

**“Let This Be Your Legacy”**  
**Second Day of Rosh Hashanah - September 10, 2010**  
**Rabbi Carl M. Perkins**  
**Temple Aliyah, Needham**

Once upon a time, many years ago, I had about a day and a half to see **all of Ireland**.

It’s a long story. I was running a three-week exchange program for a group of American high school kids at a school just outside of Dublin and I got a day and a half off to see the countryside. So off I went, racing from place to place.

At one point, I found myself on the road to Connemara, a lovely town on the west coast. A garrulous and gregarious local man who was directing me to various points of interest told me that he had a place that he thought I’d really appreciate, and it wasn’t too far from where we were. He asked me whether I wanted to see it.

I wasn’t so sure. After all, my time was limited. But I agreed to go.

And so, a little while later, he turned off the main road onto a dirt road leading up a hill. The road got narrower and narrower, and the undergrowth got taller and taller, until the road finally came to an abrupt end. He turned off the ignition. Except for the tick of the engine, it was utterly silent.

“Come on,” he said. “We have to walk from here.” He disappeared into the woods, with a spring in his step that belied his age. I followed him. (“Do I *really* have time for this?” I thought. “Do I *really* want to see this place?”) When I caught up with him, I could see that there was a path that climbed steadily through the woods, curving higher and higher and higher. Finally, we came out onto a clearing, and suddenly and entirely unexpectedly, there before me was **all of Ireland**: a 360 degree expanse. To the west, the Atlantic coast, with the famous Cliffs of Moher in the distance. To the north and the south, gentle, beautiful green hills, and to the east, a perfect view: as my new friend put it, if you closed your eyes, you could see all the way to Dublin. The sun was peeking through some light clouds. Birds were chirping. The air was moist and fresh. We stood there for a few moments taking it all in.



The man looked at me. “I come up here a lot,” he said. “I like to make tea up here,” he said. “But when I do,” he continued, “I don’t need to put any sugar in the tea.” And then, in his inimitable Irish accent, he explained: “*The air sweetens it.*”

*Hayom Harat Olam*: “Today is the birthday of the world.” We say those words on Rosh Hashanah because according to our tradition, this is the anniversary of creation. We say those words, but most of the time, it’s hard to imagine what it was like at the dawn of creation—certainly not on a day like this when we’re sitting indoors in this sturdy, air-conditioned structure, in our nice clothing, far from what we call “nature.” But when you have an encounter like that one I had long ago in Ireland—with the open stillness at the top of a mountain, the sunlight reflecting off the water, the gentle, fragrant breeze—it’s a little easier.

Sometimes, our encounters with nature are just like that. Reverential. Appreciative. Spiritual. Idyllic.

Sometimes, though, they’re not.

This past summer, I found myself on top of a different hilltop: Cadillac Mountain, in the middle of Acadia National Park in Maine. Once again, a beautiful panoramic view. Not quite 360 degrees, but close enough. My wife and I weren’t alone, of course. There were other people. Most moved around quietly, appreciating the incredible view, but there was one man near us talking very loudly. As I turned and looked, I could see that, unlike everyone else, he was sitting down, and he was facing away from the view, talking energetically and emphatically—into his cell phone. I suddenly realized that he was buying and selling stocks. (I was tempted to take notes, but I pulled myself away.)

Sometimes, it seems that human beings aren’t just oblivious or unappreciative toward nature. Sometimes, it’s a lot worse than that.

We all know about the oil spill in the Gulf. That’s rather appalling. But it’s just a dramatic example of what happens every day. Every summer, after all, millions of tons of pollution wash into the Gulf of Mexico, causing a so-called dead zone, where no fish can live. When you hear that, it may sound unfortunate, but perhaps not particularly alarming. It may even sound natural, especially when you’re told that it’s nitrogen pollution. But when you learn the size of that zone, you can begin to get concerned. It’s about the size of Massachusetts.

Have you ever heard of the so-called Great Pacific Garbage Patch? The Great Pacific Garbage Patch is a trash stew consisting mainly of plastic refuse, such as plastic bags. It is sitting in the ocean between California and Hawaii. It is estimated to be twice the size of Texas.

Is this any way to treat our planet? The Jewish tradition is firm in condemning this. Defiling our air, our lakes, rivers and oceans, our land—these are violations of the *mitzvah* of *bal tash-khit*, the *mitzvah* forbidding us from wasting or destroying anything in this world.

This *mitzvah* arises in a very specific context: the laws of war. In the Torah, we're told that if we're waging war against the enemy, and we're besieging them, we are not permitted to cut down fruit-bearing trees—even though that might help us in our siege. The rabbis extended this very specific *mitzvah* into a general principle forbidding us to exploit or waste any natural resource, and that includes our air, water and soil, and also the other creatures who live on the planet.

Now, our tradition's condemnation of waste might lead you to think that **any** kind of use is forbidden, but this is not so. We *can* make use of natural resources. Judaism does not demand that we have *no* impact on the world around us. But there is a difference between “wise use” and thoughtless exploitation. The former is permitted; the latter is not.

Some imagine that the Jewish and Christian traditions, based as they are on the Bible, legitimate the exploitation of natural resources. After all, in the first chapter of Genesis, God says, “Let us create an earthling [for that is the meaning of the name, “*adam*”; it comes from the word, “*adamah*,” meaning earth] in our image, and let him **rule** the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle,—the whole earth ....” And after creating human beings, God says to them, “Fill the earth and **master** it. And **rule** the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all living things.” (1:27)

Those words, “**master**” and “**rule**,” appear to give us complete license to do whatever we want. After all, if we are the masters, then the fish and birds and cattle are our slaves, and the environment in which we all live is even less worthy of our consideration.

But the rabbis didn't believe that. They interpreted those verses in which human beings are given the authority to “rule” over the rest of the world in a very different way. The word “*u'r'du*,” which I've translated, “to rule,” sounds a lot like the word, “*yirdu*,” which means, “to fall down.” Picking up on that odd association,

Rashi says the following: “Yes, human beings may *rule* the animal and the vegetable kingdoms, and the planet—but only if they are worthy; if they are not, it will be their undoing, and they will **fall down** before the other species.”

Rav Kook, the early twentieth century mystic and Chief Rabbi of the Land of Israel, put it this way: “There can be no doubt,” he writes, “to any enlightened or thoughtful person, that the [kind of] rule [over nature that we are granted] is not the rule of a tyrant who deals harshly with his people.... It would be unthinkable to legislate so repugnant a subjugation...”

Indeed, the very next chapter in Genesis makes clear what relationship we should have with our environment. God takes Adam and places him in the Garden of Eden, “*l’ovdah u’l’shomrah*”—“to serve it and to preserve it”—or, as others translate it, “to till it and to tend it.” We have a responsibility of stewardship toward nature—which sounds very different from “mastering” or “ruling over” it. A garden is a place to enjoy and appreciate, but the gardener also has work to do.

There’s a midrash that brings us back to that moment when God tells the first humans that they are “to till and to tend” our world. In the midrash, God turns to Adam and Eve and says to them: “Look around you at all that I have created. Look how lovely it all is, how fine it all is. It’s all for you. Take care, though, not to degrade or destroy it. **For if you do destroy it,**” God concludes, “**there will be no one to come after you to restore it.**” (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1 on 7:13)

Have we been worthy? Have we tilled and tended the world? Or have we behaved like tyrants? Well, I think you could say that we’ve done both. On the one hand, many of us appreciate nature. We realize how precious it is, how important it is for our emotional and spiritual well-being. A vital part of our essence is restored when we expose ourselves to nature. As the Talmud put it, “Three things restore a person’s consciousness: *kol, u’mar’eh, v’reyach*: beautiful sounds, sights, and aromas.” (Berakhot 57b).

On the other hand, we have wasted precious resources, and we have fouled and degraded the land. And we have dominated the other creatures on the planet in brutal, thoughtless ways. There used to be farms in the country, where animals lived. Now, most are factories, with appalling conditions. There used to be huge schools of fish swimming in the sea. Now, for the most part, our fish, too, come from unnaturally confined and generally unhealthy environments. Soon, the so-called “wild” fish will be the exception.

If you want to see a picture of where we're going if we don't do anything about our disrespectful and dismissive relationship to nature, just go ahead and see an animated film that came out a few years ago, called, *Wall-E*. It depicts the world many years in the future. And what does the world look like? It's one big garbage dump. It's so clogged and cluttered with refuse that living creatures can't live there—or, I should say, *here*—anymore.

Some would say that it's already too late. That there isn't anything we can do to reverse the degradation of nature that has already occurred.

Bill McKibbon, a crusader for the environment, is one such person. He wrote a book over 20 years ago called, *The Death of Nature*. That is his greatest fear, or most controversial assertion, that nature, as we have always imagined it, is dead. His most recent book is *Eaarth*, spelled “E-A-A-R-T-H,” with an extra “a” in the word. (You apparently pronounce as if you were Arnold Schwarzenegger saying the word, “earth.”) McKibbon writes “earth” that way to indicate that the planet we now live on is, in his view, not the same one that existed up until a few years ago.

McKibbon's thesis is shocking and disturbing: namely, that we're well beyond the philosophical stage of talking about whether we should or shouldn't seek to dominate nature; whether we should or shouldn't have an impact on it. We have already had such an enormous impact, that nature—as we imagine it, as we always imagined it—no longer exists.

Is it indeed too late?

The name “John Adams” is probably familiar to many of us. After all, it is the name of the second president of the United States. But we may never have heard of his namesake, a lawyer who became fired up about the environment after the terrible Santa Barbara oil spill off the coast of California in 1969—which, incidentally, pales in comparison to this summer's Gulf spill. Together with some like-minded colleagues, Adams created the National Resources Defense Council. That organization was instrumental in creating many of the protections that we now take for granted. Before John Adams, there was no Environmental Protection Agency; there was no National Environmental Policy Act; there was no Clean Air Act to keep our air fresh and sweet. Without John Adams' tenacity, these accomplishments might not have been achieved.

Of course, there's much more to be done, but John Adams and the NRDC haven't given up. They envision a very different picture from the one that appears in *Wall-E*: They look forward to seeing our country's last unprotected wild areas declared

off-limits to oil and gas drilling. They look forward to the day when electric vehicles will account for 35 percent of all U.S. vehicles; when *all* of our cars will average 60 mpg—or more.

**John Adams and the NRDC haven't stopped dreaming.** And we shouldn't either. This year is the year of *Haganat HaTeva* in our congregation. *Haganat HaTeva* means “the protection of nature;” our focus will be learning how to do just that. We're going to study, reflect, and take action.

I would like to urge everyone to get involved. We now have a congregational Green Committee, chaired by Vicki Krupp. The committee has been and will continue to be looking into ways that we as a community can diminish our waste of natural resources. Please consider joining our Green Committee and contributing your time and expertise, your caring and commitment.

But even if you don't join the committee, you can take small steps now, as an individual, to make a difference:

- Get a free energy audit for your home.
- You can also **recycle**.
- Start routinely powering down your electronic equipment when you leave the office, or when you go to bed.
- You can also **recycle**.
- Don't leave your AC on when you're away from home.
- You can also **recycle**.
- Unplug your cellphone chargers and other devices that are constantly draining power.
- You can also **recycle**.

I think you get the idea.

Earlier, I mentioned that today commemorates the Creation of the World. When we say that, we tend to think back to the first day of Creation, when the material world as we know it first came into being.

But most rabbinic texts hold that Rosh Hashanah is the anniversary not of the *first* day of Creation but of the *sixth* day, the day on which human beings were created. They hold that what we celebrate today is the day that human beings first encountered the natural world.

What a fascinating and instructive association: the world is born when we become a part of it. Our responsibility is not to restore the world to some mythic pre-human phase, but to maintain it as a proper environment for us as well as the other creatures on the globe, for many generations to come.

Rosh Hashanah is, or should be, the ultimate “Earth Day,” a day on which to reflect on our relationship with nature, and to strive to harmonize our needs and desires with the moral imperative to be proper stewards of our natural home.

On the inside front cover of the current issue of “OnEarth,” the journal of the NRDC, there’s a stunning picture of a stream gushing out of a verdant hill, with a snow-covered peak in the distance. The caption reads, “Let This Be Your Legacy.” That’s a great message for all of us. If we act now, we can work to assure that the next generation will be able to experience the forests and meadows, the rivers and oceans that we appreciate today.

What do we wish each other on this day? We wish each other a *shanah tovah u’m’tukah*: a “good and a sweet year.” We can do something about that. When we treat the earth with respect and care, when we refrain from degrading it, and instead contribute to the sweetening of the air, water and soil of this beautiful planetary home of ours, then we have the right to hope that, not just in Ireland, but here as well, the earth’s air, water and soil will sweeten our lives, and the lives of our loved ones.

Let’s commit ourselves this year to “tilling and tending” this beautiful garden that we have inherited—and let’s commit ourselves to bequeathing it to the next generation.

*Shanah Tovah!*