

Central Reform Temple

Yom Kippur Morning 2024

Shomrei Adamah

Yom Kippur calls us to review our deeds of the past year and make an accounting of our actions in the light of what we could have done better. Those things we did wrong in speech, action or intention and the things we didn't do that we should have. Judaism emphasizes the fact that this is a communal act of teshuva for we are all responsible for each other. Our prayers are in the main in the plural; *avinu malkenu, hatanu lefanecha* – our Parent and Sovereign, we have sinned before you. *Ashmanu* – We have done wrong.

Notwithstanding our own personal sins for which we have to make atonement, we do have one universal sin for which we all have to make amends and vow to put it right and that is environmental teshuva. We now know that if we carry on as we are, we will continue to do irreparable damage to life on this planet. We've been told by the scientists, the politicians, the younger generation and now it has to be also the people of religious faiths. Progressive Jews must add their voice.

We just have to watch the news to see the millions of people evacuating Florida in the wake of Hurricane Milton and on the heels of the devastation of Hurricane Helene. We know that the warming of the seas leads to intense weather events and they are getting more and more extreme with each Hurricane season. It was only a few years ago that Hurricane Harvey forced the evacuation of Houston including my in-laws who all lost their homes to flooding and had to be rescued in boats with others wading in waist height water at night in the dark. And we remember the terrible impact of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and all the lives and livelihoods and infrastructure that were impacted by that storm.

These extreme weather events taking place all over the globe; Storms, Floods, Fires, drought, are a direct result of the damage that humans have done to the environment in the last 200 years after millions of years of planetary existence. Scientists tell us that our outpouring of carbon in the atmosphere as a result of industrialization, commercial activity and petro-carbon fuels will never be eradicated. We cannot go back. We have reached the point of no-return where the earth's temperature is already at the doomsday level of 2 degrees Fahrenheit above pre-industrial levels. I recently heard the analogy that the world is like someone asleep in a bed with a duvet covering them. As the carbon increases in the atmosphere, more and more duvets are laid upon the sleeper so that they are now stifling and suffocating and there is nowhere else to go. All we can do now is ensure that we do not add more and more duvets to the pile. For then, human habitation on this planet or at least parts of it would no longer be viable and cause significant impact on other species of life, vegetation, food sources, water, all of which would also be devastating.

For us this is not a new story. It goes right back to Noah and the flood.

Noah, you will remember saves his family and the specie of the animals and birds by building a giant boat and living out the flood inside leaving the rest of humanity to its fate. As the waters recede after 40 days, he sends out a dove as a messenger to see if there is dry land on which they can land. In the end however Noah succumbs to the realization of this enormous tragedy by drinking himself into a stupor and finally drowning in his own liquid. The message is quite clear, if the world continues on the path its going, the creatures of the land and air are doomed and despite the sanctuary of a storm tossed boat, the trauma post flood will still drown its remnants. The Bible may not have foreseen global warming, sea levels rising, glaciers melting and enormous hurricanes and tornados but they knew that actions have consequences and that human behaviour impacts the world around us.

Can we rewrite the flood story of environmental disaster confronting us?, who are our messengers and what must we do to think again about our planet and our place on it?. How can we influence others to action and indeed avert a planetary disaster

This must be by our environmental teshuva.

We all know what we should be doing as responsible global citizens from recycling our waste to conserving energy, from reducing our reliance on fossil fuels to avoiding products that have single use plastic packaging, from flying less, buying less foreign produce, growing more, cycling more, becoming vegetarian. We know that we should work towards eliminating carbon in oil and gas and build a new energy economy of wind, solar and water – all renewable, recyclable, clean and amazingly in abundance in all the gifts of each day of Creation.

But what is our contribution to this effort as Progressive Jews? What is our distinctive responsibility to change the narrative and avoid the calamity of the Noah ending. There is Jewish wisdom that we would impart to the world as a messenger and it is summed up in the phrase ‘Shomrei Adamah’. This is the title of the week -long program we have planned for the festival of Sukkot next week in partnership with Emmanuel Church and other organizations. I hope you have seen out flier and will join us for some or all of the program. Shomrei Adamah means guardians of the earth. It is quoted from Genesis chapter 2 when God instructs Adam and Eve to be guardians or stewards of our world. God told us to “guard and preserve it” – *l’ovda u’lshomra* as our special responsibility¹.

The Sukkot festival lasting seven days is the biblical harvest festival in which we build temporary dwellings to remind us of the fragility of life and God’s presence all around us even on Newbury St. We bring four species of plant life known as the Lulav and Etrog; the palm branch, the willow, the mrytle and the citron and wave them in celebration in

¹ Genesis 2:15

the Sukkah each day. For Sukkot is know as *zman simchatenu* – a time of celebration or rejoicing and it follows swiftly after Yom Kippur intentionally.

There could be no more explicit example of Jewish wisdom around environmental responsibility that the festival of Sukkot for here all the concepts of *Shomrei Adamah* are played out. There is the interaction with nature and the outside, there is celebration and joy in God's unfolding seasons and bounty of the land, there is looking up at the sky through the *shkach* - leafy roof and taking time out just to be present in Gog's creation. Like Shabbat, the Sukkot festival says we should release the world from our control of it. It is to relinquish having, in order just to be. To pause in our ambitious thirst for things and our drive for acquisitions and to stop and reflect on all the gifts of creation in appreciation, gratitude and community. Essential to a 21st century first world life is a time set aside to be unplugged, centred and in community. Not just for Jews but for all. For it reframes our relationship to the rest of the world and helps us see what is important in our own lives as well as in the lives of others around us.

However *Shomrei Adamah* is not just about the natural world. *Adamah* is the word of earth or land but it is also connected to the word *HaAdam*, the first creature endowed with the image of God and the responsibility to be guardians of the other life forms. *Shomrei Adamah* also means to take responsibility for the intersection of life forms of all types on the planet including our own. We know that unless and until we treat all life forms with dignity and care, we will not be able to take care of our fellow human beings. Surely that is the message of the Noah story as well, finding a way to sustain life and living amongst all beings even in a rickety boat! To that end, a group of religious and other leaders in the 1990s drew up, what they called an Earth Charter, a platform whereby we might measure our intentions for interdependence on this planet amongst and between the environment, all forms of life and human beings and our ways to guard and protect.

The Earth Charter preamble says:

We stand at a critical moment in earth's history ;a time when humanity must choose its future as the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile. The future at once holds great peril and great promise. To move forward, we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms, we are one human family and one earth community with a common destiny. We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice and the culture of peace. Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of earth declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life and to future generations. We urgently need a shared vision of basic values to provide an ethical foundation for the emerging world community.

The sections of the charter include declarations on ecological integrity, social and economic justice, democracy, nonviolence and peace.

Let ours be a time remembered for the awakening of a new reverence for life, the firm resolve to achieve sustainability, the quickening of the struggle for justice and peace, and the joyful celebration of life.

Judaism understands the relationship of humanity to the world as one of a sibling. We were both created and humanity came last in that sequence, but with a responsibility to look after our other created siblings. After all, the universe, earth, the creatures on it and the green and growing things are all cocreated with us. They are our siblings and we need to think of them that way as a relationship of interdependence with a parent who wants the best for all of us living and flourishing together. There is so much more we can do to remind ourselves, our children, our communities of this interdependence and be *Shomrei Adamah*.

We have inherited a habitable planet for life for all types of creatures to thrive and flourish and with a Jewish responsibility to be *Shomrei Adamah*, preservers of our sacred place, preservers of the planet and its creation and preservers of the ancient call to daily reflect on the gifts we have received. Let us listen to the messengers that we have been sent and avoid the tragedy of the destroyed world of Noah. On this day of teshuva as we recount our personal flaws, bring to mind our sister the earth, our neighbours in endangered environments and our fellow creatures sharing this fragile earth with us. Let's all work on our environmental teshuva this year.