A Time For Every Purpose Under Heaven

Let’s begin with a bit of musical call and response, shall we?
Sim: to everything…
Cong: Turn turn turn
Sim: there is a season…
Cong: turn turn turn
Together: And a time for every purpose under heaven.

Of course you know that song. Everyone knows Turn Turn Turn… the Pete Seeger song, written and then recorded in the early 1960’s, setting to music the words of the biblical author Kohelet, AKA, Ecclesiastes, informing us that there is a time for every experience, predictable in its season.

Though he was using an ancient text, Seeger was writing a timely anti war song, a petition for peace. Yes, there is a time to build up, a time to tear down, a time to be born, a time to die. But then the songwriter tacks on a coda at the end – a time for peace, I swear it’s not too late!

Such was his plea to us: Regardless of what we may believe heaven has decreed in the natural order of things, the times for war and for peace lie most certainly in our human hands. Created in the Divine Image, we are critical instruments of change.

As the War in Vietnam raged on, the controversial song caught fire with the record buying public. Turn Turn Turn was recorded by the Limelighters in 1962 and then further popularized by the folk rock group the Byrds in 1965, shooting up to number one on the pop charts! We sang it at our summer camps, retreats and rallies, Jewish and otherwise.

I think Turn Turn Turn could again become a controversial song. The ancient Biblical poet wrote about the seasonal changes with absolute certainty. We celebrate those changes on this awesome day. Hayom harat ha olam – today the world is born! A brand new year of reliable, God-given, seasonal changes. And yet we know the weather patterns are shifting in a most unnatural way.

The book of Ecclesiastes is also known for the words: There is nothing new under the sun, but there is most definitely something new under the sun. For the first time in recorded global history our species has altered the seasonal cycle, pushing up global temperatures beyond our capacity to handle the consequences.

Proven scientific data show polar ice caps melting, sea levels rising, and carbon emissions darkening huge sections of the earth’s surface. A third of all CO2 emissions are absorbed by our oceans which are reaching dangerous levels of acidity. Heat indexes are rising and storm patterns are shifting dramatically. 30% of the earth’s species are in danger of extinction. Tens of thousands of acres of forest continue to be lost. Barb and I hiked the Superior Trail of the north...
shore amidst old growth spruce and pine forests that will never be replaced that far south by new trees because of rising temperatures.

Climate change has not been addressed much from this pulpit, perhaps because it still strikes people, oddly enough, as a political question.

But I chose to speak about it today because I believe that climate change is a religious issue, and it is a Jewish issue, and will be the dominating concern of the 21st century.

In the book of Exodus God speaks to the Israelites saying: If you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day, I will grant the rain for your land in its season. You shall gather in your new grain, your wine and oil. I will also provide grass in the fields for your cattle -- and thus you shall eat your fill. Take care not to be lured away to serve other gods and bow to them. For Adonai’s anger will flare up against you, and God will shut up the skies so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce; and you will soon perish from the good land that your God is assigning to you.

These troubling words used to be part of our reform liturgy until they were removed because they smacked of ancient reward and punishment hocus pocus that our movement didn’t buy into. Perhaps they should be reconsidered.

For centuries we prayed and depended that the dew would fall when it was supposed to, and that the rains would come precisely in their seasons. Could our ancestors have imagined the role we would someday play in altering creation to this extent?

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, one of the great religious Jewish minds of the 20th century observes that in the biblical creation story we read not one, but two narratives detailing the origin of the first human beings. He calls them Adam the first and Adam the second –(some modern readers look at that kind of thing and assume bad editing) but Rabbi Soloveitchik suggests that what is being described are two distinct aspects of human character alive in each of us.

In the Torah, Adam the first is created “in the image of God” bezelem Elohim - a creative and industrious being, accessing immeasurable resources for the realization of his goals. This is the inventor of the wheel, the discoverer of fire, the farmer and shepherd, the manufacturer of the toaster oven and the microchip! A creature who can envision and achieve space flight, build remarkable businesses, erect skyscrapers, and who can conceive of deep fried m and m’s on a stick and donut flavored beer.

Adam the first is given dominion over all the earth – to work it, use it, create new features, and to evolve his massive intelligence. “Subdue nature” is the biblical command to Adam the first – “take control!!” Rabbi Soleveitchik notes that Adam the second is created from the very dust of the earth, and life is breathed into him. The command to Adam the second is to cultivate the garden and protect it. We are of this earth.
Adam the first asks questions like: how does it work? How can I control and accumulate? How can I build a better widget?
Adam the second asks - why does it function the way it does? And what is my role in preserving it?

In the coming weeks our Torah will chronicle the seven days of creation, then the great flood epic of rising sea levels and Noah’s efforts to save the earth’s creatures. And then to the story of Abraham and Sarah, when a Jewish voice first appears on the scene.

“Lech l’cha”, says God to Abram, go out there and change the world. And may all who associate themselves with you find themselves enriched by your presence. Abraham and Sarah were known as Ivrim – Hebrews – literally, people on the other side. Outliers. People who, upon finding themselves in the midst of a society gone meshugeh, plant themselves firmly and objectively outside the madness and call for a sane response. This is what makes climate change a Jewish issue. We are an idol smashing people. We are a truth seeking people.

If the majority of the inhabitants of this great earth continue the quest for more power and industry and fortunes at the expense of the earth itself, then we must be the “other” voices – the Ivrim, who stand firmly, as Jews have in so many circumstances throughout history, and sound the shofar of vigilance and foresight.

Climate change needs to be a religious issue because the vast majority of the 7 billion inhabitants of this world hold religious views at the core of their being. If they see what’s happening as a natural fluctuation in the evolution of the planet we’re toast. Literally and figuratively.

But addressing climate change as a religious mandate may be the only way to trigger a huge shift of human consciousness over the coming decades.

Now I know, Jews are now roughly 0.2% of the world's population. If all the Jews in the world recycled our newspapers it would make little difference. Sure, Temple has solar panels which are largely symbolic. They fuel the eternal light and recharge our clergy cell phones. If every Jew in the world swapped out their existing car for a hybrid we might save 25 million barrels of oil a year – and that’s less than what OPEC extracts in one day.

Meager numbers notwithstanding, the Jewish people have always blessed the communities in which we have lived. We brought justice and higher moral consciousness into being. We initiated the judicial system while we were still a wandering nomadic people. We introduced monotheism to the world. The theory of relativity; the Polio vaccine. Radiation and chemotherapy, Potato kugel. Blue jeans! Laser technology and stainless steel! Israeli Drip agriculture that has helped to feed millions in arid nations. We championed human freedom, changing forever accepted norms of slavery.

And perhaps most poignant of all, the Jews gave the world the idea of a Sabbath! A day’s rest at the end of the work-week and a rest for the land every seven years. Anybody remember the Sabbath? Taking a day of rest was once almost universally observed. Today, people today who
work seven days a week, even if they are paid millions of dollars to do so, are, in the Jewish biblical conception, slaves. A planet that is not allowed to rest is also enslaved.

The Jewish bible literally invented history. Prior to the advent of Judaism just about every ancient religion saw the world in cyclical terms, as a Great Wheel. No event was regarded as unique, every event had already been enacted, is being enacted, and will be enacted perpetually; the same individuals have appeared, appear now, and will appear at every turn of the circle.

Judaism alone differed. According to the Jews’ way of viewing life, events move forward; they do not merely repeat themselves. We were the first people to break out of this “circle” ideology. In a sense this innovative way of thinking meant the birth of adventure, surprise, uniqueness of the individual, vocation, free will, progress, hope and justice! This was the beginning of vigilance and responsiveness.

This is certainly not the time to let up. How interesting that people still sit back in silent acquiescence accepting the circle theory of existence. That what we are observing is the natural order. Chiming in with Ecclesiastes’ cynical “there is nothing new under the sun” – it’s all been done before attitude. Everything will right itself.

Continuing to pour more CO₂ into the atmosphere likens us to the ancient Egyptian Pharaoh of Egypt, addicted to his own power, refusing to stop oppressing humans and suffering the consequences of plagues — which, by the way, if you remember, were mostly ecological disasters!

Rabbi Arthur Waskow of the renewal movement says that today the Pharaohs are giant corporations: big coal, big oil, and big natural gas. Maybe so, but they are also us, stuck in our ways. The only way to deal with a modern-day Pharaoh is for the people of Adam the second to cry out that their physical earth is being compromised and to recognize our intended roles of stewardship.

If we are only Adam the first, our self glorification and endless accumulation of resources will continue unabated. But if we can truly see ourselves as part of the biology of this planet and that the stewardship of said planet was breathed into us from the get-go, we stand a chance of a midcourse correction.

Elie Wiesel, another gift of the Jewish people to a world gone insane, reminds us, "Just as humanity cannot live without dreams, we cannot live without hope. If dreams reflect the past, hope summons the future."

At a certain point of frustration, Moses begs God to reveal himself or at least give him a business card so he’ll have more street cred with the Israelites. God says, well buddy you can’t see me but here’s what I am about: I am slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity transgression and sin – yet not remitting all punishment, but visiting the iniquity of parents upon children and children’s children, upon the third and fourth generations.
These last words are particularly chilling and come to my mind when I hear or read denials of human culpability for the warming of our planet. Perhaps we don’t feel personally threatened by the shifting winds, but are we willing to stake the future of our children and our grandchildren on such a gamble?

My friends, with all due respect to Ecclesiastes, there is indeed something new under the sun, and it is of our doing. Long ago the Jewish people brought to this world an innovative notion that humans can and will alter the course of global history and we have been doing it ever since. We are ivrim, Jewish voices that cannot remain silent as our planet turns a dangerous corner. On this Rosh Hashana 5774 we arrive at a critical tipping point, where continuing to make the wrong decisions will be disastrous, but where waking up and changing our behavior will put us into partnership with a God who is slow to anger and quick to forgive. And there cannot be a one of us here who wishes the iniquities of our generation to be visited upon the children.

To everything there is a season… turn turn turn. There are still seasons… turn turn turn, and there is a time for every purpose under heaven. A time to rend, a time to sew. A time to renew, a time to heal… Our time is now. I swear it’s not too late.