

**ROSH HASHANAH 5780 DAY 1 SERMON  
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BY STEVEN LOGAN**

Steven Logan is a teacher, writer and researcher. He teaches at the University of Toronto Mississauga, covering such disparate subjects as dystopian visions of ecological catastrophe, the visual life of the Anthropocene, the proposed name for Earth's latest geological epoch, urban infrastructure and the unseen technologies that guide everyday life, and suburban history. His first book, *In the Suburbs of History*, explores the parallel histories of capitalist and socialist suburbs of the 20th century, and will be out in summer 2020. He is also the former editor of the now defunct *Carbusters* magazine, which was devoted to critiquing car culture and exploring the alternatives.

It is not easy to talk about the climate these days. About crisis. Hope.

Despair. The future. I am truly privileged to be up here to share my thoughts with you. In his book *This is Real and you are completely unprepared*—a book about the preparations leading up to the high holidays, but a pretty good summing up of our current climate situation (it has my vote for the best book title ever), Alan Lew writes: “I always felt the high holidays start at Tisha B'av, the day when we mourn the Fall of the temple...This is the day when the walls come tumbling down and we begin to acknowledge our heartbreak, when we begin to acknowledge the futility of our present course of action, when we begin to acknowledge that we are utterly unprepared for what we have to face in life. This is when the walls of our psyche begin to break down.” As our walls crumble and we seek to repair, I offer to you today three short inter-related commentaries, titled simply: domination, Breath, and Repair of the earth (tikkun tevel), the journey of which Rabbi Goldberg has already set us on in her sermon from last

month. And through these three words and phases I want to explore what I hope can be a Jewish, mystical, and ecological response to climate crisis and repair.

***Rada, or Looking for stories.*** I began the task for this sermon searching out stories that connect Jewish life with ecology and the environment. For example, in Leviticus, humans are instructed to let the land lie fallow once every seven years, a Shabbat for the land. In addition, in this sabbatical year, all debts are forgiven in what is called the *Shemittah*, or Release. Now, debt release is something to work with, although in our current context, utterly utopian. Any approach to the climate crisis has to not only account for economic inequalities, but reconcile with the fact that for many people their livelihoods depend on oil and gas extraction. If you ask someone who does contract work in the tar sands in Alberta, why they do it, you will often hear that it is because of debt. Student debt. Credit card debt. A house foreclosed.

Yet one of the stories that have given Jewish, as well as Christian, ecological thinkers the most difficult time is the idea of dominion and domination. The Hebrew word *rada*, appears twice in Genesis, repeated in almost the same phrase: Humans are to rule and master the earth and “all the living things that creep on it”. Although, further on when the Garden of Eden is described, Adam is put in the garden to till and tend the land, not dominate it, humans are still separate from the earth. When we see the earth as something separate from us, as an object to be controlled and subjugated, it also lets us treat the forests, the

animals and each other as a set of resources to be managed in the interests of perpetual economic growth. We need a new story. The torah *demands* interpretation. And where there is danger, a saving power also grows, and it is to the very first lines of Genesis that I want to turn for that power.

**Breath.** The courses I teach at the university ask students to reflect on the taken-for-granted: the water we drink, the electricity we use when we turn on the lights, the waste we discard. The aim is to make visible those often invisible networks of labour and energy, with which we could not go about our everyday lives. To be in awe of the everyday. And on these days of awe, what better then to be in awe not of power, dominion, and domination, but of something far more mundane, but much more fundamental: the breath. In Genesis, there are actually three hebrew words which all at their core signify breath: they are ruach, nefesh and neshamah. Their meanings run deep, as each represent three different, but interrelated aspects of the soul.

In the very first lines of Genesis, when the earth is an unformed void, when there is no separation between light and day, before God utters a word, there is a wind, *ruach*, sweeping over the water. It is a powerful image: the wind links the void of nothingness with all that follows in creation. *Ruach* also means spirit and breath. The ecologist David Abram writes that here Hebrew shares with other ancient languages of the Americas, a single word for wind and spirit.

Further along in Genesis, God gives the breath of life to all living things.

Here the word for the breath of life is *nefesh*, that life which is common to all creatures human and non-human. *Nefesh*, like *ruach*, is multi-faceted, and can mean soul, breath and psyche. This breath of life is a reminder of that shared moment between animals and humans: the shared fact of breathing.

Finally God blows the breath of life into the nostrils of the first human; This breath, called *neshamah*, most explicitly links the breath of the divine with the breath of humans. Gershom Scholem calls it the spark of divine intellect that allows the most gifted Kabbalist practitioner to achieve oneness, but which more generally we can call “conscious awareness.” In so many of our different practices of meditation, focusing on the breath is central to all that follows.

But even this state of conscious awareness is not simply the property of the single human mind as we like to believe; Abram reminds us that the word *psyche* comes from the ancient Greek *psychi*, which signifies soul, mind, breath and, of course, a gust of wind. “The *psyche* is not an immaterial power that resides in us,” he writes, “but is rather the invisible yet thoroughly palpable medium in which we (along with the trees, the squirrels, and the clouds), are immersed.” The spiritual is inseparable from the material. In this sense, the walls of the *psyche* indeed break down, but that does not mean emotional breakdown; if the walls of our individual *psyche* crumble, it becomes harder to dominate that which is around us. It becomes an occasion for humility, wonder and relationship to the broken world, rather than superiority over others. It is an occasion for

solidarity between faiths: many of the indigenous peoples of this land have words and relationships that correspond with the Hebrew words and who held spirit, in its many guises, sacred.

***Tikkun Tevel (Repair of the World)***. One of the greatest teller of stories, Ursula Le Guin, wrote that we need new stories to rebuild and repair a broken world. To be in awe not just of the great biblical heroic acts of men, of the “sticks, and spears and swords, the things to bash and poke and hit with,” but we need stories about vessels and containers. That which holds water, grain, and the seeds of life. We need stories that emphasize care, and repair, rather than stories that see us build bigger bombs, bigger egos, or sharper verbal spears to hurl at established climate science. Broken vessels are at the center of the kabbalistic story of creation: the task of tikkun in this creation story is repairing the vessels that burst when the energy of creation was unleashed. From the very beginning, and before the beginning, humans have been tasked with repairing the world.

Humans *do* have the power to change narratives and attend to our broken vessels. The inevitable question that comes during talks like this one is: what can I do? How do I go about the task of repair? I ask myself the same question every day, but also I ask: what should *they* do? Some people have more power than others, and some bear more responsibility than others. Some humans can't breathe. Literally. Who decides who shall live and breathe clean air? And who

shall die of heat exhaustion, mudslides, and nuclear radiation poisoning? 71% of global CO2 emissions are caused by the 100 biggest industries, mostly oil and coal.

Yet on the individual level there is much we can do. Although the kabbalah reserved the highest mystical experience to the select few—they were only men—there is no reason that that story must persist: When we have effected *tikkun tevel*, repaired the world in a state of redemption, access to the interconnection of all beings will become common property.

In the meantime? Show up on the street at a protest. Be a breathing body and occupy an intersection. On June 10, Rabbi Goldberg, Reverend Sheri diNovo, other faith leaders and a host of supporters occupied the intersection of Yonge and Dundas for 15 minutes in a show of solidarity with the movement Extinction Rebellion. As one commentator put it, this was a coalition of religion, ritual and rebellion. And Reverend diNovo along with the supporters of Extinction Rebellion are there every Monday at 5 pm to occupy the intersection. Last Friday, as I marched down Bay Street with my daughter and eight of her friends, and thousands of other people, so many of them young women, I thought this *is* real, and you are getting prepared by showing that 12 year olds can be political.

There were a lot of signs saying we have to save the planet. The planet does not need saving, it will thrive without us. Our task is a different one. In one

of her sermons, Reverend diNovo, who often speaks across chasms to her Jewish brothers and sisters, said “we need to save ourselves from ourselves. It was done, it can be done, it will be done. After all, we are earth, water and air. That is who we are.” Find your breath, revolutionize spirituality, tell new stories, and repair that which is broken. Shana Tova.

**References:**

Ursula le Guin. “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction.”

Gershom Scholem. *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*

David Abram. *The Spell of the Sensuous*

Alan Lew. *This is Real and you are Completely Unprepared*