



Fill the Earth and Master It
Rabbi Tara's Rosh Hashonah 2005
Sermon

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Genesis, chapter 1 verse 27 & 28:

And God created human beings in His image, in the image of God... male and female He created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth.

Better than any sermon I could ever write. Perfect as Eve in the Garden, I have born a second child, as utterly unique, as unspeakably miraculous as the first. She has arrived, created in God's image: sweet angels' breath, silky perfumed hair, dimpled elbows, and bright eyes, her nerves attuned to every new sensation. She is already complete and I am an innocent bystander, a mere vessel for this ultimate act of creation, an expression of God's transcendence.

So what was one of the first household changes we made upon our return home from the hospital, bearing this miraculous new life?? We joined the 21st century and got cable TV. I thought it would help with late-night feedings, and it does.

But everything cuts both ways. With Adina's tiny fingers curled around my own, I rocked back and forth, back and forth watching hurricane Katrina unfold. First, as a swirling mass of digital color somewhere off the Florida coast. Then pictures of a battered coastline. Windswept reporters barely able to stand. Then waves lapping rooftops and finally footage the Superdome. Filth and desperation. The poor and the elderly unable to flee. Missing children.

As I watched the all this, my eyes shifted from the TV screen down to my daughter's face as she rested in my arms. Through it all, she slept so sweetly. Safe from the storm. But I will not be able to protect her forever. In her life, I wondered, what storms will she encounter? What kind of a world is my little girl entering? Have we left the Garden of Eden forever?

Yes, indeed we are created in God's image, masters of creation. But Katrina teaches us we are not immune, invincible in the face of the created world. Confronting the wrath of the storm, we may find ourselves as vulnerable and as dependent as a newborn child.

We *can* view these hurricanes as acts of God and nature and choose to see ourselves as passive victims caught in the hurricanes' path, but on closer examination, we may find that human choices played a role in these storms, and we, like all masters, must bear the consequences of our actions.

"Katrina demolished the pretense that we needn't reckon with global warming," writes John Adams, president of the Natural Resources Defense Council. He continues, "While no single hurricane can be directly linked to global warming, climate scientists agree that we are entering



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an epoch of warming oceans, rising sea levels and much more intense storms.”

Even *if* we suppose that global warming is not the cause of these recent extreme weather patters, still, we human beings took part in the unfolding of the crisis in New Orleans. In order to build, we destroyed wetland ecosystems along the Louisiana coast, there throughout the ages, as a buffer against catastrophic storm surges. We are the ones who created the toxic waste that now saturates the flood waters. Without the buffer of the wetlands, without protection against industrial runoff, New Orleans residents have found themselves as vulnerable as the wildlife that once inhabited it the Louisiana coast.

Our tradition teaches us that we are apart of nature, that all life is part of a sacred unity.

Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad. “Hear oh Israel, *Adonai* is our God, *Adonai* is One.” Each choice we make matters, our every decision affects the whole, and the suffering we inflict upon the other creatures of the natural world will, eventually, be our own. “Fill the world and master it,” our Torah tells us. What kind of masters have we become?

Being a mother heightens my awareness of each decision that I make. I watch my children vigilantly and see such purity in my newborn daughter. But as soon as she entered our lives, our home, she became implicated in the problems of our world. (When she is 13 she'll hate me for having said this from the pulpit, especially at such a solemn moment, but I must share these facts.) Adina uses roughly 10 diapers a day. I did the math. At this rate, by the time she has been on the planet for three months, we will have thrown away close to 1,000 of her dirty diapers. She won't feel the effects of that waste, not immediately at least. Her diapers will sit in a landfill in some less desirable neighborhood, or be burned in an incinerator, whose exhaust other children will breathe. I try not to think about it as I stand at the changing table and look into her innocent face. It's too much, it terrifies me. I feel helpless.

My son, Gavi, has already had a much greater impact on his world. At 3 ½ years old, he is an accomplished consumer. Every toy that he owns requires resources to make and creates waste in its production. Then, even more waste as it is used, broken, forgotten and thrown away. He has lots of toys—given to celebrate life's great and small moments, given because we can, because we love him. Toys and more toys and more toys. He probably plays with only 10% of what he owns, *if* that. I've noticed lately that as he grows older and possesses more, the less satisfied he becomes with each individual toy. “Eema,” he said to me the other day. “All my toys are old.” Sometimes he even asks for another one moment after receiving a first. As if he is trying to fill some insatiable hole inside. As if the first present didn't make him feel quite as good as he thought it would. I don't want to raise that kind of a kid. He is an incredible little boy—but he is a reflection of the home and the world in which he lives. My home, our world. It is so easy to give him stuff, lots of stuff. I return from Target with five times more than I planned to buy.



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And it's so easy to *want* more.

Some estimate that by the end of each of our lives, we will have spent one year watching television ads. We shop just to make ourselves feel better. My home, my cars, my TV, the portion sizes I receive in restaurants... All are bigger than what my grandparents owned or expected. And my great grandparents? Well, they couldn't have dreamed of all I possess. And I'm hoping to buy more in the coming year!

"Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it." 1:28

Whether we wish to acknowledge it or not, all evidence points to the reality that our ever-growing habits of consumption are destroying the fine balance, the holy unity, that is our created world. We Americans have become masters in the art of consumption. It's what we do best. Making up only 5% of world population, we consume 30% of world's resources, one quarter of the world's fossil fuels. Then, once our stuff is produced, we throw it out to make room for more. I recently read that, in one year, the waste generated by America would fill a convoy of 10 ton garbage trucks over half way to the moon. I apologize for evoking this upsetting image at this sacred moment, but how long do you think it would take us gathered here tonight to fill this sanctuary with the waste we collectively produce? How long until it would reach the balcony? Those gorgeous stained glass windows? This is the hard reality that we must face, the consequences of our habits of consumption. Did you know that 180 million gallons of motor oil is sent to landfills and poured down drains in the United States each year? That's more than 16 Exxon Valdez spills. In only the last 200 years America has lost 50% of its wetlands, 90% old growth forests, 99% tall grass prairies. We blacktop 1.3 million acres every year. In Adina's lifetime, all the earth's petrol will be used up. (facts taken from www.ecofuture.org)

Yet, as a rabbi when I ask the question, "When do you feel spiritual?" "When do you have a sense of God's Presence?" People invariably answer that it is when they are in nature. That's when feel held, awestruck and humble. We care about creation. Yet, all too often these feelings do not translate to our daily choices: What kind of car we drive, if we choose to turn off the water when brushing our teeth, whether we re-use old bags and containers, whether or not we recycle... It's so hard to connect our mundane possessions, our daily habits to some dramatic statement about the environment, the state of the world.

But it's all connected. *Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad.* Our God is One.



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We, the privileged people of the world and of our country, do not have to face, in any tangible way, the effects of our consumption. Our waste is in somebody else's backyard. It's the most vulnerable, the poorest in our global community and our country who live daily with the effects of industrial pollution, drought and flooding. And it's getting worse. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate change records that the world's temperature rose one degree in the last century and predicts possibly a ten degree increase in the next. Most of the scientific community agrees: More intense storms, drought and flooding will all follow as the world's temperature rises. Whether or not recent hurricanes were actually caused by global warming, the devastation of Katrina & Rita is a wakeup call. Besides highlighting our massive dependence on oil, these storms give us the smallest taste of the results of climate change, showing us that *all* are vulnerable, all of us fragile in the hand of mother nature.

What is to prevent more such events, more rising global temperatures, more strange weather, more flooding, more chaos and more fear? Will our habits of consumption, our dependence upon oil change? We have been entrusted with the care of the planet, we are the masters of creation. How will we use this responsibility? What will we do with our power?

How ironic that it is our very comfort which contains the seeds of our destruction. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks puts it, "The real challenge is not poverty but affluence, not slavery but freedom, not homelessness but home. The paradox is that when you have the most to thank God for, that is when we are in greatest danger of not thanking- nor ever thinking of God at all." (www.chief Rabbi.org), Sacks on *parasha Ki Tavo*) Listen, we Jews have not inherited a tradition of asceticism. We are told to partake of the riches of creation, to live well. But, our sages warn that our appetites and desires must be controlled, guarded, lest they get the better of us. When it comes to food, our longest blessing is not the blessing before eating bread, *hamotzi lechem min ha-aretz*. No, it's the blessing after meals. The *Birkat Hamazon*. We are told in the Torah. *V'achalta v'savata uverachta* (Deuteronomy 8:10) When you eat and are satisfied, you will bless. That's the hardest part, the feeling satisfied. Maybe that's why the blessing after meals is so long, to give us the opportunity take in that feeling of satisfaction and from that place, to bless.

Meir recently asked a group of high school students what they felt grateful for—In this community of overflowing bounty, many of them struggled to find an answer. Again, this is not about our kids. It's about us. If we don't have a visceral sense of our blessings, then what is our Judaism worth? We are taught to say 100 blessings a day perhaps with the hope if we say the words, *Baruch Ata Adonai...* the feelings will follow and we can stand a chance of instilling in ourselves a feeling of fullness. In her book, *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee*, Wendy Mogel writes,

"At Hanukkah we celebrate the miracle of the oil lasting eight days. Perhaps the real miracle was



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that there was already enough oil... The modern version of this miracle is the recognition that what we already have may be all that we need, and that there is even enough to share with others" (p. 132, Penguin Compass, 2001)

Our world overflows with light and abundance and there IS reason to hope- *Rosh Hashannah* is about creating ourselves and the world anew.

There is so much that we can do, both on a large and a small scale.

It can start in simple ways. Mogel encourages us to look at the language we use. Ever heard someone speaking to a cashier, "I need a pack of Marlborough Ultra Lights." Or at Starbucks, "I need a grande triple latte vendi frappa whatever..." Or ever catch yourself saying, "I need a pair of shoes to go with that..." Mogel suggests, don't say "need" when you really mean "want." (p. 121) It's easy advice to give our kids, but can we ourselves take Mogel's challenge seriously? I hope so. For when our language shifts, so can our thinking, and actions follow thoughts. Once we have internalized a sense of our true needs and our limits, new paths can open up.

Options exist out there for changing our patterns of consumption. We do not have to pay over \$3 a gallon for gas. We do not have to buy the oil that funds terrorism around the globe and we do not have to promote the degradation of the planet. There *are* so many choices, alternatives, exciting initiatives, conservation opportunities and new technologies, many being implemented right here in Memphis.

I've spent some time researching just one of them. It's called biodiesel. Ever heard of it? It's fuel based on any domestically produced oil—like soybean oil or even recycled cooking grease. Biodiesel provides the highest energy content of any alternative fuel. It can be used in existing diesel engines without adjustments and is presently being utilized successfully across the nation to power trucks, farm equipment, government vehicles (like those used by NASA and the U.S. military), boats, buses and even personal cars. A friend and Temple member who recently began using biodiesel in his car told me, "It works great, without a hitch."

Biodiesel lowers our dependence on foreign oil and supports our farmers at home who grow oil-producing vegetables. Because it is plant-based, the production of biodiesel actually *removes* carbon dioxide from the atmosphere through photosynthesis as the plants grow. Biodiesel is both biodegradable (decomposing as fast as sugar) and nontoxic. Its production requires no mining or drilling. Best of all, biodiesel is supported by Republicans and Democrats alike: truckers (Willie Nelson is big into it), farmers and environmentalist, those who are interested in increasing our national security through reducing our dependence on foreign oil and those worried about the growing number of children with asthma. President Bush has called biodiesel our most promising alternative fuel, and it's only one of many renewable and clean



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energy solutions. (information taken from www.biodiesel.org & www.npr.org *Driving a Green Vehicle*)

In August of this past summer, an Energy Bill was signed by President Bush. This bill sets a renewable fuel standard requiring, by the year 2012, the annual use in our nation's fuel supply of 7.5 billion gallons of biodiesel and ethanol (another new fuel). This bill offers tax incentives for the purchase of energy efficient fuels and products. It's a huge step in the right direction.

We live in a frightening age but in an age that is full of opportunities to change the ways we live. As author Jared Diamond puts it, "While we do face big risks, the most serious ones are not the ones beyond our control... they are the ones we are generating ourselves... The future is up for grabs," he says, "lying in our own hands. We don't need new technologies to solve our problems... we just need the political will to apply solutions already available." (p. 522, *Collapse*, Viking Penguin, 2005) The West Tennessee Clean Cities Coalition is an organization working to promote clean energy solutions such as BioDiesel right here in our own city. I was told that Memphis is a perfect spot for Biodiesel production. Look at all our fried food. We're like Saudi Arabia when it comes to grease. Let's dream big. We as a Temple community could be powerful force, supporting the Clean Cities Coalition and bringing about environmental change in our own community.

But this is not only about making an impact outside the walls of Temple Israel. It is about who we are as a spiritual community. How intentional are we, Temple Israel, about our environmental impact? What do we use? What do we throw away? I invite any of you listening tonight who are interested in thinking seriously about such issues and about solutions, both within and beyond our Temple community, to contact me in the coming weeks. Together, we can move towards a place of greater awareness, a place of hope and change.

It's about baby steps. Here's an example. A few weeks ago, on my desk in the chapel, there appeared this jar filled with dirt. It was left for me by "Mr. Eddie" who tends our Temple's grounds with such care. For one year I have brought all my food waste to a small heap hidden back by Noah's Ark and for one year, Eddie has tended this compost pile. And now look at it. Rather than sitting in a landfill where it is unable to decompose, a year of our family's food waste has, through the magic and mystery of creation, become rich, black soil. How fitting that this compost pile should be here at Temple. For we, as a people, have always planted new seeds in the soil of the past, taken what is old and made it new again.

Our sages teach, *Lo alecha hamlacha ligmor...* It is not up to you to finish the work, but (the saying continues) neither are you free to desist from trying. (*Pirke Avot*)

This compost pile is going to change the world. It's a tiny, rather messy gesture on my part and I



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look pretty ridiculous in my high heels, bucket of slop in hand, making my way across the grass and mud to the compost pile. I laugh at myself... but this small daily ritual pushes away my despair. It gives me a sense of hope. I can do something. I'm not just a part of the Big Bad Problem. Well, I am, but perhaps this balances the equation somewhat.

In his book, "The Evolving Self," Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi writes. "It is essential we remember that every time we invest attention in an idea, a written word, a spectacle; every time we purchase a product, every time we act on a belief, the texture of the future is changed, even if in microscopic ways. The world in which our children and their children will live is built, minute by minute, through the choices we endorse by our psychic energy. It's not only the legislation we help pass, the wars we help wage, the great inventions and works of art that will shape the future, but also our small habits of mind and behavior: the way we talk to our children, how we spend our free time, whether we always increase the consumption of finite resources or whether we find ways to live in less wasteful limits. These small choices, these trivial decisions have as much weight, in the long run, as all of Napoleon's wars." (167-8, Harper Collins, 1993)

The *shofar* blast, like the mighty wind of a hurricane has come to rouse us, wake us from our sleep, our despair, our unwillingness to examine the consequences of our actions.

Dear God, this year as we seek to create ourselves a new,
let us hear the call of the *shofar*.
Help us to return to You
and to move towards a vision of ourselves and the world,
not as it is, but as it should be, like the Garden You planted so long ago.

Help us to pay close attention to our choices.
Awaken our sensitivity to the sacred potential in each decision we make.
Let us realize that untold power resides in even our most mundane acts,
and that our strength rests, not in continually acquiring more,
but in feeling the fullness of what we have, already.

Holy One, help us to know that our potential as human beings can be reached
only when we stand in humility,
knowing our place in the order and balance of the created world.
Help us to turn away from the constant allure of all that is for sale
and to turn instead, within, to turn to You, our Wellspring of Life and Hope.

"Fill the world and master it." You told us. "Have dominion over all creation."
"I have given you the power to do with creation what you will," says God,



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"Now it is in your hands.
And I am watching.
I am waiting."

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