

Rabbi Marci Jacobs
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The World's Birthday

My favorite place in the world is in the middle of the Agam, the lake at Camp Ramah in New England. Floating there, with nothing around me to tie me down or hold me back, I feel both totally free and deeply connected to the world around me. Looking down, if I'm still enough, I can see the fish and other creatures that populate the lake. Looking up, I can watch the clouds as they blow by, and see the shadows they cast on the mountains behind me. I close my eyes and I feel the wind as it blows through the trees. The light of the sun warms my face. It's almost magical. I like to recall this place, to bring its imagery alive particularly at this time of year because it reminds me of the beauty and peace that I associate with the Creation of the world. The brand new world, shiny and green in its newness, idyllic, infinite in its potential is a profound image to call on today, on Rosh Hashanah, because today is the day on which the world was created.

We are reminded of this fact in our musaf service, when we recite **היום הרת עולם** (*Hayom harat olam*). These words begin a short prayer said three times in our musaf Amidah. In English, the prayer reads: "Today the world was born! Today, all the creatures of the world stand in judgment, either as children or as servants. If You look upon us as children, then have mercy upon us as a father has mercy for his children. If You look upon us as servants, we look to you to be gracious to us as in your judgment, Great and Holy One!"

While the first words of this prayer declare that today the world was born, the rest of the prayer focuses on the other prominent feature of this day—our judgment before God. In the many years since the world's creation, this aspect of Rosh Hashanah has captured most of our attention. Our most fervent prayers are focused on the repentance and hopes for a better future that accompany our yearly review. We see ourselves as flocks of sheep, passing before our shepherd to be accounted for; we ask to be written in the book of life; we describe God as the omnipotent judge, who knows all our deeds and rules accordingly.

היום הרת עולם (*Hayom harat olam*) continues in this model, leading us to consider our relationship with God as we prepare for judgment. Even its place in the service, following the 3 Shofar blasts in the Musaf Amidah, keeps us on task as we strive for Teshuvah. The piercing sound of the Shofar proclaims the gravity of the day. We respond with these words, stepping forward to be judged. With the gates of heaven open before us as we enter the Divine court, it's easy to forget that today is the day the world was born.

But today is the day the world was born. We begin our new year, and every new year, on the day the world was created. The rest of the Jewish calendar follows suit, reminding us of our connection to that world, keeping us aware of how our own renewal depends on the renewal of Creation. Our pilgrimage festivals mark the agricultural year. We celebrate Pesah as we prepare to plant our crops. We celebrate Shavuot at the time of our first harvests and Sukkot as our harvesting season comes to a close. We bring light to the darkest part of the year with Hanukkah. Since so much of our year follows the cycles of

nature, it seems fitting that once a year, we come back to honor the moment when these cycles were first set in motion.

Still, something about focusing on creation as we transition into autumn, feels a little strange to me. I imagine us celebrating Creation when the world's appearance mirrors that perfect moment. Now, we have just passed the peak of our greenness. We are at a point in our year when the world goes into hibernation. The leaves are already turning colors, being drained of their chlorophyll, and falling to the ground. Living in this kind of an environment, how can we understand Rosh Hashanah as a time to turn our attention to creation?

This is the time of year when we take stock. As we ask ourselves if we have lived up to God's and our own expectations, we can remember that today is a celebration of Creation, and ask ourselves some new questions. How have we impacted the earth this year? What can we do to keep the promise and potential of Creation alive?

Sadly, we know that the world has not fared especially well from another year of our existence on it. The world is in crisis. The phenomenon of Global Warming is continuing at an unprecedented pace, and its consequences are immediate and terrifying.

Our polar ice caps are rapidly disappearing. Since the 1970's, the Arctic ice cap has diminished tremendously. The Antarctic ice cap, larger and more stable than its neighbor to the north, is also melting. In January of 2002, the 150 by 30 mile Larsen-B ice shelf in Antarctica, which was believed by scientists to be stable for at least another century, broke up and fell into the sea over a period of 35 days. And the more ice melts, the more ice melts. Ice reflects most of the radiation from the sun, but water absorbs it, and warms up. As more ice melts, there is more water to absorb the sun's heat, and more heat to melt the ice that remains. The melting ice kills our arctic animals—polar bears are drowning as distances between ice floes grow to upwards of 30 miles. They simply have too far to swim to get to the next solid piece of ice.

The melting of polar ice affects the rest of the world as well. It disrupts the gulf and jet streams, the currents that create our weather patterns. As the earth continues to heat up, we have seen our weather grow more and more severe. In 2004, the all-time record for tornadoes in the US was broken. In 2005, the hottest year on record so far, we witnessed the devastation of Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma. While Global Warming causes our storms to be greater in number and intensity in some places, in others it leads to severe drought. Lake Chad, formerly the 6th largest lake in the world, has essentially disappeared over the last 40 years. The change in climate endangers countless numbers of species, destroying their habitats, changing their migratory patterns, and disrupting their mating habits. Higher temperatures in our oceans bleach our coral reefs, foretelling their deaths.

All of this paints a terrifying, surreal picture of the world and what lies in store. But we know that it is all too real, and that we continue to have a hand in the unnatural, unprecedented way that the world is changing. Global Warming, as we know, is caused by "Greenhouse Gases," gases such as CO₂, Nitrous Oxide, and Methane that build up in our atmosphere, allowing the sun's light in, but trapping a portion of the outbound radiation, warming the air. Greenhouse gases are essential for having a hospitable environment—

without them, the earth's average temperature would be around 0 F. But due to increasing amounts of human-caused greenhouse gases in recent years, we are raising the average temperature and creating dangerous changes in climate. We release greenhouse gases into the atmosphere when we burn fossil fuels, as we do to drive our cars, and heat, cool, and power our homes; when we leave our garbage in landfills, and burn our forests for clearing.

Global Warming has become a political issue. Reducing our reliance on fossil fuels, for example, would drastically reduce our contribution to Global Warming. As the United States is responsible for fully 30% of the world's greenhouse emissions, this would make a big difference. It would also threaten the American oil industry, whose profits depend upon our addiction to fossil fuels. American cars cannot be sold in China, because their emissions are too high, but researching alternative fuels, hybrid technology, and better gas mileage would be expensive. So these industries work to prevent policies that would alleviate the crisis because they would interfere with business. And sometimes, our responses to fight Global Warming are also political. The Town of Lexington, as many of us know, has an anti-idling law. When you are parked in your car, perhaps waiting in the carpool line after religious school, Lexington demands that you turn your car off to avoid dumping extra pounds of CO₂ into the air. The entire world got together and drafted legislation to take action when we began to understand the scope and severity of the hole in the ozone layer during the 1980's and '90's. Today, the day when we recall and celebrate Creation, we must remember that Global Warming is not only a political issue—it is also a religious issue.

The day of creation we celebrate was also the day of our creation. When we came into being God gave us a charge. We read at the beginning of Genesis: “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 the earth.” According to this story of Creation, the world was created for us. We, as the pinnacle of creation, have been blessed by God with the ability to master it, to use it for our benefit. This is an important part of our role in the world. Ramba”n, Nahmanides, explains that God gave us authority over the earth to do as we wish with all the world's creatures, to build, to uproot that which has been planted, and to take from the earth. Much of human society depends on our ability to rule the earth in these ways. But there is an ambiguity in God's blessing. God tells the people to rule, in Hebrew **ורדו** (*ur'du*). That word, **לרדות** (*lirdot*), can mean just to rule, or to rule tyrannically, to wield authority as a weapon. Unfortunately, we see some of the results of that kind of rule in the way we have been treating our world.

Fortunately, there is a second creation story in the Torah, and a second charge. In the second chapter of Genesis, man is created before the other creatures of the world, not as the pinnacle of creation, but as its prerequisite. God then creates the Garden in Eden, with its rivers and its trees, and places man there, giving him the freedom to eat of its fruit, but making it clear that his purpose there is **לעבדה ולשמרה** (*l'ovdah ul'shomrah*), to till it and to tend it, to work it and to guard it. Rashi explains that this creation story joins the heavenly and the earthly realms. God gave man life by breathing God's living spirit into his nostrils. But man also came from the earth, and his role was to tend and guard it. Man is God's **שומר** (*shomer*), God's steward of the world.

Putting these two stories side by side, we learn from the Torah that we can benefit from the world, and that we also need to be sure to protect and care for it. A wonderful midrashic legend makes this point even clearer. This tale imagines God taking the newly created first person on a tour of the Garden in Eden, showing him every tree. After the tour, God said: 'Look at my works! See how beautiful and excellent they are! I created them all for you. But you must see to it not to spoil and destroy my world; for if you do, there will be no one to repair it.'

Indeed, our Torah is filled with laws that teach us how to be שומרים (*shom'rim*), how to care for our world. We have the laws of שמיטה (*sh'mitah*), requiring us to let our fields lie fallow every seventh year, so that they can rejuvenate. Fruit trees can only be harvested in the fourth year of bearing fruit, allowing them to mature before serving as a source of food. Even in war, the Torah reminds us that we must not recklessly cut down fruit-bearing trees. And the Talmud takes this law, known as בל תשחית (*bal tashhit*), one step further, explaining that tilting a lamp to cause it to burn more quickly is a violation of this principle, as it is wasteful of the fuel.

These laws are quite ancient, but in order to fulfill our roles as שומרים (*shom'rim*), as God's stewards of the earth, we must find ways to apply them to our lives. We know that the largest human cause of Global Warming comes from greenhouse gases, primarily CO₂. The average American is responsible for emitting 15,000 pounds of CO₂ each year. That's quite a lot of Carbon Dioxide rushing into our atmosphere. But we are capable of reducing our CO₂ output. Just as we pursue Teshuvah in our personal lives, let us engage in Teshuvah with our world, for all the ways in which we have contributed to Global Warming.

This process of Teshuvah will not force us to sit in the dark all the time, nor will it break our banks, as we might fear. But it does require of us two things—the will to change, and the action to back it up.

Here are some ways that we can participate in this process of Teshuvah with our world:

- Energy efficient lighting. Compact fluorescent bulbs fit into most light bulb sockets and use 66% less energy than standard incandescent bulbs. They also last 10 times longer than regular bulbs, up to 10,000 hours. COEJL, the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life is starting off this year with a campaign for these bulbs. They are asking the age-old and predictable question: How many Jews does it take to change a light bulb? If every household in the US installed just one compact fluorescent bulb in place of an incandescent one, it would have the same effect on pollution as removing 1 million cars from the roads.
- Reduce emissions from cars and other vehicles. Don't idle when parked. Drive a hybrid car. Reduce the miles you drive by carpooling, taking mass transit, or walking. Reducing your drive by just 20 miles a week would reduce CO₂ emissions by about 1,000 pounds per year.
- Reduce, Reuse, Recycle. Choose to buy products that have minimal or refillable packaging. Boycott those that don't. Recycling uses far less energy than producing new glass, plastic, metal, and paper.

These are just a few suggestions. Following up on even one of them has the potential to change our world for the better, and to change our relationship to the earth. There are hundreds of ways we can personally reduce the factors that contribute to Global Warming. Taking the first step toward being God's שומרים (*shom'rim*), the stewards of our world, is quite doable, immediately significant, and essential to ensure the future of the Creation we celebrate today.

This year, let us seek to repair our world. Today, on the birthday of the world, let us remember the beauty of Creation, keep it in mind as we engage in Teshuvah, and work to restore it. I wish each of us, our families and loved ones and our world, a Shana Tovah, a good new year.