

WHEN IT SEEMS LIKE TOO MUCH- JUST DO YOUR PART-
LO ALECHA HAMLACHA LIGMOR

INTRODUCTION

This past year the United Nations issued its report on global warming. According to the United Nations report changes in the atmosphere, the oceans and glaciers and ice caps now show unequivocally that the world is warming due to human activities.

One of the things that struck me was the evaluation that “if we were to take every car off the road and close every factory we still could not reverse the effects of carbon dioxide and other pollutants on global warming.” Some still debate whether we are dealing with a natural cycle of global warming or whether it is caused by human technology- either way we live through its effects. Meanwhile we watch the melting of the great glaciers and worry about the rising ocean levels. Not only is there the potential for coastal flooding and even the complete immersion of certain tropical islands, but the decreased desalinization of the oceans could have a catastrophic effect on ocean life and the availability of food resources. At the same time we hear about the growing Saharan deserts and decreased arable land. We got to the moon first, but now with the decreasing polar caps, the Russians are claiming the oil deposits beneath the Arctic Circle. I wonder who got the best deal there?

The problem with talking about global warming is that it often ends up, like many subjects today, devolving into politics. Republicans versus Democrats, conservatives versus liberals; sides have been drawn and too often the reasonable arguments of each side are ignored because the barriers are too fortified. When it comes to the question of global warming there are conservatives who feel that there is way too much hysteria about what they refer to as “normal, cyclical fluctuations of global temperatures.” On the other side, liberals castigate conservatives for their myopic self-centered view of the world and an inability to see the warning signs. And like most issues, we mostly hear the extreme views of each side.

So what are we supposed to do?

NOW WHAT?

In spite of my introduction, this sermon is not an attempt to prove the case for global warming: either you believe it or not. Every day we are confronted with news reports that deal with the theme of global warming.

Does it faze us anymore when we hear things like:

-Since 1980, we've experienced nineteen of the twenty hottest years on record - with 2005 being the hottest ever.

-Over the last four decades, the percentage of the Earth's surface suffering drought has more than doubled. In the United States, the drought we experienced in 2002 was the worst in forty years. And in Africa, more rivers are beginning to dry up, threatening the water supply across the continent.

-As more land becomes parched, more forests are starting to burn. Across Indonesia, throughout Alaska, and in the Western United States, wildfires have raged in recent years like never before. A new record was set in 2002, as more than 7 million acres burned from Oregon down to Arizona.

-In the last 35 years, with warming ocean waters, category 4 and 5 hurricanes have doubled, and the wind speed and duration of these storms has jumped 50%.

You either accept the connection between these natural phenomena and global warming or you don't. While it is almost unanimously accepted that global warming is adversely affecting our world, the only question is how severe you consider our current circumstance to be.

I'm not going to offer any more statistics about global warming for fear that some of you will begin to start thinking of refutations. I don't want to confuse the issue, because the issue is not how severe it is currently, only whether we should do nothing until everyone is convinced.

What will the next twenty years bring? What about the next fifty? No one knows. But what if this is not a normal cycle of nature? What if our consumption habits are contributing to the global warming? For those who do not believe this is a serious issue, what if you are wrong? Are we really ready to risk our future?

Today I want to go beyond the question of global warming. The question I want to ask is much bigger. My question deals with our ability to do something about it. Because there are those who argue that you and I can't do anything about it. There are people who accept the dangers of global warming and yet do nothing because they believe that it is up to world governments or big businesses to do something. This approach is predicated on the fact that even if we could put a stop to global warming that it could only be accomplished on a large scale.

So what are we to do?

LO ALECHA HAMLACHA LIGMOR

As usual, Jewish tradition has an important teaching to help us deal with overcoming this tension. Found in Pirkei Avot- The Ethics of the Fathers- we are taught: "Lo alecha hamlacha ligmore, v'lo atah ben horin le'hebatel mee'mena"- "It is not required that you finish the job, but neither are you exempt from beginning it." This teaching reminds us that when it comes to the great issues of life that are sufficiently complex and complicated we are not obligated to complete the task. But more importantly, we cannot sit back and do nothing. Doing nothing is not acceptable in our tradition.

Why are we required to act even in the face of overwhelming odds? Why not admit the reality of the situation? After all, Judaism is very realistic about the world. In this case, it is an issue of personal responsibility. It is a reminder that when we abdicate our ability for initiative and ingenuity we give up on our human condition. Our tradition won't allow for a forfeit. Even when the odds seem overwhelming, we must play the game of life as if we can make a difference.

Will our actions make a difference? And how do you define making a difference? Maybe our small contribution will have just the necessary impact. The degree to which humans impact global warming is an inexact science. Who is to see that our efforts won't help in some way? Who is to say that as we figure out the bigger issues that our small acts of today won't make a difference? I believe they will. I have to believe. Or perhaps we will inspire others. Perhaps your purchase of a Prius will inspire others to do the same. Who knows what our small acts will accomplish; it is this hope that makes each act significantly powerful on its own.

At this time of year rabbinic tradition teaches to be conscious of each of our decisions. We are supposed to live each day as if the next good deed we do will actually tip the scales of justice in our favor. What a perfect time to remind ourselves that each act, no matter how small, can make a difference.

WHAT CAN I DO?

When it comes to global warming what are the things that we can do? It is important to lobby our government and support businesses that are globally conscious and I encourage you to do so. We all know about the impact of emerging countries like China and Indonesia on the world eco-system. We have learned the term “carbon footprint” to express the impact that our personal habits make on the environment.

Yet the solutions are not easy. Each answer seems to have its own set of issues. Like ethanol gas derived from corn that seems like a great alternative, but may cause as much impact on the environment due to the fact that there are no pipelines to move it and therefore it must be transported by truck. Eventually we feel frustrated and potentially hopeless about solving the problem. But we all know that there are little things that we can do. We may not have the answer today, but perhaps our actions will give us the time to figure out the right answers.

What can we do?

We all know that one of the most significant ways to decrease carbon dioxide is through the types of automobiles we drive and our driving habits. And while I admire people who drive hybrid cars and encourage people to purchase one, it is possible to make a difference with your existing automobile by cutting down on driving and by carpooling. In addition, when it is time to get a new car, strive to get a car with better gas mileage. The difference of driving a car that gets ten miles per gallon and one that gets twenty can be significant. Maybe your family really doesn't need the largest truck ever made and a smaller SUV will do- even going from 10 miles per gallon to 15 can make a difference. One does not have to become an eco-fanatic to make a difference.

What else can we do?

Replace your regular light bulbs with energy efficient ones. How many of you have already done this? These compact fluorescent light bulbs, known as cfl's, use only 25% of the energy of a regular bulb. And talk about individuals being able to have an impact, if every house in America installed just one cfl in place of a regular light bulb, we could prevent greenhouse gases equivalent to the emissions of more than 800,000 cars. If every household would install one cfl it would be like taking 800,000 cars off the road. This is a small act with great potential.

In addition to cfl's we must consider energy efficient appliances and the latest suggestions of turning off computers when not in use and unplugging appliances when not in use because many appliances use energy even when in the off mode.

What else can be done?

Solar energy is becoming more efficient and affordable. With the opportunity of selling back unused energy, those of us with the means must begin to make a statement about our beliefs.

There are many ways that we can make a difference. All you have to do is look on line to find suggestions about reducing oil consumption and carbon dioxide emissions. But again, there are those who believe that these actions will not make a difference.

These may be small contributions to the cause, but together we can make a difference. Temple Aliyah is a sacred community. Together we can begin to make a difference.

Margaret Mead wrote: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." And some of you may know the words of a popular Israeli song, "Ani V'atah ne'shaneh et ha'olam"- "You and I will change the world."

When we stop acting like we will make a difference then we have lost the greatest of all human qualities- hope.

BIGGER ISSUES

Like all issues that are far more complex than most people are willing to acknowledge, the oil we consume is not just about global warming. It is not just about the carbon monoxides that break down our atmosphere resulting in the ever-increasing hole in our ozone layer, it is also about the politics of oil.

Several weeks ago I attended an intimate meeting with Senator Diane Feinstein. With about thirty other leaders of the Jewish community, we had the opportunity to question her about any issues of concern. The topics of course focused on the Middle East, in particular American policy about the Israel-Palestinian conflict and Iran. In the words of Senator Feinstein, "we cannot resolve the issues of Iran or the Israel-Palestinian conflict until we attain energy self-sufficiency." If you want to decrease the political power of Iran and Saudi Arabia we need to use less foreign oil. If we want American foreign policy to function without concern of our own energy needs, then we must begin to do something. If you are a lover of Israel who is concerned about the political power of oil and the role that petro-dollars play in supporting world-wide terrorism and more specifically the efforts of Hamas, then we must stop doing nothing.

What can we do?

Make sure the next car gets better gas mileage. See if your current family situation has allowed you to downsize your cars. Many things have changed in the nine years since my family last purchased a family vehicle, that is why this summer we finally downsized from a large SUV to a smaller one that gets fifty percent better gas mileage. In addition, I hope to be very soon to be driving a hybrid, instead of my gas-guzzling Mustang GT. I am arriving late to the game of global warming concern, but I could no longer do nothing. I want to thank those of you who drive Priuses and other hybrids and who have inspired me, your actions have made a difference.

So why don't people do more?

In addition to the feeling that our actions can't make a difference, I believe that another reason deals with personal inconsistencies that may be perceived as hypocritical. Can I own a large SUV that gets 8 miles per gallon and still replace my regular light bulbs with energy efficient light bulbs? Of course. Can I be a lousy recycler and still drive a Prius? Of course. We must come to believe that any action is better than none. We must not be critical of people who have made global warming their issue and don't yet live a hundred percent according to the lifestyle. In these issues of ultimate concern, when we should all be trying to do our part, let us not negate any act that makes a difference.

But unfortunately, another of the greatest obstacles to changing our ways is our dislike for inconvenience. We like our big cars and we don't like carpooling. We like

our home lighting to be just right and CFL's can be a brighter light and take a minute to warm up. Our time is precious and we don't want to be inconvenienced. Ultimately, we must be willing to accept compromises, to acknowledge that there are more important issues than our own needs and accept a small amount of inconvenience.

According to one source, in 2005 America used .16% less oil than the year before. This may not seem like much, but it is a beginning... lo alecha hamlacha ligmor- it is not for us to finish, but we must begin. Although global use of oil increased 1.3%, Americans must still acknowledge that we are the largest consumers of oil, utilizing approximately 20 million barrels per day, compared to China, the second largest consumer who utilizes approximately 7 million barrels per day.

The only way we stand a chance is to begin to change the things over which we have control.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

As a community Temple Aliyah has begun to take some small steps:

1. I hope you have noticed over the last year, the recycling bins in the courtyard used by our schools and staff. In addition, we recycle the discarded paper in our office.
2. Look above you if you can and you will notice energy efficient lighting that we have utilized for several years now.
3. In the coming years, as we consider necessary changes to our facilities we will also consider energy efficiency in these plans.
4. After the High Holy Days, we will be forming a new greening committee to evaluate the ways in which we can decrease our carbon footprint. Sisterhood has already begun to consider these issues in catering like using plates made from recycled goods and I would like us to look at the larger issues as a synagogue. If you are interested in serving on such a committee I would like you to leave a message in the office and I will pass on your name to the appropriate party.

As a symbol of our desire to make a difference, it is my pleasure to acknowledge that our ner tamid- the eternal light above the ark is now solar powered. The ner tamid has long been a symbol of God's eternal presence. It harkens back to the first words heard in the universe "Let there be light," and cosmologically is connected to the first energy of creation. I am grateful to Kahn Solar who donated the materials and labor. I hope that each time we look at the ner tamid, we will now think of our obligation to preserve the limited resources of creation.

SOCIAL ACTION

Making a difference through small actions is not limited to ecological issues. Making a difference happens through one action at a time. One does not have to become a Mother Theresa to make a difference in the world.

Most schools now have requirements for community service, because it is a lesson, that just a couple of hours can make a difference. Granted a couple of hours is not

going to make great changes in the world, but a couple of hours of reading to an underprivileged child through Koreh LA can make a difference to that child.

Can thirty dollars make a difference in Darfur? Through Jewish World Watch thirty dollars can provide a family with two solar cookers. What's the big difference? Well, in two of the larger refugee camps many of the households are headed by women. The violent acts that take place against women often happen when they are out collecting wood for cooking. In addition, two solar cookers can replace up to one ton of precious firewood. The refugee crisis has also led to the deforesting of these countries in conflict. The Jewish World Watch may not be able to stop the innocent killings of civilians in Darfur, but it allows you and me to make a big difference for one family with just thirty dollars.

COMFORTING PEOPLE

If you want to know the power of the individual to make a difference, just ask someone who received a call at a time of personal need. Whether it is illness or a death taking the time to write a note or make a call can mean the world to someone.

A common topic in my office is with congregants who come in to share with me that at one of these difficult moments people that mattered most to them did not bother to call or write a note. Whether it is the loss of a spouse, a child diagnosed with cancer or a divorce, some of their closest friends are not able to be a source of comfort. Often it is because people don't know what to say. Words are difficult to come by in these situations. How do you offer words of comfort without being trite? Let me give you some simple words I use, "I'm so sorry to hear about, fill in the blank, I just wanted to call and let you know I was thinking about you." If you are intimidated by a call, then just drop a note. But often we are just too busy and caught up with our own lives to respond. We don't think that our call or note will make a difference. That is where we make our mistake. Our little acts of kindness do matter. Each one has the potential to comfort another human being.

CONCLUSION

Whether it is global warming, conflict from war or just the lives of people around us our small acts are important. Each act is a statement of hope about us as individuals and about our society. It is a reminder that personal benign neglect can turn into communal complacency and we can't let that happen.

A Chasid once came to his rabbi in tears. "I feel so paralyzed. I've tried so hard to repair the world and it does no good – it's just hopeless. The world is still filled with sin." The rabbi very patiently embraced the man and explained: "Have hope. Before you change the world, you must start with yourself. And after you've repaired yourself, repair your community. And after your community, repair your nation. Know that then you will have begun to repair the world." The rabbi advised the Chasid to have hope.

We must recapture the belief in ourselves to make a difference. To do nothing is unforgivable; it is the greatest sin of all. It is to acknowledge a hopelessness that reflects the death of the human spirit. Unless we believe that we can make a difference we might as well abdicate our elevated human status. We might as well ask God for forgiveness, because we have failed Him. One this very day when we celebrate the creation of humanity, we must act upon our human potential.

There is a Talmudic story of an old man planting a fruit tree. His old bent figure is hunched over the sapling as a stranger approaches the old man and says, “why are you planting that tree, you won’t live long enough to eat of its fruit.” The old man looked at the stranger and said, “I might not live long enough to eat of its fruit, but God willing my children and their children will be able to.” Let us begin to plant our trees of hope through our actions.

What should your new year look like?

Picture yourself replacing your light bulbs with energy efficient ones or trading your car or truck in for one that gets better mileage, maybe even a hybrid.

Picture yourself writing a letter to a member of congress on behalf of an important cause.

Picture yourself considering energy efficient appliances and maybe even changing your house over to solar energy.

Picture yourself donating to Jewish World Watch for solar cookers that can help prevent violence and save precious resources.

Picture yourself writing a note to someone who is going through a difficult time and knowing that it makes a difference.

A rabbi was once asked, “How do you bring light to a darkened room?” his answer, “Strike a match!” Then they asked him, “Rabbi how do you bring light to a darkened world?” his answer, “Become the match, become the light!”