

Reversing Environmental Damage

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My wife Alice first knew, when she was a little girl growing up in Detroit, that she loved Alaska. She learned about Alaska in elementary school. Alaska was then still a territory, not yet a state. That vast, beautiful, mountainous territory captured her imagination.

Alice and I have been married for 43 years. Over all those years we accumulated and studied countless books, brochures and maps of Alaska. But we never went there.

This summer, we finally did it. We flew to Juneau. We spent a week in Alaska. We cruised for four days in Glacier Bay.

It was all that Alice had ever imagined, and more.

Huge glaciers with the bluest lakes.

Snow on the mountains in the middle of summer.

Bears catching salmon.

Soaring eagles, sometimes nabbing some salmon from the bears.

Playful sea lions.

A once in a lifetime experience. We both loved it.

But we also found reminders everywhere that this beauty will end before long. We human beings are spoiling this planet.

We saw melting glaciers.

We saw enormous cruise ships that carry 3,000 people. These monster ships each produce as much sewage and waste as a mid-sized city. They spew out diesel exhaust. Each ship pollutes the atmosphere as much as the exhaust of 10,000 cars. Every day.

It was on this trip that I had my third conversion. My first conversion, when I was 24 years old, was my conversion from Christian to Jew. My second conversion, from lawyer to rabbi, happened with my rabbinic ordination last year. This conversion, my third conversion, was from a person who had no time for environmental concerns to a fully committed environmentalist.

Before this trip I was blind to the evidence of danger to our planet. Now I see that evidence everywhere.

I saw that evidence in Alaska in those melting glaciers.

I saw that evidence in diminished and threatened populations of otters and whales and polar bears.

I saw that evidence in those giant, oil-guzzling ocean liners.

And now I see that evidence in the stories of climate change. Arctic melting. Floods. Fires.

Last month a huge part of the Greenland ice shelf broke off. It formed an ice island with an area of 100 square miles. That is four times the size of Manhattan. This immense iceberg is half as thick as the Empire State Building is high. This is the largest such event in the Arctic in nearly 50 years. And it provides further evidence that climate change is real.

On a smaller scale that story is repeated wherever there are glaciers. I saw that melting myself. I stood with Alice on a glacier near Juneau and watched it melt.

The news from Pakistan goes from bad to worse. Gigantic floods, like none seen in 80 years, have killed at least 2,000 people. Estimates of the homeless range from 10 million to 20 million people, more than twice the population of New York City. These victims live in wretched refugee camps. They face disease and starvation.

Russia suffered its worst heat wave ever. The fires in July and August caused smoke so toxic throughout Moscow that 700 people died each day. One third of the Russian wheat crop was lost.

The receding ice cap and melting glaciers are caused by rising atmospheric and sea temperatures. The extreme weather patterns leading to floods and heat waves result from the same cause. Global warming, climate change caused by human activities, are real. We are ruining the environment. We have to take corrective action urgently.

It was more than our trip to Alaska that changed my mind. Alice and I are part of a discussion group. We are reading a book called Overshoot, by William Catton, Jr.

Professor Catton's book educated me about the urgent necessity for all of us to work to save our environment.

Catton explains that every habitat has a dominant species. That is the species that uses the resources of the habitat most efficiently and therefore rises to dominance over all other species. Over time, however, the dominant species

exhausts the resource that is responsible for its dominance. The species loses its dominance and either moves on to another habitat or dies out.

This is a fundamental rule of ecology. It is called “succession.”

We human beings are now the dominant species. Like all dominant species, we are causing our own destruction.

Our entire way of life depends mainly on a single resource: the carbon under the earth that results from the plant and animal life that lived and died millions of years ago. Buried in the earth, those fossils have become coal, natural gas and oil.

These are the primary fuels that run our economies. And these fuels release carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. The carbon dioxide concentration in the atmosphere has increased to 360 times what it was before the Industrial Revolution began in about 1750. This increase contributes to the climate change we’re experiencing. And we can’t breathe carbon dioxide.

Coal and oil and gas companies are busily digging up fossil fuels from miles below the surface of the earth and under the oceans. Doing that supports our economies and everything we think we need.

But buried carbon is a limited resource. We will run out.

My father thought otherwise. Dad had a career that extended over four decades working as a top executive for a major oil company whose name is now Exxon-Mobil. He and others who were running that company were so convinced that the supply of oil will never be exhausted that they treated that opinion as a proven fact. I used to hear that claim repeated often at our family dinner table as I was growing up.

My Dad and his oil company colleagues were wrong. The supply is not being replenished. It will run out.

Henry Ford produced his first car in Detroit in 1901. Now, 110 years later, there are more than 700 million motor vehicles in the world

Today there are 29,000 commercial airplane flights every single day.

All those airplanes and virtually all those vehicles run on petroleum-based fuel. The largest of those planes burns almost 4,000 gallons of fuel per hour. America alone uses nearly 900,000,000 gallons of oil every year, consuming 25% of the world supply even though we have less than 5% of the world’s population.

This is the fuel we are digging up from under the earth and burning in the atmosphere. If we keep this up, it will all be used up.

We are already running out of oil we can extract easily. Hence the deep water drilling that led to the BP oil disaster in the Gulf of Mexico.

Oil companies take other desperate measures all the time. They pump chemicals underground at tremendous pressures to force low grade, dirty petroleum out of underground oil shale. This method of oil extraction pollutes the local ground water. That's the water we drink. The process also uses huge amounts of energy. Even using these desperate measures, those supplies will also run out.

In other words, homo sapiens – that's us--the dominant species of the habitat that is the world, is using up the resource that makes us the dominant species. Unless we make radical changes, we will crash, as we succumb to the laws of ecology.

Our environmental damage is not limited to burning fossil fuel so excessively. We are ignoring and ruining our environment at our peril in other ways.

Commercial fishing and whaling are emptying our oceans of fish and whales. Some species of fish simply no longer exist. As just one example, about 100 million salmon used to hatch in the Connecticut River every year. Now it's much easier to know how many hatch. Zero. There simply are no more Connecticut River salmon.

Trees are another example. Humanity uses more than 250 million tons of paper each year. It takes twelve trees to make a ton of paper. Every year we destroy as many as three billion trees, entire forests, to make paper

Before 1850 or so, the size of forests globally did not change very much. Trees would grow at approximately the same rate as humans were cutting them down.

But that began to change dramatically about 150 years ago. We began to destroy forests faster than they could grow. We have been doing that faster and faster ever since then. We have now destroyed about half of the Earth's mature tropical forests. Some scientists have predicted that there will only be ten percent remaining in good condition twenty years from now, unless we act together on a dramatic basis worldwide. Another ten percent may survive, but in a degraded condition. In other words, unless we change what we are doing we will have lost eighty percent of these forests by 2030.

All animal life, including us, depends on the oxygen produced by trees and other plants, the very trees that we are destroying.

Unless we change direction, our world faces terrible disruptions and eventual horrendous wars as we fight over scarcer and scarcer resources.

Today is the birthday of the world. Just a little while ago during the Shofar service we chanted this in Hebrew: "Hayom harat olam." Today is the

birthday of the world. That is particularly why I wanted to speak about this today.

When God first created the world on that long ago birthday of the world, "God saw everything that He had made, and behold, it was very good." And He made us responsible for appreciating and keeping it a good and abundant world.

That's why the Talmud tells us that when a Jew sees a natural wonder, he should say: "Thank you, God, Ruler of the world, Who made the works of creation." *"Barukh atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech ha-olam, sheh asah maasei b'reishit."* I said that blessing in Alaska as Alice and I looked in wonder upon the dazzling white face of the Marjorie Glacier in Glacier Bay.

After God created humanity, Genesis tells us, God placed us in the Garden of Eden in order both to tend it and to guard it. A midrash in Ecclesiastes Rabbah summarizes our responsibility to the world, to protect it and not to destroy it. According to this midrash, God led Adam around the Garden of Eden and said,

Look at My works! How beautiful and praiseworthy they are. Everything that I have created, I created for you. Take care not to damage and destroy My world, for if you damage it, there is no one to repair it after you

"If you damage it, there is no one to repair it after you." The author or compiler of Ecclesiastes Rabba wrote those words more than 1200 years ago. They still apply today with equal or greater force. "If you damage and destroy God's world, there is no one to repair it after you."

Our greedy consumption of oil has created a special problem for Jews. The U.S. has needed foreign oil ever since we lost our energy independence in 1970. Arab nations hold 58% of the oil reserves in the world. I don't have to tell you that many of these Arab governments have special animosity against Jews and against Israel. If we all could succeed in converting the world's economy to reduce or eliminate our dependence on oil, these hostile governments would lose power to threaten us. We would live not only in a cleaner and more sustainable world, but also a safer world.

We are using up all the fossil fuel that exists. We are likely to run out before the end of this century. How can we slow, or halt, or reverse the environmental damage that we ourselves are inflicting on our common habitat?

We are citizens in a democracy. We can take action together and organize to insist that our elected representatives adopt sensible government policies.

Urge the United States Senate to approve the climate change legislation now pending before it. Our own Senator Kerry sponsored the bill, known as the American Power Act.

Urge our junior Senator, Senator Scott Brown, to join with Senator Kerry to allow floor debate on the legislation and get it enacted into law this year.

Write to Senator Harry Reid, Majority leader of the Senate. Urge him to insist that the Senate debate this legislation, no matter if that means there has to be a filibuster in order to move forward.

We can act locally. Braintree and Quincy have recycling programs. Braintree has adopted single stream recycling with regular curbside pick-up. Quincy's website includes suggestions for volunteering for a better environment.

Finally, we can make our own choices to tread a little lighter on this earth.

Use cloth napkins, not paper napkins.

Use metal silverware and china plates, not plastic and paper.

Wear a sweater in the winter in our homes and reduce the thermostat by a degree or two.

The next time we buy a car, look for one that gets the very best mileage.

I don't expect us to remember all the details of what I've said today. I hope, though, we will leave here with a sense of the urgency of the task. After the holidays I will circulate a reminder with a list of specific actions we can take and some guidance on where we can learn more about what needs to be done and how we can help.

In Pirkei Avot, the Ethics of the Fathers, Rabbi Tarfon says, "It is not incumbent upon you to complete the task. But neither are you free to desist from it." *Lo aleichah ha'm'lechah ligmor, v'lo atah ben chorin libatel mimenah.* "It is not incumbent upon you to complete the task. But neither are you free to desist from it."

We do not have to complete the tasks of conserving fossil fuels and reversing climate change. But we are not free to stand by and watch our world die. We must not allow our species to destroy itself. We must learn to treat with intelligent care the precious resources we received as a gift at the birthday of the world.

May we be inspired to do all we can to tend and to guard the world God gave us. Hayom harat olam. This is the birthday of the world.

Shanah Tovah U'm'tukah.