

Parashat Yitro 5769
“ A Green Revelation”¹

One generation goes and another generation comes, but the earth remains forever. These words spoken by the sage Kohelet in the book of Ecclesiastes take on such profound meaning. Generations have come and gone, we know that there are scores of species that have become extinct, those generations have come and gone, it is our generation who will come and go if we do not change the ways in which we think about environmental awareness. The earth will endure long beyond our days, the question we must ask is: “Will we be here to enjoy it? Will our children be here to enjoy it?”

“Eco Babies Wear Green” is the title of a book I read to my daughter. Maybe this book is a start to teach the next generation what they can do in order to enjoy the world. Each page teaches her a little bit more about what an Eco Baby does. Eco babies compost, Eco-babies are powered by solar energy, eco babies recycle, eco babies turn off the lights. There are about ten things that Eco Babies do to be aware of the environmental needs of our society.

This month seems to have taken on a Green theme. There are so many events to raise all of our awareness regarding the Environment. Last week was our Tu B’shevat seder led by the Green Team. Tonight for our Shabbat Schmooze Gabe Elsner will talk to us about The clean energy economy, Climate Change and how young people are changing America. Gabe, I bet you did not know about Eco Babies wearing Green. Next weekend our teenagers have been invited to participate in a Heal the Bay Clean up and, the following week we will be screening portions of the 11th Hour, that evening we will

¹ There are no footnotes to citations from Friedman’s book because it was read on a Kindle. The Kindle locations do not correspond to specific page numbers.

welcome Leila Connors Peterson, one of the writers, directors, and producers of this film to lead us in a discussion about the film. We have Environmental Opportunities abound.

Tonight, I wanted to take a few minutes to highlight some of the significant lessons that appear in Thomas Friedman's recent book Hot, Flat, and Crowded: Why We Need a Green Revolution and How It Can Renew America. Friedman's key message in this book is that we need a new system to think about the environment. Individuals recycling, composting and saving energy are all wonderful mind you but he says we need a new system. Quoting Jonathan Rose a national real estate developer specializing in green buildings and communities, Friedman writes, "The systemic nature of the planet earth is persistent and robust. Nature is a system and always responds systematically. It is intrinsic. It does not wax or wane." Taking this into consideration, Friedman points out that in a system everything is connected to everything else. We can only optimize pieces to a certain point. If we don't scrap the old system and put a new system in place, everything we do will be limited.

Friedman speaks of the Toyota Prius as an example of an entire new system. Just like every other car, it has a battery and an engine. "It is not a better car, it is a better system." Friedman writes. The system of the Prius uses breaking to generate energy that gets stored in the battery. This is a transition from a problem fix, to a transformational innovation that reinforces the biblical notion of Bal Tashchit, Do Not Destroy.

The Sefer Hachinuch, a book of learning teaches us, "The purpose of this mitzvah, bal tashchit, is to teach us to love that which is good and worthwhile and to cling to it, so that good becomes a part of us and we will avoid all that is evil and destructive. This is the way of the righteous and those who improve society, who love

peace and rejoice in the good in people.” By taking a systems approach to the environment, we love what is good and we cling to it. If you have ever met a Prius owner, you know how they cling to that car and the preservation that it promotes. Humankind must change its nature to avoid all that is destructive. It is how we will improve society.

For me the highlight of Friedman’s book is when he begins to talk about a new era, the Energy Climate Era, in which essentially our electricity usage is like Burger King, where you can have it your way. Friedman describes a vision for energy consumption that is comparable to the phone plan. You could by the “The Bargain Power Nights and Weekends plan” or the “Day Trading for Electrons plan” you could also opt to have the same plan that we have always had but energy costs would be much higher. What makes this vision transformative and systemic is that it uses something called the Energy Internet, in which you a have Smart Black Box that is the size of a microwave in your basement. Much like the cable box we receive from the cable company, the SBB controls and assures the interoperability of all your energy, communications and energy devices and services. Every appliance in your house is plugged into this SBB and it monitors how much energy is being used. This Smart Black Box, takes instructions from us or from the utility company as to when it should operate and at what level of power. We would be able to program our appliances to run at lower levels when demand for electricity on the larger grid is highest and the energy usage is most expensive. We could charge our electric car at night when electricity demand is light. This whole concept seems so far fetched, but in 2007 a simple prototype was deployed in Washington State’s Olympic Peninsula. One person who signed up for the

plan said that his electricity load dropped by 15%. Think of all the energy that we might save if this program was expanded. Friedman is anxious to get this system built. In doing so, we would have the potential to have more growth with fewer power plants, better energy efficiency and more renewable energy, like wind and solar. What is preventing us from doing it is the financial greed that takes over our electric companies. We have to change the system, electric companies and oil companies have to be willing to change the way they operate in the economy in order for us to make this happen. Friedman writes that, “there is only one thing bigger than Mother Nature and that is Father Profit, and we have not yet even begun to enlist him in this process.”

Perhaps one of the most important Jewish teachings from Ecclesiastes Rabbah explains why such a transformation is so difficult. When God created Adam, God led him around all the trees in the garden of Eden. God said to him, “See how beautiful and praiseworthy all of My works are? Everything I have created has been created for Your sake. Think of this, and do not corrupt or destroy my world; for if you corrupt it, there will be no one to set it right after you.” (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13) If we corrupt it, there will be no one to set it right after you. The world has already been corrupted. Our systems are broken. Who will be here to set it right? It will take a combination of Energy Technology and innovation and individuals who are programmed to naturally avoid destroying God’s world. This type of system would take thousands upon thousands of innovators working together to create transformational breakthroughs.

This week in our Torah we read of Moses receiving the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai. It is a moment of revelation in which God showed the Israelites what it meant to be free. The 1999 Principles of Reform Judaism expand on this concept of revelation

to something we call ongoing revelation. “We cherish the truths revealed in Torah, God's ongoing revelation to our people and the record of our people's ongoing relationship with God.” Ongoing revelation means that the Torah was not just given at that one moment when we stood at Sinai. Ongoing revelation means that we can experience God’s Torah in new and innovative ways. We need to think of our environmental awareness as an ongoing Green Revelation. We can be renewed each day through a Green revelation that enables us to see our world in a new light, a green light, a light that shines on the future illuminating a path towards an Energy Climate era, one in which we do not waste and we preserve and protect God’s World.

One Generation goes and another generation comes, but the earth remains forever. May we allow that generation to come with the knowledge of systemic change. May we help that generation grow through energy innovation. And may we all remember that we are the stewards of this earth, it will endure forever, when we go let’s leave it in good hands. Amen.