, how beautiful and praiseworthy they are! Everything that I created, I created for you. Take care that you do not damage and destroy My world, for if you damage it, there is no one to repair it afterwards!"²

Regardless of their historical accuracy, the focus of the Torah on stories such as Adam and Noah emphasize the importance of human responsibility to the natural world. And let's be honest, we've done a pretty crummy job. As technology has allowed to us to leave no spot unexplored, few natural elements that we can't overcome or resist, and as our need for resources grow and grow, we have treated the planet much like a High School senior whose parents have been away for the weekend. We're sorry now for breaking the vase when we played ball in the house, and we know the crystal egg on the mantle has that nasty crack, but we feel we did okay in caring for the house because we haven't burned it down. But when mom and dad go away again, we'll happily try to push it to the limit. We need to be better guardians of the earth.

Any discussion on the environment finds solutions that are well known. I recently came across a lesson plan I wrote almost 20 years ago for a 6th grade class. In it, I fully expected that they already knew the three Rs – Reduce, Reuse, Recycle. Basic environmentalism is something that has become part of most every American's life. We recycle to some extent our paper, glass, and metal. We return printer cartridges to the manufacturer. Perhaps we turn off lights as we leave a room, which the TV show *Mythbusters* confirmed does save electricity. We may do environmentally friendly things because they feel right, or they look cool, or because they save us money, or simply because they've been drilled into us.

Everywhere we look, big companies are making environmentalism a part of their standard operating procedure. Hotels now give you the option of not replacing your towels and sheets every day. Maybe they do it for monetary reasons, but it helps the environment too.

Environmentalism has become very trendy. Rock groups such as Linkin Park and My Chemical Romance run environmentally friendly concerts. There are reality shows like *The*

EcoZone Project that focus on a green way life. One thing I've learned about pop culture in 2007: Once you have a rock group, a reality show, and a spokesperson like Leonardo DiCaprio fronting your cause, you have hit the big time.

But as much as environmentalism, "going Green," is a part of life, we don't fully engage. Our commitment is inconsistent, timid, and casual. We know it's the right thing to do. We know it might make us feel better and even save us money, but we don't do enough. We recycle the newspaper, but not the junk mail. We do cans, but not bottles. We buy local organic if we have a little extra time. We turn down the air-conditioning, except when it's hot. We're a bit more aquamarine than we are forest green.

If I had a PowerPoint display and an elevated platform, I suppose we could talk about the critical path we are stumbling down in the world. God told us that there would be no one to repair it if we destroyed it. And yet we still don't make the active efforts to respond to what is already a worldwide crisis.

One person can't make a real difference, we think. And yet we know that's not true in other issues of social justice. We all make an impact on the world individually. Take garbage. Every day we throw away some amount of garbage. Over our lifetime that adds up to about 45 tons of garbage.³ The younger you are, the higher the total. One person alone can make a difference negatively. Or by changing our habits, one person can help be a guardian of the world. "It is not your responsibility to complete the work," Pirke Avot reminds us, "but neither are you free to ignore your responsibilities."⁴

Today is the world's birthday. What better present could we give it, other than perhaps an iPhone, than our new commitment towards its long-term health. So let's each do one super-simple, no sweat thing. How many congregants does it take to put in a light bulb? Let's hope it's a lot. By now, most of you know about Compact Fluorescent Light bulbs or CFLs. The swirl bulb, as it is sometimes called, is an alternative light bulb to the standard. Now, the only time I deal with light bulbs as a rabbi is that some grooms step on one instead of a glass at the end of a wedding. And I know that you shouldn't step on CFL bulbs because they should be recycled.

What I do know is that when you buy a CFL, you better like it because it lasts as long as 10 years and will save you at least \$55 in energy costs over that lifetime for each bulb. The cost of a bulb will be paid for in about 3 months. If every home in America replaced one 60-watt bulb

with a CFL equivalent, the energy saved would power the city of Philadelphia.⁵ Even West Orange, the home of the light bulb, is advocating CFLs are part of their current citywide light bulb celebration.

Wal-Mart has been pushing CFL bulbs trying to get every customer to buy one. You can't get more mainstream than Wal-Mart as it strives to position itself as an energy activist. While Wal-Mart may try to get you to buy a bulb, Temple Emanu-El wants to do one better. Upon leaving services this morning, we will be distributing one 60-watt equivalent CFL bulb to every family. Free. Take it home. Replace some table lamp's 60-watt bulb with this one and compare them. They both make the house bright. But one does it using 75% less energy and lasts eight times longer. One bulb will ultimately cost you far less and is better for our environment.

But you don't have one socket in your house; you have between 50 and 100. No really, you do. To help populate your home full of CFLs, order forms for 60, 75, and 100 watt equivalent bulbs will also be handed out through a special program organized by our Social Action Committee. Only 5% of US light bulbs are CFLs. Each of us can nudge that number higher. CFLs are also available in numerous shapes, sizes, and wattages from stores like Home Depot and IKEA, and online. They should be recycled instead of tossed into the garbage. We're giving you your first bulb – only one per household please. Now you do the rest. And plan ahead – buy them eight at a time; they make great Chanukah gifts.

There are lots of ways each of us can make an environmental difference in our own homes, families, jobs. It takes some initial effort and sometimes some cost. Those are typical stumbling blocks. Mark Twain noted this human condition suggesting: "Do something every day that you don't want to do; this is the golden rule for acquiring the habit of doing your duty without pain."

But once in place, such actions become invisible or part of our way of life. They may come with significant cost savings in the longer run. But mostly they are our obligation as Americans, as Earthlings, and as Jews. Judaism is filled with laws on caring for the environment and for the world around us. In the Torah, we learn that when holding a city under military siege, we cannot cut down fruit trees surrounding the walled city for army use.⁶ Their value of the trees exceeds our personal need. We often speak of *Tikkun Olam*, repairing the world. As we care for

our fellow human beings, our efforts must extend to repairing and saving the animals and nature across the globe.

Let's start with recycling. When I was a kid, I found it embarrassing to have sort my garbage into different categories. My friends weren't doing it. Our recycling had to be taken off to various recycling stations and drop off points. Now, the local township comes right to my door and takes it all for me. And they recycle more than ever before. In Livingston, for example, they accept pizza boxes and water bottles and grocery store plastic bags which otherwise would get thrown away. You don't even have to separate out the metal and plastics. It takes far fewer resources to turn our recyclables into brand new products than to create a product from scratch. When done to the fullest, we can recycle as much as 75% of our trash.⁷ That's almost 34 tons of the garbage each and every one of us creates in our lifetimes. Each of us can make a difference.

Temple Emanu-El is renewing its commitment to recycling. This fall, additional recycling bins will be placed throughout the building. Our religious school will learn about Judaism and the environment and their role in it. And to show my support, I will recycle this sermon on Yom Kippur (Just kidding).

There are so many little things we can do. Some of them you might be doing already. We can run the dishwasher only when it's full. That saves 7300 gallons of water a year. Don't stand with the fridge door open! Opening the refrigerator door counts for as much as \$60 of your yearly electric bill. If you have a teenage son, double that. Instead of simply recycling junk mail, get off as many lists as possible. Tell catalogs you don't use to stop sending them to you and use one of the online junk mail services to reduce your overall total.

If you can't or don't know how to recycle something, reuse it or help someone else who has a use for your junk. Isn't that really what eBay is all about? Take sports equipment. It usually sits in the garage until we throw it away. Temple member Dylan McCauley, who becomes bar mitzvah in just over two weeks, collected old sports equipment from friends and neighbors. This summer at a garage sale, he found an international need for this old stuff. One man bought baseball equipment for a little league team in the Dominican Republic. Another bought soccer balls for Haitian children living in South Africa. And with the funds raised, Dylan had enough money to sponsor a little league team here in Orange. Instead of a landfill or a garage, the equipment is being used in many ways and no one has to buy or make new stuff.

We live in a world of endless supply. Whatever we want, as long as we have money, is there for us. We never consider that each item has to be created, which requires resources and energy. Just because we CAN buy new stuff doesn't mean we should. And especially as Jews, we have to always recognize that energy isn't limitless and it comes quite often from countries that wish only evil towards Israel. The more we can reduce America's and the world's dependence on Jew-hating oil rich countries, the less political power those countries have.⁸

The green movement has never simply been about doing what's best for the earth. Environmentalism has dramatic economic and political impact and choices. Do we drill for oil in Alaska at the expense of the Artic National Wildlife Refuge? How do we balance recycling and reusing products with the resulting loss of jobs in manufacturing industries? What are we to believe on the conflicting scientific reports on the dangers and effectiveness of alternative energies from coal to nuclear to solar to wind?

Environmental activism gets mixed in with political parties such as the Green Party and with those on the extremes such as the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. People that strive to help the earth sometimes become arrogant in their own self-righteousness. An episode of *South Park* last year showed the Colorado town overrun with pollution after everyone began buying hybrid cars in a effort to save the world. The deadly clouds that filled the atmosphere weren't smog, we learned, but smug.

Doomsday scenarios have especially become popular as inspiration to environmental action. They make for good theater, but I don't think they motivate most people to awareness. We don't need to be scared of the world, but inspired by it. The more aware and in touch we are of the world, the more we care about it. The more we care about it, the more we strive to protect and nurture it. Perhaps the best thing you can do for the environment is to go experience it.

So make that next vacation in the Grand Canyon or Napa Valley or the Serengeti or Alaska. Go skiing in Vermont or bike with me on the next Hazon Ride. Go for a jog in the South Mountain Reservation or take a weekend down the shore. Listen to the sounds of the birds and the wind, take in the scents of the variety of flowers in your garden, aim your telescope at the stars, enjoy the flavors at a nearby farmer's market, or watch some *Discovery* channel special. By engaging, you move towards your role as a guardian of the world.

This synagogue and all houses of worship need to lead the way. We must model the behavior, and reap both the financial and moral benefits, of creating a greener environment and guarding our precious planet.

A synagogue-wide audit will be conducted this fall to see how we might make changes in various aspects of Temple life to be more environmentally friendly and “to till and to tend” our world. From choices on light bulbs to cleaning products, fair trade coffee to appliances, there is so much we can explore and consider. If you have interest in being part of our synagogue green audit, please contact the Temple office. While we can’t do everything, there is so much we can do. This year, look for several environmentally focused programs and speakers at Temple, including our annual pet blessing. Some people try to argue that if they *don’t* come to Temple they save fuel, but I think that whatever you are doing instead often consumes more energy and rarely provides as much replenishment. Plus, you can always ride a bike here. Temple Emanu-El, thanks to the Confirmation Class of 2006, now has a beautiful bicycle rack out front. I have parked my bike there today so you can see it on your way out. Feel free to ride your bicycle here or anywhere and get a workout for your body and soul.

On your way out, you’ll be getting a sheet that lists a few ideas for you and your family to incorporate into your lives. You already have a head start on one of those ideas with the CFL Light bulb, one to a family. I hope you’ll save this list, post it on your fridge, and use it as inspiration for the coming months to add one new thing each month. And make sure to recycle it when its time has passed.

There’s a classic Jewish folktale of two people fighting over a piece of land. Each claimed ownership, and each bolstered the claim with apparent proof. After arguing for a long time, they agreed to resolve their conflict by putting the case before a rabbi. The rabbi sat as an arbitrator and listened carefully, but despite years of legal training the rabbi could not reach a decision. Both parties seemed to be right. Finally the rabbi said, “Since I cannot decide to whom this land belongs, let’s ask the land.” The rabbi put an ear to the ground, and after a moment stood up. “My friends, the land said it belongs to neither of you – but that you belong to it.”⁹

We are privileged to till and tend this world. We are guardians of her present and caretakers of her future. As we damage and destroy God’s world today, there is no one to repair it. It may take commitment, creativity, and personal change, but this year let’s embrace what we

can do – in our families, our houses, our Temple, our jobs, and our world – to experience, appreciate, and care for the only home we have.

¹ Genesis 2:15.

² Midrash Kohelet Rabbah 7.

³ *Let the Earth Teach You Torah*, Ellen Bernstein and Dan Fink, p. 90.

⁴ Pirke Avot 2:21.

⁵ www.fastcompany.com/magazine/108/open_lightbulbs.html.

⁶ Deuteronomy 20:19-20.

⁷ www.oroloma.org/resources/kidscorner/earthday/2005/recyclingFacts.html.

⁸ “Why going Green will make the world safer for Jews – and everyone else.” Thomas L. Friedman interviewed by Robert S. Greenberger. *Moment*, August 2007, p. 72.

⁹ Source unknown.