

YK 5784 – Earth 2.0

We live in paradise. Southern California is so beautiful, and especially so here in Ojai. We are close to places to hike, meditate, enjoy the mountains, the desert, the ocean, and, one of my favorite activities, to go birdwatching. We have nature surrounding us, and changing one vowel and adding one consonant to the word nature we have nurture, as nature very often nurtures us.

There have been moments though, where the thought, “the earth is trying to kill us” has occurred to me. It’s hard not to notice how many in the world are experiencing Unetaneh Tokef moments...who by flood, who by fire...who by earthquake...

With storms, hurricanes, flood, fire, glaciers melting, ocean levels rising... what is our human responsibility for the earth, do we humans have anything to do with this? I’m not a scientist, and I read the news like you do. So, as a good rabbi, I look to our Jewish teachings for insight. What answers does Torah give us? We get more than one answer! Of course. Ask a rabbi a question, and you get how many answers?

Two conflicting texts right there in Genesis. The first is in chapter 1, a creation story with a universal, non-personal tone. The second text is in chapter 2, a creation story with the first human being, adam rishon.

Here’s the first text, right after the first human beings were created, Genesis 1:28:

וַיְבָרֶךְ אֱלֹהִים וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם אֱלֹהִים פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת-הָאָרֶץ וְכִבְשׁוּהָ
וּרְדוּ בַדְגַת הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבְכָל-חַיַּת הָאָרֶץ עַל-הָאָרֶץ:

God blessed them and God 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 the land.” The word “master it” is כִּבְשׁוּהָ, which is to master, to subdue.

The second text is in chapter 2:

וַיִּקַּח יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם וַיִּנְחָלֵהוּ בְּגֶן-עֵדֶן לְעִבְדָּהּ וּלְשִׁמְרָהּ:

*God יהוה settled the Human in the garden of Eden, to till it and tend it.*¹

The translation for Adam to tend the land is from the word, *lishmor*, to keep, to guard. So are we to master, subdue the earth or work it and tend-keep-guard it?

¹ Genesis 2:15

A verse in Ecclesiastes says: *Look at God's work - for who can straighten what God has twisted?*²

רָאָה אֶת־מַעֲשֵׂה הָאֱלֹהִים כִּי מִי יוּכַל לְתַקֵּן אֶת אֲשֶׁר עָוְתוּ:

The Rabbis elaborate: *When the Blessed Holy One created the first human, and took him and led him round all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said to him: "Look at My works, how beautiful and praiseworthy they are! And all that I have created, it was for you that I created it. Pay attention that you do not corrupt and destroy My world: if you corrupt it, there is no one to repair it after you."*³

And, before God brought the flood:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים לְנֹחַ קֹזֵן כָּל־בְּשָׂר בָּא לְפָנַי כִּי־מָלְאָה הָאָרֶץ חָמָס מִפְּנֵיהֶם וְהִנְנִי מִשְׁחִיתָם אֶת־הָאָרֶץ:

*God said to Noah, "I have decided to put an end to all flesh, for the earth is filled with lawlessness because of them: I am about to destroy them with the earth."*⁴

In some ways, it seems that over the decades, humanity has followed the first instruction to the letter – to master, to subdue, the earth. Give us this command, and we have followed it!!!

The rabbis ask the question, what is this lawlessness that filled the earth? And they answered, idol worship, bloodshed, and sexual immorality.⁵ These are "the big three" of all the transgressions.

The molten calf was an idol. It was made to replace holiness, to replace God. When Moses, in his anger, broke the tablets of the covenant, he forgot that the tablets were *symbols* of holiness, symbols to remember the central teachings of the Torah, which are to be kind to one another and pursue justice. If we treat our Torah as an item to be worshipped, we miss the whole point. In doing so, we make of it an idol. But if we read Torah and take her teachings and inform our values, ethics, and guide our actions, then we are not making an idol of her. Modern rabbi, Rabbi Elliott Kukla teaches, "...the presence of a Torah scroll does not equal the presence of Torah. Torah is made real only through acts of justice and tireless compassion."⁶

² Ecclesiastes 7:13

³ Kohelet Rabbah 7:13

⁴ Genesis 6:13

⁵ Bereshit Rabbah 31:6

⁶ AJWS Dvar Tzedek: Parshat Ki Tisa, [AJWS Dvar Tzedek: Parshat Ki Tisa \(sefaria.org\)](http://AJWS Dvar Tzedek: Parshat Ki Tisa (sefaria.org))

We are most apt to get caught up in idol worship and forget what the Torah teaches when we put ourselves above everything else, our wants are placed higher than other's needs.

Much of human experience is currently engaged in idolizing the self. In his book *Morality: Restoring Common Good in Modern Times*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, zt"l, spoke of morality as:

a concern for the welfare of others, an active commitment to justice and compassion, a willingness to ask not just what is good for me but what is good for "all of us together." It is about "Us," not "Me"; about "We," not "I." If we focus on the "I" and lose the "We," if we act on self-interest without a commitment to the common good, if we focus on self-esteem and lose our care for others, we will lose much else. Nations will cease to have societies and instead have identity groups. We will lose our feeling of collective responsibility and find in its place a culture of competitive victimhood. In an age of unprecedented possibilities, people will feel vulnerable and alone.⁷

From this perspective, treating the earth with concern only for the self is like having all of humanity in a boat, and drilling a hole under one's own seat.

Judaism has always taught us to yes, care for ourselves, while also caring for others. Even a poor person is obligated to give *tzedakah*. *Tzedakah* means righteousness, not charity.⁸ One who turns their eyes away from giving *tzedakah* is described as rebellious, like one who worships false deities.⁹

Humanity's relationship with the earth has largely been without concern, responding to the "master and subdue" instruction and disregarding the "care for and tend it" instruction. It is more than time to treat the earth with *tzedakah*, righteousness.

Whether we believe in what the scientific world is telling us, it is certainly not something we should ignore. Back in 1859, John Tyndall proved that water vapor, carbon dioxide, and nitrous oxide strongly absorb radiation and are greenhouse gasses. Ever notice that a foggy evening is warmer than a clear starry night? That's because water vapor traps heat, sending some of the heat radiating from the earth out into the atmosphere, and some of the heat goes back towards the earth. This is a greenhouse effect. A clear starry sky and the heat will go out into the atmosphere. And, the warmer the earth, the more

⁷ Sacks, Jonathan. *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times* (p. 17).

⁸ Mishneh Torah, Gifts to the Poor, 10:7-14, Maimonides.

⁹ Mishneh Torah, Gifts to the Poor, 10:3, Maimonides

radiation it emits. The difference between water vapor and carbon dioxide is that water vapor leaves the atmosphere within about two weeks, while carbon dioxide remains for thousands of years.¹⁰

I find this fascinating, and I am no scientist. I don't know if all this is true, but I do understand that humanity has done much to subdue our earth. So, what can we do, you and I? Can we act as individuals and make a difference? What if anything, is enough?

הוא הִזָּה אֹמֵר, לֹא עָלֶיךָ הַמְּלָאכָה לְגַמֵּר, וְלֹא אַתָּה בֶּן חוֹרִין לְבַטֵּל מִמֶּנָּה.
In Pirke Avot, the Ethics of our Sages, “He [Rabbi Tarfon] used to say: It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it.”¹¹

There are many positive things going on in the world that illustrate ways humanity is learning and helping to care for and tend to our earth, even as we care for ourselves.

One example is Miyawaki forests.¹² These are tiny forests, native plants on small plots of land that are delivering environmental benefits around the world, and in the US. This is a sweeping movement that is transforming dusty highway shoulders, parking lots, schoolyards and junkyards worldwide. Tiny forests have been planted across Europe, in Africa, throughout Asia and in South America, Russia and the Middle East. India has hundreds, and Japan, where it all began, has thousands.

Now tiny forests are slowly but steadily appearing in the United States. In recent years, they've been planted alongside a corrections facility on the Yakama reservation in Washington, in Los Angeles's Griffith Park and in Cambridge, MA, where the forest is one of the first of its kind in the Northeast.

Healthy woodlands absorb carbon dioxide, clean the air and provide for wildlife. They can grow as quickly as ten times the speed of conventional tree plantations, enabling them to support more birds, animals and insects, and to sequester more carbon, while requiring no weeding or watering after the first three years. They lower temperatures in places where pavement, buildings and concrete absorb and retain heat from the sun.

¹⁰ [Climate Science - Climate Science, Risk & Solutions \(mit.edu\)](https://climateprimer.mit.edu/climate-science#a-brief-history-of-climate-science), <https://climateprimer.mit.edu/climate-science#a-brief-history-of-climate-science>

¹¹ Pirke Avot 2:16

¹² NY Times article, 8/24/2023, by Cara Buckley

The Griffith Park Forest occupies 1,000 square feet, and has drawn insects, lizards, birds and ground squirrels, along with western toads that have journeyed from the Los Angeles River.

A second example is along the Los Angeles River, where conservationists, along with the City of Los Angeles Department of Parks and Recreation, have restored wetlands featuring native plants, and is now overgrown beautifully with deergrass, desert lavender, scrub oak, California Poppy, and many native plant species. It now is also home to a thriving population of coyote, gray fox, desert cottontail, brush rabbit, California ground squirrel, and more. Over 150 different species of birds are seen there, including egrets, herons, bluebirds, cormorants, and more.

A third example of positive trends – the ozone layer is healing. A UN report released earlier this year stated that our efforts to heal the ozone layer by banning dangerous CFC gasses in a 1987 treaty is working.

This year, the America's Endangered Species Act turned 50, and the Center for Biological Diversity says it has saved 291 species so far, and that 80 percent of species on the endangered list are on the road to recovery. Just here off the coast of Southern California, blue whales, which were driven nearly to extinction in the 1800s and 1900s, are making a comeback. The California Blue Whales were protected from commercial whaling in 1966 by the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling, and a few years later, listed as endangered and protected under the Marine Mammal Protection Act.

I will always remember a local whale watching trip Ken and I took 5 years ago, and there was so much marine life that the captain had to turn off the engine because the whales were swimming all around, underneath and aside the vessel, and hundreds and hundreds of dolphins were playing and racing around nearby in the ocean swells. This filled our hearts with hope to know that our ocean could support that much marine life, as well as having a captain who took the welfare of marine life so seriously that we were quite late returning to the harbor.

And right here in Ojai, the Ojai Valley Land Conservancy has permanently protected roughly 2,300 acres of open space through direct ownership and conservation agreements, including the Ojai Meadows Preserve which has a dog friendly trail.¹³ You

¹³ [Saved Lands - OVLC : OVLC](https://ovlc.org/preserves/), <https://ovlc.org/preserves/>

can even go hiking using their trail maps on your mobile phone.¹⁴ The impact of the Ojai Valley Land Conservancy cannot be overstated, and I encourage you to become involved with the Ojai Valley Land Conservancy as much remains to be accomplished.

We do have much to be concerned about, and there is much to do. But as Rabbi Tarfon used to say: “It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it.”¹⁵ We are seeing good changes despite all the terrible news out there, and every good choice we make is a *tikkun*, a healing.

Here in Ojai, in Southern California, all over the world, our voices, choices, and the work of our hands make a difference. Do not give up, do not close your heart to what is possible. The earth is our home, and she needs us.

May we keep in mind the midrashic message crafted over a thousand years ago: *“Look at My works, how beautiful and praiseworthy they are! And all that I have created, it was for you that I created it. Pay attention that you do not corrupt and destroy My world: if you corrupt it, there is no one to repair it after you.”*¹⁶

The answer to how we should treat the earth is simple, we must care for and keep her.

G'mar chatimah tovah,
Rabbi Lisa Bock

¹⁴ Ovlc.org/trailfinder/

¹⁵ Pirke Avot 2:16

¹⁶ Kohelet Rabbah 7:13