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“For the Sake of our Children”

If you’ve been to Yosemite National Park, you know that it is one of the most stunningly beautiful landscapes on earth. Granite cliffs soar upward from a forested valley. Aspen trees, sequoias, pine and evergreen wave in the wind around gentle streams, while waterfalls trickle and plunge down rock faces. This is a place I love to go in the summer. We send our kids to camp there, we visit them, go for hikes, swim in the rivers, watch the sun set and the moon rise and the stars come out, and marvel at the glory of this earth we’ve been given.

As Felicia and I approached Yosemite Valley this summer, we could barely see Half Dome and El Capitan - they were faded against the thick sky. Smoke filled the air. The surrounding Sierra forests reminded us of a battlefield after a gruesome war. Thousands upon thousands of thin charcoal spears stood in barren formation where the forests used to be. The earth itself looked scorched. It was disorienting: we knew that the smoke we were breathing was not related to the devastation we were seeing. We were seeing the aftermath of the Rim Fire from last summer – the largest and hottest Sierra wildfire in recorded history. We were breathing this summer’s four Sierra wildfires, burning simultaneously.

Wildfires are a natural part of a forest’s lifecycle. They take down old growth and mulch the earth with carbon-rich material for regeneration. They’re powerful, they’re destructive, and they’re part of the earth’s system of self-regulation. However, steadily hotter and drier conditions are making wildfires burn more frequently and with greater ferocity than ever before.

In addition to visiting Yosemite, I spent part of this summer conducting something of a literature review on parenting. There is a brisk business of parenting advice in America these days. You can find more than 90,000 parenting titles on Amazon, such as “Scream-free Parenting: The Revolutionary Approach to Raising Your Kids While Keeping Your Cool” or “Have a New Teenager by Friday – From Mouthy and Moody to Respectful and Responsible in 5 Days.” (That’s a real title.) Books promise to teach us how to raise children who are calm and secure; resilient and joyful; strong; emotionally intelligent; patient and cooperative; and most of all HAPPY.

I read seven parenting books this summer, not only for my own edification – I am always trying to be a better parent – but also because I’m co-teaching a class this year with Laurie Levit on Parenting as Jewish Spiritual Practice. Looking through these books, one can see how much reflection, worry, care, and love parents strive to put in to raising our children.

We worry about what our kids eat and don't eat, we want them to do their homework and get their projects and papers done on time and get good grades and score well on tests, we take them to baseball practice and swim meets and piano lessons. We set up play dates or hang out time (older kids do not have play dates). We make sure they brush their teeth and wash their hands and we take them to the doctor and dentist religiously. If we need to, we'll move across town or spend tens of thousands of dollars so that they'll have a good education. We'll spend hours in the car every day to enrich their chances at a good life. We work out complex schedules for carting them around from activity to activity. We limit screen time because we want them to be conversational adults someday. We try to get them to read lots of books and get lots of exercise, so they'll be both knowledgeable and fit.

We want them to know they're loved, we want them to have life skills, we want them to have good behavior, we want them to contribute to the world.... we give so much thought and effort and emotion to our dreams for our children.

And our grandchildren? I cannot yet imagine how much I'll love my grandchildren. I hear the love is as great or even greater – if that's possible.

So here's what I do not understand. We love our children. We love our grandchildren. We'll sacrifice our time and our money to create the best possible conditions for their future.

And yet we are standing by and watching while their future becomes an unimaginable, unmanageable reality, and we are doing almost nothing to avert disaster.

I am not bringing you news. We know this. In 2005, the United Nations put out the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, a comprehensive scientific analysis by 1,300 experts. This was ten years ago – the report stated that “Human activity is putting such strain on the natural functions of Earth that the ability of the planet's ecosystems to sustain future generations can no longer be taken for granted.” The report also said that up to 30 percent of the mammal, bird, and amphibian species on earth are threatened with extinction.¹

According to Gustave Speth, the Yale Dean of Forestry and Environmental Studies: “Half the world's tropical and temperate forests are now gone. The rate of deforestation in the tropics continues at about an acre a second. About half the wetlands are gone. An estimated 90 percent of the large predator fish are gone. ...Species are disappearing at rates about a thousand times faster than normal.”²

Harvard professor E.O. Wilson says: “We are dependent on the whole web for our survival – the plants and animals, forests, rivers, oceans, and glaciers that regulate life on the planet to the great benefit of human beings for free. This moment is about deciding who we are as a species and how we intend to continue living on this planet.”

¹ MEA report quoted in Thomas Friedman, [Hot Flat and Crowded: Why We Need a Green Revolution--and How it Can Renew America](#), Release 2.0, New York: Picador/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009. This sermon draws a great deal from Friedman's book. Other books that I recommend and used to research the sermon include [Moral Ground: Ethical Action for a Planet in Peril](#), edited by Kathleen Dean Moore and Michael P Nelson; [Countdown: Our Last Best Hope for a Future on Earth?](#) by Alan Weisman; [Rav Kook's Introduction to Shabbat Haaretz](#), translated and with an introduction by Julian Sinclair; [The Sixth Extinction: an Unnatural History](#) by Elizabeth Kolbert.

² In Friedman, [Hot Flat and Crowded](#)

NASA reports that the West Antarctic ice sheets are “irrevocably destabilized.” The collapse of these glaciers now “appears unstoppable.” According to the National Academy of Sciences, the world’s ice sheets contain enough frozen water to raise sea levels by 200 feet.³

You don’t have to live in a blue state anymore to believe in global warming. Former Governor Brian Schweitzer of Montana says that hunters, farmers, and fisherman have become climate change believers. “Old timers are the first to say, ‘Oh boy, things are changing.’ All they have to do is look up at the mountains in August and see that they are not snowcapped.” The Flathead River which flows out of Glacier National Park has experienced a 4 degree Celsius increase in temperature from lack of snowmelt. The trout are so stressed that they’ve closed some rivers to fishing. Polls show that more than 60 percent of Montanans would agree to change their lifestyle and pay higher taxes if it would lead to a decrease in climate change. This is no longer just an issue for lefties and liberals or even people who care about the environment. It’s economic. It’s humanitarian.

The dead and dying forests, the melted ice caps, the warming rivers, the typhoons and floods, the hurricanes and droughts, are the result of less than 1 degree⁴ Celsius increase in global temperatures. According to just mid-range projections, the “warming by 2100 will be between 3 and 5 degrees Celsius.”⁵ – four times what we are experiencing now.

John Holdren, a climate advisor to President Obama, says that what’s happening now is actually worse than the *worst* case projections. He says, “We had predicted that at worst, Arctic summer sea ice would be gone by 2070. Now people think it could be gone in just a few years. Since the mid-1990s almost all scientific evidence has caused increased concern that 3 degrees Celsius will not be tolerable.”⁶ But the mid-range projections are between 3 and 5 degree Celsius increase in this century! That’s our children’s lifetimes!

The question is no longer whether we will prevent climate change. The question is how much will the climate change?

This morning we celebrate the creation of the world. We celebrate the lives we’ve been given, the Earth our home, the miracle of the cycle of life. This morning we make ourselves aware of how precious life is, how sacred, how fragile. And we hold ourselves accountable for how we’ve been living our lives. Jews all over the world read these words: “On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed: How many shall pass on, how many shall come to be; who shall live and who shall die; who shall see ripe age and who shall not; who shall perish by fire and who by water; who by sword and ...who by plague; who by hunger and who by thirst; ...; who shall be secure and who shall be driven; who shall be tranquil and who shall be troubled;”

Who will it be this year? We are running an uncontrolled experiment on the only home we have, and those who caused it the least – the poorest people in the world, who have no electricity, no cars, no power plants— will suffer the most. As heavier and more prolonged rains drench some areas and more severe droughts strike

³ Two new scientific papers, in the journals [Science](#) and [Geophysical Research Letters](#), reported in [Mother Jones](#), May 2014.

⁴ .8 degree Celsius

⁵ From the report “Confronting Climate Change” by scientific research society Sigma Xi, 2007.

⁶ In Friedman

others, they will face hunger and thirst, insect-borne plagues, flooding, fires, and they will be driven to migration that destabilizes regions and leads to death by the sword.

And it won't only be them. We remember Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Sandy. This year, eleven Midwestern and Western states (including our own) were declared natural disaster areas because of drought. According to a 2012 study, climate change currently costs the world \$1.2 trillion a year, killing almost 400,000 people every year.⁷ Who will it be *this* year?

Here's the most difficult part: what we're experiencing now is the delayed effect of carbon emissions from decades ago. And human consumption of energy is expected to DOUBLE by 2050.⁸ There are currently 7 billion people on earth, by 2050 there will be 9 billion. But more significant than the number of people is how those people live. As Jared Diamond wrote in the New York Times: The average American consumes 35 times what the average Kenyan consumes, and we set the standard – everyone in the world wants to live like us. Two to three billion people are in reach of our lifestyle. By 2030, (that's in fifteen years) the number of people in the world who live like Americans will quadruple – with our level of wealth, consumption and waste.⁹

We do love our children and our grandchildren. It's evident in the care and worry we put into almost every detail and decision affecting their lives and future. But we're missing the most important piece. While we're busy choosing the best schools and activities, we're still filling up at the gas station and consuming energy and everything else as if there's no tomorrow.

What kind of love is this?

What are we doing? Are we in denial? Are we frozen in fear? Are we so deep in despair that we've given up, think it's too late? Do we feel so powerless that we've decided it's not worth trying anything?

This is a moral imperative that trumps all others. Think of any war, any atrocity, any evil that human beings have done. The devastation from climate change and environmental destruction will dwarf any other moral outrage we can identify.

During these High Holy Days, we come before God aware of our sins. We beat our chests as we name the many wrongs we have committed as a community. Can there be any that matches this sin in scope or scale of harm? Today we quote the thirteen attributes that enable God to forgive all of our sins. But in the Torah, the passage that includes these thirteen attributes goes on to say that the sins of parents are visited upon their children, and their children's children, all the way to the third and fourth generations. God cannot wipe away these sins, and their effects will be felt by those we love most.

⁷ "Climate Vulnerability Monitor: A Guide to the Cold Calculus of a Hot Planet," the DARA Group, reported in The Guardian, 25 September 2012.

⁸ Royal Dutch Shell's energy scenario team predicted in 2008, reported by Thomas Friedman in Hot, Flat, and Crowded

⁹ In Friedman

Paul Gilding, former head of Greenpeace, said: “How we respond now will decide the future of human civilization. We are the people we’ve been waiting for. There is no one else. There is no other time. It’s us and it’s now.”¹⁰

Us, as humans, who are given a mission in Genesis to be *shomrei adamah*, guardians of the earth. Us, as Jews, who are commanded to choose life. Us, as Americans, who have the greatest moral obligation, because we consume the most, and because we have the standing to affect more people than any other nation.

We have to create a new American way of life. Now.

The rest of the world is emulating us. We must set a life-affirming instead of life-destroying example.

In his book *Hot, Flat, and Crowded*, Thomas Friedman gives us a plan of action.

The first thing we have to do, he says, is create massive demand for renewable energy – solar, wind, geothermal. We have to wean ourselves from oil and coal. As we know, in addition to destroying our children’s future, oil strengthens the anti-democratic governments of the world; and groups like ISIL, Hamas, Hezbollah. Therefore we must support the massive deployment of technologies we already have – solar, wind, geothermal – moving them much more quickly along the manufacturing learning curve. As they achieve volume, prices will drop and technology will improve – they’ll become smaller, cheaper, smarter, more productive. Already solar has dropped in cost by almost 50 percent in the last decade.

Los Angeles averages 292 days of sunshine a year. But Los Angeles Department of Water and Power gets 40% of its power from coal. How can it be that we are continuing to burn coal to cool our houses and dry our clothes? If you don’t have solar panels on your roof, every time you turn on the light, you are burning coal. A recent UCLA study showed that 98 percent of this city’s solar potential is untapped.

How many people in this sanctuary have solar panels on your roofs? Would you be willing to raise your hands? Look around. Like most of you, I don’t – yet. But I just signed a contract and my house will go solar this year. How about you? What if we came back in a year, and half of the hands went up, or more?

How many people in this sanctuary drive an electric car? I don’t, but that’s a change I aim to make this year too. How many drive an electric car and have solar panels on the roof and drive off the power of the sun? Many of us can do this.

Did you know that you can lease solar panels? You can now install solar on your roof for very little money – in many cases for free; and once they’re on, you save every month. Not everyone can do this. Not every building can have solar panels, and not everyone owns a home. But if you do own your home, isn’t it worth making a couple of phone calls to find out? And tell everyone. People don’t know that they can go solar, they don’t think about it... and the clock is ticking. This has to become the new norm. Not in five years, not in ten years. This year.

¹⁰ In Friedman

And if you can't make your home solar, you can still make a change that matters. What if you switch to an electric car this year? These are also available for lease, with big rebates that make it affordable. What if you pull up your lawn and replace it with drought-tolerant plants? DWP has huge rebates right now – they'll pay you \$3 per square foot to do this. If you don't own your home, don't have a lawn, can't switch cars, there's still something you can do. You can eat less red meat. If the whole country ate just 20% less red meat, it would be like turning every car into a hybrid. Or you can make more organic, locally grown food choices. Every choice we make about food is connected to our entire earth – climate, water, toxins, extinctions. Here's one last idea: you can switch your investments from fossil fuels to renewables.

You might ask: "Come on, does it matter what we do?" How can it matter in a world of 7 billion? This city, more than any other place on the earth, shapes the dreams and aspirations of humanity. There are three billion people right now watching what we do. We define the standard of the good life. But there will be no more good life unless we change. Television, film, advertising, social media must begin to show us – the rich – in electric cars, in desirable neighborhoods with solar panels on all the roofs, so that the rest of the world who aspire to be like us start to copy the *new* American way.

Step one is to change our behavior, the example that we're setting for the world.

Step two is to find new technologies – big breakthroughs – for cheap, clean, reliable energy AND technologies to clean up the mess we've made.

We can do this. Human ingenuity is infinite.

We as a species figured out how to control fire, how to make ships and wheels and paper and iron and engines, how to feed millions, how to see into the heavens and into the atom, how to cure diseases, how to fly, how to launch into space, how to communicate in more than 6,000 languages and reach our voices, images, and words around the world in seconds.

Innovation is what we're good at. Finding solutions is what we're good at. We can figure this out. We just have to decide that we want to. Now.

And though our country has the greatest responsibility, and ought to apply the full force of our capitalist system and research universities to solve this, with tax incentives, regulatory incentives, and government funded research, we're not alone in this. China, the European Union, they're moving to renewables and new technologies and they might beat us to it.

We need a global systems approach because everything is interconnected. We need family planning resources in every village and every city in the world so that women and men can choose how many children to have; and we need to continue to lift everyone out of poverty so that people don't need so many children. And we, in the first world, must center our lives around an ethic of conservation. We must read everything we can get our hands on about what to do and how to do it and we must teach each other and model for each other about how to change ... and be willing to be inconvenienced.

If every Leo Baeck Temple member put solar panels on our roofs and every one of us drove electric cars, and if, in response to the drought, every one of us pulled up our lawns and captured the rain and recycled water, and if we succeed at building our train out front of our temple, from the north valley to the port — if we do all that,

still we alone will not save our earth or protect our children. But we are not alone. This last Sunday, 400,000 people filled the streets of New York along with millions more in 150 countries around the world calling for decisive action by world leaders to reverse climate change. This week, an unprecedented number of world leaders are meeting at the U.N. to consider what those changes might be. They need to see that Americans mean business. To join the global grassroots movement against climate change, go to 350.org.

No, solar panels and electric cars alone will not solve all the problems of our world. But if we keep burning coal and oil, we are directly contributing to the misery and suffering of our own children. We need to be willing to make sacrifices. If we do not change now, and three billion more people copy us within the next fifteen years, what will be?

I want to be able to look in my grandchildren's eyes and say, "Once I knew, I did everything I could." Don't you?

I challenge us, the Leo Baeck Temple community, to make a change this year. Will you try this with me? If you own your own home, will you call to see if your house could go solar? Let's see if we can get 100 solar houses among us this year. If you can't do that, will you switch to an electric car, or will you pull up your lawn, or will you consider a change in what you eat, or in your investments? Every one of us can do something big.

I would like to keep track of what we're achieving here at Leo Baeck Temple and report back to you periodically. Please contact me if you've already made any of these changes. And if you make a change this year – if you install solar panels, or start driving an electric car, or convince someone else to do this, or pull up your lawn, or cut out red meat by 20%, or change your investments, please let me know. Tomorrow I will email you with all the information you need to pick up the phone and get started. Why not make a call before Yom Kippur?

In a well-known midrash God says to humanity, "Look at My creations. See how beautiful they are, how excellent! For your sake I created them all. See to it that you do not spoil or destroy My world – for if you do, there will be no one to repair it after you."

Oh God, we are grateful for this earth you've given us. We know that our lives are sustained by it every moment. And we do love our children, so much our hearts hurt with it. We do not want to destroy their future. Please God, in this New Year, give us the hope, the focus and the will to change our ways for the sake of life, now and for the generations to come.

Blessed are you, Source of All Life, who turns the hearts of parents to our children.

Benediction:

Source of All Life, may the blast of the shofar continue to pierce our hearts and resound in our ears until we change our ways. Wake us up to our moral duty to sacrifice for the sake of our children and all life on earth. Please let us act with alacrity and courage to save our world.

Then it will be a Shanah Tovah.